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CASE STUDY

# THE REFUGEES, DISPLACED PERSONS, AND FORCED MIGRATION STUDIES CENTER

An academic research center  
in Jordan's knowledge  
ecosystem on forced  
displacement



As part of an initiative funded by the Canadian International Development Research Centre (IDRC) in collaboration with the Local Engagement Refugee Research Network (LERRN) at Carleton University and the African Migration and Development Policy Centre (AMADPOC) in Kenya, the Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy & International Affairs (IFI) at the American University of Beirut conducted this research project seeking to generate a more nuanced understanding of how localized knowledge ecosystems on forced displacement can be effective, policy impactful and sustainable. This project builds on earlier research undertaken in 2019 and 2020 which aimed to support an evidence-based understanding on how to localize research on refugee and forced migration issues in key regions of the Global South. The aim of this phase is to transition from anecdotal to evidence-based insights on how localized “ecosystems” of research, civil society, and refugee-led initiatives produce new forms of knowledge on displacement issues that have an impact on policy and practice.

Project researchers set out to understand how localized knowledge ecosystems in Kenya and Ethiopia in East Africa and Jordan and Lebanon in the Middle East produce, translate, and use knowledge to effect change. This was achieved through in-depth case studies of knowledge ecosystems, sub-ecosystems, and entities that make up knowledge ecosystems in each of the four included countries. For the purpose of this study, and in the context of forced migration, the study adopted the following definition of knowledge ecosystem:

*Localized knowledge ecosystems include actors with lived experience, research actors, practitioners who produce and use knowledge on forced migration (including, but not limited to, NGOs/INGOs, research centers, institutes, networks and universities and academics) who coordinate with each other to advance new knowledge production within this system and translate and mobilize this knowledge to influence policy, practice, action and discourses, and narratives to advance the well-being of refugees.*

For the definitions used in this project and an overview of the research conducted in East Africa and the Middle East, read our working paper [here](#).

The research team for this project included Nasser Yassin (Co-Principal Investigator), Kassem Kassak (Co-Principal Investigator), Yara Mourad (Program Manager), Nadia Nameh (Project Coordinator), Maysa Baroud (Lead Consultant and Author - Lebanon Case Studies), and Zein Soufan (Lead Consultant and Author - Jordan Case Studies).

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## INTRODUCTION

More than a decade into the Syrian refugee crisis, the influx of Syrian refugees in Jordan has continued to increase. Today, the overall number of Syrian refugees in Jordan is 1.36 million, the second highest in the Middle East and North African Region (MENA). Around 660,892 Syrian refugees in Jordan are registered with the UNHCR (UNHCR, 2022). In response to the influx of Syrian refugees, the government of Jordan established refugee camps. Yet, the majority of registered Syrians in Jordan - over 542,000 - live outside of camps in urban, peri-urban and rural areas (UNHCR, 2022). The Syrian refugee crisis has placed a strain on governmental administrative services, and the availability of resources such as water, housing, and solid waste disposal. It has also adversely affected the socio-economic circumstance of host communities, particularly in the Kingdom's northern regions. Jordan's infrastructure and financial resources were already stretched thin before the crisis. With an increased number of inhabitants, living conditions and host community infrastructure deteriorated further. Poorer districts and neighborhood -areas that Syrian refugees would eventually reside in - were neglected and required improved infrastructure, water, and electricity networks.

The discrepancy in statistics between the Jordanian government and UNHCR with respect to the number of Syrian refugees in the country may be ascribed to a variety of factors, including refugees' requests to not be recognized as refugees, while other Syrians lived in Jordan with their extended families and did not register. According to early indicators, the number of Syrian refugees in Jordan is expected to rise by 3% every year (UNHCR, 2022, with limited prospect for voluntary return. As of now, there appears to be slim chances for structured and universally acknowledged long-term remedies (Ministry of Planning and International Cooperation [MoPIC], 2020).

Because of its security, accessibility, and transparency, Jordan is one of the most frequently investigated refugee-hosting countries in the world. Working in Jordan's humanitarian research sector means frequently rubbing shoulders with foreign researchers, relief workers, and students. Countless studies, surveys, visual projects, documentary films, advocacy papers, blogs, and photo diaries on the plight of refugees in Jordan have been produced (Simpson & Abo Zayed, 2019).

Jordan itself boasts research centers that tackle this very subject through an interdisciplinary approach. A case in point is the Refugees, Displaced Persons, and Forced Migration Studies Center (RDFMSC) at Yarmouk University, located in the northern governorate of Irbid. Irbid hosts just over 20% of the registered Syrian refugees in Jordan (UNHCR, 2023) and is currently undergoing enormous social, economic, and demographic changes. As host communities in Irbid and Syrian refugees became accustomed to one another, refugee-host relations oscillated from a welcoming atmosphere in 2012, to an atmosphere rooted in fear over shortages and security concerns in 2016, culminating in a now more tolerant relationship and sense of joint ownership over Irbid's neighborhoods today. Acknowledging the importance of social relations between Syrians and Jordanians, the arrival of Syrian refugees is merely one aspect of a larger set of issues that affect newcomers' capacity to assimilate. These issues include water scarcity and increased urbanization that also coincide with societal changes and growing job opportunities for refugees and nationals in response to the modernization and globalization of Jordan's economy (Simpson & Abo Zayed, 2019).

This case study<sup>1</sup> aimed to gain a deeper understanding of the approaches through which the RDFMSC, an example of a university-based research center, contributes to the knowledge ecosystem on forced displacement in Jordan. The center specializes in undertaking research specifically on refugee matters through utilizing an interdisciplinary approach. The RDFMSC case study highlights the roles of various actors who aim to enhance the betterment of the Jordanian society and the livelihoods of Syrian refugees (Refugees, Displaced Persons and Forced Migration Studies Center [RDFMSC], n.d.).

Since its formation as a research center in 1997, RDFMSC has emerged as a key actor within Jordan's knowledge ecosystem in producing and disseminating knowledge on forced displacement. Through adopting a multidisciplinary approach that brings forward current perspectives, the center has played a unique role in tackling discussions on forced migration. Considering its legacy, the institution has strong access to local and international networks of academics, data and funding, all of which are instrumental in successfully localizing RDFMSC as a knowledge ecosystem. The university's center is categorized as one of the most important research institutions operating in the Kingdom and the Middle East (RDFMSC, n.d.).

## METHODOLOGY

Prior to implementing the case study, a mapping of potential entities that comprise the local knowledge ecosystem on refugee and forced displacement in Jordan was conducted. These mapped entities were then validated through a phone call survey, resulting in a comprehensive sampling frame for case study selection.

The methodology adopted for this case study comprised of a desk review and a qualitative data collection approach. The desk review was conducted based on a comprehensive analysis of available sources with reference to RDFMSC produced research reports and data. Data was collected between December 2021 – February 2022. In total, six key informant interviews with relevant stakeholders were conducted (n=6), including four directors of the center who are professors and experts in the field of migration and two Syrian beneficiaries. The interviews were guided by a questionnaire designed specifically for this study. Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim to capture the exact information disclosed by the participants, and were analyzed to highlight emerging themes relevant to knowledge ecosystems on forced displacement.

The primary challenge faced while conducting the case study was accessing publications needed for the desk review. Some of the center's work has not been documented nor published on its website, making it difficult to assess the center's knowledge products. Furthermore, due to inadequate funding, the center remains understaffed, making it difficult to schedule interviews with the different center directors.

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<sup>1</sup> This case study was commissioned by the Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs at the American University of Beirut as part of a joint IDRC/LERNN research study aiming to understand how localized knowledge ecosystems of research, civil society, and refugee-led initiatives produce new forms of knowledge that have an impact on policy and practice. The case studies are meant to provide an in-depth look at the nature and function of localized knowledge ecosystems in the Middle East and North Africa region.

# OVERVIEW OF THE REFUGEES, DISPLACED PERSONS, AND FORCED MIGRATION STUDIES CENTER AT YARMOUK UNIVERSITY

Formed in 1976, Yarmouk University retains a well-established history in supporting the local community, particularly the Palestinian refugee population in Irbid. The University's proximity and awareness of local dynamics enable them to identify community needs and labor market requirements, ensuring alignment between the two when offering its academic programs (Abualasal, n.d) while ensuring its commitment to community service and development. This legacy prompted the establishment of the RDFMSC (RDFMSC, n.d). Throughout the years, the center's mission has focused on promoting research on refugee and displacement issues and has worked to inform and influence policymaking at the national level. As part of its ongoing commitment to its community, RDFMSC offers courses at Yarmouk University on forced migration to raise awareness and encourage students to form a deeper understanding of the issues and implications of this subject. RDFMSC extends its programs and services to the host community and refugee beneficiaries especially in supporting student training and education. Most recently, the center implemented a training, funded by the *Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ)*, for Syrian and Jordanian Students to obtain a diploma in Psychosocial Support. Other similar projects implemented throughout the past ten years included providing technical diplomas for Syrians refugees.

As an entity within Jordan's local knowledge ecosystem, RDFMSC has published numerous studies, newsletters and data on forced migration throughout the past ten years to disseminate to fellow research institutes across the world during different national and international conferences that they have participated in and hosted. RDFMSC also organizes conferences and symposiums on various aspects of refugee issues and forced displacement. Some subject matters the center addresses include studies on the pressure of migration on host and refugee communities, host communities' perception of the Syrian refugee crisis, and the infrastructural and economic impact of the refugee crisis.

## LOCALIZATION

Oversight of the RDFMSC is through a predominantly Jordanian board (Annex 1 provides an overview of the list of 2021 board members and their corresponding roles). Board members work in positions across various networks within the university and other supporting institutions, providing their expertise on subjects related to refugees and displacement. Furthermore, most decision-makers in the center are local members of the community. Ensuring that leadership positions are filled by Jordanians who deeply understand the local context contributes to the localization of RDFMSC activities and knowledge production. Although the RDFMSC is part of Yarmouk University, the center's leadership has the autonomy to bring in funding and choose the partners with whom they will work. Based on the Key Informant Interviews with the four center directors, they emphasized that they advise their donors to focus on the work and topics that they have identified as the most pertinent and in need of funding. They base their assessment on host and refugee community needs, and topics with existing data gaps.

The center maintains local and international partnerships. International partners provide resources, input, and investments to the RDFMSC. These include, among others, the Norwegian Refugee Council, University of Oxford Refugee Studies Centre, UN International Organization for Migration, Syrian American Society, Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH, Lund University International Rescue Committee, and the Delegation of the European Union to Jordan. Some of RDFMSC's local partners also include the Ministry of Planning and International Cooperation, the Ministry of Interior, the Public Security Department, the Jordan Hashemite Fund for Human Development (JOHUD), the Princess Basma Center for Jordanian Women's Studies, RASED, and the Jordan University of Science and Technology.

While the center itself produces various types of knowledge, professors affiliated with the center also produce publications related to forced displacement issues. Such entities may work with the center on different studies, share funding for projects, host and participate in conferences, and share knowledge and data. In recognition of RDFMSC's efforts and expertise, a previous director was invited to draft the chapter on Jordanian policies towards refugees as part of Jordan's 100-year celebration book.

The center ensures communication and dissemination of their work and publications through various social media platforms, including Twitter and Facebook to ensure ongoing knowledge and dialogue with their audience and stakeholders. They also have agreements signed with civil society institutions to ensure community engagement in their activities. For example, they signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the Humanitarian Excellence Community Center to connect them to potential beneficiaries.

With regard to funding, the center is primarily funded by international donors while the university also allocates a minimal budget. Despite this, the center aims to support the Jordanian community and policymakers and provide training and education to Syrian refugees. The center's activities are outlined below.

## **RDFMSC ACTIVITIES**

Two departments manage the center's work: the department of studies and research and the department of media and organizations. The department of studies and research produces data to inform ongoing discussions and policies on migration and forced displacement, with a particular focus on the MENA region. Its overarching aim is to support graduate programs and foster stronger research cooperation with local academics at Yarmouk University and international universities. Through this department, RDFMSC recruits researchers who specialize in subjects related to displacement and refugees. These programs are made possible by Fulbright and DAAD grants, wherein graduate students carry out research as part of their graduating project to fulfill the center's research scope.

Indeed, given that it is at an educational institution, RDFMSC's activities focus primarily on knowledge generation, filling data gaps, informing analysis, and responding to relevant and ongoing issues. In addition, RDFMSC researches legislations, practices, perceptions, challenges, and opportunities. Specific projects have aimed to understand refugees' consumption patterns during the pandemic, field research into the mental health and well-being of refugees, distance education, poverty, social protection, pressures of seeking refuge, pressures on host communities as well as social cohesion and the challenges of being a refugee.

The center also provides new books, references, and journals related to refugees and asylum to keep its library up to date and enrich knowledge production. These resources are available for researchers, students, and interested individuals. This initiative was made possible by a grant of around five thousand euros. In addition, the center provides training and awareness sessions for host and refugee communities, which vary in quality and level of certificates. To date, the center has included more than

200 Syrian refugees in their different programs, some of whom obtained diplomas in psychosocial support training. The center's work with different civil society actors and communities has also allowed for better outreach and inclusion.

The center's executives participate in international conferences in Jordan with international stakeholders to encourage reciprocal knowledge exchange. Moreover, the executives produce a radio program that airs weekly dedicated to sharing knowledge regarding refugees and their circumstances.

The department of media and organizations connects the department of studies and research to local and international organizations by establishing and maintaining communication channels with NGOs and the public sector and supporting the center's research database. The department also conducts periodic dialogue groups with experts and partners. Most notably, the center organizes events supporting its mission of pioneering refugee research to increase its engagement and impact on the local, regional, and international levels.

To increase its engagement and impact, the department of studies and research in collaboration with the department of media organize a variety of events; including lectures on mental health, annual lectures on World Refugee Day and Human Rights Day, and a symposium for International Women's Day, hosted by the Princess Basma Center for Jordanian women's studies that aims to provide much-needed representation of refugee women in current discussions. In addition to a series of seminars focused on asylum, displacement, and forced migration issues under the scope of society, economy, politics, policy, and legalities. One such example includes a seminar titled "Social Media and its Effects on the Local Community and Refugees." These seminars are jointly organized with other knowledge hubs, including universities, with the aim to raise awareness on these subjects, and support the dissemination of knowledge, data and recent studies.

## **RDFMSC'S IMPACT AND REACH**

Through interviews with government, INGOs, donors, international media and other non-localized actors, results indicated that measuring the center's influence is challenging. Nevertheless, in order to assess its influence and impact as best possible, a detailed analysis during the desk review and interview stage was carried out. The findings suggest that the center works holistically to cover different target audiences, This is achieved through capitalizing on its extended networks to disseminate its research. As a localized knowledge-producer, the center has worked with different related stakeholders, including refugees and host communities, with the support of local (Community-Based Organizations) CBOs and (Civil Society Organizations) CSOs. The center also works closely with the public sector to host conferences, apply for joint funding, and launch partnered studies. Such entities include the Ministry of Planning and International Cooperation, the Ministry of Labor, the Ministry of Social Development, the Ministry of Interior, the Department of Statistics, and the Palestinian Refugee Department.

Aiming to ensure inclusivity of all community segments in its work, the center also partners with the private sector. Additional stakeholders include students and professors from local and international universities, while the local media plays a key role in covering the center's events. Finally, the center collaborates with the international community working on the refugee crisis, including different UN agencies, such as UNDP, UNHCR, WFP, ILO, alongside international donors, such as GIZ, World Bank, and different embassies, including the Embassy of Switzerland, the Embassy of the Netherlands, and the Embassy of the United States of America. This network of stakeholders ensures that information is well-validated and widely disseminated.

RDFMSC has published a variety of knowledge products, including but not limited to the following publications, it aims to disseminate at the local, regional, and international levels:

- » Jordanian Perceptions towards Syrian Refugee Crisis;
- » Refugee Development and Forced Displacement; Legislation, Protection and Practice;
- » International Development Opportunities and Challenges;
- » Articles of the Second International Conference on Refugees in the Middle East, Human Security: Commitments of the International Community and the Role of Host Communities;
- » Economic and Social Reality of Labor Force; Refugee Perspective;
- » Living Situation in Refugee Camps;
- » Women Refugees Empowerment; Reality and Ambitions. A symposium of "The Refugee Women: Reality and Achievements".

Despite its focus on the Syrian refugee crisis in recent years, RDFMSC has also contributed significantly to research on Palestinian refugees by lobbying and producing a range of publications on Palestinian refugees and their right to return.

The center's hosting of two international conferences proves their good reputation among the related international community. They also have been part of major international conferences on displacement issues where they presented their different publications. It is important to note that another success factor of the center is its cohort of directors. Three of whom out of five retain significant expertise on refugee issues. As directors, they worked with graduate students and included them in the research process to better aid their understanding of current contexts and enhance their research skills.

A small sample of Syrian refugee beneficiaries were interviewed for this case study. They were asked about their experience and how they benefitted from the center, learned different knowledge tools, and earned their diplomas in psychosocial support as part of the GIZ-RDFMSC partnership. As expressed by the interviewees, this diploma program not only expanded their horizons, but also opened them up to a host of opportunities.

The respondents shared the following:

- » "The center has included us in the project and enabled us to understand different areas related to our refuge and our rights as well as available opportunities."
- » "The Psychosocial Diploma is a real opportunity for me and I wouldn't have been able to access it without the center."



## Factors that explain the RDFMSC's influence and reach

Upon taking a deeper look at the center's influence and impact, networking and awareness of local dynamics were essential factors that led to its success. Firstly, the director expanded the center's network, engaged with relevant stakeholders, and diversified outputs through different channels to ensure tapping into a wider audience. In turn, this influenced funding and brought in more partnerships. These networks were evidently fruitful, as experts and government officials often attended RDFMSC workshops, activities, conferences, and forums to present their research.

A second factor pertains to understanding the dynamics of the refugee context in Jordan, which facilitated outreach among the local community and enabled for the inclusion of graduating students in the research process. It is significant to underscore that graduate students' participation not only enhances inclusion and allows for academic and scientific research modalities to be implemented, but also provides the opportunity for students to participate in data collection, analysis and drafting of final reports. This can be a prime example of how the center plays a role in local knowledge production and in building the capacities of local researchers.

## CONCLUSIONS

This case study focused on the RDFMSC and its relation to localized knowledge production. In the Jordanian context, it is challenging to assess this subject, primarily due to funding shortages, resulting in dependency on foreign aid. Although the center relies extensively on international funding, the dedication of the different directors has been a major success factor in allowing the center's activities to remain localized. It is important to note here that this form of success is highly dependent on the directors' personal efforts, contacts, and networks in international and national stakeholder circles. The addition of graduate students to conduct research and of refugees in educational programs signifies the center's level of inclusion and ability to understand the needs of refugees residing in Jordan.

The center conducts numerous activities to launch, disseminate and discuss the different studies and papers produced. These activities usually include high-level government officials, students, the international community, local think tanks and experts. This extended network allows for wider outreach and representation at international conferences and forums. The publications produced through the center have been presented locally and internationally, portraying the local context of refugees residing in Jordan while taking into consideration the host community perspective. Furthermore, the center produces research that includes data and analysis needed to support policy makers and researchers make valid scientific decisions and design relevant policies and programs.

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## ANNEX 1 – LIST OF THE BOARD MEMBERS IN RDFMSC

Role	Name and Title	Position in the Board
Vice President of Administrative Affairs	Dr. Riad Almomani	Chairman
Director of RDFMSC	Dr. Reem Al-Kharouf	Rapporteur
Director of the Refugee Program, Health and Humanitarian Work Academy	Dr. Bayan Abdel Haq	Member
Director of the Refugees Health and Humanitarian Projects Unit Irbid	Reham El-Gammal	Member
Dean of the College of Law, Yarmouk University	Dr. Yusuf Obeidat	Member
Dean of the Faculty of Arts. Yarmouk University	Dr. Mousa Rababah	Member
Dean of the Faculty of Economics and Administrative Sciences, Yarmouk University	Dr. Mishiel Suwaidan	Member
Director of Projects and Missions at Hopes Organization	Dr. Abdel Nasser Hindawi	Member

# About the Refugee Research and Policy Program

Lebanon and the Arab region are facing one of the largest refugee crises spawning serious public policy challenges. Given this context, the Refugee Research and Policy program generates refugee related/policy-oriented research that addresses an existing knowledge gap in the field of refugee studies. Moreover, the program seeks to enrich the quality of debate among scholars, officials, international organizations, and civil society actors, with the aim to inform policymaking relating to refugees in the Middle East and beyond.

# About the Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy & International Affairs

Inaugurated in 2006, the Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy & International Affairs (IFI) at the American University of Beirut is an independent, research-based, policy-oriented institute. It aims to initiate and develop policy-relevant research in and about the Arab world. The Institute aims at bridging the gap between academia and policymaking by conducting high quality research on the complex issues and challenges faced by Lebanese and Arab societies within shifting international and global contexts, by generating evidence-based policy recommendations and solutions for Lebanon and the Arab world, and by creating an intellectual space for an interdisciplinary exchange of ideas among researchers, scholars, civil society actors, media, and policymakers.

## ABOUT LERRN

LERRN is the Local Engagement Refugee Response Network bringing together global researcher and practitioners committed to promoting protection and solutions with and for refugees. The aim is to reshape the discourse and politics of the global refugee regime by enhancing the role of civil society in all stages of the development and functioning of the regime. This is done through partnered and collaborative research, various capacity building activities, knowledge mobilization tools, and promoting the value of refugee participation.



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