

Policy brief

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Cross-border legacies of conflict exposure: understanding social well-being of Syrian refugees in Jordan

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Purpose

When refugees flee violent conflict, they carry the legacies of their experiences across borders. Using representative survey data from refugees living in Jordan, we examine how pre-displacement exposure to violent conflict shapes the long-term social well-being of refugees. We find that specific dimensions of conflict (exposure to conflict events and exposure to conflict fatalities) have different outcomes on three measures of social well-being: life satisfaction, social trust, and social safety nets. The effects of conflict change depending on individual and household characteristics, such as gender or household composition. The evidence also supports the conclusion that mental health, specifically depression, is a relevant path through which conflict legacies affect individuals' well-being.

Context

Forced displacement is a global challenge, affecting more than 117 million people worldwide, 48 million of whom are refugees. The Syrian Civil War created one of the largest forced displacement situations in recent history, fundamentally reshaping the demographic and social landscape of the Middle East. Within this context, Jordan is a crucial host country, hosting approximately 710,000 refugees of various nationalities, with Syrians constituting the largest group at over 619,000 individuals.¹

Forced displacement comes with myriad challenges for those affected. Forcibly displaced populations are deeply impacted by the circumstances that led to displacement, the process of displacement itself, and their living conditions and status as refugees in their place of destination. Each of these has dire immediate and long-term effects on refugee

1 UNHCR (2024), 'Global Trends: Forced Displacement in 2023. Technical report.' (Copenhagen, Denmark: United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees). Available at: <https://www.unhcr.org/global-trends-report-2023>.

populations' well-being such that individuals, households, and whole communities suffer from these consequences years later.

In this brief, we summarise the findings from a forthcoming study, where we disentangle the dynamics of cross-border forced displacement by examining the lasting impacts of two dimensions of conflict exposure in the origin location – namely, exposure to conflict events and exposure to conflict fatalities² – on Syrian refugees in Jordan. More specifically, we look at the intersection between forced displacement, violent conflict, and environmental stress, and how these affect social outcomes in the long term.

Social well-being of Syrian refugees in Jordan

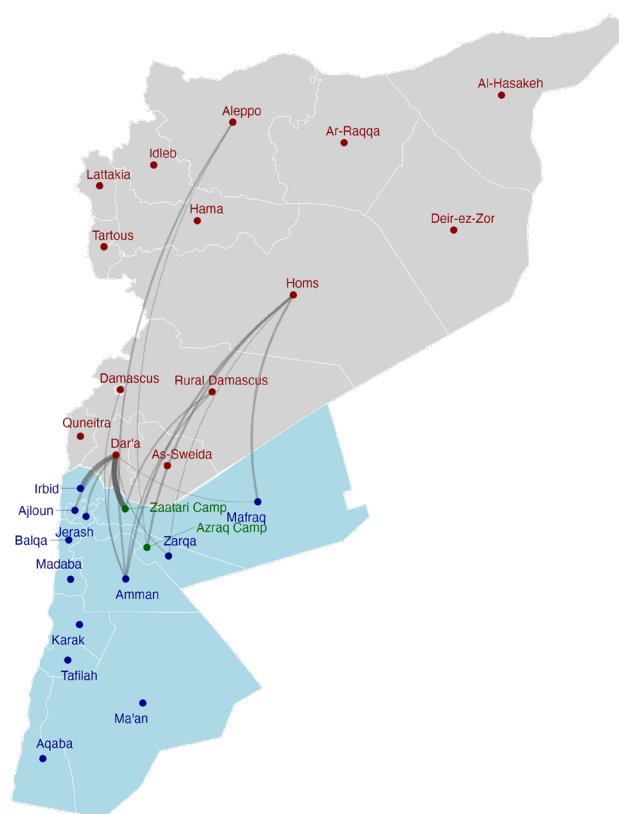


Figure 1. Patterns of refugee movement from Syria to Jordan (governorate level).

Since the onset of the Arab Spring in 2011, many Syrians have been forced to seek refuge in neighboring countries. One of the primary host countries for Syrian refugees is Jordan. The governorates of Amman and Mafraq host more than half of Syrian refugees. The two main UN refugee camps in Jordan are Zaatari and Azraq, although most Syrian refugees in Jordan do not live in these camps. Figure 1 shows the largest refugee flows from Syrian governorates (in red) to Jordanian governorates (in blue), as well as the location of the aforementioned refugee camps (in green), based on analysis of data collected by the office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

The experience of refugees in Jordan is far from uniform. Key differences stem not only from how they lived in Syria before displacement but also from how they settled in Jordan after displacement. Identifying these differences allows us to better understand how refugee lives are affected by both pre- and post-displacement conditions and, consequently, how to improve their well-being in the host country.

What is social well-being?

'Social well-being' is used as an umbrella term for three different aspects of an individual's welfare. The first is life satisfaction, which is the measure of how content an individual is with their life overall. The second is social trust, which is how likely that person is to trust another person. The third is the extent of an individual's social safety net, which describes their support network and the number of people an individual knows that would be able to lend them support. Taken together, these measures form a comprehensive view of social well-being, which has strong implications for an individual's ability to be mentally, physically, and economically secure and thus to live a healthy and satisfactory life.

Methodology

Our study examined how different types of conflict exposure before displacement shape the social well-being of Syrian refugees in Jordan in the long run. We analyzed survey data of 5,775 refugee households from the 2023 UNHCR 'Vulnerability

2 For this, we use data from the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP), which defines a conflict event as an incident where armed force was used by an organized actor against another organized actor, or against civilians, resulting in at least one direct death at a specific location and a specific date. For fatalities, we use the estimate provided by UCDP of total fatalities resulting from each specific event.

Assessment Framework' survey³ and linked the survey data with detailed conflict data from the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP) on both conflict events and fatalities in refugees' home regions before they fled Syria.

We examined the substantial variation in the places of origin of the Syrian refugees in Jordan and the places of their destination, to understand precisely how these differences affect social well-being today. What effect does experiencing conflict in Syria have on someone's well-being? Do environmental stressors such as drought have an impact on these effects? Are refugees living in camps better equipped to cope with the long-term consequences of conflict exposure? What is the role of mental health in how individuals process this traumatic event, and how does it affect their lives afterward?

We highlight the long-term nature of the effects of conflict exposure and find significant impacts of the intensity of conflict exposure before displacement on the social well-being of individuals who have been living in Jordan for, in many cases, more than ten years.

The detrimental effects of conflict on well-being

Forced displacement has profound and enduring consequences. While existing literature suggests that exposure to war-related trauma, basic needs deprivation, and forced family separation can have lasting impacts,⁴ our study reveals a critically nuanced insight: not all conflict exposure is equally impactful.

Exposure to conflict events (of any type) alone shows no significant impact on the social well-being of an individual. In other words, experiencing more conflict does not necessarily lead to long-term reductions in trust, life satisfaction, or social safety nets.

Instead, we find that the key factor for social outcomes is the intensity—or severity—of conflict experiences. Exposure to conflict fatalities dramatically reduces life satisfaction and weakens social safety nets: people's quality of life and their access to support in their social networks go down.

Environmental stress: from crisis to polycrisis

When designing programs and studying populations, the international community tends to look at different crises as separate from one another. Intellectually, this helps simplify things. This simplification may, however, come at the cost of not understanding the whole picture.

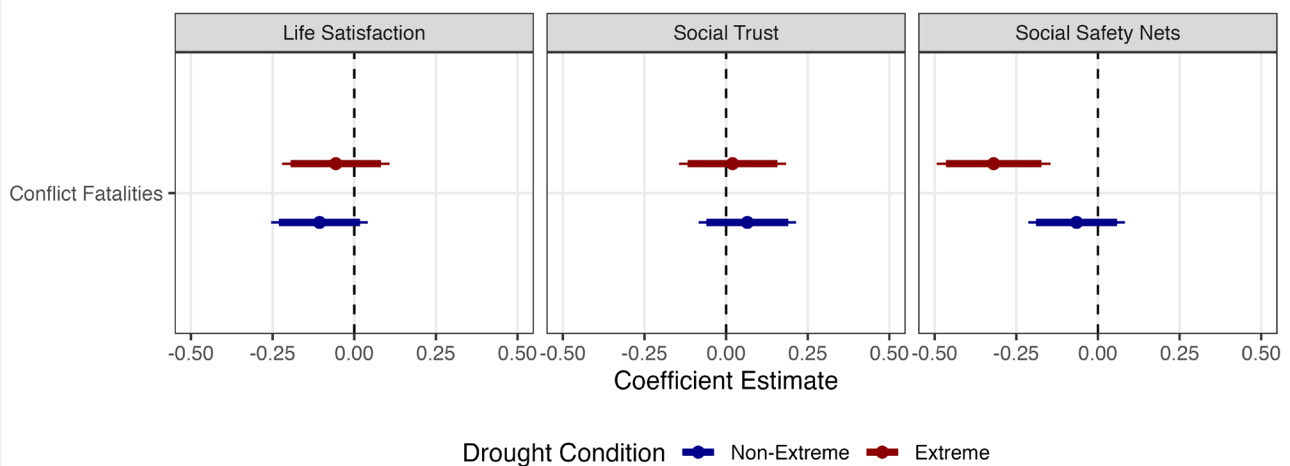
For example, we may understand what happens when a population is affected by drought. We also have some understanding of what happens when a population is displaced. Once a displaced population faces a drought, however, the picture becomes more distorted. The term 'polycrisis', coined by Morin and Kern, refers to situations where several crises coincide, such as displacement, droughts, natural disasters, wars, famines, or any other kind of complex emergency.⁵ While not yet well understood, polycrisis are perilous, as the impacts of different crises may not only add to, but also interact, with each other, potentially creating newer and more severe challenges.

We find that environmental stressors—in the form of droughts—can indeed alter the long-term impacts of conflict exposure, bringing about such polycrisis in conflict-impacted households. Exposure to drought by itself may not significantly change the social impacts of experienced fatalities. Once again, however, the picture changes when we look at severity. The adverse impact on households' social safety nets is significantly worse for those who experienced drought in addition to conflict fatalities, even many years later.

3 The Vulnerability Assessment Framework (VAF) survey was collected in 2023 by UNHCR in both host communities and refugee camps in Jordan to assess vulnerabilities among refugee populations. For more information, please visit <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/109074> and <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/109075>.

4 Hazer, L., and Gredebäck, G. (2023), 'The effects of war, displacement, and trauma on child development.' *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications* 10 (909). Available at: <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41599-023-02438-8>. See also Kondylis, F. (2010), 'Conflict Displacement and labor market outcomes in post-war Bosnia and Herzegovina', *Journal of Development Economics* 93 (2), pp. 235–248. Available at: <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0304387809001060>. See also Singhal, S. (2019), 'Early life shocks and mental health: The long-term effect of war in Vietnam.' *Journal of Development Economics* 141 (102244). Available at: <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0304387818302268>. And also Kovac, D., Efendic, A., and Shapiro, J.N. (2022), 'Forced Displacement, Exposure to Conflict and Long-run Education and Income Inequality: Evidence from Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina', *World Bank Policy Research Working Paper* WPS 10021, (Washington, D.C.: World Bank Group). Available at: <https://www.worldbank.org/content/dam/videos/fcv/2022/dec/20221215-bosnia-croatia-forced-displacement.pdf>.

5 Morin, E., and Kern, A.B. *Homeland Earth: A Manifesto for the New Millennium*. Cresskill, New Jersey: Hampton Press, 1999.



Note: Coefficients represent the change in log-odds of reporting a higher category of social well-being variables for each standard deviation increase in conflict fatalities. Confidence intervals at 95% (thin lines) and 90% (thick lines).

Figure 2. Effects of conflict and environmental stressors on social well-being.

The role of household gender composition

Rather than affecting all refugees uniformly, household structure and gender composition play a significant role in shaping how conflict affects individual well-being. Our analysis shows that individuals living in female-majority households experience significantly worse effects of conflict fatalities on life satisfaction compared to those in gender-balanced households, reflecting increased vulnerability to conflict trauma.

Conversely, individuals in male-majority households show worse effects on social support networks, suggesting that female presence helps maintain valuable social connections despite conflict exposure. These findings emphasise how gender interacts with other factors (like displacement and conflict) to create unique patterns of vulnerability and resilience.

These patterns reveal that assistance programs should consider family structure when designing interventions. For example, individuals in male-majority households might benefit more from programs that strengthen community ties, while those in female-majority households may need targeted well-being and mental health support to address the heightened negative effects of conflict experiences.

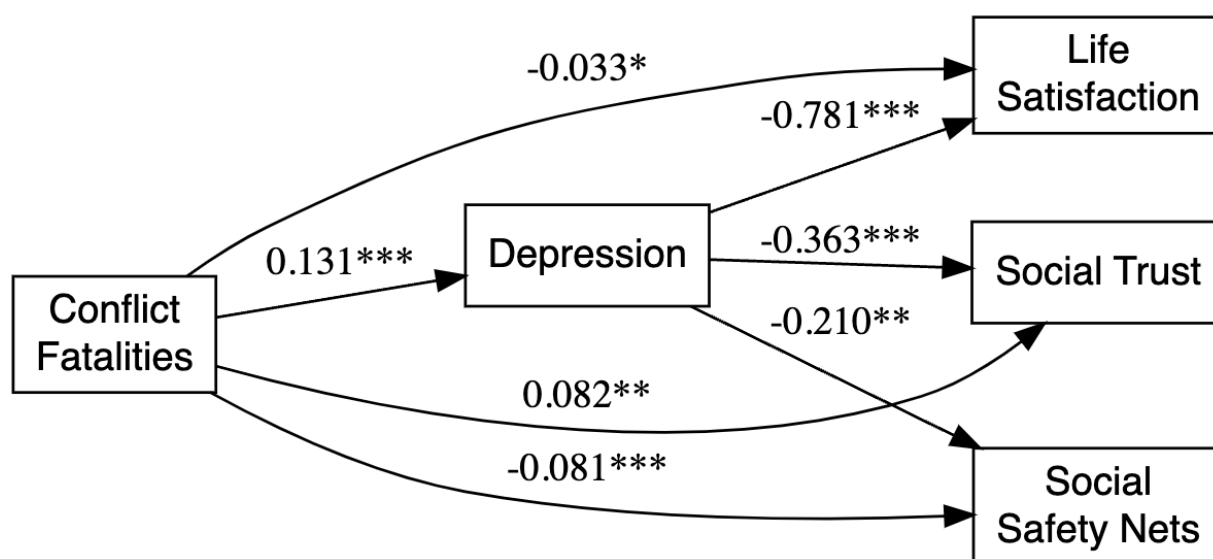
Location matters: camp vs. non-camp

In addition to showing the prominent role of conditions before households had to flee, our study shows that refugee conditions during displacement also have significant impacts on social well-being. Generally, the Syrian refugee population in Jordan lives in one of two circumstances: within dedicated camps, or outside of them, in host communities.

Overlapping this difference with fatality exposure paints a clear picture for social outcomes: the adverse consequences of having experienced severe conflict in Syria on life satisfaction and social safety nets are concentrated among refugees living in camps. The implication here is that refugees living in camps are less well equipped to deal with and overcome the long-lasting collective trauma that violent conflict has left on them. Nevertheless, for individuals living in female-majority households, we see strong negative impacts in both types of locations, suggesting that conflict fatalities negatively affect the well-being of individuals from female-majority households regardless of their environment.

A key to the puzzle: mental health

Our study identified several factors that impact the social well-being of Syrian refugees in Jordan. But for a complete picture, these factors must be



Note: Coefficients show the impact (in log-odds) of one standard deviation increase in conflict fatalities on social well-being variables, both directly and through depression.

Figure 3. The mediating effect of depressive symptoms.

examined in conjunction with the mechanisms by which the impacts unfold. Figure 3 shows the strength and direction of relationships between variables. Our findings show that depression strongly reduces life satisfaction, social trust, and social safety nets. While conflict directly affects refugee well-being, its strongest impact pathway operates via increasing levels of depressive symptoms. This effect is particularly relevant for women.

Policy implications and recommendations

Given the implications of the impacts of previous life events in the social well-being of refugees, and the channels by which these effects occur, it is essential that policymakers continue to study exactly how violent conflict and other contributing factors, such as environmental stressors, have shaped, and continue to shape, their lives and livelihoods. This will ensure that effective and efficient interventions can be designed and implemented.

Conflict legacies carry over across borders and time

Displaced populations often face challenges and discrimination before displacement – at their point of origin—and after displacement, at their

destination. The psychological and physical stress of these experiences, coupled with contributing factors such as environmental stressors, create enormous psychological and social challenges that cannot be addressed in isolation from one another. When designing programming for forcibly displaced populations, it is critical to understand what exactly the population has experienced and how the social outcomes of these experiences interact.

The findings of this study are clear: Syrian refugees in Jordan are still suffering from the impacts of exposure to traumatic events, including death, from before their displacement, in many cases more than a decade after their arrival. The trauma of these events continues to shape their day-to-day well-being, creating hurdles for their integration and long-term prospects. Additionally, the experience of severe environmental stress in their location after displacement is a significant contributor to the reduction of their social well-being. It is also clear that one of the key mechanisms of these effects is mental health, with women refugees being more affected by conflict exposure, while men are more affected by conflict fatalities.

Key takeaways and programming recommendations

1. Exposure to severe forms of violent conflict affects refugees through mental health impacts

including depression. To support the social well-being of refugees in host countries, offering mental health support as part of programming outputs would be highly beneficial.

2. Women refugees who arrived from areas with more conflict events show significantly increased levels of depressive symptoms, while men are more affected by conflict fatalities. This should be taken into consideration when designing programmes with a gender-sensitive lens.
3. There are stark differences in pre-displacement experiences within refugee populations. Those who have experienced particularly intense conflict before displacement are more likely to suffer more pronounced impacts, even years after their displacement.
4. One-size-fits-all approaches to support refugee populations risk, at best, to be too broad and, at worst, to exacerbate existing problems.
5. Polycrises exacerbate the impacts of conflict exposure. Particular attention must be given to those who experienced both severe conflict and environmental stress.
6. Location matters. Refugee populations in camps have lower life satisfaction and weaker social safety nets. Programming needs to be sensitive to these differences.

About the authors

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About ISDC

International Security and Development Center (ISDC) is a non-profit academic institute based in Berlin, Germany. We conduct research to improve lives and livelihoods shaped by violent conflict, fragility, and humanitarian emergencies. We believe in the power of data and evidence for understanding and alleviating suffering around the world.

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The Cross-Border Conflict Evidence, Policy and Trends (XCEPT) research programme brings together world-leading experts and local researchers to examine conflict-affected borderlands, how conflicts connect across borders, and the drivers of violent and peaceful behaviour. Funded by UK International Development, XCEPT offers actionable research to inform policies and programmes that support peace. The views expressed in this material do not necessarily reflect the UK government's official policies.

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