

As 2016 drew to a bloody close in Syria and the government took back control over eastern Aleppo, over [4.8m Syrian refugees](#) continued to seek safety and a means of living a dignified life across the Middle East. There are 2.8m Syrians currently registered in Turkey, over a million in Lebanon, and around 656,000 in Jordan. To put this figure into context, in the so-called European “refugee crisis” a total of [884,461 Syrian refugees](#) applied for asylum in Europe between April 2011 and October 2016.

Media focus on international forced migration continues to leave internal displacement largely invisible to international audiences. It also hides the realities of involuntary immobility – people who are “internally stuck” – and those who are physically prevented from crossing Syria’s borders to its neighbouring countries. What will 2017 bring for those people who have been displaced by the ongoing Syrian conflict?

Continually seeking safety

In December 2016, over [6.3m people](#) remained displaced inside Syria’s borders. Syria’s internally displaced people (IDPs) remain at risk both within the towns and cities they once called home, and also when attempting to escape. These IDPs include Syrian citizens, but also over [430,000 Palestinian refugees](#), an estimated [5,000 stateless Kurds](#), and thousands of Iraqi refugees. [Evacuation buses](#) – including those from eastern Aleppo and villages in Idlib province in December 2016 – were attacked and torched. IDPs, stayees, and evacuees alike both fear, and often face, a similar fate.

In June 2016, Jordan effectively closed its border with Syria, citing security concerns. As a result, more than 75,000 Syrian refugees have spent more than six months [stranded](#) on the Syrian-Jordanian border, including in the Ruqban and Hadalat camps.

As early as 2012, Jordan had already [barred](#) the entry of certain

groups of refugees fleeing Syria: all [Palestinian refugees who had been living in Syria](#); unaccompanied men without family ties in Jordan; and people without valid identity documents.

At the Ruqban border crossing, in the far north-east of Jordan, the number of people in the border camps has been increasing dramatically. [Satellite images](#) published by Amnesty International showed that 90 shelters were present in July 2014. By the end of July 2016, this had increased to 6,563, and by September [8,295](#).

With only [one delivery](#) of humanitarian aid allowed between June and August 2016, satellite images have also documented [graves and burial sites](#) there. Desperately needed aid deliveries resumed in [October](#). However, such deliveries remain under threat, as do the lives of the camps' residents – the camp was reportedly struck by a [car bombing](#) in October and an [IED explosion](#) in mid-December.

The recent history of the region is scarred with barriers to entry and border camps that violate the international principle of non-refoulement – which prohibits refugees from being pushed back over a border into a territory where their lives or freedoms are at risk. Between 2006 and 2010, thousands of Iraqi Palestinians were left stranded at the al-Tanf and al-Waleed camps on the Syrian-Iraqi border after the end of the 2003 Iraq War. The Libyan War also left thousands of Libyan and non-Libyan migrants and refugees, including Iraqis and Palestinians, [stranded at a camp on the Salloum border crossing](#) between Libya and Egypt in 2011.

Even after a conflict is officially declared to be “over”, thousands of people can remain stranded in border camps for years.

Borders will become tougher to cross

As in Jordan, Lebanon's border controls have been increasing

over the past year, with border closures and [push-backs](#) to Syria occurring on and off since at least 2013. Michel Aoun's election as Lebanese president at the end of October 2016 is expected to lead to even greater restrictions on Syrian refugees. Aoun's [inaugural speech](#) called directly for Syrian refugees to return to their country of origin, irrespective of the conflict.

Aoun, along with [other political leaders](#) in Lebanon, have proposed the creation of "safe zones" within Syria, in the expectation that refugees in neighbouring countries could be moved back. The international community has not yet supported such a proposal, which – history clearly tells us – would likely result in the creation of hyper-militarised zones that are far from "safe" for those people corralled there.

Even Turkey – which has been heralded as having the most accessible border policy out of these three countries – started building a [concrete wall](#) along its 900km border with Syria in 2014. It is due to be completed by spring 2017. In addition to [closing 17 of its 19 border crossings](#), Turkey has also used physical force [on a regular basis throughout 2016](#) to prevent Syrian refugees from entering its territory.

This year will invariably witness new and ongoing border closures and push-backs over the Turkish-Syrian border in light of both the ongoing unrest across Turkey and the [EU-Turkey deal](#) that allows European states to return those refugees who have crossed the Mediterranean to Turkey. This deal has helped to provide an air of legitimacy for Turkey to close its border with Syria in the name of protecting the EU, while sacrificing refugees from Syria in the process.

Lives and livelihoods

Despite the Zaatari and Azraq refugee camps in Jordan featuring heavily in media and political accounts of Syrian refugees, fewer than 10% of all refugees from Syria across the Middle East live in camps. Instead, more than 4.3m – in addition to

hundreds of thousands of new and established Palestinian and Iraqi refugees – live alongside host communities in cities, towns and rural areas across Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey.

Figure: Syrian street vendors working in the alleyways of Baddawi refugee camp, North Lebanon. Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, Author provided

In Turkey, 38% of all Syrian refugees are in the poor regions of the south-east and 29% in the south of the country. In one city, Killis, they make up 49% of the population. Employment opportunities in these poor towns and cities, even in the informal market, remain low, and large proportions of both refugees and host communities continue to live in acute poverty. In Jordan, an estimated 93% of Syrian refugees in urban areas are living under the poverty line.

In Lebanon, over a million refugees from Syria are obliged to pay a prohibitive fee every year to renew their residence permits to remain in the country legally, and face numerous restrictions on formal employment. This has meant that increasing numbers of refugees from Syria are forced to live in hiding. Syrian men are particularly vulnerable to arrest at the many checkpoints across Lebanon and can find themselves at risk of immediate deportation. As a result, hundreds of thousands of women and children continue to engage in unsafe and exploitative forms of labour to survive.

Palestinian refugees living in Lebanon have for over 60 years been prohibited from employment in over 20 professions, including medicine, law and engineering. Newcomers can only enter formal employment if they are sponsored by a Lebanese employer through a system which effectively leads to exploitative labour. A similar sponsorship system exists in Jordan and Turkey.

The international community is encouraging host states to grant Syrian refugees legal access to the labour market in Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey to overcome these vulnerabilities. But given

high unemployment and impoverishment levels among each country's own citizens this is unlikely.

Turkey has been heralded for accepting such a large number of Syrians and also for officially developing policies to grant Syrians the right to work legally in the country. But between January and April 2016, only 2,000 Syrians applied for permission to work in Turkey and the actual number of permits issued remains undisclosed.

As states continue to develop increasingly restrictive policies, and as the international community continues to fail to deliver its promises to meaningfully support Syrian refugees, local communities will continue to be the most important sources of support, even when they themselves are highly vulnerable. This is the focus of the ongoing Refugee Hosts project, that I am leading through research with nine local communities across Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey. Regional and international leaders alike have a great deal to learn from the humanity and hospitality of these communities.