



International  
Labour  
Organization

## Work permits for Syrian refugees in Jordan



International Labour Organization  
Regional Office for Arab States  
2015



## Background

To date, there are around 630,000 Syrians registered as refugees in Jordan.<sup>1</sup> Unofficial estimates put the number of unregistered refugees at around 741,000 people.<sup>2</sup>

Unlike migrant workers of other nationalities, Syrian refugees fleeing conflict in their home country do not enter host countries with the intention to work. Yet, most refugees arrive to their host country with little to no economic resources, and it therefore becomes inevitable that finding work is essential to make ends meet.

According to a recent International Labour Organization (ILO) study<sup>3</sup>, 99% of Syrian refugees work outside Jordan's labour regulations and in the informal economy. This subsequently means that almost all Syrian refugee workers are employed in jobs, which are not subject to national labour legislation, income taxation, social protection, entitlement to certain employment benefits or have a written contract.

The study also found that Syrian workers in Jordan are willing to accept lower wages and harsher working conditions than Jordanians, competing with Jordanians in some sectors and further increasing the informality of the labour market. This is putting more pressure on Jordanian authorities to enforce existing labour standards such as minimum wage, working hours and safety at work.

Even prior to the crisis, Jordan was facing a number of labour market challenges, such as high national unemployment, dependency on low wage and foreign labour, which has left the country unable to meet its nationals' economic opportunity needs.

## Refugees' right and access to work in Jordan

Jordan lacks domestic refugee legislation and policy that would outline concrete measures and provisions for planning, rights and protection for its refugee population.

Syrians entering the country as asylum seekers or who are registered as refugees with UNHCR are not given residency, which, in turn, seriously limits their ability to seek lawful employment.

While Jordan asserts that it has given Syrian refugees priority over other non-Jordanians in obtaining work permits, very little has been done to facilitate the work permit procedure. However, there are specific guidelines for obtaining work permits in certain sectors in accordance with Jordanian regulations.

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<sup>1</sup> Statistics for October 2015. For updated data and information, see

<sup>2</sup> Assessment Capacities Project (ACAPS). "Syria Needs Analysis Project, April 2014", page 18. Available at [www.acaps.org](http://www.acaps.org)

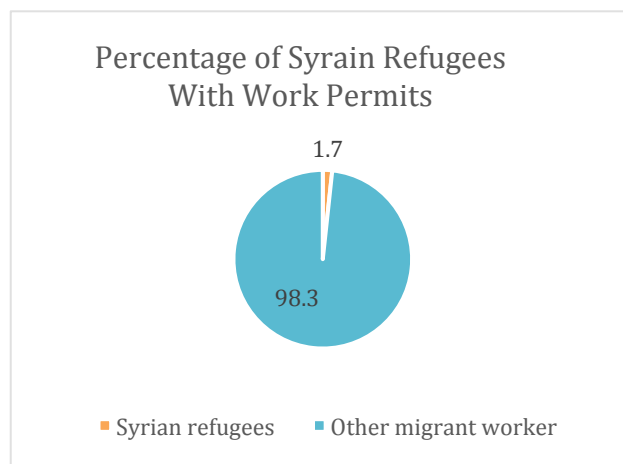
<sup>3</sup> For more information on the ILO study, entitled "Impact of Syrian Refugees on the Jordanian Labour Market", see [http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---arabstates/---ro-beirut/documents/publication/wcms\\_242021.pdf](http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---arabstates/---ro-beirut/documents/publication/wcms_242021.pdf)

## Challenges

- According to the Ministry of Labour, Syrian refugees are given priority over other foreign nationals to apply for work permits, provided the positions they are applying for do not compete with Jordanians. However, given the generally low skill sets of Syrian workers, many end up competing with lower-skilled Jordanian workers for the same jobs. Consequently, Syrians either do not apply for work permits or are denied, leading many to engage in paid work without any work permit.
- Although under Jordanian law, employers are required to pay their workers' fees, Syrian workers interviewed by the ILO say that in practice, it is the workers themselves who end up paying the fees required for the work permit as well as the social security contribution. These fees are too high for most refugees to afford<sup>4</sup>.
- Syrian refugees and other foreign workers applying for a work permit must pass a background security check. Given the complex security dynamics of the Syrian crisis and the number of refugees currently in Jordan, in addition to loss of identity documents, this requirement also proves very challenging for Syrians.

### **MIGRANT WORKERS WITH WORK PERMITS:**

According to the Ministry of Labour's annual report for 2014, out of the **324,410** workers who obtained work permits, only **5,700** of them were Syrians, mostly in the food service sector, such as restaurants and the manufacturing sector. This makes **around 1.7%** of the total foreign workforce with work permits.<sup>5</sup>

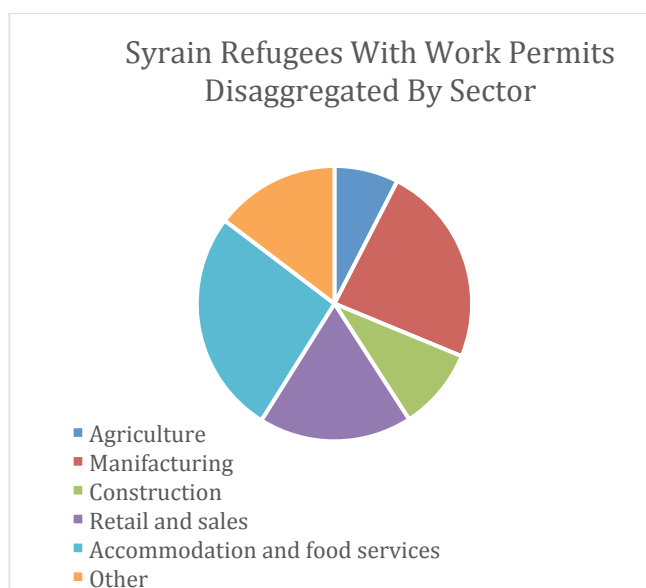


Source: MOL annual report 2014

<sup>4</sup> The total costs for one work permit can be up to 800 JD in construction sector

<sup>5</sup> The Ministry of Labour's annual report 2014, page 101. See

<http://mol.gov.jo/Documents/المكتبة/التقارير/السنوية2014/Taqrer%20Ministry%20of%20Labour%202014.pdf>



Source: MOL annual report 2014

## Acquiring a work permit in Jordan

### ***Are Syrian workers entitled to work permits in Jordan?***

Yes, Syrians are entitled to acquiring work permits in Jordan. The requisites for applying for and obtaining work permits are predominantly similar to those of other non-Jordanian workers in Jordan. According to the Ministry of Labour, one main difference is that Syrian workers who have entered Jordan through unofficial borders or who are residents of refugee camps are not entitled to work permits.<sup>6</sup>

As with other non-Jordanian workers, Syrians may apply for permits provided they are applying for positions that do not compete with Jordanians and the sectors they are applying for are not “closed” to non-Jordanians. Yet even in open sectors, Syrian workers are limited by foreign workers’ quotas within each sector as well as by specific quota for Syrian investors for employing Syrian refugees.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Syrians who enter through unofficial crossings are often met by the Jordanian authorities who provide them with shelter or takes them to one of the camps. Identity documents are often taken away from arriving refugees, limiting their freedom of movement and right to work in their host country. For more information, see ILO publications entitled “Access to work for Syrian refugees in Jordan: a discussion paper on labour and refugee laws and policies” [http://www.ilo.org/beirut/publications/WCMS\\_357950/lang--en/index.htm](http://www.ilo.org/beirut/publications/WCMS_357950/lang--en/index.htm).

<sup>7</sup> See the quotas table below for further details.

**Professions and industries in which only Jordanian citizens are allowed to work in, include:**

- Medical professions
- Engineering professions
- Administrative and accounting professions
- Clerical work including typing and secretarial work
- Switchboards, telephones and connections works
- Warehouses works
- Sales works, including all groups
- Haircutting works (coiffeur)
- Decoration works
- Teaching professions, including all specialties except for the rare ones when there is no Jordanian available
- Fuel selling in main cities
- Electricity professions
- Mechanical and car repair professions
- Drivers
- Guards and servants
- Buildings servants<sup>8</sup>

***What documents are required when applying for a work permit?***

The work permit is valid for one year. Syrian workers and their employers must provide the Labour Directorate with the following:

- Application form
- Two copies of the work contract
- Valid vocational license of the establishment
- A copy of a valid passport for the worker
- Proof from the Social Security Corporation of workers' subscription
- Ministry of Interior's identity card

If the worker is applying for the first time, the application is referred to a committee at the ministry for approval.

***What are the fees for obtaining a work permit?***

Under Jordanian law, employers are required to pay for a worker's permit. The fees range from 170 – 370 Jordanian Dinars (\$240-\$522). Yet, these fees are subject to increase according to the Ministry of Labour and in some cases, they may reach as high as 700 JD (\$986).

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<sup>8</sup> For more details, see <http://www.hg.org/article.asp?id=23748>

## Recommendations

### ILO recommendations, include:

- Easing the procedures involved in obtaining valid work permits for Syrian refugees from the Ministry of Labour by disseminating clear instructions to the Labour directorates in the field around the Kingdom.
- Disseminating work permit guidelines within refugee communities.
- Linking work permits to the Ministry of Interior's identity cards to replace the need for Syrian passports.
- Delinking the work permit applications from an employer.
- Lowering the cost of the work permit to encourage refugees to apply.

## Case Studies

Faisal is one of more than 600,000 Syrian refugees who have fled to Jordan to escape the bloody conflict tearing their home country apart. Around 100,000 of these Syrians live in refugee camps. But the rest, including Faisal, have found shelter in existing urban and rural communities, particularly in the capital Amman and the northern governorates of Irbid and Mafraq.

He says that applying for a work permit is impossible, so instead he just relies on irregular work in construction to help support his wife and four daughters.

***"My situation was very good in Syria. Work was good. Now in Jordan, I am working in construction, which is the only work available. The work here is very different from what I used to do in Syria but I have to work to pay the rent and support my children."***

***"We Syrians don't have the right to work because we are registered refugees. This means we aren't entitled to work permits. So we rely on working independently because we aren't allowed to work."***

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Ahmad<sup>9</sup> came to Jordan in 2011 to help support his wife, five children and ailing parents whom he was forced to leave behind in war-torn Syrian.

After almost five years working in construction in Amman, he has finally managed to obtain a work permit. But the process, he says, was agonizing, even though he

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<sup>9</sup> Not his real name.

entered the country legally and his passport is valid. Even the high fees, which the employer is required to pay, had to be provided by Ahmad.

***“After months of begging my employer to apply for my work permit, he finally agreed. When we first arrived at the labour directorate, everyone was surprised to see a Syrian applying for a work permit. It was almost unheard of.”***

***“It took us six months of going back and forth to the labour directorate office to finally get the work permit. The process was complicated and there were no clear guidelines as to what was needed. But I have my work permit now and I hope this will help improve my situation.”***

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Contrary to popular belief, the Jordanian government says Syrian refugees can easily be given work permits under certain conditions.

Hani Sawalha, of the Migration Department at the Ministry of Labour: ***“If Syrian workers enter the country in an official way and they are not residents of a camp they have the right to a work permits. If they apply through the right channels with all the valid documents, then they should not face any issues in obtaining a work permit, provided the sector or profession is open to non-Jordanians.”***

Hussein Quran, the director of Labour Department in Irbid: ***“A large number of Syrian refugees have settled in the Governorate of Irbid. The majority of them have entered the labour market, which has caused a degree of disruption and chaos. Yet, any Syrian worker who possesses a passport and a security identification card can acquire a work permit for sectors (which are open to non-Jordanians nationals) as long as the limit on their numbers hasn’t been reached.”***



## Quota of migrant workers based on economic sectors

Sector	% of Jordanian Workers	% of Migrant Workers
Fuel	60%	40%
Support Services	70%	30%
Unrated Restaurants	55%	45%
Car wash profession	30%	70%
Construction	50%	50%

### Industrial sector

Sector	% of Jordanian Workers	% of Migrant Workers
Chemicals	80%	20%
Mining	85%	15%
Food	80	20%
Therapeutic	95%	5%
Engineering	85%	15%
Printing and packaging	80%	20%
Wooden	65%	35%
Construction	50%	50%
Plastic	40%	60%
Clothing industry except QIZ	60%	40%
Garments	60%	40%
Garments with QIZ	30%	70%

### Hotels and Touristic getaways

Sector	% of Jordanian Workers	% of Migrant Workers
5 stars	88%	12%
4,3 stars	85%	15%
2,1 stars	75%	25%

### Syrian Investors

Syrian Investors	% of Jordanian Workers	% of Migrant Workers
Outside the industrial areas	40%	60%
Inside the industrial areas	30%	70%

Source: Ministry of Labour



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