

# The True Samaritans Hosting 1.5 Million Refugees has not Caused Protest in Jordan

Steffen Huck

It was the second day in our new home in Amman: I turned on the kitchen tap, there was a little stream of water, and then nothing. Friendly neighbours explained to us that we had a cistern that is filled up by the city once a week. Once this water ration is used up, our only option is to turn to the private market. A telephone call and half an hour later, a tanker pulled up outside. The driver and his mate pulled a hosepipe through the garden, ran 50 cubic metres of water into the cistern and pocketed 50 Jordanian Dinar. That's around €65. In Germany, the same amount costs around €10.

Jordan is one of the most arid countries in the world. The formerly mighty River Jordan is now just a stream; at the site of Jesus's baptism, where I saw it for the first time, it is little more than three metres wide. In the north, too much water has been pumped out for too long by other countries. When it rains in Jordan, the mood is as joyful as it is in Germany on the first warm, sunny days of spring.

Now, with an estimated one and a half million refugees in the country, the public water supply in many parts of Jordan no longer comes once a week, but only once a fortnight. People who can't afford the water supplied by expensive private companies must do with just half the amount – half of what must be said is not a particularly generous quantity to start with.

Native Jordanians will tell you how difficult things are – but you won't hear any protests from them about the refugees, although only around a fifth live in refugee camps, while the rest are accommodated in Jordanian towns and villages, which has put great pressure on rents: alongside water, this is the second fundamental area of life that has been hugely compromised by the refugee crisis. The third is the labour market: at its lower end, wages are falling, which may benefit some businesses, but is hardly good news for the majority of Jordanians. The construction sector in Amman is booming, with hardly a block where there isn't some kind of building work going on, and noise everywhere in the city. And of course, anyone who has an ear for it can hear Syrian accents

on the construction sites and in restaurant kitchens around the country.

During his visit to Jordan in May 2015, German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier saw the refugee situation for himself. There are currently around 1.5 million refugees living in a country with a population of six million. He said that Jordan's humanitarian achievements amount to a near miracle.

One and a half million refugees in a country of around six million inhabitants: that's the equivalent of Germany taking in 20 million refugees. What's more, Jordan is a developing country with few resources; the average income per capita here is only a quarter of that in Germany.

It is a near-miracle that the situation has not led to riots, or protests at the very least. It is also a miracle that this very fact has drawn little attention from the Western public. Not that the West is ignoring the region itself, but reports are dominated by the horrors of Islamist terrorism. Whenever pillars fall, world heritage sites are destroyed, and another bestial murder is committed by "Daesh" (otherwise known as ISIS, or ISIL or IS), everyone's eyes are on the Arabian Peninsula.

This focus on bad news leads to a sadly distorted picture of the Arab region and its dominant religion, which causes all 1.6 billion followers of Islam worldwide to suffer. Hardly any of our Arab friends in Jordan are without a specific story to contribute in this respect: they get evil looks from fellow flyers at the airport gate, are grilled by border control officials, and on entry to Israel they even have to take off the baby's nappy so the guards can make sure there are no explosives hidden inside.

But in Amman, daily life is a splendidly colourful mish-mash of ideologies and religions. Women in headscarves at the wheel of the new S-class, parking outside supermarkets where almost all the other female customers go bare-headed; bankers worrying about whether it will create a bad impression if they offer products that conform to Sharia; improvised

prayer rooms in offices where the majority of workers are Christians; Muslim employees who would gladly do their Christian boss a favour, but who really can't help her carry boxes of wine; Muslim dignitaries who, by contrast, know all there is to know about Burgundy.

Admittedly, even here society has become much more conservative over the last 30 years. The upper class, which tends to be more liberal, is troubled by this, but the handling of these circumstances (which, it must be said, the West's policies and rhetoric of demonisation have helped to create) is refreshingly tolerant – something for which I am grateful, as a member of a Christian minority. The Jordanians are consistent in their charity: they are offering a new home here not just to the Muslim refugees from Syria, but also to the Christians who have made it here from Northern Iraq. It has now become clear to everyone that this will probably be these refugees' home for the foreseeable future.

An unchecked stream of refugees: there are currently 83,000 Syrians in the Zaatari refugee camp in Jordan, who have fled the war in their homeland. According to UN figures, 3,300 children have to work in Zaatari to help support their Syrian families. Around 13 per cent of the children in the camp to the north-west of Amman are in paid employment, according to a report by children's charities UNICEF and Save the Children.

## Jordan under strain

The Hashemite royal family plays a key role in all this. In spite of its huge domestic economic problems and the external threat from "Daesh" in the north and north-east of the country, Jordan has so far managed to hold together a country that is already shaped by enormous diversity, and in which, even before the Syrian crisis, it was not easy to reconcile the native

Jordanian tribes with the Palestinians, and later the Iraqi refugees.

Now the tourist industry, traditionally one of the most important areas of the country's economy, is close to collapse. When we travel towards the Iraqi border, to visit the desert palaces that have been made UNESCO World Heritage sites, we cause genuine amazement: European visitors just don't come here any more. But the journey through Jordan, which offers tremendous cultural variety – from the world's largest agglomeration of upright Roman pillars in Jerash, to the miracle of Petra, the natural wonders of Wadi Rum and the diver's paradise of Aqaba – is no more unsafe than a trip on the London Underground. This is thanks to a hugely efficient military, who control sensitive areas and the borders (and whose soldiers, despite being heavily armed, greet travellers with a friendliness that one might like to see from US border officials, for example).

Jordan is groaning under the weight of the task with which its neighbouring states have confronted it, but the rest of the world is only providing a little help. Additional development aid remains limited in spite of all assurances: the international transfer payments to Jordan have risen by around half a billion euros as a result of the refugee crisis; but per refugee, that only comes to just over €300. And while more support would help the country, and therefore peace in the region, at least in the short term, it would be much more helpful in the long term if the Christian world acknowledged that the message of Isa ibn Maryam, whom we call Jesus, is nowhere being followed as consistently around the world as it is in Jordan.



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