

Negotiating Cultural Exclusion: Experiences and Coping Strategies of Syrian Refugees in Jordan

Ola Majthoub 

Abstract. *This study investigates cultural exclusion as experienced by Syrian refugees in Jordan, focusing on how exclusion is produced in everyday social interactions and how refugees respond to it. A qualitative research design was used, based on face-to-face, in-depth interviews with 13 Syrian refugees residing in Mafraq Governorate who were recruited through snowball sampling. The interviews explored participants' relationships with the host community, experiences of acceptance and rejection, and coping strategies. Descriptive qualitative analysis was used to organize and interpret the accounts thematically. The findings show mixed experiences of coexistence. Some participants described hospitality, cooperation, and meaningful exchange with Jordanians, whereas others reported social distancing, discrimination, limited interaction, and exclusion linked to nationality and perceived cultural differences. Participants frequently relied on Syrian social networks, silence, conflict avoidance, selective withdrawal, and emphasis on shared religious identity as coping strategies. The findings suggest that cultural exclusion is not a uniform condition, but a dynamic process shaped by social boundaries, interaction contexts, and unequal power relations. The study contributes context-specific evidence from Mafraq and highlights the importance of policies and community initiatives that promote sustained, meaningful interaction between refugees and host communities.*

Keywords: *Syrian refugees, cultural exclusion, Jordan, social integration, marginalization, intercultural relations, social identity*

National University of Public Service, Amman, Jordan

E-mail: Ola.majthoub@gmail.com

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Mədəni xaricetmənin razılaşdırılması: İordaniyadakı Suriyalı qaçqınların təcrübələri və mübarizə strategiyaları

Ola Məhcub 

Xülasə. *Bu tədqiqat Suriyalı qaçqınların İordaniyada yaşadığı mədəni xaricetmə (təcridolunma) prosesini araşdırır; xüsusilə də xaricetmənin gündəlik sosial qarşılıqlı əlaqələrdə necə yarandığına və qaçqınların buna necə reaksiya verdiyinə diqqət yetirir. Qaropu üsulu ilə Mafraq mühafizəsində məskunlaşan 13 suriyalı qaçqınla üz-üzə, dərinləməsinə müsahibələrə əsaslanan keyfiyyətli tədqiqat dizaynından istifadə edilmişdir. Müsahibələrdə iştirakçıların qəbuledici icma ilə münasibətləri, qəbul və*

rəddedilmə təcrübələri, eləcə də mübarizə strategiyaları araşdırılmışdır. Hesabatları tematik olaraq təşkil etmək və şərh etmək üçün təsviri keyfiyyət təhlilindən istifadə olunmuşdur. Nəticələr birgəyaşayışla bağlı qarışıq təcrübələri üzə çıxarır. Bəzi iştirakçılar iordaniyalılarla qonaqpərvərlik, əməkdaşlıq və mənalı mübadilədən danışdıqları halda, digərləri milli mənsubiyyət və qavranılan mədəni fərqlərlə əlaqəli sosial məsafələşmə, ayrı-seçkillik, məhdud qarşılıqlı əlaqə və təcrid olunduqlarını bildirdilər. İştirakçılar mübarizə strategiyaları kimi tez-tez suriyalı sosial şəbəkələrə, səssizliyə, münafiqlikdən qaçmağa, seçici şəkildə uzaqlaşmağa və ortaq dini kimliyin vurğulanmasına güvənmişlər. Nəticələr göstərir ki, mədəni xaricətmə yeknəsəq bir vəziyyət deyil, əksinə, sosial sərhədlər, qarşılıqlı əlaqə kontekstləri və qeyri-bərabər güc münasibətləri ilə formalaşan dinamik bir prosesdir. Tədqiqat Mafrəqdan kontekstə xas sübutlar təqdim edir və qaçqınlar ilə qəbuledici icmalar arasında davamlı, mənalı qarşılıqlı əlaqəni təşviq edən siyasətlərin və icma təşəbbüslərinin vacibliyini vurğulayır.

Açar sözlər: Suriyalı qaçqınlar, mədəni xaricətmə, İordaniya, sosial integrasiya, marjinalaşma, mədəniyyətlərarası əlaqələr, sosial kimlik

Milli İdarəetmə Universiteti, Amman, İordaniya

E-poçt: Ola.majthoub@gmail.com

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Introduction

Forced displacement remains a major global challenge. At the end of 2025, an estimated 117.8 million people worldwide were forcibly displaced as a result of conflict, persecution, violence, human rights violations, or events seriously disturbing public order (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), 2026). For refugees, displacement involves more than physical relocation. Entry into a host society requires navigating unfamiliar institutional arrangements, social expectations, and cultural practices while rebuilding everyday relationships and a sense of belonging.

Refugee integration is therefore best understood as multidimensional. The framework developed by Ager and Strang (2008) identifies employment, housing, education, health, social connections, language and cultural knowledge, safety, and rights as interrelated domains of integration. Later work has emphasized that integration is not simply a one-directional process of refugee adaptation; it also depends on the opportunities, institutions, and relationships created within the host society (Strang & Ager, 2010). Cultural inclusion is central to this process because participation and belonging can be constrained even when refugees share language, ethnicity, or religion with members of the host population.

Jordan provides an important setting for examining these dynamics. Research has documented policy efforts to incorporate Syrian refugees into the labour market while also identifying continuing institutional and socioeconomic constraints (AlShwawra, 2021). More recent research in Al-Mafrəq shows that coexistence between Syrian refugees and Jordanians is shaped simultaneously by cooperation, shared interests, economic pressures, security concerns, and tensions in community relations (Kamruzzaman et al., 2025). These patterns suggest that integration cannot be assessed only through employment or access to services. Everyday perceptions of acceptance, social distance, cultural difference, and group boundaries also shape whether refugees experience themselves as participants in the host society.

This article examines cultural exclusion among Syrian refugees living in Mafrəq Governorate. It focuses on refugees' own accounts of everyday interaction, the cultural and social boundaries they

perceive, and the strategies they use to cope with exclusion. By foregrounding lived experience, the study seeks to clarify how inclusion and exclusion can coexist within the same local environment and how refugees exercise agency within unequal social relations.

Literature Review

Cultural Inclusion, Integration, and Belonging

Contemporary refugee research increasingly treats inclusion as a relational process rather than an expectation that displaced people abandon their cultural practices and assimilate into a host society. Inclusive approaches stress mutual adaptation, participation, recognition, and institutional access (Dobson et al., 2021). Belonging is particularly important because it captures the subjective dimension of membership: whether individuals feel accepted, recognized, and able to participate in the social worlds around them. Yuval-Davis (2011) conceptualizes belonging as socially situated and shaped by boundaries of membership, identity, and power.

Social connections can strengthen integration by providing emotional support, information, and access to wider community life. Strang and Quinn (2021) found that social connections are strongly connected to refugee well-being, while recent evidence shows that neighbourly interaction and community participation can improve health and subjective well-being during resettlement (Song et al., 2025). At the same time, strong ties within an ethnic community do not automatically translate into a sense of belonging to the wider host society. Khoury and Kohlenberger (2025), studying Syrian refugees in Austria, describe an "excluded belonging" in which refugees may have strong family and co-ethnic ties while remaining weakly connected to the broader society.

Structural and Social Barriers to Inclusion

Cultural exclusion is often reinforced by structural disadvantage. Restrictions on mobility, employment, documentation, services, and public space can deepen social distance and limit opportunities for meaningful interaction. Özkazanç (2021), for example, shows how poverty, spatial segregation, and transportation constraints can reproduce social exclusion among Syrian refugees. In Jordan, Hartmann et al. (2023) found an important relationship between perceived discrimination and poverty among Syrian refugee women, demonstrating how economic vulnerability and social exclusion can overlap. Recent work also shows that marginalization is shaped by age, gender, nationality, and legal position. Pincock et al. (2025), drawing on research with displaced youth in Jordan and Lebanon, show that both formal and informal exclusion influence civic identities and relationships with host states. These findings are important because they demonstrate that exclusion is not generated only through formal policy. It is also produced through everyday interpersonal encounters, unequal status, and expectations about who legitimately belongs.

Education and Institutional Belonging

Educational institutions are significant sites of inclusion because they bring refugees and host-community members into repeated contact. In Jordan, Morrice and Salem (2023) show that refugee inclusion in national education systems raises questions of quality, recognition, representation, and social justice, not only physical access to schooling. Research in Türkiye similarly finds that school belonging among Syrian refugee students is associated with school acceptance, teacher-student relationships, social alienation, and educational aspirations (Mammadova & Aypay, 2023). At the university level, Çelik and Ozenc-Ira (2024) document experiences of marginalization and social isolation among Syrian refugee students, while also emphasizing the role of supportive academic relationships in strengthening participation and belonging.

Community Participation and Cultural Engagement

Community participation can create opportunities for contact, social-network expansion, and psychological integration. A scoping review by Zhang et al. (2023) shows that community participation can help migrants address marginalization and cross-cultural challenges, although

participation does not necessarily produce integration when encounters occur in biased or exclusionary environments. Cultural participation can also create alternative spaces for identity negotiation. Karaköse (2025), in research on Syrian refugees in Istanbul, demonstrates how art-based practices can support expression, challenge stereotypes, and facilitate engagement with host communities.

Policy Approaches to Refugee Inclusion

Policy responses increasingly recognize that refugee integration requires more than short-term assistance. A recent scoping review of integration interventions found that programmes in education, health and social care, employment, and housing can produce positive outcomes when they are sustained and embedded in local systems (Namata et al., 2025). For cultural inclusion, this implies a need for policies that create repeated opportunities for meaningful social contact, reduce discrimination, and support participation rather than relying solely on refugees' individual capacity to adapt.

Research

Existing research in Jordan has examined labour-market integration (AlShwawra, 2021), discrimination and poverty (Hartmann et al., 2023), education (Morrice & Salem, 2023), youth civic identities (Pincock et al., 2025), and host-refugee coexistence in Mafraq (Kamruzzaman et al., 2025). However, less attention has been given to how adult Syrian refugees themselves interpret everyday cultural exclusion in Mafraq and the strategies they use to manage these experiences in routine social life. This study addresses that gap by focusing specifically on lived experiences of acceptance, distancing, discrimination, cultural difference, and coping. The aim of the study is to explore how Syrian refugees in Mafraq experience cultural exclusion and how they respond to it.

The analysis is guided by the following research questions:

RQ1. How do Syrian refugees in Mafraq experience acceptance and cultural exclusion in everyday interactions with the host community?

RQ2. What social and cultural factors do participants identify as contributing to exclusion or social distance?

RQ3. What coping and resistance strategies do Syrian refugees use in response to experiences of cultural exclusion?

Methods

Research Design and Setting

A qualitative research design was employed to allow in-depth exploration of participants' lived experiences and subjective interpretations. Fieldwork was conducted in Mafraq Governorate in February 2025. Mafraq was selected because of its substantial Syrian refugee population and the importance of everyday interaction between refugees and members of the host community. Data collection took place in different locations within the governorate in order to capture a range of social experiences.

Participants and Sampling

The study sample consisted of 13 Syrian refugees residing in Mafraq Governorate. Participants were recruited through snowball sampling, which facilitated access to individuals willing to discuss potentially sensitive experiences of exclusion and discrimination. The sample included 10 men and three women. Participants ranged in age from 26 to 55 years: five were aged 26–35, five were aged

36–45, and three were aged 46–55. Most participants were married and had children, while two male participants were widowed.

Educational backgrounds varied. One participant had completed primary education or its equivalent, two had completed secondary education, and the majority held university degrees or equivalent qualifications. Employment patterns were strongly gendered within this small sample. All male participants reported self-employment in sectors including agriculture, trade, construction, tailoring, and small-scale services, whereas the three female participants reported that they were not engaged in paid employment and described themselves as housewives. Participants also differed in length of residence in Mafraq: eight had lived there for two to five years and five for six to eight years. Most participants reported holding documentation related to their legal or residency status in Jordan, while one participant reported an exception.

Data Collection and Ethical Procedures

Data were collected through face-to-face, in-depth interviews lasting approximately 15–25 minutes. Interview questions focused on participants' relationships with the host community, experiences of acceptance and rejection, perceived cultural differences, discrimination, social participation, and coping strategies. Interviews were video-recorded to support accurate documentation of the interview context and non-verbal communication. A second individual was present to record observational notes on non-verbal cues. These observations were treated as contextual material rather than as an independent measure of participants' responses.

Before participation, individuals were informed about the academic purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, confidentiality, and anonymity. No names or other direct personal identifiers were used in the analysis. Participants were informed that the data would be used for research purposes, and informed consent was obtained before interviews were conducted. In the presentation of findings, participants were assigned numerical identifiers (K1–K13).

Data Analysis

The interview material was analyzed using descriptive qualitative analysis. Responses were organized around recurrent patterns in participants' accounts and compared across interviews to identify common and contrasting experiences. The analysis focused on four broad themes: (a) mixed experiences of acceptance and exclusion, (b) limited interaction and reliance on Syrian networks, (c) discrimination and perceived cultural boundaries, and (d) coping and everyday resistance. The aim was not to generate statistically generalizable estimates but to provide a systematic account of how participants understood and navigated cultural exclusion in their daily lives.

Results

Mixed Experiences of Acceptance and Exclusion

Participants did not describe the host community in uniformly positive or negative terms. Several reported hospitality, cooperation, and a willingness among Jordanians to help them adapt. These accounts indicate that meaningful interaction and acceptance were possible and, for some participants, became important elements of their experience in Mafraq.

Participant 1, male, K1: "Honestly, my experience was very good. People welcomed me with warmth and hospitality".

Participant 2, male, K2: "There was a clear willingness to help me adapt to the environment".

Participant 5, male, K5: "There was an exchange of knowledge and experience, and I benefited a lot from that interaction".

Participant 8, male, K8: "I learned how to build friendships and gradually felt like part of the community".

Other participants, however, described a slower and more uncertain process of acceptance. Differences in customs, traditions, dialect, and everyday social practices sometimes created hesitation or distance between refugees and local residents.

Participant 13, female, K13: "Some people were cautious around foreigners, so it took time for me to adapt before I felt accepted".

Limited Interaction and Reliance on Syrian Networks

Many participants described limited day-to-day engagement with Jordanians outside workplaces, public spaces, or situations of practical necessity. In areas with a high concentration of Syrian residents, social interaction often remained largely within Syrian networks. Participants viewed these networks as important sources of psychological support, practical information, and mutual assistance.

Participant 4, male, K4: "Among Syrians, we find psychological and social support. We exchange resources and experiences and form a strong support network".

Participant 6, male, K6: "It is easier to communicate with Syrian youth because they understand the challenges we face".

These accounts show that intracommunity ties can reduce isolation and help refugees manage everyday difficulties. At the same time, participants' reliance on co-national networks sometimes coincided with limited opportunities to build broader relationships with members of the host community.

Discrimination and Perceived Cultural Boundaries

Several participants reported experiences they interpreted as discrimination across social, economic, and cultural settings. Nationality was one of the clearest markers participants associated with differential treatment. Some described direct reluctance by others to interact with them, while others reported that their abilities or requests were evaluated differently because they were Syrian or because of documentation-related barriers.

Participant 3, male, K3: "I experienced discrimination when some people refused to interact with me because of my nationality".

Participant 5, male, K5: "At work, my abilities were sometimes underestimated because I am Syrian".

Participant 6, male, K6: "I faced economic discrimination when my scholarship application was rejected".

Participant 10, male, K10: "My request for a housing loan was rejected due to documentation issues".

Participants also referred to negative stereotypes circulating through public discourse and social media. Their accounts suggest that exclusion was not understood primarily as a consequence of visible racial difference. Instead, they emphasized perceived differences in customs, practices, nationality, and social expectations. At the same time, participants frequently stressed similarities between Syrians and Jordanians, particularly shared religious values, as a way of reducing social distance.

Coping and Everyday Resistance

Participants described several practical strategies for managing exclusion. These included remaining silent about personal background, avoiding situations likely to produce conflict, withdrawing selectively from negative interactions, relying on Syrian social networks, and emphasizing shared religious identity. These strategies were generally low-profile and oriented toward minimizing confrontation while preserving dignity and social support.

Participant 1, male, K1: "Sometimes I remain silent and avoid talking about my background to prevent negative reactions".

Participant 6, male, K6: "I try to build a strong social network that helps me cope and feel supported".

Overall, the results show that cultural exclusion was experienced as variable and context-dependent. Participants could encounter hospitality and discrimination within the same local environment. Their responses demonstrate both adaptation to local expectations and active attempts to manage social boundaries in ways that reduced conflict and maintained access to supportive relationships.

Discussion

The findings demonstrate that cultural exclusion among Syrian refugees in Mafrq is neither total nor uniform. Participants described a continuum ranging from hospitality and cooperation to distancing, discrimination, and restricted interaction. This pattern is consistent with recent research in Al-Mafrq showing that coexistence is shaped by both positive community relations and continuing economic and social pressures (Kamruzzaman et al., 2025). It also reinforces the broader argument that social connection is a central dimension of refugee integration rather than a secondary outcome of economic participation (Ager & Strang, 2008; Strang & Quinn, 2021). A second finding concerns the role of symbolic and social boundaries. Participants often described themselves as culturally close to Jordanians because of shared religion, language, or regional background, yet still experienced differentiation based on nationality, customs, and perceived social status. Elias and Scotson's (1994) established-outsider framework helps interpret this pattern: boundaries between established residents and newcomers can persist even where groups share substantial cultural similarities. Recent evidence from Jordan also shows that informal exclusion and unequal recognition can shape refugee identities alongside formal legal and institutional conditions (Hartmann et al., 2023; Pincock et al., 2025). Similar patterns of marginalization and weakened belonging have been observed among Syrian refugees in educational settings (Çelik & Ozenc-Ira, 2024; Morrice & Salem, 2023).

The strong role of Syrian social networks is also important. Participants relied on co-national networks for understanding, support, information, and emotional security. Such ties can be protective, particularly where refugees face discrimination or uncertainty. However, the findings also suggest a potential tension between bonding ties within the refugee community and bridging ties with the host community. Recent evidence indicates that community participation and neighbourly interaction can strengthen well-being and social integration, but only when interaction is meaningful and not structured by bias or exclusion (Song et al., 2025; Zhang et al., 2023). The present findings therefore support a relational view of integration: refugee networks are not inherently barriers to integration, but broader inclusion requires opportunities for sustained and relatively equal interaction across group boundaries.

Participants' coping strategies further show that refugees should not be understood as passive recipients of exclusion. Silence, avoidance, selective withdrawal, and reliance on trusted networks can be interpreted as forms of everyday resistance that reduce exposure to confrontation while preserving agency. Scott's (1985) account of everyday resistance is useful here because it draws attention to low-visibility practices used by people in unequal power relations. In the present study,

participants also emphasized shared religious identity as a strategy for claiming commonality with the host community. This finding resonates with research showing that refugees actively negotiate identity, belonging, and visibility rather than simply accepting externally imposed categories (Karaköse, 2025; Khoury & Kohlenberger, 2025).

The findings have practical implications. Policies aimed at refugee inclusion should not assume that legal access or labour-market participation automatically produces social integration. Programmes should also address discrimination, create repeated opportunities for host-refugee interaction, and support community spaces in which refugees can participate without being positioned as permanent outsiders. Evidence from integration interventions suggests that sustained, locally embedded programmes can improve outcomes in several domains, including education, employment, housing, and social and health services (Namata et al., 2025). In Jordan, this approach should complement existing efforts to improve labour-market inclusion and reduce structural barriers (AlShwawra, 2021; Özkazanç, 2021).

Limitations

The study has several limitations. First, the sample is small and was recruited through snowball sampling, so the findings cannot be generalized to all Syrian refugees in Jordan. Second, data collection was confined to Mafraq Governorate; experiences may differ substantially in Amman, Irbid, refugee camps, or other localities. Third, the sample included 10 men and only three women, which limits the study's ability to examine gender differences. Fourth, the interviews were relatively brief, which may have restricted the depth of some accounts. Finally, the analysis relies on participants' self-reported experiences and interpretations; it therefore captures perceived exclusion rather than independently verified incidents. These limitations are consistent with the exploratory purpose of the study but should guide interpretation of the findings and the design of future research.

Conclusion

This study examined how Syrian refugees in Mafraq experience and respond to cultural exclusion in everyday life. The findings show that refugee-host relations are characterized by simultaneous processes of inclusion and exclusion. Participants reported hospitality, cooperation, and friendship, but also social distancing, discrimination, restricted interaction, and cultural boundary-making. Exclusion was often associated with nationality, perceived differences in customs and practices, and unequal social position rather than with religious or ethnic difference alone.

Refugees responded through pragmatic strategies including silence, conflict avoidance, selective withdrawal, reliance on Syrian networks, and emphasis on shared religious identity. These practices demonstrate agency, but they also reveal the burden placed on refugees to manage exclusion at the individual level. Sustainable integration therefore requires more than adaptation by refugees. It requires host-community and institutional efforts to reduce discrimination, expand meaningful contact, and create settings in which refugees can participate as legitimate members of local social life. Future research should use larger and more gender-balanced samples, include multiple Jordanian locations, and examine how cultural exclusion changes over time and across different forms of employment, education, and community participation.

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