



July 19, 2021

President Joseph R. Biden
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20500

RE: Human Rights Concerns to Raise During Jordanian King Abdullah II's White House Visit on July 19, 2021

Dear President Biden,

We write to you today regarding your upcoming meeting with Jordanian King Abdullah II to urge you to use this opportunity to address and call for accountability by the Jordanian government for the treatment of Syrian and Palestinian refugees, as well as to raise concerns to the King about the Jordanian government's violations of freedoms of expression and speech.

Jordan continues to host approximately 2.7 million refugees, primarily made up of Palestinian, Syrian, Iraqi, Yemeni, and Sudanese nationals displaced by conflict and repression. Yet despite its long-standing role as a country that has opened its borders to accommodate refugees, Jordan's government has also continuously violated the rights of those same refugees and asylum-seekers, implementing problematic policies that exacerbate the already dire humanitarian situation.

Concerning Syrian refugees, Jordan has forcibly [detained and transferred](#) at least 16 Syrian refugees, half of them children, to the "berm" - a no man's land located in the desert between Syria and Jordan. They joined at least [10,000 Syrian refugees](#) already restricted to living in the berm, all of whom lack access to adequate food, clean water, medical care and sanitation. One family even chose to return to a dangerous government-controlled area in Syria rather than remain in camps where poor conditions prevail. Refugees living in the arid berm suffered even further from limited access to humanitarian aid and medical equipment after Jordanian authorities decided to [bar aid convoys](#) from crossing into the region to deliver humanitarian aid and medical equipment, claiming it to be a COVID-19-prevention measure. However, the refugee population was instead left at greater risk with no consistently available, let alone sufficient, medical care, particularly impacting pregnant people for whom health care was entirely cut off.

Syrian refugees and migrants have been systemically and disproportionately harmed by policies imposed to limit the spread of COVID-19. They suffered significant economic harms due to a largely informal employment structure that UNHCR estimates resulted in one third of Jordan's Syrian refugees - overwhelmingly lacking official work permits and thereby stranded - losing their jobs in 2020, resulting in a [40% drop](#) in income for the refugees. [Thousands](#) of them lacked access to special protection or alternative employment. In violation of international law, Syrian and Palestinian refugees continue to face discrimination, as they remain unfairly and unreasonably barred from several broad employment sectors, from public health and education to engineering and technical

professions. For those refugees specifically from the Gaza Strip, lack of Jordanian citizenship strips them of rights and access to essential services available to the rest of the population.

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, Amnesty also recorded a disturbing trend of increasing crackdowns on the right to freedom of expression. Jordan's government issued a decree in 2020 stipulating that disseminating COVID-19-related news from non-government sources would carry a penalty of three years in prison for "causing panic." Soon after, Jordanian authorities arbitrarily [detained](#) two television executives and 13 journalists in the country over their COVID-19 reporting and criticism of the government's response. In July, authorities also blocked access to social media platforms under the guise of curbing cheating during school examinations.

The repression has generated a broad fear in civil society of governmental surveillance, resulting in the silencing of even interpersonal communications and private critiques of authorities' response to COVID-19, or of the monarchy generally. In sum, the violations of the rights of refugees and migrants, and the increasing suppression of freedom of the press and freedom of expression are alarming; they should be highlighted as issues of utmost concern in the upcoming discussion with King Abdullah. Recognizing the long-standing relationship between the U.S. and Jordan, we urge the U.S. to use its influence to promote respect for the human rights of all people residing within Jordan during today's meeting.

As such, Amnesty International USA calls on the Biden administration to:

- Oppose Jordanian authorities' forcible transfer of Syrian refugees to the no-man's land (the "berm") in the desert, and guarantee the safe and unimpeded transport of aid convoys and assistance to refugees.
- Call on Jordan's government to end all discriminatory policies barring equal access to employment and public services for the millions of Palestinian and Syrian refugees in the country; ensure protections for refugees and migrant workers who have lost income sources during the COVID-19 pandemic; and to implement resilience programs and improve access to water, education, and health services for refugees.
- Raise the need for Jordanian authorities to fairly address the status of Palestinian refugees from Gaza and ensure pathways to secure Jordanian residency or citizenship.
- Urge the Jordanian government to respect and protect the rights to freedom of expression, speech, and the press and end all ongoing violations.

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Sincerely,

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