

Wealthy Gulf states, other nearby nations, respond to Syrian refugees

by [Taylor Luck](#) and added sources in the [October 14, 2015](#) issue

([The Christian Science Monitor](#)) Wealthy Arab Gulf states have come under increasing scrutiny for their perceived reluctance to open their borders to those fleeing Syria.

Saudi Arabia and Qatar have been examined in particular, as they have supported combatants in the Syrian conflict, now in its fifth year, backing several predominantly Sunni Syrian rebel groups that oppose President Bashar al-Assad.

But Arab Gulf states are repudiating the criticism, saying they have pumped more than \$4 billion into Syrian refugee support since 2011. They say they have taken in hundreds of thousands of Syrians as visitors, guest workers, and pilgrims—allowing them to overstay their visas and seek unofficial refuge in their countries.

Under Gulf states' regulations, foreign workers and visitor statistics are not categorized by their nationality or country of origin. Due to loopholes in labor laws and visa enforcement, tens of thousands of foreign guests who overstay tourist or Hajj visas go unreported, migration scholars say.

UNHCR, the UN refugee agency, reported in September that 500,000 Syrians had taken up residence in Saudi Arabia since 2011. The Saudis classified them as "Arab brothers and sisters in distress."

Scholars of the region say Gulf states' reluctance to officially recognize refugees stems from the legacy of the 1948 Arab-Israeli conflict, which left Jordan and Lebanon with more than 2.5 million Palestinians nearly six decades later.

"There is a sense that if you let people in as refugees rather than visitors, their temporary stay becomes permanent," said Gregory Gause, professor of international affairs at Texas A&M. "Gulf states have believed that the best approach is improving Syrians' situation in host countries such as Jordan and Lebanon—a policy which mirrors U.S. policy and the policy of European countries until a short while ago."

Jordan and Lebanon each have 2 million refugees or more, said Rashid El Mansi of Popular Aid for Relief and Development in Lebanon, in a September 17 press conference organized by the Mennonite Central Committee, one of its Christian partners.

“People like to stay in the neighboring countries because they still have hope to go back to their homeland,” he said.

However, life is difficult for them as the economic situation deteriorates in Lebanon and services decline, he said.

Rosangela Jarjour, general secretary of the Fellowship of Middle East Evangelical Churches, is among the Syrians living in Lebanon. She spoke at the press conference of the need for Western leaders to stop the flow of weapons into Syria, so that people can stay in their homes. She also spoke of the pastors and other community leaders who have stayed in Syria amid frequent bombing. She told the story of a pastor in Aleppo whose church has been bombed twice. When she asked how he could remain and rebuild the church, he told her, “The church has to be a sign of hope to the people. Otherwise there will not be one single person in Aleppo.”