Iraqi Refugees in Jordan - Pressure on a Strained System

Overview

Though Jordan is considered one of the most stable countries amongst its neighbors, the country’s natural, social and economic resources are straining under the weight of a rapidly increasing population. Considering this dynamic, of particular concern to outside observers and Jordanians in the past eight years has been the significant influx of hundreds of thousands of Iraqi refugees fleeing the violence in their home country. The maps juxtaposed here are intended to present a snapshot of how already vulnerable aspects of Jordan might be exacerbated by increased refugee numbers.

Methodology

Populations In Un/Suitable Land Areas

The raster data represented on the maps depicting population density and land cover was used to create the central map illustrating population densities in areas deemed suitable and unsuitable. Using the spatial analyst tool, the relevant land uses were reclassified with values representing suitable (1) and unsuitable (0). Next, those values were used as inputs to the raster calculator along with the population density information to visually determine the density of people living in suitable and unsuitable land areas. To determine the densities of population living in unsuitable areas, the same methods were used, but the values of suitable and unsuitable were switched so that when used in the raster calculator, the result of quotient would reflect populations living in unsuitable areas.

Iraqi Refugees and Jordanian Unemployment

Locating reliable numbers of Iraqi refugees was appropriately difficult, as different organizations have found reasons related to security and politics to collect meticulously, overestimate, or not collect at all. The 2004 numbers were reported by UNHCR as Iraqis who had officially registered with the organization, a requirement to receive UNHCR assistance and participate in programs. Because of this, the disparity between estimated, collected and actual refugee numbers tend to vary widely. To determine the number of Iraqi refugees per governorate for 2007, the 2004 percentage distribution per governorate was calculated and then applied to the UNHCR estimate of 700,000 for 2007 (other estimates put the number as high as one million). Independent excel spreadsheets were created for each population characteristic above. The join function was utilized to attach this information to the first (governorate) administrative level, from which new shapefiles were created through the export function.

Implications


Jordanian Unemployment, 2005

Though not a party to the 1951 Refugee Convention, and facing stressed systems for its own citizens, Jordan accepted the vast majority of Iraqis seeking refuge in its country. These groups subsist in a precarious legal limbo; their fulfillment of the needs of daily life adds to the stress on Jordan’s already strained natural, economic and social resources. A network of UN organizations, Jordanian government agencies, and local and international NGOs work together to administer programs to help fulfill the basic needs of the refugees, but only to those officially registered.

Though attributed to a number of internal and external economic and political forces, Jordanians blamed the sudden Iraqi influx on a number of worsening statistics, including housing prices, inflation, commodity prices, unemployment and crime. For example, the hiring of Jordanians by some Iraqis for construction of new housing initially engendered hope amongst Jordanians for the positive externalities of the refugee presence. That hope was soon dismissed with the reality that Jordanians had to compete with other new Iraqi counterparts for those jobs.

In reality, the real issues Jordan faces are the same ones it faced prior to the arrival of Iraqis. The nation of nearly six million is at its absolute capacity for enduring the stress of millions of additional refugees, from Iraq and across the region. The most pressing issues in the near future the desire the most time and resources will be the growing water crisis, health issues resulting from overcrowded urban centers and socio-political instability resulting from growing popular disaffection with government policies.