

**Executive Committee of the
High Commissioner’s Programme**

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Update on UNHCR’s operations the Middle East and North Africa

A. Situational context including new developments

Syria situation

With the crisis in the Syrian Arab Republic in its ninth year, more than 6.1 million Syrians remain internally displaced and over 5.5 million Syrian refugees are hosted in Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey. Inside the Syrian Arab Republic, humanitarian access to areas with internally displaced persons (IDPs) and returnees remains challenging. While internal displacement decreased in 2019 compared to previous years, new displacements continue to be recorded on a daily basis, mainly in the northern regions of the country. The humanitarian situation in the north-east remains dire, with some 1.6 million people in need of humanitarian assistance, including in Al-Hol camp. The onset of military operations in October 2019 displaced over 200,000 people. As of mid-December 2019, almost 70,600 people remained displaced from the Governorates of Al-Hasakeh, Ar-Raqqa, and Aleppo. Furthermore, some 19,000 refugees had crossed the border from the Syrian Arab Republic into Iraq as of January 2020.

In the Syrian Arab Republic, ongoing conflict in the north-west continued to drive displacement. Over 400,000 people were displaced by hostilities between April and September 2019, many of whom were displaced multiple times. From 1 December 2019 to 12 February 2020, more than 800,000 people have been displaced, mainly from the south of Idlib Governorate; over 80 per cent were women and children. Providing affected populations with protection and assistance remained a challenge in the north-west due to access constraints. Under relevant United Nations Security Council resolutions, UNHCR continued to conduct cross-border interventions from Turkey. In January 2020, the United Nations Security Council renewed the authorization for United Nations humanitarian agencies and their partners to use the two border crossings of Bab al-Salam and Bab al-Hawa (both in Turkey) in order to ensure that humanitarian assistance reaches those in need, for a period of six months ([S/RES/2504](#)), while excluding the border crossings of Al-Ramtha (Jordan) and Al Yarubiyah (Iraq).

The level and pace of return movements has gradually increased over the past year. From January to December 2019, UNHCR verified the return of over 95,000 refugees to the Syrian Arab Republic from the neighbouring countries. Surveys conducted by UNHCR to gauge the intention of Syrian refugees indicate that at least three-quarters of the population hope to return one day. UNHCR maintains a comprehensive approach in pursuing the full range of durable solutions for Syrian refugees. For those who choose to return, the Office provides an array of support, including documentation and counselling, and identifies solutions for unaccompanied or separated children.

In the context of the “whole of Syria” approach, UNHCR continues to lead the shelter and non-food items (NFIs) cluster, the protection cluster and the camp coordination and camp

management clusters. Despite operational challenges, as of November 2019, UNHCR had provided protection to more than 1.5 million people, some 200,000 of whom are children; around 1.6 million people had received basic relief items; over 330,000 individuals had benefited from UNHCR's shelter support; and some 358,000 people had been provided with health assistance. In 2019, the Office also provided basic relief items and shelter support to more than 358,000 people through cross-border interventions from Turkey.

Living conditions for Syrian refugees continue to be precarious, with over half of the population living in poverty. Although host countries have taken measures to provide refugees with enhanced access to health, education and legal employment, continued support from the international community remains essential. Together with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), UNHCR continues to lead the implementation of the [regional refugee and resilience plan \(3RP\)](#) in response to the Syrian Arab Republic crisis. The 3RP 2020-2021 requires over \$5.4 billion to help some 9 million people.

Iraq situation

Since October 2019, ongoing demonstrations in Baghdad and other parts of Iraq, as well as a recent escalation in regional tensions have led to a deterioration in the political, economic and security situation in the country.

While over 4 million people have returned to their communities since the height of the conflict in 2014, some 1.8 million IDPs remain in Iraq, more than half of whom have been living in displacement for at least three years. Despite significant efforts to rebuild the country and revitalize local economies, significant challenges hinder return. These include security concerns, lack of social cohesion, documentation issues, few livelihood opportunities, as well as destroyed or damaged housing.

UNHCR's strategy to address internal displacement in Iraq focuses on protection, while gradually transitioning from emergency response to a longer-term development approach. With this in mind, the Office is working closely with the Government of Iraq, as well as with development actors to incorporate the needs of IDPs in development plans and to support a gradual absorption into the Iraqi social welfare system. In the interim, UNHCR has provided IDPs and IDP returnees with multi-purpose cash grants, core relief items and primary health assistance. Furthermore, the Office, together with the United Nations Human Resettlement Programme (UN-Habitat), co-leads the Working Group on Sustainable Solutions for IDPs in support of the two-year resilience and recovery programme for Iraq.

Some 250,000 Iraqi refugees are registered with UNHCR, including in Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, the Syrian Arab Republic and Turkey.. The Office provides these refugees with protection and basic services in support of the efforts of neighbouring countries.

North Africa

The operational and security environment in North Africa remains complex with new and protracted displacement. The security situation in Libya continues to be volatile, with hostilities fuelling internal displacement. In 2019, there was a twofold increase in the number of IDPs largely due to the ongoing conflict in areas in and around Tripoli and Murzuq, in southern Libya. According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), as of the end of January 2020, over 343,000 people were displaced inside the country and some 447,300 IDPs had returned. The number of IDP returnees decreased significantly in 2019, with only 2,000 people returning to their places of origin, compared to over 100,000 in 2018. Almost 47,000 refugees and asylum-seekers are registered with UNHCR.

Despite the challenging operational environment in Libya, UNHCR provided assistance to IDPs, refugees and asylum-seekers, including medical consultations, NFIs, shelter kits and cash. UNHCR continued to advocate an end to detention for some 2,000 persons of concern.

The Office conducted over 1,200 visits to detention centres and registered more than 3,500 asylum-seekers in detention. Those in the most vulnerable situations (around 1,700 individuals) were subsequently transferred to the gathering and departure facility (GDF) in Tripoli, where they remained until their evacuation to a third country. In 2019, UNHCR provided a total of 2,427 people with solutions in third countries through resettlement or evacuation to Italy, Niger, Romania and the new Emergency Transit Mechanism in Rwanda. The spontaneous arrival of some 900 individuals at the GDF between July and October 2019 resulted in the suspension of transfers from detention centres to the GDF in the last two months of the year, due to overcrowding and the facility no longer being able to function as a transit centre. Amid safety concerns, UNHCR announced on 30 January 2020, the suspension of its operational work at the facility. Most individuals (some 90 percent) have relocated from the GDF to urban areas to receive assistance packages, concurrent with the expansion of UNHCR’s urban assistance programme.

Moreover, efforts are underway to increase outreach activities and multipurpose cash programmes for vulnerable persons of concern, while maintaining the provision of humanitarian assistance at disembarkation points. The number of sea crossings to Europe through the central Mediterranean route has decreased. Some 9,000 people were rescued or intercepted at sea by the Libyan Coast Guard and disembarked in Libya, the majority of whom were subsequently transferred to detention centres.

In Egypt, some 252,600 refugees and asylum-seekers from 57 countries are registered with UNHCR. In 2019, the Government of Egypt announced plans for the integration of refugees and asylum-seekers in the local health and education systems. In Mauritania, the Government continued to issue documentation for over 57,000 Malian refugees in and around the Mbera camp. The Mauritanian authorities extended the issuance of documentation based on UNHCR registration of Malian refugees beyond the camps, including in the urban centres of Nouakchott and Nouadhibou. The deteriorating security situations in Burkina Faso and Mali have impacted mixed movements across the North Africa region, with an inflow of new arrivals into Mauritania.

The number of registered persons of concern increased four-fold in Tunisia during 2019, with some 2,000 individuals newly-registered. This brought the total number of persons of concern to UNHCR in Tunisia to over 3,200. Given the deteriorating situation in Libya, the Office, in coordination with the Government of Tunisia and partners, has undertaken preparedness measures in the event of a potential influx. In Algeria, UNHCR continued to provide humanitarian assistance to Sahrawi refugees in the five camps located near Tindouf. In view of sustained arrivals of mixed populations in Algeria, the Office continues to advocate the establishment of a national asylum system in order to ensure that persons of concern to UNHCR have access to international protection. In Morocco, UNHCR worked to enhance integration and the self-sustainability of refugees through multisectoral programmes. Given the growing number of people seeking international protection in the country, the Office is working with the Government to renew momentum towards the approval of the national refugee law.

Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)

During 2019, UNHCR continued its resource mobilization efforts in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) region, raising a total of \$136.8 million. Moreover, the “Refugee Zakat Fund”, a global Islamic finance structure, was launched to assist refugee and IDP families worldwide, primarily through cash assistance. The Fund has delivered promising initial results, generating some \$38 million in 2019 alone. The Office will further pursue this work in the GCC region aiming to increase unearmarked and predictable funding.

Israel

In Israel, UNHCR advocates fair and efficient asylum procedures, access to public services and enhanced livelihood opportunities for asylum-seekers and refugees. The Office will continue to explore durable solutions for some 50,000 persons of concern to UNHCR, particularly those in vulnerable situations, through resettlement and complementary pathways. In this context, the comprehensive solutions strategy for Eritrean and Sudanese asylum-seekers constitutes a joint effort with the Government of Israel to pursue a durable solution for persons of concern to UNHCR that also addresses the needs of host communities in Israel.

Yemen

The humanitarian situation in Yemen remains dire, with over 24 million people in need of assistance (representing 80 per cent of the population). Significant progress was made following the deployment of United Nations observers to monitor the ceasefire on the frontlines in Hudaydah, resulting in a decrease in the number of security incidents in the city. Nevertheless, a partial blockade and import restrictions continue to have an adverse humanitarian impact on the population. The operational environment remains challenging as critical funding shortfalls impede the implementation of UNHCR programmes. In 2019, the Office provided protection and assistance to IDPs and refugees in 19 governorates across the country. This included cash assistance, shelter kits and basic household items. With over 275,000 refugees and asylum-seekers in the country, UNHCR continues to advocate an improved protection environment. Given ongoing hostilities, the Office will also continue to prioritize its assisted voluntary return programme for Somalis.

Mixed and onwards movements

The overall downward trend of movements from the Middle East and North Africa to Europe has continued, with a total of over 21,800 people reaching Europe by sea in 2019 compared to 116,600 in 2018. Nearly 500 people were reported missing or dead at sea. Spain continues to be the main entry point, with 45 per cent of arrivals travelling from Algeria and Morocco and across the Mediterranean. Movements by sea from Libya were substantially reduced, partly due to the enhanced capacity of the Libyan authorities to engage in search and rescue operations and interception at sea. UNHCR and partners remain concerned about protection risks facing those travelling in mixed movements such as detention, insecurity, exploitation and abuse, and trafficking. Women, unaccompanied children, people with disabilities and individuals with diverse sexual orientations and gender identities are particularly at risk. The Office has put in place a number of measures to address humanitarian needs at disembarkation points, in detention facilities and in urban settings, and to identify potential solutions in third countries including through evacuation for the purposes of resettlement. Reception and processing arrangements are also in place in Tunisia to identify people in need of international protection who have been rescued or intercepted at sea by the Tunisian authorities.

In view of persisting challenges, United Nations agencies have proposed greater coordination and burden-sharing among States and other relevant stakeholders to improve disembarkation procedures and access to safety and protection for affected people. Community-based and communication strategies have also been established to strengthen community networks, increase the outreach of vulnerable populations along migration routes and ensure persons of concern are able to access protection. Furthermore, UNHCR, in collaboration with partners in the United Nations system and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), is working with national institutions to improve cooperation in detecting and responding to human trafficking in the Levant region and beyond. The Regional Dialogue on Trafficking took place in Turkey in November 2019 with the aim of developing a regional anti-trafficking framework. This will enhance identification of international protection needs along migration routes and

displacement cycle. The introduction of restrictive measures to address irregular migration has affected persons of concern to UNHCR, particularly in relation to access to territory and protection from forced return. In several countries, asylum-seekers and refugees were refused entry at the border or were captured in collective arrest operations, resulting in their forced deportation to third countries. UNHCR has strengthened outreach in order to disseminate information about access to asylum.

B. Progress and challenges in achieving the global strategic priorities

Creating a favourable protection environment

In the context of the #IBelong campaign and leading up to the high-level segment on statelessness during the seventieth session of the Executive Committee in October 2019, UNHCR worked closely with governments in the region to address issues of statelessness. As a result, the Government of Mauritania made several pledges, including to ensure refugees have access to civil registration and documentation. The Office will remain engaged with other countries in the region with a view to achieving tangible results and eliminating statelessness. These efforts will be complemented by continued collaboration with the League of Arab States, particularly towards the implementation of the [Arab Declaration on Belonging and Legal Identity](#), which was adopted in February 2018. UNHCR and 3RP partners are also taking measures to reduce the number of Syrian refugee children without any form of identity document.

The Office collaborated with governments and partners to promote access for refugee children and young people to national education systems at all levels. In 2019, around 65 per cent (1.2 million) school-age Syrian children (those between 5 and 17 years old) were enrolled in formal or regulated non-formal education, while 800,000, some of who have disabilities, remain out of school across the region. Access of refugee youth to tertiary education remains limited, between 1 and 7 per cent. Barriers to education persist due to a wide range of protection and socio-economic challenges, giving rise to negative coping mechanisms, including child labour, early marriage and recruitment by armed groups. Protracted crises in the region continue to strain education services in host communities, particularly in smaller countries where resources are already overstretched. Sustained support is needed across the region to ensure access of refugees to quality education in line with the [Education 2030 agenda](#) and [UNHCR's strategy for refugee education 2030](#).

Under the “no lost generation” initiative, UNHCR contributed to and reinforced child protection priorities for discussion and affirmation at [the third Brussels conference](#) on supporting the future of the Syrian Arab Republic and the region, which took place in March 2019. Contributions included data on child protection and inputs for a [report](#) on the protection and education of Syrian children and youth. To further enhance child protection programmes, UNHCR combines cash assistance with other services in a sustained manner. According to the results of a UNHCR study conducted in three 3RP operations, this approach has proven to be effective in reducing vulnerabilities and promoting children’s development.

Community-based protection approaches are being implemented across the region, with a focus on age, gender, disability and other diversity considerations. Over 4,200 community members work directly with UNHCR and partners to identify people at risk and ensure they receive support. Some 400 community spaces and centres provide essential assistance and timely information on access to services, psychosocial support and development opportunities for refugees, asylum-seekers, IDPs, returnees, stateless individuals and host community members in vulnerable situations.

Operations across the region also provide support to community-led initiatives by various groups, including youth, women, people with disabilities, older persons and people with

diverse sexual orientations and gender identities. Moreover, in order to improve programming for the protection of people with disabilities, UNHCR conducted a regional study on the impact of inclusion, the outcomes of which will be used for upcoming planning and advocacy.

The Office is working to strengthen accountability to affected populations and improve complaint mechanisms, conducting three country assessments in Egypt, Jordan and Lebanon. A regional workshop will be held for humanitarian partners in the region to examine the findings of the country assessments and plan for next steps. In 2019, UNHCR integrated mental health and psychosocial support, as a cross-cutting issue, within the overall protection response. This was accomplished by holding regional capacity-building sessions and conducting field missions aimed at supporting country operations in Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Tunisia, Turkey and Yemen to develop strategic plans on mental health and psychosocial support. Country operations also benefited from continuous technical support to address the mental health needs of persons of concern to UNHCR. Regional guidance on mental health and psychosocial support is under development to ensure that effective approaches are integrated in protection programming across all operations. Moreover, the Office will conduct a regional study in 2020 to document good practices in suicide prevention, which will be followed by a regional workshop on minimum standards of mental health and psychosocial support and the harmonization of good practices.

The detention of asylum-seekers and refugees has become common in a number of countries in the region, which has serious long-term effects on individuals and families. UNHCR is concerned about the continued use of immigration detention, particularly that of children. In line with [UNHCR's global strategy to end detention](#), the Office continues to advocate with authorities to end the detention of children, ensure that alternatives to detention are incorporated into national laws and implemented. Where detention is unavoidable, UNHCR will work to ensure that conditions in detention meet international standards.

Ensuring protection from violence and exploitation

Preventing, mitigating and responding to sexual and gender-based violence remains a priority for UNHCR in the region. Between January and September 2019, some 100,000 survivors and people at risk, including boys and men, benefited from multisectoral services. UNHCR strengthened the mainstreaming of prevention, risk mitigation and response across all areas of programming and intervention. This was achieved by holding a series of workshops between April and October 2019 for multi-functional country teams from Algeria, Egypt, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Tunisia, Turkey and Yemen. As a result, efforts are underway to develop country-level action plans in this area. The Yemen operation received funding through the “Safe from the Start” initiative to implement a multisectoral project on prevention, risk mitigation and response in refugee and IDP contexts. Moreover, the gender with age marker tool, developed by the Inter-agency Standing Committee, has been introduced to 3RP operations to further support the integration of gender equality measures across diverse age groups in 2020-2021 programming.

To support operations in implementing UNHCR's zero tolerance policy towards sexual exploitation and abuse, and sexual harassment, regional focal points participated in a webinar to discuss the findings and recommendations from a compliance review of several 3RP operations. New procedures to strengthen prevention, risk mitigation and response and improved project design measures were also shared.

Children continue to be deeply affected by conflict and displacement in the region. Over 2.5 million Syrian children live as refugees in the region, while an additional 2.5 million are displaced inside the Syrian Arab Republic. In Iraq, some 1.9 million children require humanitarian assistance and protection, over 800,000 of whom are in acute need. In addition to immediate protection and assistance needs, a significant number of these children require

longer-term interventions, including in the areas of mental and psychosocial health, as well as family tracing and reunification. Between January and September 2019, over 78,000 girls and boys benefited from specialized child protection services through the 3RP response. Furthermore, over 195,000 girls and boys participated in structured, sustained child protection and psychosocial support programmes. Some 90,000 women and men also benefited from parenting support designed to enhance their capacity to address and mitigate the impact of conflict and displacement on their children in a more effective manner.

Several initiatives are underway in the region to prevent and mitigate protection risks such as child labour and early marriage including through the use of cash assistance. UNHCR and partners supported advocacy and capacity-building efforts to ensure that all interventions prioritize the best interests of the child, while improving the quality and accessibility of services, such as mental health and psychosocial services for children. UNHCR maintained robust legal aid and community engagement to promote access to civil documentation, including birth and marriage certificates.

Achieving durable solutions

Some 41,500 refugees from the region, including over 29,500 Syrians and around 2,500 Iraqis, were put forward for resettlement in 2019, up from some 37,500 submissions in 2018. This represents only 6 per cent of the region's overall resettlement needs for the year (around 690,000 refugees).

In line with the Global Compact on Refugees, UNHCR encouraged new resettlement programmes and the expansion of existing ones to enhance burden- and responsibility-sharing with host countries. The Office worked with the Governments of Ireland and Sweden, as the new chairs of the Priority Situations Core Group, to share good practices, demonstrate the strategic impact of resettlement programmes and identify durable solutions. This engagement aimed at ensuring strong partnerships and collaboration in relation to resettlement programmes in the context of the Syrian Arab Republic and central Mediterranean situations.

The development and expansion of complementary pathways for admission to third countries constitute one of the main goals of UNHCR's [three-year strategy \(2019-2021\)](#) on resettlement and complementary pathways. With this in mind, the Office continues to implement a wide range of complementary pathways, including: access to family reunification, scholarship opportunities and labour mobility schemes. UNHCR is also working to expand and develop partnerships in the areas of registration, identification and referrals. The Office conducted best interest determination for unaccompanied and separated children in the region to identify alternative care arrangements, provide protection and find solutions.

Between 2016 and the end of 2019, some 230,000 Syrian refugees have returned home. The number of returnees increased by 73 per cent in 2019 compared to the previous year. As a growing number of refugees choose to return, the response needs to be guided by their needs. With this in mind, UNHCR, together with partners, undertook measures in 2019 to strengthen preparedness and planning for returns in line with the Global Compact on Refugees. In collaboration with host governments and underpinned by the Comprehensive Protection and Solutions Strategy, the Office has enhanced operational support to returning refugees. These services include help with documentation, assistance to people with specific needs and those in vulnerable situations, pre-departure vaccination and health referrals and support at the borders and with transportation. UNHCR is also conducting pre-departure counselling and return monitoring. Upon their return, individuals are further supported through ongoing humanitarian programmes at the community level in accordance with their needs. In tandem with these operational efforts, the Office is also in dialogue with the Government of the

Syrian Arab Republic and other stakeholders to address obstacles to voluntary return, such as concerns about access to humanitarian assistance.

Mobilizing public, political, financial and operational support through strategic partnerships

In line with the Global Compact on Refugees, the Office continues to strengthen strategic partnerships, with a renewed focus on engaging emerging local stakeholders in the strategic planning and operational management of refugee situations. Country operations across the region support the inclusion of civil society, academia and other stakeholders in responses to all phases of the displacement cycle through the Civil Society Network for Displacement. The first regional annual consultations with NGOs and civil society, which was held in Jordan in 2019, underscored the commitment of partners and helped chart the way forward for continued collaboration. The Global Refugee Forum, which took place in December 2019, demonstrated the importance of strategic partnerships in refugee responses in the region and revealed the need for further investment.

Given the protracted nature of displacement in the region, as well as its scope and scale, working towards favourable longer-term national and regional policy frameworks for persons of concern remains a priority. With this in mind, the Office continues to promote the inclusion of refugees in entrepreneurship opportunities and to strengthen its engagement with faith-based actors and others so as to influence favourable public policy. Furthermore, support to encourage more robust and impactful private sector engagement with development actors and financial institutions, including the World Bank was provided.

C. Financial information

The 2020 budget of \$2.6 billion for the region is slightly lower than the 2019 budget of \$2.7 billion, representing a 5 per cent decrease.

As at 17 January 2020, some 8 per cent of the region's 2020 financial requirements are funded taking into consideration the indicative allocation of unearmarked and softly earmarked contributions.
