

Seventy-first session
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Update on UNHCR's operations in the Middle East and North Africa

A. Situational context including new developments

Syria situation

With the crisis in the Syrian Arab Republic in its tenth year, more than 6.7 million Syrians¹ remained internally displaced and over 5.5 million Syrian refugees were registered in Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey. An acute economic crisis, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, worsened the humanitarian situation in the Syrian Arab Republic. Humanitarian access also remained a challenge. The safety and protection of over 4 million civilians in the north-west, over half of whom are internally displaced, were major concerns.

UNHCR continued to lead the protection as well as the shelter and non-food items (NFI) clusters in response to the internal displacement situation in the Syrian Arab Republic. From January to July 2020, the organization provided some 629,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs), returnees and host community members with protection-related assistance. Around 543,000 people received core-relief items; nearly 19,000 benefited from shelter activities; and almost 170,000 individuals were supported through community-based health interventions. During the first half of the year, UNHCR quadrupled its cross-border assistance in the north-west, providing 150,000 kits containing core relief items and shelter materials targeting 790,000 people. In July 2020, the United Nations Security Council ([S/RES/2533](#)) renewed the authorization for United Nations humanitarian agencies and their partners to use the border crossing of Bab al-Hawa (at the border with Turkey), for a period of 12 months while excluding the border crossings of Al-Ramtha, Al Yarubiyah and Bab al-Salam.

Despite the generosity of host countries, the 5.5 million Syrian refugees in the region continued to face difficulties, with over half of them living in poverty. This situation was exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Together with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), UNHCR continued to lead the implementation of the regional refugee and resilience plan (3RP) in response to the Syria crisis, coordinating the work of over 270 partners in five countries hosting Syrian refugees. In Lebanon, as part of the inter-agency efforts, UNHCR helped respond to the needs of those most affected by the explosion of 4 August in Beirut, including Lebanese nationals, refugees and migrant workers, providing protection, shelter and other forms of assistance, such as mental health and psychosocial support.

Iraq situation

There were some 1.3 million IDPs in Iraq,² more than half of whom have been living in displacement for at least three years. At the same time, over 4 million IDP returnees continued to face protection risks, constrained access to basic services, and insecurity, while contending with the lack of livelihood opportunities and adequate shelter, as well as the threat of explosive remnants of war. UNHCR worked with the Government of Iraq and

¹ Source: United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA).

² See "[Iraq Mission](#)" on the Displacement Tracking Matrix of the International Organization for Migration (IOM).

development actors to include the needs of IDPs in development plans and support their gradual absorption into the Iraqi social welfare system.

UNHCR continued to collaborate with the Ministry of Interior to support the issuance of civil documentation for IDPs in camps and out-of-camp locations through the deployment of government officials as part of mobile missions. Over 28,000 individual documents were issued to IDPs living in 15 camps across five governorates. This brought the number of IDPs and IDP returnees who had secured civil documentation through UNHCR's legal assistance programmes in 2019 to 36,600.

In relation to COVID-19, UNHCR advocated that persons of concern were included in the national response plan. The Office adopted new protection and assistance modalities, including the door-to-door distribution of relief items and remote legal counselling and protection monitoring.

In neighbouring countries, UNHCR continued to assist around 239,000 Iraqi refugees and asylum-seekers registered with the organization, of whom 39 per cent are children and 48 per cent are women. In addition, there are some 31,000 Iraqis living in camps without any form of registration in the Al-Hasakeh governorate in the Syrian Arab Republic.

Yemen

The humanitarian needs in Yemen continued to be acute. Over 24 million people depended on humanitarian assistance to survive due to persistent fighting, socioeconomic insecurity and heavy rains and flooding. Since January 2020, nearly 23,000 families have been forcibly displaced inside Yemen. The protection space for over 283,000 refugees and asylum-seekers in the country also deteriorated in the context of COVID-19. Despite the high level of needs, options for durable solutions remained limited. UNHCR continued to facilitate the return of Somali refugees from Yemen under its Assisted Spontaneous Return programme, which has been halted for several months due to movement restrictions related to COVID-19.

In response to growing needs, UNHCR has provided cash assistance to 30,000 refugees and 475,000 IDPs. Shelter, legal assistance and healthcare support were also provided. The synergies between the Protection, Shelter, and Camp Coordination and Camp Management clusters was strengthened to ensure the complementarity of interventions as part of an area-based approach.

North Africa

Throughout 2020, the security situation in Libya remained volatile. The protracted conflict has resulted in over 390,000 Libyans being internally displaced, while some 493,000 IDP returnees are in continued need of assistance. As of the end of August, over 46,000 refugees and asylum-seekers were registered with UNHCR, most of whom were located in urban areas. As of mid-September, 2,391 people were in detention, of whom over 1,000 were persons of concern. Some 230 refugees and asylum-seekers had been released from detention earlier in the year. Due to restrictions related to COVID-19, only 312 refugees were evacuated or resettled to third countries. Amidst the pandemic, UNHCR strengthened its support for the national health response and expanded protection and humanitarian assistance programmes to refugees in urban areas. This included cash and food assistance (in partnership with the World Food Programme), non-food items, hygiene kits and medical assistance. Amid safety concerns, UNHCR announced in January 2020 the suspension of its operations at the Gathering and Departure Facility in Tripoli, and some 1,000 refugees and asylum-seekers received assistance packages upon their relocation to urban areas.

The overall political and security situation in Mauritania remained stable, although ongoing instability in neighbouring Mali continued to be a major concern. In early 2020, Malians fled to Mauritania's borders in increasing numbers. However, following the border closure to curb the spread of COVID-19, no significant influxes of refugees were observed. Meanwhile, UNHCR registered some 4,000 Malian refugees, bringing their total number to approximately 62,000 in and around Mbera camp. In addition, some 4,200 refugees of other nationalities were living in urban areas.

In Egypt, over 258,800 refugees and asylum-seekers from 61 countries are registered with UNHCR, over 50 per cent of whom are Syrians. In June 2020, UNHCR initiated a pilot project to conduct refugee status determination interviews remotely in compliance with COVID-19 prevention measures.

In Tunisia, an increase of interceptions on land and at sea was observed, as well as rescue operations at sea, between January and August 2020, when compared to the same period in 2019. While an influx of refugees and asylum-seekers from Libya did not occur during the first half of 2020, UNHCR and other United Nations partners, in coordination with the Government of Tunisia, strengthened preparedness measures.

In Algeria, UNHCR continued to provide humanitarian assistance to Sahrawi refugees in the five camps located near Tindouf. Nevertheless, existing food security was further threatened by a livestock epidemic that resulted in the loss of hundreds of goats and sheep belonging to refugees.

In Morocco, UNHCR enhanced the integration and self-sustainability of refugees through multisectoral programmes. Following the Government of Morocco's early COVID-19 response and decisive public health measures, UNHCR strengthened its communication with host communities to identify protection needs and to inform them about available services.

Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries

During 2020, UNHCR continued its resource mobilization efforts in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, raising nearly \$128 million. The organization continued to facilitate the “Refugee Zakat Fund”, helping provide assistance to the vulnerable refugee and IDP families around the world, primarily through cash assistance.

Israel

UNHCR continued to advocate fair and efficient asylum procedures, access to public services and increased livelihood opportunities for asylum-seekers and refugees. The repeal in April 2020 of the “deposit law”, which required refugees and asylum-seekers to deposit 20 per cent of their monthly salary into a locked account, represents an opportunity to alleviate their difficult socioeconomic situation.

Mixed and onwards movement

Irregular mixed flows continued to affect the region. The overall downward trend of movements to Europe continued, with some 45,000 people reaching Europe by sea, between January and August 2020. Nearly 170 people were reported missing or dead at sea. The number of those reaching Yemen (mainly Somalis and Ethiopians) by crossing the Red Sea decreased during the first half of the year, from 84,380 in 2019 to 31,840 in 2020, due to restrictions related to COVID-19. While the majority of individuals involved in mixed movements were men, women and children represented approximately 22 per cent.

The COVID-19 pandemic and relevant border management measures exacerbated the vulnerability of refugees and asylum-seekers involved in mixed movements and impacted their ability to access asylum, protection and durable solutions. This increased concerns about trafficking, exploitation and abuse. In its joint advocacy with IOM and other United Nations partners, UNHCR highlighted the need for greater coordination and responsibility-sharing among States and relevant stakeholders, and the importance of preventing forced returns and detention in accordance with international law.

In September 2020, UNHCR issued a [position](#) on the designation of Libya as a safe third country and as a place of safety for the purpose of disembarkation following rescue at sea.

B. Progress and challenges in achieving the global strategic priorities

Creating a favourable protection environment

Registration and identity management, including the issuance of documentation and refugee status determination continued to play a critical role in preserving protection space in the region. Despite restrictions due to COVID-19, UNHCR has registered some 84,840 individuals since January 2020. The Office adopted innovative remote modalities that have enabled the continued processing of asylum applications.

UNHCR worked with governments in the region to address statelessness and continued its close collaboration with the League of Arab States, particularly towards the implementation of the Arab Declaration on Belonging and Legal Identity. UNHCR also provided updated country of origin information and eligibility guidelines to support operations and national asylum decision-makers in assessing the international protection needs of asylum-seekers from the region.

The measures taken to contain the spread of COVID-19 exacerbated existing vulnerabilities that refugee and IDP children and youth face in accessing quality education at all levels. As governments adopted national distance learning modalities, many refugee and IDP children were put at a disadvantage due to unequal access to the necessary equipment and support services.

UNHCR continues to promote the mental health and psychosocial well-being of both persons of concern and its staff. Ongoing technical support was provided to operations to facilitate remote psychosocial interventions, including to prevent self-harm and suicide among forcibly displaced people.

Community-based protection approaches were strengthened, with a focus on age, gender, disability and other diversity considerations. UNHCR and partners reached 5.2 million persons of concern, over 50 per cent of whom were women and girls, and some 30 per cent children. The Office conducted research in Egypt, Iraq, Jordan and Lebanon aimed at identifying good practices and next steps for strengthening communication with communities in line with its commitment on accountability to affected populations. Furthermore, an exercise was initiated to map digital feedback, response and complaint mechanisms in the region. A new regional tool was also piloted in Algeria, Israel and Morocco to enhance community inclusion and participation in operational management aspects of UNHCR and partner programmes.

UNHCR and the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) enhanced cooperation in several areas, including protection-related programming, complementary pathways, civil documentation, and registration and data sharing

Ensuring protection from violence and exploitation

Sexual and gender-based violence prevention, risk mitigation and response remain a priority for UNHCR in the region. However, the COVID-19 pandemic further exacerbated existing protection risks. In response, UNHCR adapted its interventions to provide remote services. Between January and June 2020, some 26,000 survivors and people at risk, including boys and men benefited from multisectoral services as part of the 3RP response.³ As of May 2020, nearly 93 per cent of staff across the region had completed UNHCR's mandatory training on the prevention of sexual exploitation and abuse.

COVID-19 aggravated the situation of children of concern in the region due to the emotional distress caused by school closures and confinement, the impact of parental anxieties and the increased risk of child abuse, neglect, violence and exploitation exacerbated by economic hardship. Between January and June 2020, over 69,700 girls and boys benefited from specialized child protection services through the 3RP response. Furthermore, over 57,000 girls and boys participated in structured, sustained child protection and psychosocial

³ This figure does not include data from Jordan.

support programmes. Some 15,600 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.

Achieving durable solutions

Some 12,600 refugees from the region, including over 10,000 Syrians and around 730 Iraqis, were put forward for resettlement consideration in the first seven months of 2020. This represents only 1.9 per cent of the region’s overall resettlement needs for the year (around 670,000 refugees). While COVID-19 adversely impacted resettlement activities, remote processing modalities mitigated this impact, ensuring access to asylum, protection and solutions were preserved.

The Office continues to implement a wide range of activities towards advancing complementary pathways. In partnership with the Government of Canada and the International Refugee Assistance Project (IRAP), UNHCR is developing a regional contact group for complementary pathways. UNHCR aims to enhance access to family reunification, including by expanding a project launched with partners in the central Mediterranean context, involving four operations in the region.

Around 21,600 Syrian refugees returned between January and July 2020, representing a reduction in returns by more than half compared to the same period the previous year. In collaboration with host governments and guided by the “[Comprehensive protection and solutions strategy](#)”, UNHCR has enhanced operational support to returning refugees. This includes 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. In the Syrian Arab Republic, UNHCR supports returning refugees with humanitarian assistance based on their needs and equal to that of other vulnerable individuals.

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

In line with the Global Compact on Refugees, UNHCR continued to strengthen strategic partnerships, with a focus on engaging emerging local stakeholders in responding to refugee situations. Country operations supported the inclusion of civil society, including faith-based actors, academic institutions, the private sector and partners from the art and culture sector in response to displacement through the MENA⁴ Civil Society Network for Displacement. This proved critical during the COVID-19 crisis, with the need for greater reliance on local actors.

The Office engaged in dialogue with municipal authorities in preparation for the first Mayors Forum: Inclusive Cities in North Africa to be held virtually in October 2020. UNHCR continued to promote the inclusion of refugees in entrepreneurial opportunities and advocated more robust and impactful private sector engagement with development actors and financial institutions, including the World Bank.

C. Financial information

The budget for the region approved by the Executive Committee in October 2020 stood at \$2.6 billion. With the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent launch of the Global Humanitarian Response Plan, the region’s budget increased by \$223.4 million (8.5 per cent), bringing the overall budgetary requirements to \$2.8 billion. As at end August 2020, 42 per cent of the region’s 2020 financial requirements were funded, taking into consideration the indicative allocation of unearmarked and softly earmarked contributions.

⁴ The Middle East and North Africa