

Update on UNHCR operations in the Middle East and North Africa

A. Situational analysis, including new developments

Syria situation

In 2024, the crisis in the Syrian Arab Republic entered its fourteenth year, with 16.7 million people in need of humanitarian assistance and protection, an increase of nearly 10 per cent from the previous year. The Syrian situation remains one of the largest displacement crises in the world, with over 7 million internally displaced persons and close to 6 million refugees who are primarily hosted in the neighbouring countries of Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon and Türkiye.

In the Syrian Arab Republic, UNHCR supported a total of 116 community centres as well as 113 mobile units, involving over 2,300 volunteers in the provision of protection services in the first half of 2024. Over 111,000 people received legal assistance, 93,000 people received health consultations. Some 1,500 people were also assisted in starting small businesses and in re-establishing agricultural activities in rural areas. In addition, UNHCR helped restore basic services, such as shelter repair, rehabilitation of education and health facilities, and irrigation channels, which were critical to strengthen the local economy.

The Syrian Government extended its previous agreements with the United Nations to maintain three border-crossing points open, enabling critical humanitarian assistance to be delivered in the north-western part of the Syrian Arab Republic through Gaziantep in Türkiye. Eighteen cross-border missions were undertaken by UNHCR between January and August 2024 to facilitate the delivery of humanitarian aid.

Maintaining assistance to Syrian refugees in host countries in the region remains of paramount importance. A total of 758,000 Syrian refugees in neighbouring countries benefitted from cash assistance, amounting to \$72 million. The majority received multipurpose cash assistance enabling them to meet their specific needs and mitigate risks, ensuring protection benefits.

UNHCR and the United Nations Development Programme continued to co-lead the regional refugee and resilience plan to respond to the Syrian refugee crisis. At the end of June 2024, the plan was 19 per cent funded. The lack of adequate resources threatened to exacerbate tensions between refugees and host communities, decrease opportunities for livelihoods and strain already overstretched national systems. The reduction in some essential services, including the provision of cash assistance, legal support and health care, further compounded the challenges faced by both refugees and host communities.

Spontaneous returns to the Syrian Arab Republic continued, with a total of 19,700 refugees returning during the first half of 2024. Concerns about safety and security inside the country remained a key obstacle to the return of refugees from Egypt, Iraq, Jordan and Lebanon. The lack of livelihood opportunities was also an increasingly important factor influencing their decision not to return.

The recent escalation of the conflict affecting Lebanon has resulted in 1.2 million displaced according to the Government of Lebanon. As of 8 October, as many as 240,000 Lebanese and Syrians have crossed into the Syrian Arab Republic. A significant increase in humanitarian financing is urgently needed in both countries.

Iraq situation

With over 1.1 million Iraqis internally displaced at the end of 2023, UNHCR supported the authorities in ensuring access to civil documentation and inclusion in the national social safety net. The decision by the Government to close all camps for internally displaced persons by the end of July 2024 was postponed, and UNHCR continued to assist the authorities to find solutions for some 143,000 internally displaced persons in 22 camps in the Kurdistan region of Iraq.

Iraq hosts over 300,000 refugees and asylum-seekers, more than 90 per cent of whom are Syrians. The majority reside in urban settings in the Kurdistan region of Iraq, where UNHCR provides them with access to legal aid and documentation. Between January and June 2024, UNHCR registered over 5,600 new arrivals in the country, the majority being Syrians. This represents a 60 per cent increase in new arrivals compared to the same period last year. A rise in the numbers of refugees at risk of refoulement was observed, and UNHCR continues to advocate with the authorities to respect the principle of non-refoulement. Related efforts in 2024 have resulted the prevention of over refoulement of over 1,000 refugees and asylum-seekers.

To support the refugee education integration policy implemented in coordination with the Kurdistan Regional Government, UNHCR completed the construction of one new primary school, renovated 10 primary schools and built 21 new classrooms in the Kurdistan region of Iraq. This resulted in increased capacity in the Kurdish public education system, improving the quality of education for some 50,000 refugee students.

More than 200,000 Iraqi refugees and asylum-seekers are hosted in neighbouring countries, primarily in Jordan, the Syrian Arab Republic and Türkiye. UNHCR provides humanitarian assistance and protection services, as well as support with third-country resettlement for the most vulnerable refugees.

North Africa

The number of Sudanese refugees in Egypt grew considerably as a result of the conflict in the Sudan. More than 700,000 people forced to flee Sudan have approached UNHCR in Egypt since April 2023. UNHCR has enhanced reception conditions at border crossing points and registration capacity in Cairo and Alexandria, and continued to advocate for the inclusion of refugees and asylum-seekers in the national social protection, health care, and education systems, as well as in other essential services. In response to the Gaza crisis, and in agreement with the Egyptian authorities, UNHCR has delivered water, clothes, blankets, jerry cans and sleeping mats to the Egyptian Red Crescent, and is providing cash assistance to medical evacuees.

In Libya, UNHCR is leading the coordination of the Sudan refugee response. More than 47,000 Sudanese refugees, including 28,000 new arrivals, are registered, and 90,000 people have been provided with medical supplies, and equipment was given to hospitals and health centres throughout the country. Since January 2024, some 1,000 refugees have departed through resettlement, complementary pathways, evacuations by means of the Emergency Transit Mechanism to Rwanda and the Humanitarian Corridors to Italy. UNHCR only has access to the official detention centres, where 21 per cent of the 5,900 individuals detained are potentially in need of international protection. Following the intervention of UNHCR, 81 asylum-seekers have been released from detention. UNHCR also helps ensure that people in detention have access to core relief items to cover their most critical needs. Approximately 9,700 people were supported with core relief items.

In Tunisia, UNHCR supported over 16,600 refugees and asylum-seekers by providing psychosocial assistance, medical care, core relief items and other humanitarian support. Through close coordination with governmental and inter-agency partners, UNHCR carried out initiatives and advocacy to enhance the protection of forcibly displaced persons and ensure the most vulnerable received life-saving assistance and access to basic services.

In Algeria, UNHCR continued to provide support to refugees and asylum-seekers in urban areas. In response to the nearly 50-year-old displacement of Sahrawi refugees in the five

refugee camps near Tindouf, UNHCR coordinated with partners to offer humanitarian assistance line with the Sahrawi Refugee Response Plan for 2024-2025.

Mauritania maintained its open door policy towards refugees and asylum-seekers, and is now hosting over 260,000 individuals, mainly from Mali. The unprecedented wave of new arrivals has put significant pressure on the limited natural resources and services in the country. UNHCR is coordinating the implementation of the inter-agency refugee response plan for 2024. It also provides emergency assistance and works with development actors to promote refugee inclusion in national systems.

In Morocco, UNHCR supported around 18,000 refugees and asylum-seekers through registration and refugee status determination, the provision of key protection services and humanitarian assistance. It also advocated inclusion in public services.

Gulf Cooperation Council countries

UNHCR continued resource mobilization activities across the Gulf Cooperation Council countries, raising close to \$57 million (inclusive of government and private sector contributions) as of August 2024, primarily from Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates.

Yemen

Yemen has remained in a “no peace, no war” state since the expiration of the United Nations-mediated truce in October 2022. Years of devastating conflict have led to a protection and displacement crisis with increased restrictions on humanitarian access. In 2024, the United Nations estimates that 18.2 million people are in need of humanitarian assistance and protection services, including over 4.5 million internally displaced Yemenis and 60,300 refugees and asylum-seekers. UNHCR is leading the clusters for camp coordination and camp management, protection, and shelter and non-food items. During the first half of 2024, over 200,000 vulnerable refugees and internally displaced persons received multipurpose cash assistance. UNHCR also co-leads the multi-sector response to the needs of refugees, and is the only agency addressing the protection and well-being of refugees and asylum-seekers across Yemen. It provides a wide array of protection services and assistance, including access to energy, education, health care, water and sanitation, and shelter.

Mixed movements

Mixed movements continued in the region, with refugees from Mali, the Sudan and the Syrian Arab Republic who constituted the largest groups on the move. UNHCR, in partnership with the International Organization for Migration, has developed a route-based approach that seeks to address the protection and assistance needs of refugees along key routes. The approach also includes measures to develop or strengthen protection-sensitive entry and admission as well as asylum systems; address immediate protection and assistance needs; strengthen inclusion and development; and increase access to regular and complementary pathways.

Movements by sea from North Africa to Europe continued. Some 12,000 people, primarily Guineans, Malians and Tunisians, crossed from Tunisia to Italy in the first seven months of 2024, a significant decrease compared to the same period in 2023. Some 19,600 people also crossed from Libya to Italy, the majority being Bangladeshis, Egyptians and Syrians.

More than 12,000 persons were disembarked in Libya after interception or rescue at sea. UNHCR does not have consistent access to disembarkation points in Tunisia and western Libya, and no access in eastern Libya, which hinders the identification of people with international protection needs. Sea arrivals in Yemen dropped significantly with fewer arrivals from Djibouti.

At least 300 refugees and migrants are known to have died as the result of several shipwrecks along the route to Yemen. In addition, some 800 refugees and migrants are known to have died in the Mediterranean Sea between North Africa and Europe, and some 700 persons have died along routes to the Canary Islands, although the actual number of deaths along the latter route are estimated to be much higher according to non-governmental organizations.

B. Progress and challenges in achieving the 2024 plan for the Middle East and North Africa

Attaining favourable protection environments

From January to July 2024, over 350,000 individuals were newly registered by UNHCR in the region, marking a substantial increase of 200 per cent compared to the same period in 2023. This increase is attributed mainly to the Sudan and Mali crises, as 71 per cent of all new registrations comprised Sudanese nationals, followed by Syrians (14 per cent) and Malians (7 per cent). In North Africa, 81 per cent of those newly registered were Sudanese (over 250,000), the majority of whom were in Egypt. This figure includes a total of 7,420 Sudanese who were already in the sub-region and who were newly registered during this period.

UNHCR continued to work closely with countries in the region to promote sustainable asylum transitions with the aim to provide longer-term solutions for refugees and asylum-seekers. At the Global Refugee Forum held in December 2023, Algeria, Iraq and Mauritania expressed their commitment to develop a domestic asylum framework in their respective countries.

The efforts of UNHCR continued to focus on community empowerment and localization. Over 980,000 persons participated in community structures and received information on asylum procedures and how to access protection and support services. UNHCR contact centres responded to over 1.1 million queries made by forcibly displaced and stateless people regarding cash assistance, registration, resettlement and other durable solutions, health care, as well as legal protection in Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon and Libya. Most of the persons reaching out for information were adult men, and 37 per cent were adult women.

The roll-out of the Middle East and North Africa accountability to affected people toolkit, the Middle East and North Africa digital participatory tool and the feedback and response module in the refugee assistance information system served to enhance the identification of, and timely response to the needs of, forcibly displaced and stateless persons in the region and to promote greater participation in the UNHCR programme cycle. Across the region, in operations using the digital participatory tool, UNHCR engaged approximately 8,300 community members in programme planning, implementation and monitoring, and facilitated structured dialogues with affected persons. Approximately 40 per cent were women, 10 per cent were young people and children, and 8 per cent older people and people with disabilities.

UNHCR continued to actively address gender-based violence, with a focus on enhancing risk mitigation measures across the region. More than 94,000 survivors and persons at risk benefitted from specialized programmes between 1 January and 30 June 2024. UNHCR also strengthened its child protection interventions to prevent and respond to violence, abuse, exploitation and neglect. UNHCR continued to promote the best interest principle and facilitated access to national child protection services through strengthened technical support, capacity-building and advocacy.

UNHCR continued to promote equitable and sustainable inclusion in national education systems for forcibly displaced and statelessness children, and enhance support to out-of-school children and those at risk of drop-out through community-based retention activities and enhance the enrolment rate at all education levels. In the context of the Sudan crisis, UNHCR in collaboration with the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) provided access to non-formal education, cash grants, mental health and psychosocial support to newly arrived Sudanese refugee children in Egypt.

To address statelessness in the region and to improve access to birth documentation, UNHCR provided legal assistance and technical support to national authorities. Significant progress was made with civil documentation in several countries, including Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon and Yemen. In Mauritania, some 600,000 persons, including individuals at risk of statelessness, were supported to register their birth through a government-led enrolment campaign conducted between July 2023 and February 2024. The Arab Declaration on Belonging and Legal Identity was launched by the League of Arab States in July 2024. The Declaration provides a strong framework on issues relating, among other things, to civil registration, childhood statelessness and women's nationality rights

Empowering communities and achieving gender equality

UNHCR continued to further develop strategic partnerships and to strengthen engagement with communities. The PROSPECTS partnership¹ remained instrumental in supporting learning for, and enhancing collaboration among, UNHCR and partners as well as community and grassroots organizations to further advance localization through meaningful engagement with organizations led by forcibly displaced or stateless persons. Between January and June 2024, 30 new organizations joined the Middle East and North Africa community protection network, which aims to facilitate the identification and referral of persons with international protection needs, including people in hard-to-reach areas or those on the move. The capacity of community and grassroots organizations to work online was developed by the Network. A peer-to-peer solutions advisory network programme was also launched in Egypt, Iraq and Jordan, with the support of the PROSPECTS Partnership. The programme aims to support refugee young people by providing them with advice on tertiary education, employment and potential third-countries opportunities.

UNHCR continued to work in partnership with the League of Arab States, particularly in the context of the implementation of the 2019-2024 Arab strategy for the protection of children in asylum context in the Arab region. With the overarching objective of improving access to rights and services for forcibly displaced and stateless persons, UNHCR further collaborated with the League of Arab State on a wide range of issues linked to child protection, the prevention and response to gender-based violence, statelessness and situations of internal displacement.

In 2024, with the support of the PROSPECTS Partnership and Safe from the Start, UNHCR also provided five grants to community and grassroots organizations, including refugee, women and youth-led organizations in Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, the Syrian Arab Republic and Yemen to enhance access to accountability mechanisms and protection, including prevention and response to gender-based violence.

In the context of the 2023 strategic collaboration framework between UNHCR and UNICEF, letters of understanding were signed in Libya, Morocco and Tunisia to jointly work towards achieving the inclusion of refugees in national strategies, plans and budgets, education, child protection, end statelessness, social protection, water and sanitation, and data in support of the sustainable development goals by 2030. In Jordan, UNHCR, together with a network of 17 stakeholders, including philanthropists and representatives from higher education and vocational training institutions, created the Higher Education Alliance in Jordan, which is committed to promoting self-reliance among young refugees.

Securing solutions

The MENA region benefited from an increase in resettlement quotas in the first half of 2024, with increases mainly for Egypt and Jordan. However, the resettlement needs that UNHCR identified were greatest in Lebanon. Lebanon was further impacted by several State resettlement programmes being temporarily suspended due to the security situation in the country, reducing the availability of resettlement options for those in need.

As part of the route-based approach, UNHCR has been advocating for increased resettlement quotas and greater opportunities for complementary pathways for refugees in North African countries. Although new quotas for resettlement were made available in early 2024, they were later withdrawn by a resettlement State due to an internal political decision.

The existing resettlement quota for the region continues to meet only 5 per cent of the needs of refugees in the region. There is a need for continued high-level advocacy as part of the routes-based approach and for resettlement from countries hosting Syrian refugees and for resettlement States to reinstate remote processing of cases.

Despite challenges, UNHCR submitted the cases of approximately 34,000 individuals for resettlement consideration, including Syrian refugees in Türkiye, between January and June 2024. A total of 9,290 individuals had departed for resettlement by the end of June 2024.

¹ The project is implemented by UNHCR, the International Finance Corporation, the International Labour Organization, UNICEF and the World Bank. It operates at global and regional level, and focuses on eight countries in the Middle East and North Africa and in the East and Horn of Africa.

UNHCR continued to work with States, partners and other stakeholders to encourage investment in complementary pathways, including linking private foundations with key partners who provided upskilling for refugees in countries of asylum and enhancing refugee engagement in raising awareness of complementary pathway opportunities within their communities.

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

UNHCR strengthened partnerships in the region, leveraging the Global Compact on Refugees to enhance collaboration with governments, development actors, financial institutions, the private sector, civil society and academia to promote sustainable solutions, and preserve a conducive protection environment for refugees and asylum-seekers. At the Global Refugee Forum, of the 70 pledges submitted by Governments and other stakeholders from the region, half of them were linked to multi-stakeholder pledges advancing the inclusion of refugees in national systems and mobilizing support for host countries. Governments, including those from Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, Mauritania, Morocco and Tunisia, as well as national institutions, also submitted 25 pledges to improve access of refugees to national education and health services, economic inclusion and social protection, inclusion in national statistics and data. Pledges also focused on the adoption of refugee and asylum laws, climate response plans and peacebuilding strategies.

UNHCR continued to work closely with the World Bank on the replenishment and potential expansion of its global concessional financing facility and the International Development Association window for host communities and refugees in the region. This work was reinforced by data and analysis on poverty measurement by the Joint Data Center on Forced Displacement and the socioeconomic vulnerability assessment framework, which was jointly launched in Jordan by UNHCR, the World Bank and the World Food Programme. In Jordan, UNHCR and the World Bank are also co-chairing a technical task force with development partners to seek sustainable employment for refugees. In line with pledges made at the Global Refugee Forum, efforts to strengthen the self-reliance and inclusion of refugees through integration in national social protection systems and access to employment initiatives in Egypt, Iraq, Jordan and Lebanon are being expanded under the PROSPECTS Partnership for humanitarian and development engagement between United Nations agencies and international financial institutions in the Middle East and North Africa. In addition, progress in Jordan and Mauritania was highlighted at the Sustainable Programming Roundtable held in Berlin in July 2024.

C. Financial information

In October 2023, the Executive Committee approved the 2024 budget of \$2,341.8 million for the region. The current 2024 budget for the region remains unchanged as of 31 August 2024. Compared to the final budget for 2023, this represents a 4 per cent decrease.

The breakdown of the requirements by impact area is as follows: realizing rights in safe environments (\$1,633.2 million); attaining favourable protection environments (\$367.7 million); empowering communities and achieving gender equality (\$247.6 million); and securing solutions (\$93.3 million).

As of 31 August 2024, 35 per cent of the Middle East and North Africa region's 2024 requirements were funded, taking into consideration the indicative allocation of unearmarked and softly earmarked contributions.