

NGO Statement on the Middle East and North Africa

Dear Chair,

This statement has been drafted on behalf of a wide range of NGOs. It has been prepared in close consultation with the NGO community and aims to reflect the diversity of views brought forward during this process.

The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region has reached an increasingly precarious position in 2023. Humanitarian needs are acute. Ongoing conflicts, humanitarian crises, changing climates, stalled peace processes, statelessness, and widespread displacement continue to upend the dreams and aspirations for tens of millions of people across the region seeking a better life. Meanwhile, the political will of the international community and the availability of financial resources from donor countries is in worrying decline.

New and emerging crises, including the ongoing conflict in Ukraine and the global economic downturn, are directly affecting funding and support for forced displaced communities in the MENA region, particularly women, girls, and vulnerable minorities. New financial demands on donors have resulted in fewer resources, reduced international attention, and increased concerns of worsening conditions. The cascading effects of these crises have deepened existing food insecurity and resource scarcity across the region. These dynamics are exacerbated by the continued targeting of civilian infrastructure, nascent rehabilitation of critical infrastructure, and damaged health systems.

The internationally-recognized durable solutions—voluntary repatriation, resettlement, and local integration—are also not available for many of those displaced across the region. Millions remain in protracted displacement, amid acute protection challenges and find themselves out-of-reach of humanitarian aid and service provision. Global resettlement is decreasing as Member States pursue more restrictive asylum procedures. This is shifting the financial burden onto hosting countries—the majority of which are developing countries facing acute economic instability.

Although several elements of last year's formal truce continue to be observed by parties to the conflict, **Yemen** remains one of the world's worst humanitarian crises. Few improvements to conditions and ongoing humanitarian access constraints by warring parties continue to impede aid deliveries and threaten the security of aid workers. In 2023, an estimated 21.6 million people will need humanitarian assistance and protection services, according to OCHA. Over 60 percent face severe needs, the vast majority of whom are women and children. More than 4.5 million of Yemenis live in protracted displacement. Some have been forced to move multiple times as they seek to find safe, dignified shelter. As the conflict enters its ninth year, many internally displaced persons (IDPs) are now living in protracted displacement, unable to return.

A reduction in hostilities as a result of the April 2022 truce has brought some respite in the severity of conflict. However, a lack of progress between parties toward an extension to the truce, which expired in October 2022, leaves Yemeni civilians at a continued risk of death and displacement during periods of escalation and localized conflict.

NGOs urge stakeholders to:

- Pressure all conflict parties to renew an inclusive truce and ensure unfettered humanitarian space for aid workers and civil society to provide critical lifesaving aid to the Yemeni people while exerting all efforts to reach a lasting peaceful settlement of the conflict.
- Ensure particular attention is paid to address the protection challenges faced by all Yemenis, including women and children, who bare the worst consequences of the crisis, including through enabling principled protection programming and unimpeded access to survivors of gender-based violence and human rights violations.
- Urge warring parties to strive towards releasing and transferring the salaries of as many as 1.2 million public servants, which have been frozen for over 4 years.
- Ensure the experiences and perspectives of NGOs, Yemeni civil society, and displaced Yemenis are integrated into the UN-led Durable Solutions architecture in Yemen.

This March marks 12 years since the start of the conflict in **Syria**. More than 13 million people remain in protracted displacement both inside Syria and beyond its borders. Inside the country, the February earthquake caused extensive devastation and loss of human life, and the follow-on effects will have generational impacts. The crisis has amplified human suffering and drastically expanded acute needs across the country, ranging from basic food and water to the reconstruction of critical infrastructure and health facilities. Prior to the earthquake, an estimated 15.3 million Syrians were in need of aid, 70% of whom are women and children. Those numbers will continue to rise over the coming year.

The fallout of the earthquake is only becoming clear. While the earthquake temporarily froze warring conditions, the risk for a return to conflict in the months to come poses long-term protection risks for millions.

Conditions are worsening across the country, but they remain most acute in the Northwest. The cross-border mechanism, established under UN Security Council Resolution 2165 in 2014, remains one of the few remaining options for providing lifesaving aid for 4.1 million Syrians in the northwest. The lack of UN action to Northwest Syria left over 4 million people without any international assistance for nearly four days and signaled that the Syria humanitarian architecture still leaves millions on the periphery of the response. At a time when needs are increasing across the country, more access is needed, not less. Moving forward, all options for moving aid and recovery assistance into Syria should be considered, including expanded authorities for UN agencies to reach the Northwest, as well as cross-line aid provided sufficient safeguards are put in place to prevent aid diversion.

- NGOs urge Member States, in an emergency session before the current resolution is set to expire, to urgently extend the Syria cross-border mechanism for a minimum of 12 months and expand authorizations for all available border crossings into affected areas of Syria so UN actors – with international donor support – can better support the stabilization, recovery, and rebuilding of devastated communities in impacted areas.
- NGOs urge donors to fully fund the Syria Humanitarian Response Plan and Cross-border Humanitarian Fund to address the impact of the recent earthquake, on top of 12 years of conflict and economic instability.
- NGOs urge donors to provide Local and International NGOs access to adequate funding, especially given the scaled-up NGO responses currently in operation. Currently, the majority of funding to pooled funds and through individual donor States are going to UN agencies.
- NGOs also call for a greater focus on internal displacement across Syria and for UNHCR to ensure that more detailed analyses are made available to all response actors. NGOs agree that area-based programming provides an opportunity to enhance the aid response while needs continue to increase, but links with IDP return are not providing a holistic displacement-focused response.
- Stakeholders should expand the protection space, particularly for women and children, protected minorities, returnees, and stateless persons by expanding routine check-ins, the

provision of safe spaces, and local interventions to advocate for expanded rights and protection with governing authorities.

- Member States should act in the spirit of UNSC Resolution 2664 and take steps domestically to ensure that sanctions do not hinder the timely delivery of humanitarian assistance inside Syria.

Across the region, 5.4 million **Syrian refugees** remain in protracted displacement between Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey, Iraq, and Egypt. UNHCR reported in 2022 that 93% do not plan on returning in the next year due to Syria's volatility. A number of reports and interviews with returnees have highlighted a wide range of protection challenges, including the risk of arrest, deportation back to Syria, arbitrary detention, disappearance, and secondary displacement. Conditions in Syria are simply not suitable for return that is safe, voluntary, and dignified.

- UNHCR should expand monitoring and information sharing for return movement and proactively engage with host-countries to prevent any form of coerced or forced return. This should include publicly sharing data on deportations, involuntary, and voluntary returns from the hosting countries. These actions must occur in tandem with designing and implementing locally focused agendas which prioritize opening additional pathways for durable solutions, including increasing resettlement opportunities and tailoring assistance to support social inclusion among Syrian refugees and the host-communities.
- UNHCR must work with donor States and host-countries to improve refugee resilience by expanding refugee access to aid, legal assistance, healthcare, education, and employment in host-countries.
- UNHCR must advocate with the governments of the hosting countries to increase refugee access to legal status.
- NGOs urge that stakeholders expand refugees' access to information on the security conditions and protection challenges in Syria to support them in making an informed decision about their future.

In Lebanon, the country is hosting the largest number of refugees per capita while dealing with the worst economic, political, and financial crisis in its recent history. Tensions between host and refugee communities are running high and vulnerabilities in both communities are increasing. Political stalemate and economic crisis have pushed hundreds of thousands of people into crisis or worse (IPC 3+) levels of food insecurity and severely limited the essential functions of the Lebanese state, including its ability to deliver basic services—highlighted by the spread of cholera for the first time in decades. At least 300,000 of those facing food insecurity are experiencing emergency (IPC 4) levels, where urgent action is needed to save lives.

- NGOs urge UNHCR and other relevant stakeholders to engage with the government of Lebanon regarding the current anti-refugee rhetoric and urge de-escalation.
- NGOs urge donor governments to prioritize social cohesion initiatives targeting both refugee and host communities in their humanitarian and development responses.
- NGOs call on the Lebanese Government to provide services to host communities and refugees without distinction and guarantee Syrian refugee children's right to access education.

In Iraq, the humanitarian picture for the 1.2 million displaced Iraqis in 2023 remains bleak. IDPs, of whom 180,000 live in camps and 103,000 in informal sites, face barriers to return, with the vast majority indicating they do not intend to return in the next year. NGOs remain concerned that the Government of Iraq may again make a renewed push to close the remaining IDP camps, with consolidation efforts already underway in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (where the majority of remaining camps are located). Such efforts would yield tragic consequences for thousands already facing abject vulnerabilities. We have witnessed this in increasing evictions of IDPs in informal settlements, often to make way for development initiatives. IDPs are forced to flee with few alternatives and find themselves secondarily displaced or forced to return before conducive conditions

are established. Concerted efforts are needed to explore both resettlement and local integration for these groups. Other problems persist. Hundreds of thousands of IDPs lack access to civil documentation, which has created barriers for securing their rights, freedom of movement, and access to basic services (food, water, health, and education).

The de-activation of the National Protection Cluster as of January 2023 also poses challenges for responding to continued and emerging protection risks, including civil documentation issues, and response actors will need to coordinate closely with – and ensure continuous and concerted engagement at various levels with – the Government of Iraq to address gaps. Without consistent monitoring and clear channels for responding to risks (including referral pathways), vulnerable groups stand to experience compound protection risks that impede their ability to recover and achieve durable solutions.

- NGOs call on UNHCR and Member States to ensure that, with the de-activation of the National Protection Cluster, gaps in the protection landscape are closely monitored, clear channels for advocacy and response exist (with connections between sub-national and national levels), and concerted engagement with the Government of Iraq is ensured, including advocacy and systems strengthening.
- NGOs call on the Government of Iraq to establish a more predictable and reliable civil documentation system, security clearance process, and nationality law reforms to enable displaced Iraqis and their children to acquire and replace critical identification documents, without discrimination on the basis of gender, marital status, or other protected grounds.
- Stakeholders should closely consult with local communities, actors, and displaced populations in areas of return to identify any potential host community tensions early and develop more effective mechanisms for the integration of returnees and IDPs into host communities.

The situation facing people on the move in **Libya**, including asylum seekers, refugees, and other migrants, remains particularly dire. From arrival, they are trapped in a cycle of violence and persistent precarity. As Libya transitions to a Humanitarian, Development, and Peacebuilding (HDP) context the protection situation for migrants, refugees and asylum seekers is not improving – it remains a protection crisis at heart. These communities continue to face high risk of physical violence, exploitation, forced labor, arbitrary and indefinite detention, as well as trafficking and robberies. Furthermore, increased scrutiny and reduction in operational space for actors in Libya has resulted in the denial of humanitarian access for protection for these affected communities.

- NGOs urge Libyan authorities to allow UNHCR to fully exercise its mandate in the country, including on the refugee status determination process and consideration of asylum seeker applications for an expanded list of nationalities present, and to ensure all protection agencies have unhindered access to populations.
- NGOs urge the EU and other donors to follow a principled approach in maintaining humanitarian services based on need in Libya in light of the end of the Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP), and to step-up humanitarian advocacy to support humanitarian access.

The **North Africa** region as a whole is reaching a new level of geopolitical tension, socioeconomic instability, and insecurity. In Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt, there remain few, if any, off ramps to growing local anger, outward migration, stricter governance, and domestic repression. Stricter governance, resulting in reduced access to aid assistance for vulnerable groups, coupled with increasing frustration among local populations are pressurizing the region.

People from host countries are fleeing to Europe through the few legal options which remain and where no legal options are left, vulnerable communities are risking dangerous boat journeys across the Mediterranean in search of hope. Among those fleeing, a growing share of non-traditional communities, including growing numbers of Egyptians, Lebanese, and Tunisians (now amongst the largest groups of arrivals), are seeking refuge and better lives in Europe. These, predominantly young, people need an increased ability to find opportunities in their home countries, as well as

complementary pathways to seek opportunities to build a future elsewhere. The economic downturn in North Africa, combined with weak or non-existent legal frameworks for durable solutions create increasing tensions within communities and between citizens and those displaced in the region, creating increased protection concerns for many already vulnerable people.

- NGOs call on UNHCR and INGOs to focus work and high-level advocacy on legal and complementary pathways for people leaving from North Africa, rather than border management, alongside enhanced temporary protection mechanisms allowing for free temporary movement and access to basic services in Europe.
- NGOs call on the EU and Member States to establish search and rescue capacity in the Mediterranean Sea to prevent further loss of life, including through strengthening coordination with all other maritime rescue actors – including NGOs.
- Member states should also increase resettlement pledges and available places while expanding other safe and regular pathways for refugees, asylum seekers and other migrants, including accelerating the pace at which people are resettled through the Emergency Transit Mechanisms (ETMs).

Across the MENA region, gender discrimination in nationality laws threatens to create a new generation of stateless children, inhibiting sustainable development and undermining women's equal citizenship. Governments must uphold citizens' equal right to confer nationality, regardless of gender, thereby fostering inclusion and eliminating a root cause of statelessness.

- NGOs urge relevant States to share concrete plans to address gender discrimination in their nationality laws at the June 2023 High-Level Summit on Achieving Gender Equality in Nationality Laws, cosponsored by UNHCR and others.

Globally, an average of 20 million people are displaced annually due to **changing climates**. This has been particularly pronounced across the MENA region where environmental degradation and war have led to prolonged drought, desertification, environmental degradation, and destruction of agriculture and water resources. Already, drought in the region, coupled with the collapse of aid support for WASH sectors is fueling a cholera epidemic across Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq. These conditions could worsen with the destruction of water infrastructure following the tragic earthquakes in February.

- NGOs call on UN agencies and donors to invest more to better understand, anticipate, and mitigate the effects of climate and disaster-induced displacement in North Africa and the Middle East, build more resilient communities, especially in the face of drought across the region which results in pressure on food security and affordability.

Thank you.