

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE OF THE
HIGH COMMISSIONER'S PROGRAMME
STANDING COMMITTEE
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13-15 March 2024

NGO Statement on the Middle East and North Africa

Dear Chair,

This statement was drafted through a wide consultation with NGOs and reflects a diversity of views.

Gaza has impacted the entire region. Over 31,000 are dead, including over 13,000 children. More than 2 million people have been displaced. While UNHCR does not operate in Gaza, the relevance of this conflict to the wider region is clear and the potential effect of funding cuts to UNRWA on responses in Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria will have implications, especially at a time where certain protection risks are increasing.

- NGOs reiterate calls for an immediate ceasefire.

In **Lebanon** sustained violence at the southern border has led to the displacement of over 85,000 individuals, many of whom are Syrian refugees. This comes at a time where the economic crisis has already increased social tensions and with reported increases in deportations, many refugees are already limiting their movements to avoid passing through certain checkpoints, for example. While Lebanese internally displaced persons (IDPs) are often able to move in with family or rent homes, Syrian refugees newly displaced are often moving into informal tented settlements, leading to overcrowded conditions. There are reports of landlords evicting Syrian refugees from rental properties to host Lebanese IDPs instead, and directives from the Lebanese government have seen municipalities and the Lebanese Armed Forces impose a more restrictive environment on Syrian refugees, also leading to an increase in negative public discourse about them.

UNHCR's [December 2023 Factsheet](#)¹ states that 87% of Syrian refugees in Lebanon struggled to pay rent, while 44% reported decreasing livelihoods opportunities, reducing self-reliance. This comes as the cost of living is skyrocketing, with a 350% increase between Q3 2023 and the same quarter in 2022, refugee families are forced into utilising negative coping mechanisms to survive.

- NGOs continue to ask for UNHCR and diplomatic missions in country to engage the government of Lebanon to ensure equitable access to aid assistance and services for Syrian refugees and engage regarding the restrictive measures that are increasing protection risks and increasing anti-Syrian refugee discourse.
- NGOs urge donor governments to invest in social cohesion programmes and to engage the government of Lebanon in ensuring that Syrian refugees are able to participate in development programming, for example through ensuring access to documentation and limiting evictions.
- NGOs caution that the shift from grant funding to loans seen at the Brussels 7 Conference should not be extended, given Lebanon's heavy debt burden and current economic

¹ [UNHCR-Lebanon-FactSheet December-2023 Final.pdf](#)

circumstance. NGOs encourage donors to further explore alternative financing mechanisms, such as preferential trade agreements for certain sectors, to circumvent bureaucratic blockages and encourage policy change for more favourable business conditions.

Meanwhile in **Jordan**, potential changes to policies on social security subsidies and access to work permits have led to concern that an increasing number of Syrian refugees may be left with reduced access to the labour market. NGOs welcome the role that the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan has played in providing opportunities for refugees to access services and livelihoods opportunities. While Syrian refugees continue to express their desire to return home, the [eighth regional UNHCR survey](#)² on refugee perceptions highlighted that 97% of Syrian refugees in Jordan do not want to return in the next 12 months, which means it is critical that they are supported to access services, aid assistance, and the labour market in Jordan.

- NGOs request that UNHCR works with the government authorities and development donors to ensure that refugees can continue to access the labour market.
- Engagement with the private sector is critical to creating job opportunities for Syrian refugees and host communities; NGOs urge stakeholders to further engage the private sector in the response.
- NGOs urge donors to maintain financing that targets refugees so that their specific needs and priorities are not lost in the broader development agenda.
- NGOs call for the integration of all refugees into Jordanian society, emphasising the importance of recognising and respecting cultural diversity.

Following the twin earthquakes of 6 February 2023, Syrian refugees in **Türkiye** have faced a variety of conditions to access aid, services, and compensation schemes. While there have been positive examples of refugees able to move away from earthquake affected governorates, many have found themselves marginalised in society, and some have moved into the Temporary Accommodation Centres (TACs) where their freedom of movement is restricted, and as such reduced access to labour markets and livelihoods opportunities. This comes at a time when there were already reports of deportations and a general reduction in the protection space in Türkiye, with new arrivals no longer able to access documentation and an increasing risk of statelessness for refugee populations. National and municipal election cycles in Türkiye have also led to anti-refugee rhetoric being utilised in political campaigns, including threats to forcibly return Syrian refugees to areas of Syria under de-facto Turkish control, which has led to some Syrian refugees – especially those without or needing to renew documents – restricting their movements in country.

- NGOs request that UNHCR and diplomatic missions continue to advocate for refugees to receive equitable access to services and assistance – including income generating activities - following the earthquakes in 2023, and in particular increase provision of mental health psychosocial support, which remains a key need.
- Donor governments should engage the government of Türkiye to uphold the principle of *non-refoulement* and that information must be provided to refugees on the security situation in Syria before they return.

Inside **Syria**, the continuing economic collapse of the country has led to IDPs choosing to return to areas of origin and, in the northeast, displacement camps as they can no longer afford rents to

² [Document - Eighth Regional Survey on Syrian Refugees' Perceptions and Intentions on Return To Syria \(unhcr.org\)](#)

live in displacement. Crime is rife, while active conflict has been increasing in areas of the country outside of government-control, in particular the northwest. Funding cuts have led to the end of WFP food assistance, which many in displacement relied on, and with humanitarian needs at their highest levels since the beginning of the conflict, funding the response plan is critical. Cross-border and cross-line assistance are both required to meet needs, and it is critical that the government of Syria continues to provide consent for the UN and other aid agencies to provide assistance to communities in northwest Syria. NGOs urge stakeholders to:

- Ensure that those living in areas outside of government of Syria control are able to receive aid assistance commensurate to their needs, through pressuring authorities not to impede the delivery of aid both via cross-border and cross-line programming.
- Deliver early recovery programmes that restore community access to essential services including water, food and electricity and are developed utilising protection analyses and ensuring that a durable solutions lens is considered as part of all programming.
- Ensure the centrality of protection, whether emergency response or early recovery, understanding that protection needs must be addressed as a critical part of resilience building.
- Deliver on the UN collective commitment, under the Action Agenda on Internal Displacement, to ensure an effective protection and assistance response to IDPs, including through enhanced data collection and analysis.

In **Iraq**, the transition out of the humanitarian architecture has resulted in new ways of working to respond effectively to existing humanitarian and protection needs – in particular those among the remaining IDPs, who still face complex challenges to re-integrate into Iraqi society. The government of Iraq has announced the further closure of IDP sites by the end of June 2024. Without a comprehensive and collaborative response between government, UN agencies, and NGOs there is a clear risk, based on past experience, that many Iraqis will end up in onward displacement and further marginalised. NGOs acknowledge that the government of Iraq commits to working with local and tribal authorities to overcome barriers to return – this process should be supported by the international community, but will also take time to deliver results. The re-integration experience of IDPs into areas of origin should be monitored to understand protection risks and needs.

The work of the UN Secretary General’s Special Adviser on Solutions to Internal Displacement to engage the government of Iraq on a coherent roadmap to ensure durable solutions for all displaced is welcomed, yet could provide more opportunities for the knowledge and expertise of civil society organisations to inform the document. IDPs living in informal settlements continue to face the risk of eviction with consideration for their future status, including as a result of government development schemes.

- NGOs urge stakeholders to ensure the protection platform in Iraq is adequately resourced and able to provide development actors with critical information on protection concerns, ensuring the most vulnerable in society, including those remaining in displacement, are not left behind.
- NGOs urge UN leadership, UNHCR, and diplomatic stakeholders to engage the government of Iraq to ensure camp closures are managed effectively and do not result in further marginalisation of those with complex protection needs, including an extended deadline for the camps to be close, to ensure necessary assistance can be provided.

Escalating conflict in **Yemen** threatens to destabilise the peace process that had provided hope to millions of Yemenis in critical need, including IDPs and migrant populations in the country. While there are reduced levels of conflict, the lack of an inclusive peace process has led to some IDPs feeling forced into returning to their area of origin, with reports suggesting very few of these returns are successful. It is critical that there is a more thorough tracking of the experience of return to inform planning of suitable durable solutions programmes.

NGOs urge stakeholders to:

- Ensure a de-escalation of the conflict in Yemen, and involvement of all populations in Yemen as part of inclusive peace processes. Ensure that there is detailed consultation with humanitarian aid agencies around the effect of terror designations on the humanitarian situation in Yemen.
- Develop a Yemen-wide framework for tracking returns and attempted returns, including understanding how those returns are informed and the reliability of information IDPs have as part of their decision-making.
- Continue to advocate for increased access for aid actors to displaced communities across Yemen.

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 exploitation. The European response to onward irregular migrations also risks trapping many in the hands of smugglers and traffickers.

- 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.

Stateless persons in the region continue to lack access to social services and livelihoods in many countries, while economic crises, displacement and conflict exacerbate their protection risks. The persistence of gender discrimination in nationality laws continues to increase the number of stateless persons, while undermining women's equal citizenship and gender equality as well as inclusive, sustainable development.

Finally, it is critical that countries outside the region increase their commitment to resettlement and complementary pathways to protect the rights and dignity of refugees, as well as reducing the risks of being left with no other alternatives than to pursue irregular and dangerous migration.

Thank you.