

## **Regional Update for the Middle East and North Africa**

### **NGO Collective Statement – Written Statement**

This statement was drafted through consultation with a wide range of NGOs.

The political landscape in the Middle East underwent a significant shift in late 2024, with Syria's rapid and dramatic power transition. This event has altered the dimensions of an already complex regional displacement crisis.<sup>1</sup> The change allows for hope and optimism but is not without immediate challenges for millions of displaced people and host communities. The factors influencing options for a brighter, safer, more hopeful future for Syria and displacement-affected Syrians will be the focus of this collective NGO statement.

#### **Next Steps in Syria**

People in Syria were facing a disastrous humanitarian situation before 8 December, with approximately 7 million people internally displaced and 16.7 million people requiring humanitarian assistance. These dire humanitarian conditions have been exacerbated by the rapid changes in the context. Donors must recognise the critical link between scaled up support and investment to jumpstart Syria's economy and durable solutions to displacement.

The humanitarian response in Syria must be led by Syrian organisations, and Syrian voices must guide the strategies, decisions and support provided by the international community. The international community must support local leadership by investing in forging linkages between organisations and fora that were previously siloed in specific areas of control and fostering equitable partnerships between response actors as the most effective way to rebuild the country. UN agencies must actively consult and include Syrian civil society in consultations to design new coordination structures and ensure that they are able to meaningfully lead and engage in coordination structures going forward.

#### **Regional Refugee Response: much remains the same**

##### **1. The Barriers to Return**

Syria remains unprepared to absorb large-scale returns. It is critical that aid response actors and donors develop a comprehensive strategy for their interventions in Syria, especially in light of the effects of the dramatic shift in the funding policy of the United States of America, and that they recognise that a hastened pace of returns could have a counter-productive and destabilising effect.

UNHCR's recent Perceptions & Intentions on Return to Syria survey, published in February, shows that just over a quarter of Syrian refugees in the region intend to return in the next twelve months. Of those,

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<sup>1</sup> Across the region, forced displacement remains a defining issue. Approximately 5.5 million Syrians remain in neighbouring countries. The escalation of conflict in Lebanon between September and November 2024 reportedly displaced 562,000 individuals, of whom a reported 63% were Syrian refugees. Many Syrians in Lebanon sought safety in Syria, though the sustainability of those movements remains uncertain. Meanwhile, 225,000 Syrians crossed back into Syria from neighbouring countries between December 2024 and mid-January 2025, reflecting shifting displacement patterns.

55% indicate that they continue to have concerns, with safety and security as the most prevalent.<sup>2</sup> This is unsurprising given that power dynamics remain fluid, leading to increased lawlessness, and that unaddressed explosive ordnance contamination continues to threaten the lives and wellbeing of 65% of the people<sup>3</sup> currently in the country.

NGOs warn that UNHCR's best case scenario planning figures<sup>4</sup> are based on an early stocktake that shows people's intention to assess their options later in the year, for instance at the end of Ramadan or the school year, and that their decision will also be informed by news coming out of Syria at that time.

It is vital that donors and response actors focus their attention on working to improve the living conditions in Syria, both as an objective in its own right, but also to prevent failed returns and to ensure that displaced Syrians can fully avail themselves of durable solutions pathways, including voluntary, dignified and safe return.

In this, NGOs emphasize that a lack of civil and Housing, Land and Property (HLP) documentation, leading to forced displacement and inadequate housing or homelessness resulting from evictions, as well as occupation and looting of personal property without access to any form of legal redress, is prohibitive to people's access to durable solutions. Moreover, Syrian women's inability to confer citizenship on children born abroad or on a non-citizen spouse raises barriers to Syrian refugee women's ability to return with their non-citizen family members and inhibits their non-citizen family members' access to rights and services. Efforts to realize a gender-equal nationality law in Syria must be supported.

UNHCR and donor's strategies to increase the space for informed decision-making should also focus on cancelling debt,<sup>5</sup> and on increasing UNCHR and partners' ability to proactively share information about return conditions inside Syria.

## **2. Pressure Against Refugees in Host Countries**

The vast majority of refugees in the region have stated that they are not intending to return in the upcoming year. It bears spotlighting that they continue to face protection, socio-economic and other challenges. Difficulties obtaining legal status, in particular, leave them vulnerable to exploitation, arrest, and deportation, while also restricting their ability to work, move freely, and access healthcare and education.

These dynamics are exacerbated by a declining goodwill on the part of host countries given the changing dynamics in Syria and the economic, political, and financial challenges that host countries themselves are facing. NGOs are concerned that the recent dramatic shift in the funding policy of the United States of America will dramatically compound these issues.

It is imperative that UNHCR continues to advocate for refugees' freedom of choice about their future, including by lobbying for labour market access and providing pathways to legal residency. Recognising that host countries face economic challenges, donors should prioritise funding for livelihoods programs and regularisation initiatives to enhance self-reliance. This also because refugees are never a homogenous group, and some within the refugee community will never be willing or able to return.

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<sup>2</sup> [Document - Flash Regional Survey on Syrian Refugees' Perceptions and Intentions on Return to Syria](#)

<sup>3</sup> Preventing safe movement of civilians, impeding access to vital services and livelihoods, curtailing delivery of humanitarian services and hindering early recovery efforts. [2024 Syria Humanitarian Needs Overview](#)

<sup>4</sup> The best case scenario planning figures are that 1,5 million refugees and 2 million IDPs will return by the end of 2025<sup>4</sup>. The agency is seeking upwards of 370 million USD to implement return and reintegration activities.

<sup>5</sup> 77% of households report that they have debt that is prohibitive to return, [Document - Flash Regional Survey on Syrian Refugees' Perceptions and Intentions on Return to Syria](#)

## **Recommendations**

NGOs would like to focus the attention of UNHCR, Member States and donors around the following recommendations.

1. UNHCR, donor and host countries must ensure refugees are not deported or otherwise compelled to return to Syria.
2. UNHCR should continue working with donor and host-countries to ensure refugee resilience by protecting and maintaining refugee access to legal residency, aid, healthcare, education, and employment.
3. Return is more than the physical movement from one place to another, UNHCR and its donors should support people's reintegration efforts in Syria.
4. Member States should use all diplomatic and political means to insist on access for protection monitoring in Syria. Data from protection monitoring must be shared with all partners in a timely and transparent way and critically evaluated against the 2018 UNHCR protection thresholds and parameters for refugee return.
5. In the current funding landscape UN and donors should continue to invest in local and refugee-led organisations. In particular, UNHCR, donor and host countries should work to remove systemic barriers that prevent local or refugee-led organizations from meaningfully participating in refugee response decision-making structures, including the potential negative impact of UN and INGO expansion on locally led organisations.
6. UNHCR and its partners must invest in proactive information sharing with refugee communities about conditions in areas of possible return.