

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

**NGO Collective Statement – Oral Statement**

Dear Chair, Distinguished Delegates,

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

MENA underwent significant shifts in 2024. Gaza impacted the entire region and the funding cuts to UNRWA will have far reaching implications in Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria. The dramatic decrease in funding to other agencies including NGOs will be devastating.

There were also significant political shifts with Syria's rapid and dramatic power transition. This event has altered the dimensions of an already complex regional displacement crisis. The change allows for hope and optimism but is not without immediate challenges for millions of displaced people and host communities.

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. Scaled up support and investment to jumpstart Syria's economy has the potential to offer a durable solution to displacement.

At present, Syria remains unprepared to absorb large-scale returns and reintegration.

NGOs urgently call for a comprehensive and fully funded strategy for Syria and the region, especially to avoid a hastened pace of returns which could have a counter-productive and destabilising effect.

NGOs commend UNHCR's recent Perceptions & Intentions on Return to Syria survey which shows that just over a quarter of Syrian refugees in the region intend to return in the next twelve months but are reluctant while power dynamics in Syria remain fluid, and increased lawlessness and unaddressed explosive ordnance contamination continues to threaten lives and wellbeing. Household debt and lack of civil and housing land and property documentation is a big barrier to return, and strategies to address this are vital.

UNHCR's returns planning figures highlight that many Syrian's intend to assess their options later in the year or school year, and that their decision will also be informed by news coming out of Syria at that time. NGOs welcome this proactive information sharing which must be a priority for the humanitarian and donor community.

Importantly, refugees are never a homogenous group, and some within the refugee community will never be willing or able to return, and must be supported to access durable solutions elsewhere. The NGO community is committed to supporting UNHCR to advocate for refugees' freedom of choice about their future.

The majority of refugees in the region have stated that they are not intending to return in the upcoming year. Yet, many face protection, socio-economic and other challenges in their host countries. 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.

NGOs urge host countries to continue to welcome Syrian refugees during these uncertain times and heed the no return advisory issued by UNHCR. Meanwhile, it is vital that donors and response actors also focus their attention on working to improve the living conditions in Syria, both as an objective in its own right, but to ensure that returns are dignified, safe, and not lead to further displacement. Against a backdrop of these needs, and opportunities, NGOs remain concerned by the dramatic shift in funding policy of the United States and the indications that other States are also reducing their funding. Continued funding from multiple and diverse donors is critical, and we call on those actors to step up support and invest in Syria and the Region.

When it comes to the humanitarian response, it must be led by Syrian organisations, and Syrian voices must guide the strategies, decisions and support provided by the international community. NGOs urge the international community to support local leadership by investing in organisations and fora, and foster equitable partnerships between response actors.

NGOs stand ready to scale up in Syria and the Region, together with Syrian national society and local organisations, and to support UNHCR in its important work.

Further details are available via [icvanetwork.org](http://icvanetwork.org)

Thank you.