

Update of UNHCR's operations in the Middle East and North Africa

A. Situational context including new developments

Syria situation

As the conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic entered its eighth year, over 6.6 million Syrians remained internally displaced. As of August 2018, over 5.6 million Syrian refugees have registered in Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey. Despite this generosity, host countries, which contend with mounting demographic, economic, political, security and social pressures, have increasingly resorted to stricter border management measures. This has had a significant impact on the ability of thousands of vulnerable people to seek safety.

In the first six months of 2018, some 16,000 Syrian refugees spontaneously returned to the Syrian Arab Republic, while a total of 750,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs) returned to their places of origin, according to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA). In 2017, nearly 51,000 Syrian refugees repatriated and slightly more IDPs (764,000) returned to their areas of origin.

As the lead agency for the global shelter and non-food items and protection clusters, UNHCR expanded its operations in the Syrian Arab Republic, reaching nearly 900,000 persons of concern through its protection activities from January through June 2018. During the same period, UNHCR distributed core relief items to over 850,000 individuals and provided shelter to 44,500 people. UNHCR also led an emergency response to meet the needs of large numbers of IDPs, including in eastern Ghouta, Afrin and the south-western region of the Syrian Arab Republic.

UNHCR continued to lead, together with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan (3RP) in response to the Syria crisis, coordinating the work of over 270 partners in the five main countries hosting Syrian refugees.

Iraq situation

The number of IDPs in Iraq has gradually declined since 2014, with some 1.9 million individuals currently displaced. The number of IDP returnees has increased to 3.9 million, according to the Displacement Tracking Matrix of the International Organization for Migration (IOM). Despite this trend, many IDPs continued to find themselves in a protracted displacement situation or in secondary or tertiary displacement situations, as was the case for example of people who have made unsuccessful attempts to return to areas of origin and went back to camps. Poor living conditions in areas of return, ongoing insecurity, the lack of shelter, services and livelihood opportunities, and explosive hazards continued to result in displacement.

Instances of displacement have also been recorded due to threats linked to perceived affiliation to insurgent groups and intercommunal tensions, following the referendum in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq in September 2017. Evictions, denied return and forced recruitment into armed groups in areas of return limited the possibilities of IDPs to live outside the relative protection of the camps. UNHCR continued to advocate and assist authorities with access to civil documentation for IDPs. Ensuring the protection of the displaced and other affected populations, including through safe and sustainable returns, also continued to be a critical component of the broader recovery and stabilization efforts in Iraq.

UNHCR is co-leading, with United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat), the working group on sustainable solutions for IDPs in the context of the recovery and resilience programme for Iraq. Over 269,000 Iraqi refugees are registered with UNHCR in neighbouring countries, with an additional 12,500 individuals living in camps without any form of registration in the Al-Hassakeh Governorate in the Syrian Arab Republic.

North Africa

In Libya, UNHCR reinforced its presence with the return of international staff to Tripoli following the lifting of the evacuation status in early 2018. UNHCR responded to the deteriorating humanitarian conditions due to the sharp increase in the use of detention and provided assistance to IDPs and returning IDPs.

Despite the volatile security situation, 372,000 IDPs have returned to their homes in Libya, and UNHCR is advocating safe, dignified and voluntary return for the remaining 192,000 IDPs.

With the number of disembarkations in Libya increasing, detention centres have become overcrowded, and conditions inside these centres worsened. Since November 2017, UNHCR evacuated some 1,860 refugees out of detention centres in Libya (1,536 to the newly established Emergency Transit Mechanism in Niger, 310 to Italy and 10 to Romania). To provide alternatives to detention and accelerate durable solutions to third countries, UNHCR also established a “gathering and departure facility” in Tripoli.

In the course of the last three months, more than 1,500 refugees and migrants were stranded for several days on rescue boats in the Mediterranean Sea. This has led to ongoing discussions in coastal States about the disembarkation and relocation of refugees and migrants.

In Algeria, UNHCR continued to provide protection and basic assistance and services to Sahrawi refugees in the five camps near Tindouf, amid serious funding shortfalls. Morocco continued to be a country of destination for migrants and refugees and is taking steps to extend social services to refugees. UNHCR is also working with the Moroccan authorities to develop and implement a national asylum system. In Tunisia, UNHCR continued to advocate the establishment of a national asylum system and supported the authorities in expanding access to public services and livelihood opportunities for refugees.

As of 31 July 2018, UNHCR has registered some 233,000 refugees and asylum-seekers of 58 nationalities in Egypt. Over half were from the Syrian Arab Republic. Refugees and asylum-seekers in Egypt remained vulnerable, and UNHCR is providing support to the most vulnerable through unconditional multipurpose cash assistance. In Mauritania, UNHCR established a Field Unit in Nouadhibou in April 2018 to monitor and conduct a profiling exercise to identify the vulnerabilities of individuals in mixed movements. In addition, 57,000 Malian refugees in Mbera camp

were assisted, and a profiling exercise of households in the camp and a market study were carried out.

Yemen

The humanitarian crisis in Yemen deteriorated in 2018, leaving more than 22.2 million people in need of assistance. This represents an increase of some 1.5 million people compared to the previous year. The deepening decline of Yemen's economic, social, political and security situation has had the greatest impact on civilians, with the threat of famine and further outbreaks of cholera and diphtheria looming.

The pace of airstrikes and armed clashes escalated, leading to scores of civilian casualties and triggering the displacement of over 2 million people since the beginning of the conflict in 2015. Displacement also increased since the Hudaydah offensive began in June 2018, with some 50,800 families fleeing from their homes.

With more people than ever resorting to negative coping mechanisms, UNHCR and partners have witnessed a surge in protection needs. UNHCR expanded its protection monitoring and outreach throughout Yemen to ensure targeted assistance for vulnerable IDPs. Despite limited humanitarian access, UNHCR assisted a total of 521,000 IDPs throughout the country, 84,000 of whom were displaced by the offensive on Hudaydah. Core relief items, emergency shelter kits, protection services and cash-based interventions were provided.

Yemen hosted over 279,000 refugees and asylum-seekers, mainly from Somalia. The asylum space in the country was compromised by increasing levels of arbitrary arrests, the use of detention and restrictions on freedom of movement. In 2018, UNHCR assisted the most vulnerable, also offering legal services, registration and refugee status determination, cash assistance, and access to education and health, and monitored detention facilities. With conditions further deteriorating, UNHCR, in collaboration with the Somali and Yemeni authorities and IOM, continued the assisted spontaneous return programme to support Somali refugees wishing to return to Somalia.

Mixed and onward movements

In 2018, refugees and migrants continued to face high levels of risk when travelling from the Middle East or Africa towards Europe. UNHCR worked with governments and other partners to provide access to safety and protect persons of concern from refoulement. Solutions in the context of migration management frameworks were also sought.

More than 1,640 people reportedly died or went missing in the Mediterranean in the course of 2018. An unknown number of individuals died along routes at crossing points in North Africa, including in the Sahara Desert. The tightening of border controls in the region also increased the risk of human rights violations.

The Central Mediterranean situation has rapidly changed due to the role that Libyan authorities are playing at sea. They have intercepted or rescued some 13,500 refugees and migrants as of mid-September this year. This represents an increase of more than 40 per cent compared to the same period the previous year. Despite the lower number of persons undertaking dangerous sea journeys from Libya, more appeared to be dying at sea. This was attributed to the restricted activity of vessels associated with non-governmental organizations and the limited capacity to detect and rescue boats in distress.

Refugees and migrants crossing through Libya also faced protection risks, particularly when arrested and detained by the Libyan authorities or exposed to criminal networks. UNHCR evacuated refugees from detention centres in Libya with a view to providing durable solutions for vulnerable persons of concern. The Office is now promoting alternatives to detention and advocating the release of refugees and asylum-seekers.

The Western Mediterranean route saw significant changes this year. Between January and July 2018, nearly 24,000 individuals crossed from Algeria and Morocco to Spain. This represents a significant increase when compared to the same period the previous year (8,700 individuals).

Despite the ongoing conflict in Yemen, there were some 100,000 new arrivals in the country from the Horn of Africa in 2017, an estimated 10 percent of whom sought international protection. These individuals continued to risk their lives during dangerous sea journeys and often faced arrest, detention and deportation after arrival.

B. Progress and challenges in achieving the global strategic priorities

Creating a favourable protection environment

Community-based approaches continued to enhance opportunities to provide protection in the region. In 2018, the majority of displaced people lived in urban settings, and outreach and engagement activities were designed taking into account age, gender and diversity. Over 3,600 community volunteers facilitated access to information, and some 380 community centres provided services. Despite having access to education, displaced children and youth faced economic hardships and language barriers in overstretched education systems. In order to mitigate this, UNHCR, partners and communities supported families with various programmes across the region.

Significant efforts were carried out to prevent and resolve cases of statelessness among refugee children. In February 2018, the League of Arab States and UNHCR convened a ministerial conference during which the Arab Declaration on Belonging and Legal Identity was adopted.¹ The declaration called for legislation that safeguards the rights of children to enjoy a legal identity, including by promoting laws that enable women to pass their nationality to their children. Through the “no lost generation” initiative, UNHCR also co-led regional roundtables on civil documentation and child protection in Beirut in January 2018, followed by another roundtable in May 2018 on the prevention of response to gender-based violence against girls and boys.

UNHCR began expanding its programme on the digitalized identification of refugees, including to enhance education, banking and other economic opportunities. In some countries, including Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Mauritania, Tunisia and Turkey, through biometric identification, refugees were able to withdraw money from cash machines, confirm their identity at airports prior to resettlement departures and access mobile phone services.

Ensuring protection from violence and exploitation

UNHCR continued to prioritize the prevention of and response to sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV). As part of a three-year plan of action on integrating SGBV prevention, mitigation and response into all aspects of its work, UNHCR organized a regional workshop for 3RP operations and the operation in the Syrian Arab Republic,

¹ Available from www.refworld.org/docid/5a9ffbd04.html.

where participants developed country action plans. Several operations subsequently received funding through the “Safe from the Start” initiative to implement multisectoral projects that help to mainstream SGBV prevention and response in livelihood and innovation programming, namely in Egypt, Jordan and Turkey. Cash-based interventions were also in place in several operations in the region to strengthen protection outcomes, including by identifying and addressing some of the coping mechanisms of survivors of SGBV, and improving their self-sufficiency and resilience. In addition, the Inter-Agency Standing Committee gender marker tool supported the integration of gender equality measures in 2018-2019 programming in the 3RP operations.

Throughout the region, initiatives to reinforce awareness of and protection against sexual exploitation and abuse among UNHCR staff were also implemented. The Office ensured that mandatory online training was completed and sessions on this theme were incorporated in the annual code of conduct training. Partner staff also received relevant training, including in Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, the Syrian Arab Republic and Yemen.

Achieving durable solutions

UNHCR continued to seek durable solutions, including through resettlement and complementary pathways, for the most vulnerable across the region. By mid-2018, operations in the region and Turkey had submitted the cases of some 19,700 refugees for resettlement, which represents a decrease compared to 29,000 submissions during the same period in 2017. The downward trend was caused by a global drop in the number of resettlement places. In Libya, UNHCR considered the cases of some 10,000 refugees in need of resettlement, including approximately 6,500 refugees in detention

With respect to the return of Syrian refugees, UNHCR continued to monitor the situation, as conditions were not yet conducive to facilitated repatriation. Despite this, a limited number of refugees returned, and UNHCR worked to ensure that refugees were able to make informed decisions and that obstacles to sustainable return were minimized. UNHCR also continued to advocate the protection of Syrians in need of international protection, and monitored the intentions and perceptions of return among Syrian refugees through surveys conducted by phone in Egypt, Iraq and Jordan and by face-to-face interview in Lebanon. Moreover, a joint study on “the determinants of return and displacement” was conducted in partnership with the World Bank in order to inform future engagement strategies in the Syrian Arab Republic and support conflict recovery and reconstruction efforts.

Mobilizing support through strategic partnerships

An inclusive approach to addressing regional refugee crises remained a priority for UNHCR’s strategic partnerships in the region. Due to ongoing conflict and displacement, persistent humanitarian needs, growing development concerns and limited prospects for durable solutions, UNHCR intends to continue to build the local and national capacities of civil society organizations which support refugee and host communities. In 2018, the Civil Society Network for Displacement in the Middle East and North Africa continued to offer a unique platform for cross-regional engagement, the exchange of learning, joint advocacy and coordinated implementation. The evolution and growth of the network will be emphasized in the next year in order to maximize its impact on protection and assistance programmes.

A platform to develop the first Arabic language journal on refugee issues is being established together with partners from academic circles, who have been engaged in

the discussions on the comprehensive refugee response framework and the global compact on refugees. In addition, the first regional memorandum of understanding was signed with the Columbia University Middle East Research Center in Amman with a view to working more closely with academics on the development of programming.

Engagement with the private sector will also continue, with renewed focus on faith-based philanthropy and social entrepreneurship across the region in support of refugees and host communities.

C. Financial information

In October 2017, the Executive Committee of the High Commissioner’s Programme (ExCom) approved the 2018 budget of \$2,168.1 million for the Middle East and North Africa region. As of 31 August 2018, the region’s budget increased to \$2,481.5 million due to supplementary budgets for the Central Mediterranean, including Libya, and Syria situations, where new needs emerged.

In the Syria situation, while UNHCR does not consider conditions in Syria to be suitable for return, a supplementary budget of \$259.2 million has been established for 2018 to respond to the needs of returnees while preparing for eventual refugee returns. These efforts are not meant to incentivize returns.

At the end of August 2018, the voluntary contributions earmarked for the Middle East and North Africa amounted to \$717.4 million, representing about 29 per cent of the needs in the region.
