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**Update on UNHCR’s operations in the Middle East and  
North Africa (MENA)**

**A. Situational context including new developments**

**Syria situation**

The Syria situation continues to be the largest humanitarian and refugee crisis in the world today, with some 6.1 million Syrians internally displaced and nearly 5.5 million refugees hosted in Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey. Despite operational challenges, UNHCR reached approximately 6.2 million people inside the Syrian Arab Republic with protection services, shelter, basic relief items and health assistance in 2017, including through cross-border interventions from Jordan and Turkey. With the emergence of a few areas of relative stability, close to 75,000 Syrian refugees and 720,000 internally displaced people (IDPs) returned to their areas of origin. These self-organized returns occurred without facilitation by UNHCR as the Office does not believe that the overall conditions for safe, dignified and sustainable returns are in place.

UNHCR’s refugee response is designed in accordance with the “grand bargain” commitments and the principle of burden- and responsibility-sharing, which is at the core of the comprehensive refugee response framework (CRRF) contained in annex I to the New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants. Together with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), UNHCR continues to lead the “Regional refugee and resilience plan in response to the Syria crisis” (3RP), which is built around government-led national plans, cost-effective and innovative programming, and a coalition of over 270 partners. The 2018-19 3RP calls for \$4.4 billion to assist over nine million people, including 5.3 million refugees and 3.9 million host community members.

Despite the continued generosity of host countries, the living situation for Syrian refugees in the region continues to be challenging. In mostly urban areas, UNHCR transfers cash to nearly 70,000 refugee households each month and reaches additional households through its cash coordination mechanisms and partners. The 2018 winter programme has already reached 2.6 million Syrians, mostly through multi-purpose cash transfers.

**Iraq situation**

In December 2017, the Government of Iraq announced that all of the country’s territory had been liberated from armed non-State groups. This has created a situation where new displacement is occurring alongside returns. According to the International Organization for Migration’s (IOM) displacement tracking matrix, the number of people returning to their areas of origin has now surpassed the number of people being displaced inside the country. However, the protection environment for civilians remains precarious due to continuing insecurity, extensive destruction of homes and infrastructure, lack of livelihood opportunities, and risk of attack for those perceived to have family affiliations with extremists.

There are some 3.6 million IDPs in Iraq, including some 2.6 million who have been displaced as a result of conflict and violence since 2014. In 2017, UNHCR assisted 1.2 million IDPs, returnees and host community members with core relief items and over 800,000 people with

protection monitoring activities. In 2018, UNHCR will continue to undertake timely protection monitoring and outreach to assess needs and to provide legal assistance, civil documentation support and referrals to specialized services to IDPs, returnees and other conflict-affected Iraqis. UNHCR will also continue to provide shelter, basic household items and protection to over 230,000 IDPs in the 35 camps set up or managed by UNHCR and its partners.

### **North Africa**

There are currently some 420,000 refugees and asylum-seekers in North Africa, a complex operational environment involving both new and protracted refugee situations, including as a result of mixed movements. Despite ongoing restrictions to humanitarian access, UNHCR was able to evacuate nearly 400 vulnerable refugees from Libya in 2017, a first for the Office in this context. Although this is an encouraging breakthrough, thousands of refugees and migrants remain trapped in poor detention conditions. In response, UNHCR and its partners conducted over 1,000 visits to 35 detention centres in 2017, obtaining the release of more than 1,350 detained refugees and asylum-seekers. In October 2017, following clashes in and around Sabratha, UNHCR provided emergency assistance to some 15,000 refugees and migrants who were previously held captive by smugglers. UNHCR also expanded its capacities and partnerships, including with national agencies, to respond to the needs of over half a million Libyan IDPs and returnees.

In Egypt, where 215,000 refugees and asylum-seekers from 65 countries are registered with UNHCR, a new procedure was introduced to help reduce the waiting period for registration and refugee status determination. In Mauritania and Tunisia, UNHCR launched a new biometric identity management system to improve registration procedures. In Mauritania, UNHCR continues to maintain infrastructure in Mbera camp for refugees and host communities as widespread insecurity in northern Mali and in the region more broadly continues to trigger displacement into the country.

In addition, UNHCR continues to provide life-saving assistance to 90,000 vulnerable Sahrawi refugees in the five camps located near Tindouf, Algeria. In the context of Algeria's multi-year, multi-partner protection and solutions strategy, UNHCR brings together different actors – including refugee communities, government entities, United Nations agencies and others partners – to advocate the establishment of a national asylum system and the inclusion of refugees and asylum-seekers into national health and education systems.

### **Yemen**

Some 22.2 million Yemenis – over three quarters of the country's population – are currently in need of assistance, 11.3 million acutely so. Due to the escalating conflict, critical protection needs have doubled over the past year, and an additional 3.4 million people are now in need of humanitarian assistance. Some 85,000 Yemenis have been forced to flee their homes in the past few months alone.

Despite challenges in the field, which culminated in the suspension of United Nations operations in Yemen in December 2017, the Office and its partners continued to deliver life-saving assistance. In particular, the Office addressed cross-cutting shelter and protection needs by distributing cash assistance to over 12,000 displaced Yemeni households to support them through the winter months. In addition, UNHCR provided rental subsidies and multi-purpose cash grants to 17,000 households; supported communities to construct 4,750 shelters; and, since October 2017, provided 26,000 families with core relief items.

Despite the conflict and dire humanitarian situation, people continue to arrive in Yemen from the Horn of Africa, with an estimated 100,000 new arrivals in 2017 alone. Over 500 individuals have been registered by UNHCR and the authorities in the south of the country since October 2017. In spite of this trend, conditions in Yemen are not considered conducive for asylum. UNHCR launched the second phase of the “dangerous crossings” campaign in the Horn of Africa to inform refugees of the situation in Yemen and the protection risks faced by individuals during their journeys by sea and upon arrival. In

coordination with IOM, UNHCR also supported almost 1,000 Somali refugees who wanted to return to Somalia. While this programme will continue in 2018, there are still some 280,000 refugees and asylum-seekers in Yemen.

### **Mixed and onwards movements**

While large-scale mixed movements from, to and through the Middle East and North Africa continued in 2017, the number of people arriving from the region in Europe by sea (some 172,300) was approximately 50 per cent lower than in 2016. Tragically, around 2,800 people were reported missing or dead at sea.

On the western Mediterranean route, the total number of arrivals (28,350 persons, including 6,250 land arrivals) was more than double that of 2016. Although the rate of land arrivals remained unchanged, sea arrivals increased from around 8,000 in 2016 to over 22,100 in 2017. Algerian and Moroccan nationals made up 12 per cent of the people arriving.

The eastern Mediterranean route witnessed a significant drop in arrivals as the “Balkans route” remained closed. There were 29,700 people, mostly Afghans, Iraqis and Syrians, compared with 173,500 people in 2016.

Despite a 35 per cent decrease, the central Mediterranean route remains the most frequently used, with around 119,350 arrivals to Italy in 2017, primarily from Libya. Departures from Tunisia to Italy, mostly of Tunisians, quadrupled to almost 4,780 people. Although there is no comprehensive explanation for the decrease, possible reasons include: the enhanced capacity of the Libyan authorities to engage in search and rescue at sea; changes in smuggling networks’ dynamics, and conflict near key departure points in Libya. With the reduction in the number of people departing from Libya, UNHCR remains concerned that refugees may become “stranded” in the country with no access to protection. A number of measures are being progressed to address these concerns, including evacuation and resettlement to third countries for the most vulnerable, advocacy on alternatives to detention, and strengthened support in urban settings.

Outreach in Algeria, Libya and Tunisia has helped UNHCR build a more comprehensive picture of mixed movements along the central Mediterranean route and to adjust its responses accordingly, including through strengthened inter-agency collaboration, data collection and analysis, and case management. In particular, the findings indicate that Europe is not necessarily the intended destination for many refugees and migrants using the route but that a significant number feel compelled to cross the Mediterranean after experiencing violence and insecurity in countries along the way.

## **B. Progress and challenges in achieving the global strategic priorities**

### **Creating a favourable protection environment**

UNHCR continues to work with governments and other partners to further improve the protection environment for displaced people in and from the Middle East and North Africa. In 2017, UNHCR advised countries developing national asylum legislation and worked closely with the League of Arab States on a draft “Arab convention regulating the status of refugees in the Arab States”. In Israel, UNHCR advocated access to legal status and promoted solutions for Eritrean and Sudanese refugees who had arrived in the country by land in recent years. In addition, UNHCR continued to conduct individual biometric registration and refugee status determination (RSD) for people of concern. The Office also implemented activities designed to safeguard the integrity, quality and efficiency of the RSD process.

Community-based and age-, gender- and diversity-sensitive approaches to protection remained an integral part of UNHCR’s response in the region. In 2017, almost 3,000 community members were involved in identifying and referring people at heightened risk to the Office. Over 250 community centres provided displaced people and vulnerable host communities with skills development opportunities, counselling and legal information. In

the Syrian Arab Republic, over 200,000 people benefitted from community-based assistance, including direct assistance, psycho-social support and education or remedial classes.

### **Ensuring protection from violence and exploitation**

With over 2.5 million Syrian refugee children hosted in the region, child protection was a key element of UNHCR's protection response in 2017. Key priorities included strengthening national child protection systems and ensuring non-discriminatory access to these systems for all children of concern to the Office; improving access to birth registration and best interest procedures; and providing quality services for refugee children who had been separated from their families or who had experienced violence, abuse or exploitation.

In 2017, over 694,000 girls and boys in the main Syrian refugee host countries benefitted from UNHCR's child protection and psycho-social support programmes. Together with the International Labour Organization (ILO) and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), UNHCR completed a regional strategy to address child labour among Syrian refugees. Consultations on strengthening youth-centred programming in Egypt and Jordan were undertaken, with additional youth consultations planned in 2018 in Iraq and Turkey.

The prevention of and response to sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) is another priority for UNHCR in the region. From January to September 2017, almost 135,300 survivors and persons at risk of SGBV, including boys and men, benefitted from multi-sectoral services. UNHCR also strengthened the collection and management of data on SGBV incidents, including through the use of the gender-based violence information management system.

In December 2017, UNHCR published a report entitled "Gender equality promising practices: Syrian refugees in the Middle East and North Africa", which highlighted good practices in promoting gender equality in humanitarian programming and addressing SGBV, including lessons learned and recommendations. UNHCR also completed a study on sexual violence against refugee men and boys to help ensure that laws, policies and services are inclusive of their needs. The findings were published in October 2017 in a report entitled, "We keep it in our heart': sexual violence against men and boys in the Syria crisis."

### **Achieving solutions**

The cases of some 44,000 refugees from the Middle East and North Africa, including more than 37,000 Syrians and almost 2,900 Iraqis, were submitted for resettlement in 2017. This amounted to just 7.5 per cent of the region's overall resettlement needs for the year (approximately 585,915). Policy changes in the United States of America had a great impact on the region and Turkey, with quota allocations reducing prospects for resettlement by 45 per cent.

In line with the commitments set out in the CRRF, UNHCR encouraged the development of new resettlement programmes and the expansion of existing ones as a means of improving burden- and responsibility-sharing with host countries. In particular, the Office engaged with States through the emerging resettlement country mechanism (ERCM) to try to increase the number of resettlement places and complementary pathways to admission available to refugees.

In addition, UNHCR worked with the chair of the Syrian Resettlement Core Group (the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland) and the chair of the Central Mediterranean Core Group (France) throughout 2017 to share good practices and identify durable solutions, including the evacuation and resettlement of refugees from Libya. The Office worked with partners from municipal governments, academic institutions, non-governmental organizations and the private sector to analyse the impact of family separation on refugees and provide them with advice on scholarship opportunities as well as pathways for labour mobility. UNHCR also conducted best interest determinations for unaccompanied and separated children in the region to identify alternative care arrangements, provide protection and find solutions.

**Mobilizing public, political, financial and operational support through strategic partnerships**

UNHCR continues to strengthen its relationship with States and other partners in the Middle East and North Africa, including as part of the practical application of the CRRF and the process leading to the global compact on refugees. Key achievements in 2017 include supporting the development of the MENA Civil Society Network for Displacement, which is due to be launched in 2018, and signing a memorandum of understanding with the Colombia University Middle East Global Centre. Exploring avenues for cooperation with the private sector to improve livelihood and employment opportunities for refugees and other displaced people will be an important focus in 2018.

**C. Financial information**

The current budget for the MENA region for 2018 is \$2,423.3 million, which includes the responses to the Iraq, Libya, Syrian Arab Republic and Yemen situations. Taking into account the number of refugees and IDPs that returned to their regions of origin in the Syrian Arab Republic in 2017, the initial budget of \$2,168.10 million approved by the Executive Committee in October 2017 was increased by \$255.2 million. This increase will support activities aimed at protecting and assisting spontaneous returnees, and facilitating the conditions necessary for larger-scale returns in the future.

The current 2018 budget is \$163.0 million more than the 2017 budget (\$2,260.3 million), which reflects the ongoing and significant humanitarian needs in the region. In 2017, contributions for the Middle East and North Africa amounted to \$1,231.2 million or 54 per cent of the overall requirements of \$2,260.3 million. As of 13 February 2018, contributions totalling \$177.8 million, or seven per cent of the region's 2018 financial requirements, have been recorded.

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