

**Seventy-second session**  
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## **Update on UNHCR's operations in the Middle East and North Africa**

### **A. Situational overview**

#### *Syria situation*

In 2021, the Syria crisis entered its eleventh year and continued to drive the world's largest displacement crisis. Over 6.8 million Syrians remain internally displaced, while 5.6 million Syrian refugees are hosted in Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey.

The impact of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) compounded the dire socioeconomic situation for refugees and host communities alike. A joint UNHCR and World Bank [study](#) in Iraq, Jordan and Lebanon found that 4.4 million people in host communities and 1.1 million refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) had been driven into poverty due to the pandemic. In Lebanon, the 2020 vulnerability assessment of Syrian refugees indicated that 88 per cent of families were living below the extreme poverty line, compared to 55 per cent in mid-2019. The economic crisis also pushed some refugees to undertake dangerous sea crossings, notably to Cyprus.

Despite challenges, host governments generously included refugees in national COVID-19 response plans, with Jordan becoming one of the world's first countries to start vaccinating refugees. With the generous support of donors, as of June 2021, UNHCR had provided nearly 1.3 million Syrians with approximately \$70 million in multi-purpose cash assistance to address economic hardships and respond to other protection-related needs, including health care and education. The Office continued to co-lead the "[Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan in response to the Syria crisis](#)" (3RP), coordinating the work of over 270 partners to assist 5.5 million refugees and 4.8 million people in host communities.

Inside the Syrian Arab Republic, 13.4 million people are in need of humanitarian assistance—2 million more than at the start of 2020. From January to mid-2021, UNHCR provided over 16,000 IDPs, returnees and host community members with legal assistance, and some 11,500 with core relief items. The adoption of United Nations Security Council Resolution [S/RES/2585](#) in July 2021 allowed humanitarian agencies and partners to continue using the Bab al-Hawa border crossing in the north-west (at the border with Turkey). UNHCR has delivered 35,000 core relief item kits, 13,900 tents and 20,000 hygiene kits since January 2021, assisting 78,300 families (some 391,500 individuals). Through its partners, the Office also provided protection-related services, such as psychosocial support and referrals to over 116,000 people.

#### *Iraq situation*

Some 1.2 million people remain internally displaced, while over 4.8 million IDP returnees face insecurity and constrained access to services. Nearly 280,000 Iraqi refugees and asylum-seekers registered with UNHCR are hosted in neighbouring countries, and over 30,000 unregistered Iraqis live in camps in Al-Hassakeh Governorate in the Syrian Arab Republic. As of June 2021, UNHCR had supported over 5,600 refugees, IDPs and returnee families with multi-purpose cash, and over 23,000 refugees and IDPs with legal assistance. Shelter and core relief items were also provided. The Office worked with partners, including local authorities, to improve the living conditions of IDPs and refugees in camp and non-camp settings. In

response to COVID-19, UNHCR also provided hygiene items, intensive care unit sets and personal protective equipment.

#### *North Africa*

In Libya, peace talks led by the United Nations resulted in the Libyan Political Dialogue Forum and the establishment of a [roadmap](#) which calls for the creation of the Presidency Council and interim Government of National Unity, charged with leading the country to national elections in December 2021. Internal displacement trends stabilized due in part to the improving security situation, with the number of IDPs falling from 278,000 to 224,000 between January and May 2021. An estimated 642,400 IDPs have returned since 2016. As of mid-2021, some 42,500 refugees and asylum-seekers had been registered with UNHCR in Libya. UNHCR and partners delivered protection and assistance, including cash and food assistance, medical consultations and legal counselling. Life-saving assistance was also provided to persons of concern at disembarkation points and detention centres.

The number of refugees newly registered in Tunisia increased by over 45 per cent in the first half of 2021 when compared to 2020, with nearly 8,500 persons of concern registered by mid-2021. UNHCR and partners supported the socioeconomic inclusion of persons of concern, while advocating the adoption of a national asylum law.

Egypt hosted some 262,500 refugees and asylum-seekers (of over 50 different nationalities) registered with UNHCR, with the Government taking a tolerant approach towards some 82,000 people who hold expired documentation. To address the registration backlog resulting from restrictions related to COVID-19, UNHCR scaled up registration activities, including document renewals.

In Algeria, UNHCR continued to undertake registration and refugee status determination, and to issue documentation for refugees and asylum-seekers. The number of new asylum applications increased by 20 per cent compared to 2020 due in part to the easing of movement restrictions. Life-saving assistance was provided for vulnerable Sahrawi refugees in the five camps near Tindouf amid an increase in COVID-19 cases. UNHCR undertook extensive repairs to the camp's health facilities and expanded water networks.

Morocco remained a transit country for mixed movements and a destination for refugees and asylum-seekers. UNHCR ensured access to international protection for persons of concern within the framework of the National Strategy for Immigration and Asylum. The Government provided protection and local integration opportunities for refugees through a multi-stakeholder approach.

Mauritania maintained its open-door policy towards refugees, hosting some 8,050 refugees and asylum-seekers in urban areas, as well as 66,500 Malian refugees in Mbera camp. Following the introduction of new protocols to the national social registry in January 2021, which allow the registration of refugee households outside Mbera camp in the Hodh el Chargui region, UNHCR began preparations for establishing a field unit in the area.

#### *Gulf Cooperation Council*

UNHCR continued resource mobilization activities across the Gulf Cooperation Council countries, raising \$75.4 million between January and July 2021 from governments and private donors. Some \$19.7 million was raised through UNHCR's "Refugee Zakat Fund", allowing the provision of cash assistance to refugee and IDP families for basic needs, including rent, food and health care.

#### *Israel*

Israel hosted some 56,500 refugees, asylum-seekers and others of concern, as well as an estimated 8,500 children, the majority of whom were born in the country. UNHCR provided cash assistance to refugees and asylum-seekers whose livelihoods had been impacted by COVID-19, while supporting primary and secondary school aged asylum-seeker students with remote learning during school closures.

*Yemen*

Yemen remained the most acute humanitarian crisis globally, with some 20.7 million people (66 per cent of the total population) in need of humanitarian assistance. IDPs were found to be four times more likely to be at risk of hunger, with over 50 per cent (an estimated 2.6 million IDPs) at risk of famine. Clashes continued in Ma'rib, Hajjah, Hudaydah and Taizz, in some places near IDP sites, causing some 46,000 people to flee.

UNHCR enhanced protection-related services, including case management for children and survivors of gender-based violence, legal counselling and cash assistance. Over \$33 million was provided in cash assistance to some 628,400 IDPs and 930 refugees and asylum-seekers by mid-2021. The Office continued registration in the south and advanced durable solutions for refugees and asylum-seekers, including through security screening and verification for resettlement following successful advocacy for increased quotas.

*Mixed and onward movements*

Mixed movements continued, including to Europe. From January to July 2021, some 42,100 refugees and migrants crossed the sea from North Africa to Europe. Around 1,375 were reported dead or missing at sea. Departures from Libya and Tunisia increased while movements from Algeria, Mauritania and Morocco to Spain continued. Sea departures from Tunisia increased by 58 per cent compared to the same period in 2020, with over 16,100 people attempting to cross to Italy as of July 2021. Some 130 refugees and migrants crossed the sea from Lebanon to Cyprus. However, reports of pushbacks to Lebanon remained a concern. Refugees and migrants continued to face risks related to trafficking and abuse at the hands of smugglers as well as death at sea. Following rescue at sea, disembarkations in Libya increased despite it not being designated as a place of safety for this purpose.

UNHCR continued to identify people with international protection needs and provided them with access to protection and assistance. UNHCR developed a blended learning programme on protection at sea for UNHCR staff and partners. Together with the Arab Interior Ministers Council, the Office organized a workshop on international protection in mixed movements for delegates from North African countries. This resulted in a series of recommendations aimed at strengthening the protection of refugees.

**B. Progress and challenges in achieving the global strategic priorities***Creating a favourable protection environment*

From January to June 2021, over 53,000 individuals were newly registered. Applying a combination of remote and in-person processing modalities, operations advanced in reducing backlogs accrued in 2020 due to COVID-19, while meeting new demands.

Together with the League of Arab States, UNHCR convened a regional meeting “Towards an action plan on belonging and legal identity” in May 2021. This resulted in the formulation of a regional action plan to address nationality issues, which will be submitted to the Arab Interior Ministers Councils for adoption, and the presentation of a [regional toolkit on nationality legislation aimed at supporting States to update elements of their nationality law](#).

The loss of livelihoods due to COVID-19 affected the ability of hundreds of thousands of displaced children and youth to access education, increasing their vulnerability to protection risks, including gender-based violence, child marriage, domestic abuse and child labour. UNHCR and partners assisted national education systems in adopting flexible learning modalities and implementing preparedness measures. This was complemented by efforts to address the digital divide and ensure supportive interventions for children, families and teachers.

A series of webinars on mental health and psychosocial support, child protection and suicide prevention were conducted in English and French for UNHCR teams and partners who provide mental health and psychosocial support to persons of concern. UNHCR maintained its engagement in the “no lost generation” task force on mental health and psychosocial support,

contributing to evidence building and technical expertise around priority issues such as preventing self-harm and suicide among adolescents and youth.

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

Gender-based violence prevention, risk mitigation and response remain a priority. Between January and June 2021, over 97,000 survivors and people at risk, including boys and men, benefited from multisectoral services through the 3RP response. A series of thematic webinars were held for gender-based violence focal points as well as protection and multi-functional teams across operations as part of the implementation of UNHCR's "[Policy on the prevention of, risk mitigation and response to gender-based violence](#)". UNHCR launched a joint report with the International Labour Organization and United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women on the participation of displaced women in the labour force at the fifth Brussels conference on "Supporting the future of Syria and the region".

The Office advanced work with partners in the United Nations system on assessing the organizational capacity of implementing partners to protect populations from sexual exploitation and abuse. A series of case consultations was organized in August 2021 with focal points on protection against sexual exploitation and abuse from operations across the region, allowing for discussion on challenges and best practices.

From January to June 2021, over 93,200 girls and boys benefited from specialized child protection services through the 3RP response; more than 73,400 children participated in child protection and psychosocial support programmes; and some 25,300 women and men benefited from parenting support. UNHCR strengthened capacity-building to ensure that protection interventions were child-friendly and adapted to COVID-19 conditions, while helping improve national child protection services. Collaborations with the United Nations Children's Fund advanced through the "[Blueprint for joint action for refugee children](#)".

#### *Achieving durable solutions*

An estimated 700,000 people in the region and Turkey were in need of resettlement in 2021. Despite challenges caused by COVID-19, UNHCR and partners proposed some 11,500 refugees for resettlement. Remote processing arrangements increased procedural integrity, as well as the safety of refugees. Following a pause in humanitarian evacuations from January to July 2021, in July over 130 asylum-seekers were evacuated from Libya to Rwanda through the emergency transit mechanism. They await resettlement departures, which are expected to resume in October. Humanitarian flights from Libya have been suspended again and are tentatively expected to resume in October.

New projects were launched to expand complementary pathways through third-country scholarships and family reunification. The regional contact group for complementary pathways expanded, with over 100 representatives from resettlement States, research organizations and UNHCR operations collaborating in this endeavour. During 2021, the contact group focused on remote processing arrangements, third-country labour pathways and advocacy to reduce barriers to access pathways in Iraq.

The COVID-19 pandemic and general movement restrictions continued to impact returns in 2021. Some 18,000 Syrian refugees returned home in the first half of the year, a level similar to that of 2020. Results from the intention survey in March 2021 indicated that return trends would likely remain unchanged for the next 12 months, although most Syrian refugees expressed a wish to return one day.

Under the 3RP framework, UNHCR and partners gradually strengthened support to returning refugees, including by providing counselling, assisting with documentation and addressing specific needs with a view to reducing the risk of harm and enabling informed and dignified returns. The Office led the Regional Durable Solutions Working Group, launching several thematic and sector-based initiatives to advance return planning and preparedness.

In the Syrian Arab Republic, UNHCR provided returning refugees and other vulnerable populations with humanitarian assistance and other services through a network of community, mobile and satellite centres and outreach volunteers. In parallel, dialogue continues with the

Government of the Syrian Arab Republic and other stakeholders on ongoing concerns, including access to humanitarian assistance. The Office also advocated the inclusion of returnees and IDPs in development programmes and social protection schemes, in line with the Global Compact on Refugees and 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

*Mobilizing support through strategic partnerships*

UNHCR advanced work on strengthening partnerships with diverse stakeholders. Collaboration with development and financial institutions, including the World Bank, expanded with a view to helping refugees and host communities recover from the impact of COVID-19. Efforts also continued to diversify fundraising streams and build sustainable partnerships with prominent foundations and individual givers. With support from UNHCR, the Civil Society Network for Displacement continued to work as first responders, assisting refugees and host communities cope with and recover from COVID-19.

Ahead of the high-level officials meeting, which will take place in December 2021, a stocktaking event was held in April to gauge the implementation of pledges made at the 2019 Global Refugee Forum and reflect on progress towards the objectives of the Global Compact on Refugees. Pledging entities shared progress on their pledges, challenges with implementation and best practices to adapt their pledges to the COVID-19 context. Discussions also highlighted the importance of matching pledges in order to facilitate their implementation, especially in light of challenges posed by the pandemic.

As part of its efforts to address the effects of climate change on displaced populations, UNHCR supported partners in academia to conduct research in this area in the regional context. The Office convened an academic roundtable on climate change and displacement and coordinated the launch of the first Arabic journal on displacement in the region, where its first edition will include an article on climate change and its impact on displacement.

## **C. Financial information**

The initial 2021 budget of \$2.648 billion for the region is marginally higher than the 2020 initial budget of \$2.605 billion, representing a slight increase of less than 1 per cent.

As of the end of July 2021, some 41 per cent of the region's 2021 updated financial requirements (\$2.696 billion) were funded, taking into consideration the indicative allocation of unearmarked and softly earmarked contributions.