

## 8 February 2024

Over the years, Cyprus has been receiving an increasing number of refugees, particularly from neighbouring Syria. As at the end of 2023, some **19,498** persons are registered as having been granted international protection, of whom **3,265** have been granted refugee status, and **16,233** are subsidiary protection beneficiaries. With significant numbers of people afforded international protection in Republic of Cyprus (RoC) in recent years, the need for greater assistance and support to help them integrate has become more apparent.

In 2023 there were **11,617** applications for asylum in the RoC. As at end December, some **26,599 persons'** applications are pending at the Asylum Service. Another **5,073 persons'** appeals are pending at the International Protection Administrative Court (IPAC).

Up until 14th Jan 2024, some **20,127 refugees from Ukraine** have applied for Temporary Protection in the RoC.

## Economic inclusion of refugees is key to effective integration

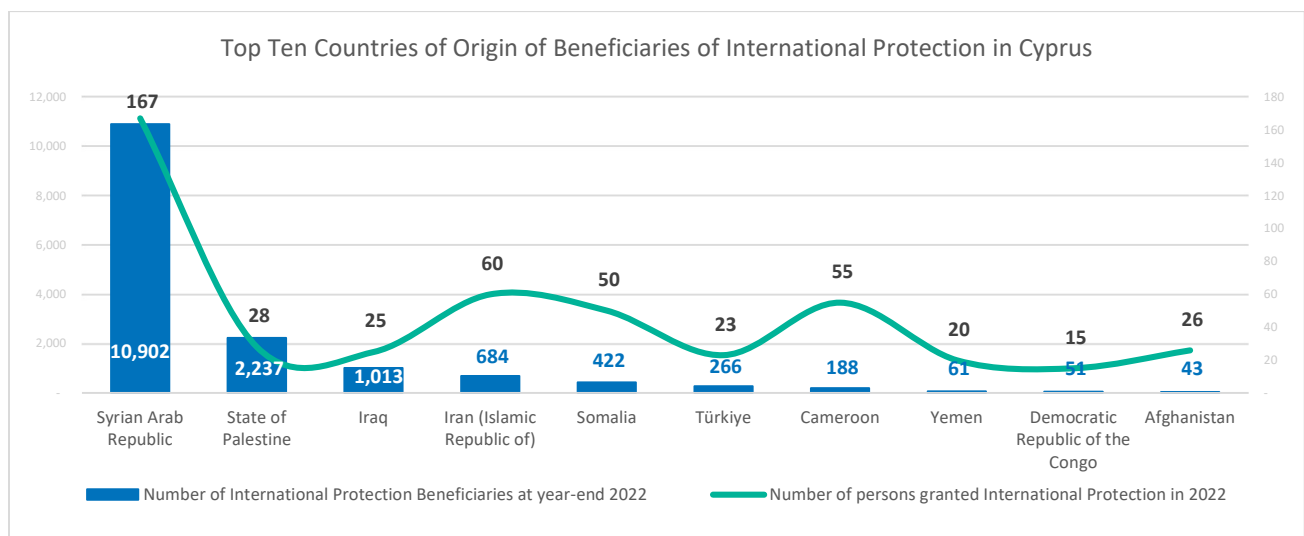


*Zaher (left) has over 10 years of experience making baklava and other specialty sweets from his hometown of Aleppo. He was fifteen when he first worked at a confectionary shop and discovered his talent and passion.*

*Now, Zaher is creating his own recipes at his own confectionary shop in Pafos with his brother-in-law Ahmed (right), and they have expanded the business to include a shop in Nicosia as well.*

*Fearing for his life, Zaher left war-torn Syria and arrived in Cyprus at age 18. For the first years he was in Cyprus he took any work he could find, just to get by, including in agriculture, as a painter, in construction and in a recycling plant. He later worked at a restaurant and as a pastry chef in a hotel, until he was able to save up enough to create his own business.*

*Due to the family's status as subsidiary protection beneficiaries, they are not able to travel abroad, and they feel insecure that their status could one day be revoked. "I came from a young age to Cyprus because of the situation in my country. I have learned Greek, made many Cypriot and international friends and I never took any money from the government. I have created my business here. My life is here now. I cannot see a life in Syria anymore."*



**Integration in Cyprus** remains one of the most challenging areas of the national asylum system. The impediments international protection beneficiaries face result from a lack of a comprehensive integration strategy to provide knowledge of local language, differing cultures and habits, bolster understanding within the host society of their specific situation and assist in gaining access to employment. Family reunification, long-term residence and naturalization also remain areas of concern.

An integration strategy was developed over the last years under an EU-funded project and includes 30 proposals, in eight key areas, including housing, education, employment and vocational training. While it was expected to start implementation in 2022, it was not approved by the former Government. In the absence of an integration plan, smaller scale integration projects under the EU's Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF) have been implemented since 2014.

UNHCR has recently submitted proposals to the European Funds Unit for consideration under the Asylum and Migration Fund, suggesting, among others: **Civic Learning and Orientation Programs** to be implemented in all districts; programs for interpretation services; programs for **smooth transition to independent living** for unaccompanied children and other vulnerable groups; **child-care services**; **vocational training** and **job matching** programs to improve employability.

Integration is affected by the limited possibilities for **family reunification**, which remains inaccessible to beneficiaries of subsidiary protection. This group makes up the overwhelming majority of international protection beneficiaries in Cyprus. For recognized refugees, administrative and procedural obstacles towards achieving family reunification persist.

The prospect of being able to obtain **long term residence** pursuant to five years legal stay has proved difficult for international protection beneficiaries due to the stringent requirements which are difficult for persons to meet: tax statements of the past five years; a statement of social insurance contributions for the last five years; health insurance coverage and a Greek language proficiency certificate. In 2021 and 2022, no long-term residency

was granted to beneficiaries of international protection.

**Naturalization of international protection beneficiaries** is also strenuous to achieve. Even when eligibility requirements are met, there is an overall restrictive policy to grant citizenship. The present requirements entail a residential qualifying period of five years and to be a person of good character; whilst the latter is not defined, the emphasis is placed on language, employment and knowledge of Cypriot culture and life. There is also a €500 application fee and another €500 for the issuance of the certificate. Amendments to the Civil Registry Law have been proposed in 2021 to further restrict access to naturalization. In 2021 and 2022, a total of 38 international protection beneficiaries were naturalized as Cypriots: 11 in 2021 and 27 in 2022.



*Wasif Almaday is a stateless Palestinian who fled to Cyprus for a peaceful life away from the sectarian violence that erupted in Iraq in 2003. Wasif lives in Cyprus as a subsidiary protection beneficiary with his wife, their two children and his mother. A holder of a BSc in Chemical Engineering and MSc in Oil & Gas, Wasif works at the Kofinou Reception Center as a translator while studying for his PhD. In his quest for stability and security, Wasif applied for Cypriot citizenship in 2017, but his application was rejected three years later. His appeal is pending.*

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**UNHCR's advocacy work on integration includes:**

- The publication of the report ***Towards a Comprehensive Refugee Integration Strategy in Cyprus in 2018***, which provides an overview of the integration challenges in Cyprus and specific recommendations based on good practices applied elsewhere.
- **Since 2019, UNHCR has held annual integration conferences** to bring together relevant stakeholders to discuss the main challenges in integration. In December 2019, UNHCR held its first Integration Conference in Nicosia, under the title ***The Integration of Refugees in Cyprus – Opportunities and Challenges*** [<https://bit.ly/2Z7L3jL>]. UNHCR's second Integration Conference tackled the impact of misconceptions on refugees' integration process in Cyprus and the following year, the conference focused on the role of local authorities and of every individual in enhancing social inclusion. In October 2022, **UNHCR held a workshop on the financial inclusion of refugees** [<https://bit.ly/3lwrkCs>] with key stakeholders from the financial sector, governmental departments, NGOs and refugee entrepreneurs to discuss the challenges experienced by the refugee population in Cyprus and explore opportunities for their financial inclusion.
- Since 2015, **UNHCR has commissioned opinion polls** to identify Cypriots' perceptions and attitudes towards refugees, asylum-seekers and migrants. According to the opinion polls in 2015 and 2018, the general feelings of Cypriots towards refugees and migrants were neutral to negative. The findings of the 2022 study [<https://bit.ly/40G9jla>] however showed a diminished public support towards refugee integration compared to the 2018 poll, with most of the respondents believing that refugees and asylum-seekers are not beneficial to the local economy or culture. Notable was also the increased concern about demographic changes, and criminality and violence that the participants believe are caused by refugees and asylum-seekers.
- The creation of the **Help Refugees Work Platform (HRW)**, an initiative of the UNHCR Office in Cyprus, in collaboration with its NGO partner, the Cyprus Refugee Council aims to boost refugees' employability. HRW brings motivated refugee jobseekers in contact with potential employers and training providers in Cyprus in an easy and efficient manner, reaching out to more than a hundred companies and hundreds of jobseekers with a refugee background. [<https://www.helprefugeeswork.org/>]
- UNHCR Cyprus has forged important partnerships with academic institutions to enhance education and self-reliance prospects for refugees, including through refugee scholarship programs. UNHCR Cyprus has signed a **Memorandum of Understanding with three Universities**, namely the University of Nicosia [<http://bit.ly/2ETD4hu>], the European University of Cyprus [<http://bit.ly/2nCHLpN>] and most recently with the Neapolis University of Pafos [<https://bit.ly/3N89fNe>]. Additionally, the **Occupational Therapy Programme of the European University of Cyprus** launched a pioneering program for refugees and asylum-seekers in February 2019 aiming at facilitating their integration in the local society. [<https://bit.ly/3L6I7LN>].
- In 2017 UNHCR launched the **Help Platform in Cyprus** [<https://help.unhcr.org/cyprus/>], which is an important source of information for refugees and asylum-seekers and therefore a useful tool for their integration. On this website there is information in English, Arabic and French about the rights and duties of refugees and asylum-seekers in Cyprus, as well as information about where to seek help and integration support information, including access to education and other programmes.