

**Executive Committee of the
High Commissioner's Programme**

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Update on UNHCR operations in the Middle East and North Africa

A. Situational analysis, including new developments

The Middle East and North Africa region grappled with numerous conflicts throughout 2024, which contributed towards a significant increase in the number of forcibly displaced persons. At year-end, the number of refugees and asylum-seekers in the region stood at 3.2 million people, representing a 22 per cent increase from the 2.8 million registered at the end of the previous year. The number of internally displaced persons remained stable, with new displacement offset by returns, standing at approximately 13 million people.

Israeli attacks and hostilities in Gaza continued to exacerbate regional instability. In late September, intensified Israeli airstrikes in Lebanon led to the displacement of approximately 1.2 million people according to government authorities. This was preceded by months of conflict, displacing civilians on both sides of the border. On 27 November 2024, a 60-day ceasefire agreement with Israel took effect, and on the same day, non-State armed groups launched an offensive in the north-west of the Syrian Arab Republic, rapidly spreading across the country and ultimately leading to the fall of the Government. Syrians expressed cautious optimism, with some considering the possibility of returning home.

Meanwhile, the war in the Sudan has driven an increasing number of Sudanese refugees into Egypt and Libya, while Mauritania continues to be significantly affected by the deteriorating situation in Mali. At the same time, after a decade of conflict, Yemen remains one of the world's most severe humanitarian crises.

Syria situation

The collapse of the Government in December 2024 punctuated the fourteenth year of the crisis in the Syrian Arab Republic. Syrians remain one of the largest refugee populations globally, with nearly 5 million registered refugees hosted in Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, and Türkiye. Political upheaval inside the Syrian Arab Republic followed another major crisis – the arrival of more than 560,000 people fleeing Lebanon, including approximately 350,000 Syrians crossing back into the country.

By the end of 2024, displacement patterns within and from the Syrian Arab Republic remained multi-directional and overlapping. Over 7 million Syrians are still internally displaced, and yet interest in returning to the Syrian Arab Republic has increased significantly. UNHCR's January 2025 intentions survey found that 27 per cent of Syrian refugees in the region expressed a desire to return within the next 12 months, compared to only 1.7 per cent in 2024. Voluntary returns from neighbouring countries also rose. UNHCR estimates that more than 290,000 Syrians crossed back into the Syrian Arab Republic between 8 December 2024 and 21 February 2025, based on host government statements, partner reporting and border monitoring.

Years of protracted conflict have devastated the country's infrastructure and economy. More than 90 per cent of the population requires humanitarian assistance, while ongoing clashes between armed groups, unexploded ordnance and criminal activity continue to pose risks for humanitarian operations and for those wishing to return home. Israeli airstrikes against targets in the Syrian Arab Republic since the overthrow of the former regime, along with the continued presence of troops in the demilitarized zone in the Golan border region have further heightened instability. In this uncertain environment, UNHCR has urged States to uphold Syrians' right to seek asylum and access to territory for those fleeing the country. It is equally critical that the international community maintains support for host countries, which have been sheltering millions of Syrians for over a decade, while also investing inside the Syrian Arab Republic and supporting voluntary and sustainable returns.

To this end, UNHCR launched the [2025 operational framework for the voluntary return of Syrian refugees and internally displaced persons](#), to support safe, dignified and voluntary returns. It serves to emphasize the importance of support for reintegration and access to essential services. While this framework is specific to UNHCR, it highlights the need for coordination with host countries and other stakeholders to facilitate the return process. It operates alongside the broader plan inside the Syrian Arab Republic currently under development by the United Nations and its humanitarian partners.

In response to the evolving context, UNHCR has adjusted its operations in the Syrian Arab Republic for 2025. In line with a sustainable response approach, priorities include protection, shelter, the provision of transportation for returns, cash-based interventions, non-food and core relief items, and creating livelihood opportunities, while advocating returnee inclusion in longer-term development programmes to promote sustainable reintegration.

Iraq situation

Iraq stands at a pivotal juncture, emerging from three decades of political turmoil and armed conflict that have deeply impacted its people and public services. In recent years, the conclusion of major military operations has contributed to relative stability, fostering progress towards sustainable development. Nonetheless, complex security dynamics and environmental challenges, including water scarcity, persist as significant barriers. The country is home to over 1 million internally displaced persons and more than 330,000 refugees and asylum-seekers, with some 90 per cent originating from the Syrian Arab Republic. Approximately 85 per cent of all refugees reside in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, while most internally displaced persons live in private accommodation, in urban areas or informal settlements. The remaining 109,000 live in 20 camps located in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

In early 2024, the Government of Iraq announced its decision to close the remaining internal displacement camps, that remained on its territory, accompanied by measures such as increased settlement grants from the Ministry of Migration and Displacement, job creation initiatives in areas of origin, and funding for reconstruction and property compensation.

Following the initial deadline for camp closures in mid-2024, the Government established a High Committee comprising senior officials from both the Government of Iraq and the Kurdistan Regional Government. This body was tasked with developing a joint humanitarian plan to address protracted displacement. As a result, three camps – two in the city of Sulaymaniyah and one in Erbil – were closed between 2024 and early 2025. Discussions are ongoing regarding the consolidation or closure of the remaining camps. While many internally displaced persons express a desire to return home, some are unable

or unwilling to do so, due to individual circumstances or prevailing conditions in their areas of origin.

In 2025, UNHCR will maintain its close collaboration with government counterparts through national and local durable solutions frameworks. UNHCR will continue advocating for the right of internally displaced persons to make free and informed decisions about their future while supporting dignified and sustainable solutions for those remaining in camps. Additionally, UNHCR will assist internally displaced persons in obtaining civil documentation, including the unified national identity card, thereby ensuring their inclusion in public services and government-led social protection schemes.

Currently, more than 200,000 Iraqi refugees and asylum-seekers remain in neighbouring countries. In response, UNHCR will continue providing legal assistance, protection services, and cash-based interventions to support their essential needs. UNHCR will also work with host governments and partners to promote community-based protection and strengthen access to national services, ensuring that Iraqi refugees can live in dignity while pursuing durable solutions.

North Africa

In 2024, most asylum-seekers registered with UNHCR in North Africa originated from the Sudan (81 per cent), followed by Mali (9 per cent) and the Syrian Arab Republic (3 per cent).

Onward movements of refugees and asylum-seekers to and within North Africa and across the Mediterranean Sea to Europe persisted, with continued loss of lives along these routes. Despite a 20 per cent decline in arrivals in Italy from Libya and an 80 per cent reduction in arrivals from Tunisia, crossings to Spain via the Mediterranean Sea increased by 6 per cent, while arrivals to the Canary Islands rose by 17 per cent. UNHCR and its partners engage with people on the move to raise awareness of the risks of irregular onward movement, providing information on alternative protection and assistance options, and enhancing data collection to better understand movement drivers. Additionally, UNHCR works with authorities and partners to implement its “route-based approach”, ensuring access to protection and solutions along key routes.

Egypt has become the largest host country for Sudanese refugees fleeing the ongoing conflict. Since April 2023, UNHCR has registered 539,000 Sudanese refugees, bringing the total number to 654,000, and the overall refugee population to 924,000. In December 2024, the Egyptian Government adopted a new asylum law. UNHCR is working with the authorities to support its implementation and facilitate the transition to a government-led asylum system. Additionally, the operation is in the process of transitioning from its Infoline telephone assistance service to establishing the Egypt Refugee Inter-Agency Contact Centre, the purpose of which will be to provide accurate, real-time information and referral services to refugees.

Mauritania now hosts some 278,000 refugees and asylum-seekers, marking a 65 per cent increase compared to 2023. The majority are hosted in the Hodh Chargui region, including 114,000 refugees in the Mbera camp and 143,190 new arrivals from Mali who have settled outside of the camp. In 2025, UNHCR will continue working towards the inclusion of refugees in national systems, together with the Government of Mauritania.

By the end of 2024, **Libya** hosted 277,000 refugees and asylum-seekers. Of this population, 73 per cent are Sudanese, 10 per cent Syrian, and 9 per cent Eritrean. UNHCR provides protection and life-saving assistance at community day centres, detention facilities, and disembarkation points, and leads the coordination of the inter-agency response to the needs of Sudanese refugees in the east of the country. UNHCR also pursues durable solutions for vulnerable and at-risk refugees and asylum-seekers and supports their relocation through the emergency transit mechanism to Rwanda, the

humanitarian corridor to Italy, and resettlement and complementary pathways to third countries. In 2024, 1,500 individuals were relocated through these mechanisms.

In **Algeria**, UNHCR provides support to Sahrawi refugees in the camps near Tindouf along with its partners. UNHCR also provides assistance to approximately 12,000 registered refugees and asylum-seekers in the country. In parallel, the Government has continued to extend access to national health and education services to both populations.

UNHCR has registered 18,000 refugees and asylum-seekers in **Morocco**, where it conducts registration and refugee status determination; provides legal assistance and housing support; and promotes inclusion in national health, education and social protection services. In 2024, close collaboration efforts with the Ministry for Foreign Affairs and the High Commissioner for Planning resulted in the inclusion of refugees as a target group in Morocco's national census – a key step toward improving data collection and service delivery.

Tunisia hosts approximately 12,600 refugees and asylum-seekers registered with UNHCR. The Office is advocating the resumption of registration and refugee status determination for new arrivals, as well as the adoption of a national asylum system.

Gulf Cooperation Council countries

Resource mobilization activities continued across Gulf Cooperation Council countries, raising \$101 million as of December 2024 from both public and private sector contributions.

Yemen

A decade of conflict has left Yemen among the world's most protracted and complex humanitarian and protection crises, with 19.5 million people - almost half the population - in need of humanitarian assistance. In 2024, 4.5 million people remained internally displaced, and the country continued to host more than 60,000 refugees and asylum-seekers, primarily from Ethiopia and Somalia. Additionally, severe flooding during the 2024 rainy season affected 100,000 families, compounding shelter, infrastructure and protection challenges. Economic, political and security conditions have continued to deteriorate into 2025. Detentions of United Nations and non-governmental organization staff, along with heightened restrictions on humanitarian operations, remain critical concerns.

Key priorities in 2025 include legal assistance and providing access to civil documentation, alongside cash and in-kind support as essential protection tools. The operation also provides core relief items, emergency shelter, and implements quick impact projects to address urgent needs.

As the sole international organization responding to the protection requirements and needs of refugees in Yemen, UNHCR continues to pursue durable solutions where feasible. While large-scale solutions remain limited, the assisted spontaneous return programme will facilitate the return of an estimated 1,300 Somali refugees and asylum-seekers in 2025, following 1,146 returns by boat in 2024.

B. Progress and challenges by impact area in 2024 and updated plans for 2025

Attaining favourable protection environments

In 2024, UNHCR registered over 627,000 individuals, marking a 94 per cent increase from 2023, driven primarily by the conflict in the Sudan. To address this increase in 2025, UNHCR's operation in Egypt will upgrade its registration appointment tool, which enables new arrivals to request a registration appointment with UNHCR online, thus

reducing response delays. Similarly, in Iraq, a pilot of the “digital gateway” platform will be launched. The platform is designed to function as an entry point enabling forcibly displaced and stateless persons to access information, avail themselves of services and engage in two-way communication with UNHCR.

UNHCR continues to conduct refugee status determination across countries in the region, enhancing efficiency through tailored strategies and processing approaches. To strengthen legal and policy protection frameworks, UNHCR actively engages with national counterparts and other stakeholders, providing capacity development for civil and military authorities on international refugee law and protection. In 2025, support will continue in countries that are developing national asylum systems.

Additionally, UNHCR will continue to support asylum adjudicators by providing updated, objective country guidance. In December 2024, UNHCR issued a [position on returns to the Syrian Arab Republic](#) and plans to release updated country guidance in 2025, highlighting emerging protection risks.

UNHCR remains committed to addressing statelessness through legal assistance, support for civil documentation issuance, capacity-building, and advocacy. Notably, in 2024, UNHCR supported the League of Arab States in launching the [Arab Declaration on Belonging and Legal Identity](#) and will work towards its operationalization in 2025.

Realizing rights in safe environments

In September 2024, the League of Arab States extended the 2019–2024 [Arab strategy for the protection of children in asylum contexts in the Arab region](#), demonstrating member States’ resolve to uphold child rights and address the unique vulnerabilities of displaced children through sustained, collective action and long-term policy engagement. Additionally, technical support on child marriage prevention was advanced, emphasizing secondary education as a key prevention tool, with efforts directed towards strengthening education systems, raising community awareness, and promoting policies that address the root causes of early marriage.

To address barriers to education for forcibly displaced and stateless children, UNHCR continues to advocate inclusive policies and for the strengthening of national education systems. In Iraq, the implementation of the refugee education integration policy, developed by the Kurdistan Regional Government with support from United Nations agencies, contributed to a significant increase in enrolment, from 50 per cent for the 2018 to 2019 academic year (i.e. preceding the strategy’s rollout) to 73 per cent for the 2022 to 2023 academic year, with further gains expected.¹ Across the Middle East and North Africa region, an estimated 580,000 persons are expected to benefit from education programming in 2025.

Gender-based violence prevention, mitigation and response remain key priorities. In 2025, approximately 450,000 individuals are expected to benefit from specialized gender-based violence programmes across the region. However, conflict, trafficking, and deteriorating socioeconomic conditions have heightened these risks, while limited resources and services have left many survivors and at-risk individuals without adequate support. Stigma towards victims of gender-based violence and gender equality issues has further limited effective programming, while legal barriers, sociocultural norms and the lack of legal status for many refugees and asylum-seekers continue to hinder disclosure and safe access to services. In response, UNHCR will prioritize gender-based violence prevention and response efforts in 2025.

¹ Statistics for the 2023 to 2024 academic year will be published in April 2025.

Empowering communities and achieving gender equality

UNHCR remains committed to empowering communities, strengthening social cohesion and ensuring the meaningful participation of forcibly displaced, stateless and other affected populations in the decisions that affect their lives. To reinforce community-based protection, localization and accountability, the Middle East and North Africa accountability to affected people toolkit was launched, to guide UNHCR and partners in designing and implementing effective, accountable responses. UNHCR also established a regional inter-agency accountability to affected people platform with the United Nations Children's Fund and other stakeholders, to enhance coordination. UNHCR also provided dedicated grants to community-led organisations, supporting women, youth and persons with disabilities.

In 2025, UNHCR will continue promoting digital solutions and two-way communication channels by strengthening community participation and evidence-based protection analysis. The Middle East and North Africa community protection network will remain central to advancing empowerment, leadership and coordination with community, refugee, youth and women-led organizations, complemented by targeted financial and technical support for community-led organizations.

Promoting nationality rights also remains a top priority in the Middle East and North Africa region, where women in 12 countries still lack the same rights as men in passing nationality to their children. In 2024, UNHCR co-organized several multi-stakeholder dialogues, bringing together key actors to share best practices and identify concrete actions to advance legal and policy reforms on this issue.

Securing solutions

In 2024, UNHCR submitted 26,305 cases for resettlement consideration from the region, representing an 8 per cent increase from 2023. However, in 2025, resettlement quotas are expected to decline significantly due to shifting political priorities. UNHCR will continue strengthening identification mechanisms to ensure that the most vulnerable refugees have access to resettlement opportunities. Additionally, efforts will focus on safeguarding the resettlement process by reinforcing oversight and accountability measures.

To expand access to complementary pathways, UNHCR set up local coordination structures to help expand networks, map services and strengthen information-sharing throughout 2024. Private funders were also connected with partners on the ground to support refugee upskilling initiatives. In 2025, UNHCR will conduct a skills mapping exercise in the Gulf Cooperation Council countries and North Africa to inform advocacy efforts for expanding skilled-pathway options for refugees.

Strategic partnerships

In 2024, UNHCR continued to expand development engagement, strengthen inclusion in national systems, promote self-reliance and enhance partnerships, in line with the Global Compact on Refugees and Global Refugee Forum pledges. Strengthened capacity in social protection and economic analysis enabled UNHCR to leverage transactional partnerships and strategic collaborations, particularly with the World Bank-UNHCR Joint Data Center, to support evidenced-based policymaking and government engagement.

Together with the World Bank and member States, and with the support of the Joint Data Center, UNHCR has been identifying opportunities for including forcibly displaced and stateless persons in national statistical exercises. In 2024, UNHCR operations in Iraq, Mauritania and Yemen secured funding from the Joint Data Center, in collaboration with the World Bank and national statistical offices. As part of these efforts, refugees were included in the 2024 national poverty assessment in Iraq; internally displaced persons

were incorporated into the 2025 national poverty assessment in Yemen; and refugees were integrated into the 2025 labour force survey in Mauritania. Additionally, in June 2024, UNHCR and the World Bank published two reports in Jordan and Lebanon, providing detailed socioeconomic assessments aligned with national statistics.

The inclusion of forcibly displaced and stateless populations into national statistical exercises is essential for ensuring access to national systems, avoiding inefficient parallel structures, and delivering equitable assistance to both host and displaced communities. It also provides the necessary data for designing targeted development programmes for vulnerable groups, including people with disabilities, older people, children, women and other people with specific needs.

In 2025, UNHCR will continue to strengthen strategic partnerships with key stakeholders in response to growing needs. A primary focus will be on the implementation of Global Refugee Forum pledges and a stocktaking exercise to assess progress ahead of the High-Level Officials Meeting. Strengthening collaboration with regional organizations and civil society networks will be critical in supporting Global Refugee Forum follow-up.

C. Financial information

In October 2024, the Executive Committee approved the 2025 budget of \$2,122.3 million for the region. This is less than the initial 2024 budget of \$2,341.8 million, representing a 9 per cent decrease, driven by the global decrease in budgets. Owing to developments in the Middle East in December 2024 and subsequent establishment of supplementary budgets (for Lebanon and the Syrian Arab Republic), the region's 2025 budget now stands at \$2,478.4 million, representing a 16.8 per cent increase compared to the initial Executive Committee-approved budget. The breakdown of requirements by impact area for 2025 is as follows: “respond: realizing rights in safe environments”, \$1,579.8 million; “protect: attaining favourable protection environments”, \$415.4 million; “empower: empowering communities and achieving gender equality”, \$289.9 million; and “solve: securing solutions”, \$193.2 million.

As of 31 January 2025, 11 per cent of the region's 2025 financial requirements were funded, taking into consideration the indicative allocation of unearmarked and softly earmarked contributions.