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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 continued to experience instability driven by overlapping conflicts, political challenges, and economic pressures. While the changes in the Syrian Arab Republic have allowed millions of Syrians to return home, displacement across the region remained high. At the end of 2025, the number of refugees and asylum-seekers in the region stood at 4.2 million people, and internally displaced persons at 14.6 million (up from 3.2 million and 13 million respectively in 2024).

In Gaza, the humanitarian situation remained desperate. While the first phase of the ceasefire enabled limited aid deliveries and returns, repeated violations resulted in significant casualties and destruction. Large parts of Gaza remained heavily damaged, and essential services operated far below pre-conflict levels. In the West Bank, intensified Israeli violence triggered additional displacement and further undermined prospects for stability. Along the Lebanon–Israel border, volatility also persisted, despite the late 2024 ceasefire. Israeli airstrikes continued throughout 2025, triggering repeated displacement. Those displaced in border areas were unable to return due to insecurity and damage, a situation expected to continue into 2026.

Syria situation

After 14 years of conflict, the political transition has led to a significant change in the hopes and intentions of Syrians to return home. By the end of 2025, UNHCR estimated that nearly 1.3 million Syrians had returned from abroad and about 1.9 million internally displaced persons had gone back to their areas of origin.

Despite this rise, Syrians remain one of the largest displaced populations globally, with 3.8¹ million registered refugees in neighbouring countries and 7.1 million internally displaced as of the end of 2025.

Return trends reflect cautious optimism among refugees. Intentions to return spiked early in 2025 but declined later in the year, with 14 per cent of refugees surveyed in December 2025 having indicated plans to return within 12 months. Many refugees appear to be adopting a “wait-and-see” approach, as conditions evolve.

The political–security transition in the country continued, enabling hundreds of thousands of internally displaced persons to return to their areas of origin. However, localized violence and insecurity recurred in parts of the southern and coastal regions, triggering new displacement, while major military confrontations occurred in the north-east earlier

¹ Approximately 700,000 refugees known to UNHCR in Lebanon are not formally registered and not included in the data.

this year. At the same time, Israel carried out air strikes across the country and ground incursions into Quneitra and Daraa governorates, while local residents were detained.

While sanctions have eased, economic recovery remains constrained by extensive destruction, high unemployment, limited access to basic services and widespread poverty. An estimated 16.6 million people remain in need of assistance, underscoring the importance of sustained international investments and support.

While at a reduced level compared to pre-2025, protection risks remain, including criminality and extensive explosive ordnance contamination. Syrians with specific profiles, including some minorities, may be particularly vulnerable.

UNHCR urges States to uphold the rights of Syrians to seek asylum and access territory, as well as to continue supporting host countries, which have generously sheltered Syrians for years. This includes addressing the increased pressures on Lebanon, which received more than 115,000 new Syrian arrivals since December 2024 as families fled renewed hostilities in the coastal and central governorates of the Syrian Arab Republic. Sustained investments in host countries and inside the Syrian Arab Republic are essential to ensure that returns remain voluntary, informed and sustainable, and that those returning have access to basic services. The [2025 Operational Framework for the Voluntary Return of Syrian Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons](#) outlines approaches to return counselling, protection monitoring and reintegration support. The December 2025 [report](#) on its implementation underscored the need for protection-based, informed and sustainable return processes.

In the Syrian Arab Republic, UNHCR is prioritizing protection, shelter, transportation for returns, cash-based interventions, core relief items, and livelihood opportunities, while advocating inclusion in longer-term development programmes.

In Lebanon and Jordan, UNHCR's 2026 priorities center on strengthening the ability of refugees to pursue sustainable solutions. This includes supporting voluntary, informed and dignified returns and sustaining essential protection, basic services, and critical assistance for those who remain displaced, with a view to safeguarding their dignity and gradually increasing their capacity to access available solutions.

UNHCR continues to advocate that the Syrian Arab Republic and host countries enhance their dialogue and strengthen regional preparedness.

Iraq

In Iraq, the gradual transition to early recovery continued in 2025, though significant humanitarian and protection challenges persisted. Relative stability has enabled progress in addressing the needs of the estimated 1 million internally displaced persons, including approximately 102,000 remaining in 20 camps in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, many facing long-standing barriers such as insecurity, a lack of livelihoods, and damaged infrastructure.

Iraq hosts more than 347,200 refugees and asylum-seekers, mostly Syrians, with 70 per cent residing in urban areas and the remainder in nine camps across the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. As of December 2025, 2 per cent of Syrian refugees expressed a willingness to return within 12 months. In total, since December 2024, 7,000 registered refugees have returned. In 2026, events in the north-eastern Syrian Arab Republic may further dampen intentions to return and could result in further population movements out of the Syrian Arab Republic and into Iraq.

UNHCR's priorities for 2026 include supporting the Government in strengthening legal and policy frameworks, ensuring access to documentation and legal assistance, advancing the inclusion of refugees and asylum-seekers in national services, and facilitating voluntary returns of Syrian refugees. UNHCR supports durable solutions for internally

displaced persons, including voluntary return, relocation to other communities within the country or local integration in areas of displacement.

North Africa

At the end of 2025, the number of refugees and asylum-seekers in the region stood at 1.8 million people, in addition to over 32,000 internally displaced persons, with most newly registered with UNHCR originating from the Sudan (81 per cent), Mali (7 per cent), and South Sudan (3 per cent), and 42 per cent being children.

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. Compared to 2024, arrivals in Italy from Libya increased by 38 per cent, while arrivals from Tunisia dropped by over 75 per cent, as restrictions continued to impact mixed movements across the region. Crossings to Spain via the Mediterranean increased by 4 per cent, whereas arrivals to the Canary Islands decreased by 62 per cent.

UNHCR is working with States and partners to advance the route-based approach by strengthening protection-sensitive responses to mixed movements, addressing the immediate protection and assistance needs of refugees and asylum-seekers on the move and reducing dangerous onward journeys.

By the end of 2025, Libya hosted over 550,000 refugees and asylum-seekers, including 108,400 registered with UNHCR. Most were Sudanese (82 per cent), Eritreans (8 per cent) and Syrians (5 per cent). In 2025, over 1,600 individuals were relocated through the emergency transit mechanism to Rwanda, the humanitarian corridor to Italy, and resettlement and complementary pathways to third countries, while over 400 Syrians were supported to return to the Syrian Arab Republic. In 2026, UNHCR will continue leading the inter-agency response for Sudanese refugees and host communities and facilitating the voluntary, informed returns of Syrians.

Tunisia hosts approximately 7,800 UNHCR-registered refugees and asylum-seekers, mainly from Sudan (3,960), the Syrian Arab Republic (1,860), and Somalia (450). UNHCR continues to advocate for the resumption of registration and refugee status determination for new arrivals and for the establishment of a national asylum system.

In 2026, UNHCR will continue providing essential support to the most vulnerable, including access to healthcare, legal services, temporary shelter, and cash assistance.

Egypt hosts over 1.1 million registered refugees and asylum-seekers, mostly Sudanese (76 per cent), Syrians (114,000) and South Sudanese (54,000). The registered refugee population has almost quadrupled since March 2023, making Egypt the country hosting the largest number of people fleeing the Sudan crisis. Egypt also remains the top recipient of asylum claims globally.

In 2026, UNHCR will continue supporting the Egyptian Government in the phased implementation of the asylum law and transition to a nationally led asylum system, as well as in expanding inclusion in national systems and facilitating voluntary returns for Syrians. UNHCR will also continue co-leading the Egypt Refugee and Resilience Response Plan with the Government and the United Nations Development Programme.

Mauritania hosts an estimated 309,000 refugees and asylum-seekers, including 184,300 jointly registered by UNHCR and Mauritanian authorities. Most are in the Hodh Chargui region, including about 120,000 Malian refugees in the Mbera camp and over 170,000 living outside the camp. In 2026, UNHCR will continue supporting the Government to advance refugee self-reliance and inclusion in national education, health, financial, and social protection systems while contributing to stability in the Sahel. This includes helping the Government strengthen cooperation with the international community to promote local development and social cohesion, enabling both refugees and host communities to thrive and reducing future displacement risks.

In Algeria, UNHCR and partners continued to support Sahrawi refugees in the camps near Tindouf. UNHCR also assists about 12,000 registered refugees and asylum-seekers in the country, while the Government includes both populations in national health and education services. In 2026, UNHCR will continue strengthening protection for Sahrawi refugees in the camps near Tindouf and urban refugees, as well as helping to advance the adoption of a national refugee law and expanding livelihood opportunities in the camps, including vocational training.

UNHCR has registered almost 23,000 refugees and asylum-seekers in Morocco, where it conducts registration and refugee status determination and provides legal support, cash assistance and healthcare to the most vulnerable.

In 2026, UNHCR will continue to support the national asylum system and refugee protection and inclusion, with a focus on socioeconomic integration. This includes improving refugee access to documentation, social protection and employment. UNHCR will also enhance protection and decentralized access to asylum in the multi-purpose hubs, with the support of the Protection Working Groups.

Gulf Cooperation Council countries

At the end of 2025, the total number of refugees and asylum-seekers in the Gulf Cooperation Council countries stood at over 14,400. The presence of refugees in the GCC is governed by expatriate regulations with the exception of Qatar. While not yet enacted, the Qatari government has adopted a national asylum law, and UNHCR will continue supporting the government in operationalizing its asylum system.

Resource mobilization efforts across the Gulf Cooperation Council countries raised \$98,680 million by December 2025, including \$72 million from public sources and \$26.7 million from the private sector. In 2025, UNHCR held high-level strategic dialogues with Kuwait and Qatar, through which both Governments reaffirmed their commitment to stronger, innovative, and sustained humanitarian cooperation.

Yemen

A decade of conflict has left Yemen among the world's most protracted humanitarian and protection crises. Needs continued to rise in 2025, with 19.5 million people – almost half the population – requiring humanitarian assistance. This figure is projected to reach 23.1 million in early 2026. Over 5 million people remain internally displaced, while Yemen hosts 63,800 refugees and asylum-seekers, mainly from Ethiopia and Somalia. Yemen remains a major mixed movement corridor, exposing people, especially refugees and asylum-seekers with limited safety nets, to dangerous journeys, exploitation, and severe protection risks. Across the country, protection concerns are widespread, driven by repeated displacement, poverty, and barriers to documentation and essential services.

While the United Nations remains committed to staying and delivering assistance to communities in Yemen, operational conditions in areas controlled by the Sana'a de facto authorities have sharply deteriorated. Recent events, including the detention of personnel and unauthorized entry into United Nations premises have significantly strained operational integrity and limited humanitarian space. Furthermore, the confiscation of information and communications equipment present challenges for the secure management of humanitarian data. Collectively, these disruptions have hampered the ability of the United Nations to maintain a consistent presence and fulfil its mandate, while meeting essential safety and security standards. In areas under the internationally recognized government, humanitarian operations continue, although insecurity and severe underfunding have required strict prioritization.

In 2026, UNHCR will maintain a protection-focused, mandated response, emphasizing legal assistance, civil documentation, and support for people with specific needs. UNHCR will also work to strengthen coordination and support to government leadership with the aim of advancing inclusion and solutions.

B. Progress and challenges by impact area in 2025 and updated plans for 2026

Attaining favourable protection environments

In 2025, UNHCR registered over 428,200 individuals, a 32 per cent decrease from 2024, though 30 per cent higher than 2023. Most new registrations took place in Egypt (300,000), where an online appointment system launched in August 2024 was upgraded in November 2025 to enable more efficiencies.

UNHCR continues to conduct refugee status determination across the region as a strategic tool to strengthen access to protection and rights, expedite vulnerable cases, enhance efficiency, and safeguard the integrity and fairness of the process. To strengthen legal and policy protection frameworks, UNHCR will work with national counterparts to provide capacity development for authorities on international refugee law and protection, including a regional workshop conducted in partnership with the Sanremo International Institute of Humanitarian Law.

In 2026, UNHCR will continue supporting countries to develop national asylum legislation and to transition to national asylum systems, including in North Africa, where strengthening asylum systems is central to ensuring protection along the routes in the context of mixed movements. UNHCR will also support asylum adjudicators by providing updated, objective country guidance, including new country guidance on returns to the Syrian Arab Republic, highlighting emerging protection risks.

Efforts to address statelessness will focus on legal assistance, documentation support, capacity-building and advocacy. Kuwait, Lebanon, Morocco and the Syrian Arab Republic will be prioritized under the 2026 Statelessness Strategic Plan, with the aim of improving access to birth registration and national documents and addressing discrimination in nationality laws.

Realizing rights in safe environments

The League of Arab States extended the [Arab strategy for the protection of children in asylum contexts in the Arab region](#) indefinitely, reaffirming member States' commitment to child rights and the protection of displaced children. In 2026, UNHCR will advance these rights through strategic partnerships, focusing on strengthening national systems and expanding inclusion in child protection services. UNHCR will also help address barriers to education for forcibly displaced and stateless children, advocating inclusive policies and strengthened national education systems.

With declining resources, efforts to address gender-based violence, will be prioritized over prevention and risk mitigation. Stigma, gender inequalities, and legal and administrative barriers continued to hinder safe disclosure and timely access to services for victims. In 2026, programming in this area will remain a priority, with a focus on improving case management, building the technical capacity of national organizations, and ensuring survivors can access minimum standards of care.

Empowering communities and achieving gender equality

UNHCR remains committed to strengthening social cohesion and ensuring the meaningful participation of forcibly displaced, stateless, and other affected people in decisions impacting their lives.

In 2026, UNHCR will enhance community empowerment, participation and accountability through the rollout of a communication and transparency toolbox that standardizes accessible, inclusive two-way communication with affected communities. UNHCR will also support operations in transitioning to the global digital participatory tool to better capture and use community feedback for evidence-based programming.

Through the regional Community Protection Network, UNHCR will advance community leadership and coordination with community-based organizations. UNHCR will also support the mapping of community-led organizations and endeavour to strengthen localization and community-based protection.

Across the region, operations are expanding initiatives that reinforce community-based protection and accountability. In the Syrian Arab Republic, UNHCR is upgrading the “Syria is Home” platform to provide refugees with timely information to support informed decisions regarding return. In Iraq, a digital gateway launched in December 2025 will serve as a key tool to communicate directly with UNHCR and obtain information. Similar efforts, including expanded digital platforms, outreach mechanisms and feedback channels, are underway, with careful attention to age, gender, disability and other factors, to ensure inclusive access and meaningful participation for all.

Securing solutions

In 2025, UNHCR submitted 7,357 individuals for resettlement from the region, a 72 per cent decrease from 2024, reflecting shifting political priorities. Similarly, low levels are expected in 2026, translating into limited opportunities for refugees. UNHCR will continue strengthening identification systems to ensure the most vulnerable are prioritized and will reinforce oversight and accountability to safeguard the process.

UNHCR will also use the enhanced knowledge of refugee populations taken from the skills mapping conducted in previous years from the Gulf Cooperation Council countries and North Africa to advocate expanded skilled pathway options and will build on its partnership with the International Organization for Migration to increase access to safe, legal alternative pathways. However, such opportunities remain limited, and many programmes are still in tentative pilot stages.

C. Financial information

In October 2025, at its seventy-sixth plenary session, the Executive Committee approved the 2026 budget for the region of \$1,628.4 million, a 23 per cent decrease from the initial 2025 budget of \$2,122.3 million, driven by the global decrease in budgets. The breakdown of requirements by impact area for 2026 is as follows: “respond: realizing rights in safe environments”, \$756 million; “protect: attaining favourable protection environments”, \$273 million; “empower: empowering communities and achieving gender equality”, \$226 million; and “solve: securing solutions”, \$373 million. As of 31 January 2026, 18 per cent of the region’s 2026 financial requirements were funded, taking consideration the indicative allocation of unearmarked and softly earmarked contributions.