In 2021-2022, the most common nationalities of people arriving in the UK across the Channel were Iran, Iraq, Eritrea, Syria, Afghanistan and Albania. In each of these years, Afghanistan, Syria, Iran and Iraq were among the top 5 nationalities. Most of these countries are affected by major global displacement and refugee situations with immense humanitarian needs and limited solutions. In countries in which there is no active war or conflict, it may still be the case that people with specific profiles are at risk of persecution – for reasons including religion, ethnicity or political opinion. These are the very people the international refugee framework is designed to protect. For those who are not refugees, fair, efficient and robust asylum processing would allow them to be swiftly returned to their home countries. In this document, we explain the displacement situation in countries from which most people seeking asylum arrived in the UK by sea in 2021 and 2022.
Afghanistan

It has been more than forty years since the first Afghan refugees left their country, in what has become one of the largest and longest displacement crises in recent history. In addition to new arrivals, neighbouring countries continue to host over 2 million registered refugees from previous waves of displacement, and a further 5 million Afghans of varying statuses, the vast majority being hosted by the Islamic Republics of Iran and Pakistan. The continued flow of new arrivals, combined with arrivals since 2021 and large existing populations, places a significant additional burden on host countries.

The situation inside Afghanistan remains complex. There has been an improvement in overall security since August 2021 and a marked reduction in civilian casualties, enabling humanitarian access to all provinces, including areas which had been inaccessible for decades. However, the humanitarian, economic, and human rights situation continues to deteriorate significantly, particularly for women and girls. Widespread food insecurity, soaring inflation and high economic instability, exacerbated by sanctions, limited livelihoods, and more frequent and severe climate shocks have left vulnerable populations in an increasingly precarious situation. The World Bank estimates that Afghanistan's economy contracted by a cumulative 30-35 per cent over 2021 and 2022. Two-thirds of households report difficulties in covering their most basic expenses.

UNHCR has issued a non-return advisory for Afghanistan calling for a halt on forced returns of Afghan nationals. UNHCR's Guidance Note on the International Protection Needs of People Fleeing Afghanistan is available here.

Albania

The number of Albanians arriving irregularly to the UK increased significantly during 2022. As for other nationalities, the fact that the country is not at war does not mean that certain individuals may not have international protection needs. Regardless of nationality, people who wish to seek asylum should have the opportunity to present their claim and have it considered through a fair and efficient process that either leads to a grant of protection if warranted or paves the way to a swift return for those found not to be in need of protection or another legal stay basis. At the end of 2022, some 20,000 Albanians were recognised as refugees worldwide, and approximately 25,000 had made claims for asylum that had not yet been determined.

The reasons behind increased Albanian arrivals to the UK in 2022 are not yet clear. UNHCR agrees that this relatively sudden change should be explored – including through cooperation with law enforcement agencies of the UK's European neighbours and the Albanian authorities. Reports of trafficking and other forms of exploitation by criminal networks are particularly disturbing. UNHCR does not oppose designating countries as 'safe countries of origin' in certain circumstances, in order to prioritise or accelerate the examination of applications. However, to prevent individuals being returned to danger, claims must still be individually considered, along with safeguards including appeal rights.
The Syria crisis is entering its twelfth year in 2023. It continues to be one of the largest refugee crises in the world, with over 6.8 million Syrians in Türkiye, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq and Egypt. While most Syrian refugees hope to return home one day, according to UNHCR’s Return Perception and Intention Survey, the majority do not plan to do so soon. During 2022, the number of refugees in host countries remained relatively stable, without major influxes, onward movements or large-scale returns. UNHCR’s Guidance Note on the International Protection Needs of People Fleeing Syria is available here.

The protracted nature of the Syria crisis has led to increased needs and deepening vulnerabilities among refugees, many of whom are now past their twelfth year of displacement. It also results in the continued need for host countries to keep providing access to public services and infrastructure, including housing, education, healthcare, waste management, water and sanitation, with associated decisions over resourcing and service delivery for displaced populations. At the same time, socio-economic conditions have been further impacted by multiple compounding crises: the COVID-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine, climate change, and political and economic challenges in some of the refugee-hosting countries leading to social tensions with the refugee community.

Assessments continue to show clearly how far conditions have deteriorated in recent years. For example, in Lebanon, 750,000 Syrian refugees or close to 90 per cent of the refugee population could not meet their basic survival needs in 2021, an increase from 55 per cent since 2019, with all communities across the country impacted by the unprecedented economic crisis.

The situation of Eritrean refugees in Sudan is one of the most protracted in the world with the first Eritrean refugees arriving over 50 years ago, and approximately 50 per cent of those living in camps were born there. While verification processes are ongoing by the end of 2023, it is projected that over 91,000 Eritrean refugees will be living in nine camps in Kassala and Gedaref, and parts of Kassala town and Khartoum. Over the last five years on average 6,500 new Eritrean refugees crossed into Sudan every year, and in 2022 by August more than 5,800 Eritrean refugees had arrived in Sudan. With almost 1 million refugees, Sudan hosts the second highest number of refugees in Africa and the country has provided protection for refugees and asylum-seekers from South Sudan, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Central African Republic (CAR), Chad, Syria, Yemen, and other countries (such as Somalia and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)) since 1965.
Iraq

At the start of 2022, Iraq had 2.5 million people in need of humanitarian assistance, including over one million internally displaced persons (IDPs) who have not yet found a sustainable path back home. As of June 2022, of the six million people displaced in recent years, over 81 per cent have returned, while 1.2 million Iraqis internally displaced since 2014 are still displaced, including 180,000 persons hosted in 26 camps (25 in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq and one in Ninewa Governorate). A lack of civil documentation impedes people's ability to access basic services such as education, healthcare and social security benefits, and can lead to restricted freedom of movement, increased risk of arrest and detention, exclusion from restitution and/or reconstruction programmes, and an inability to participate in public affairs in the country. Children who lack birth certificates are also at risk of statelessness.

There are also currently more than 200,000 Iraqi refugees and asylum-seekers living in neighbouring countries such as Syria and Turkey. UNHCR’s Eligibility Guidelines for Assessing the International Protection Needs of Iraqi Asylum-Seekers are available here.

Iran

The number of Iranians arriving irregularly to the UK increased significantly during 2021 and 2022. As for all other nationalities, the fact that the country is not at war does not mean that people may not face persecution or otherwise need international protection. Regardless of nationality, people who wish to seek asylum should have the opportunity to present their claim and have it considered through a fair and efficient process that paves the way to a swift return for those found not to need protection. At the end of 2022, some 142,000 Iranians were recognised as refugees worldwide, and approximately 65,000 had made claims for asylum that had not yet been determined.

FOOTNOTES AND ADDITIONAL SOURCES

6 Verbatim from UNHCR cleared lines on externalization – October 2022.
7 3RP Regional Strategic Overview 2023,p5 available at: Regional_Strategic_Overview_2023_full.pdf (3rpsyriacrisis.org)
8 Ibid. p6
9 Ibid. p5
* UNHCR Sudan - Eritrean Refugees in Sudan Dashboard as of 31 January 2023