

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

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Update on UNHCR’s operations in the Middle East and North Africa

A. Situational overview

Syria situation

After a decade, conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic continues to drive the largest displacement crisis in the world. Over 6.7 million Syrians remain internally displaced and 5.6 million refugees are hosted in Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey. Despite the generosity of host countries, the living situation for Syrian refugees in the region has become increasingly challenging. The new coronavirus disease (COVID-19) exacerbated economic and social distress as many, including refugees, lost their livelihoods and were pushed further into poverty.

UNHCR and partners increased support in response to COVID-19, which will be maintained in 2021. As of mid-2020, the Office had provided cash assistance to over 1 million Syrian refugees, including some 576,200 who received emergency cash assistance as part of the COVID-19 response. UNHCR also undertook a regional winterization programme to address the needs of over 3 million vulnerable individuals, mostly through cash transfers. In 2021, UNHCR will maintain large-scale cash assistance for the most vulnerable Syrian refugees, alongside ongoing multisectoral assistance and other necessary support.

Together with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), UNHCR continued to lead the “[Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan in response to the Syria crisis](#)” (3RP), which requires \$5.9 billion to assist over 5.5 million refugees and 4.8 million people in host communities.

In the Syrian Arab Republic, the humanitarian situation remains challenging. The number of people in need has significantly increased as a consequence of worsening economic conditions and food insecurity. Humanitarian access also remained a challenge due to movement restrictions, some of which related to COVID-19. Nevertheless, from January to October 2020, UNHCR provided protection-related services to over 1 million people, including some 170,000 children; nearly 1 million people received basic relief items; around 135,000 individuals benefited from shelter support; and some 275,000 people were provided with health assistance.

The Office expanded its cross-border assistance from Turkey to respond to the emergency situation caused by large-scale displacement in December 2019. The United Nations Security Council authorization ([S/RES/2533](#)) for humanitarian agencies to use the border crossing of Bab al-Hawa (at the border with Turkey) will expire on 10 July 2021.

Iraq situation

There are some 1.2 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Iraq, and over 4.8 million IDP returnees continue to face protection risks, constrained access to basic services and insecurity, while contending with limited access to livelihood opportunities and shelter, as well as the threat of explosive remnants of war. In neighbouring countries, some 287,000 Iraqi refugees and asylum-seekers have been registered with UNHCR, while around 31,000 Iraqis without registration live in camps in Al-Hassakeh Governorate in the Syrian Arab Republic.

Following the decision of the Government of Iraq to accelerate the closure of IDP camps in late 2020, UNHCR increased its support to affected Iraqis to mitigate the effects of camp closures. The international community is also increasingly focusing on identifying durable solutions for IDPs, including voluntary return and local integration in places of displacement.

The overall political and security environment in Iraq remains fragile and international support is key to safeguarding the progress made towards stability and reconciliation. UNHCR and partners continue to deliver protection and assistance programmes, utilizing alternative modalities due to COVID-19. In 2021, the Office will enhance collaboration with development actors to ensure the systematic inclusion of persons of concern in national development plans and programmes.

North Africa

The security situation in North Africa remained complex. In October 2020, a ceasefire agreement was reached among parties to the conflict in Libya. While a significant number of IDPs (an estimated 568,000) returned to their places of origin in 2020, some 316,500 remain displaced due to the prevailing insecurity. Over 44,000 asylum-seekers and refugees have been registered with UNHCR.

Despite operational challenges, the Office continued to provide protection and assistance to IDPs, returnees, refugees and asylum-seekers, including those in detention centres and at disembarkation points. In response to COVID-19, UNHCR also expanded support to the national health system.

Egypt hosts around 260,000 registered refugees and asylum-seekers, a number that is still growing due to the situation in the region. In spite of the challenges related to the economic reform program followed by the COVID-19 pandemic, Egypt continues to provide refugees with access to public health, education and other services. UNHCR is working with the Government to improve the welfare of registered refugees and mitigate the socio-economic impact of the pandemic, particularly for vulnerable refugee families.

Mauritania hosts some 67,200 refugees and asylum-seekers, including some 62,000 Malian refugees in Mbera camp and surrounding areas. The Government maintains its open-door policy towards refugees. UNHCR will continue to lead the humanitarian response and work with the Government and the World Bank to include refugees registered at Mbera Camp in national social protection mechanisms. In January 2021, the national social registry confirmed new survey protocols which will allow for a wider registration of refugee households outside Mbera camp, in the Hodh el Chargui region.

In Tunisia, the number of registered refugees and asylum-seekers nearly doubled for the second consecutive year, from 3,300 in 2019 to 6,400 in 2020, with 1,800 people awaiting registration by the year's end. UNHCR's priorities will be to expand the protection space and support the socioeconomic inclusion of refugees and asylum-seekers, while continuing to advocate the adoption of a national asylum law.

In Algeria, UNHCR will continue the registration, refugee status determination and issuance of documentation for refugees and asylum-seekers. The Office will also maintain life-saving assistance to vulnerable Sahrawi refugees in the five camps located near Tindouf.

The Government of Morocco expanded efforts in 2020 to prevent irregular movements towards Europe by dismantling smuggling and trafficking networks. Morocco remains a transit country for mixed movements while gradually becoming a destination for refugees and asylum-seekers. In 2021, UNHCR will work with partners to ensure continued access to international protection for persons of concern in Morocco, while strengthening the capacity of national institutions and civil society for a gradual transfer of responsibility.

Gulf Cooperation Council

In 2020, UNHCR continued its resource mobilization efforts across the Gulf Cooperation Council region, raising \$129 million. Moreover, the “Refugee Zakat Fund” raised a record \$130 million, allowing UNHCR to support more vulnerable refugee and IDP families primarily through cash assistance.

Israel

Israel hosts some 56,500 adult refugees and asylum-seekers, as well as an estimated 8,500 children, the majority of whom were born in the country. UNHCR continued to advocate fair and efficient asylum procedures, access to public services and enhanced livelihood opportunities. The COVID-19 pandemic severely impacted persons of concern, with an estimated 70 per cent losing their sources of income. In 2020, developing a comprehensive framework for durable solutions will remain a priority for UNHCR.

Yemen

Yemen remained the largest humanitarian crisis globally, with over 24 million people in need of assistance. The conflict continued to drive internal displacement, while the blockade and the drop in remittances aggravated poverty and food insecurity. In 2020, some 1.3 million IDPs and over 40,000 refugees received \$57 million in cash assistance. UNHCR also distributed non-food items and emergency shelter kits, and operated eight community centres to provide protection services and assistance.

In 2021, UNHCR aims to resume registrations and to implement a limited set of durable solutions. The Office will maintain its Assisted Spontaneous Return programme for Somalis subject to health and security conditions. To address the needs of people in protracted internal displacement situations, UNHCR will enhance protection, including through providing case management services for children and survivors of gender-based violence, legal counselling and cash assistance, in addition to specialized services.

Mixed and onwards movements

Movements to Europe continued, with over 95,000 people reaching Europe by sea and land in 2020 and some 10,000 in the first two months of 2021. Nearly 500 people were reported missing or dead at sea. Increased departures from Libya and Tunisia towards Italy, and from Mauritania and Morocco to Spain continued. Over 300 individuals crossed the sea from Lebanon to Cyprus. Movement restrictions related to COVID-19 and tightened border management measures reduced access to safety and protection and caused delays in disembarkations; the number of individuals reaching Yemen by crossing the Red Sea decreased by over 70 per cent compared to the same period in 2019 (from 127,000 to 37,000). Risks related to trafficking and smuggling, and access to safety during disembarkation remain a concern. Coordination among governments and other actors is required to ensure protection and predictable rescue and disembarkation procedures. In a [position](#), UNHCR reiterated that

Libya did not meet the criteria for being designated as a place of safety for the purpose of disembarkation following rescue at sea.

The Office strengthened efforts to uphold the principle of non-refoulement, identify alternatives to detention and improve coordination on disembarkation procedures. A blended learning programme on the prevention and response to trafficking and smuggling was launched for UNHCR staff and partners. Efforts on monitoring detention and assisting individuals in need of international protection were strengthened.

B. Progress and challenges in achieving the global strategic priorities

Creating a favourable protection environment

Despite restrictions related to COVID-19, over 118,700 individuals in the region have newly registered with UNHCR since January 2020. UNHCR's remote modalities have enabled the continued processing of asylum applications and access to solutions, while helping ensure data protection.

The Office provided support to governments in the region to mitigate the impact of COVID-19 on stateless persons and those at risk of statelessness. Measures are underway, in collaboration with 3RP partners, to reduce the number of Syrian refugee children without identity documents. UNHCR will also strengthen collaboration with the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation on the reduction of statelessness including through organizing a roundtable on this subject.

School closures due to COVID-19 impacted some 2.2 million school-aged refugee children in the region, many of whom are at risk of dropping out as a result of learning loss, protection issues and economic pressures. A significant number of children, adolescents and youth had limited or no access to distance education due to a lack of internet connection, equipment and support services. The suspension of school meal programmes also affected children's nutrition and health, especially those from marginalized backgrounds. These challenges continue to adversely impact students in the new academic year.

UNHCR supported sustained access to education for refugee and other displaced children and youth. The COVID-19 situation forced the change of education systems to a blended learning approach. UNHCR and partners supported return to schooling including through the "Framework for reopening schools" and the regional "Back to learning" initiative, consistent with public health protocols and coordinated through the Ministries of Education.

UNHCR and partners assisted 5.2 million persons of concern and other affected communities through in-person and remote arrangements. Over 900 community centres remained largely open during the pandemic. Community-led initiatives, targeted visits and digital communication tools were expanded to reach the most vulnerable people. More than 24,700 outreach volunteers and over 66,000 visits helped support families in remote areas and people with specific needs. New call centres, hotlines and social media groups were created to facilitate COVID-19 risk communication and ensure the continuation of registration, refugee status determination and other life-saving services.

To improve accountability to affected populations, UNHCR advanced the inclusion of people with disabilities in programming guided by its [study](#) on the effectiveness of protection responses for this population in the region.

In response to growing mental health and psychosocial needs due to COVID-19, UNHCR strengthened technical support to country operations and organized various trainings, including on mental health and psychosocial support for protection teams and partners. An action plan on suicide prevention was also put in place for 2021. UNHCR enhanced contributions to the evidence base and technical expertise on mental health and psychosocial

support at the regional level. Under the “no lost generation” initiative, the Office contributed to a mapping survey on mental health and psychosocial support aimed at strengthening advocacy efforts in this area. The League of Arab States welcomed UNHCR’s technical guidance on addressing the mental health and psychosocial needs of displaced children.

Ensuring protection from violence and exploitation

Gender-based violence prevention, risk mitigation and response remain a priority in the region. Between January and September 2020, some 143,250 survivors and people at risk, including boys and men, benefited from multisectoral services through the 3RP response. Operations adapted activities to maintain services during COVID-19 including through online awareness campaigns, hotlines for reporting incidents and remote case management. Following the launch of UNHCR’s [“Policy on the prevention of, risk mitigation and response to gender-based violence”](#), regional multi-functional teams and operations in Algeria, Egypt, the Syrian Arab Republic and Yemen received funding through the “Safe from the Start” initiative to implement multisectoral projects on prevention, risk mitigation and response in refugee and IDP contexts. An operational review to strengthen gender equality in Egypt, Jordan and Lebanon was completed. Operations received trainings on the new policy, as well as UNHCR’s gender equality toolkit and the Inter-Agency Standing Committee gender with age marker tool to further advance the integration of gender equality measures across diverse age groups in programming.

New procedures and resources on protecting populations from sexual exploitation and abuse were launched. This was complemented by a webinar to introduce the new [“Policy on a victim-centred approach in UNHCR’s response to sexual misconduct”](#) and to provide support on incorporating protection from sexual exploitation and abuse in the 2021 planning and in procedures for the selection and retention of partners.

From January to September 2020, over 116,900 girls and boys benefited from specialized child protection services through the 3RP response. More than 92,000 children participated in structured child protection and psychosocial support programmes, and 52,000 women and men benefited from parenting support. UNHCR strengthened capacity-building to ensure that protection interventions are child-friendly and prioritize the best interests of the child. Peer-to-peer child protection trainings expanded geographic coverage and engaged national actors. Child protection activities were adjusted due to COVID-19 to facilitate remote case management including through digital platforms and hotlines.

Recognizing the link between socioeconomic vulnerability and child protection risks, UNHCR produced a regional analysis with summaries from key 3RP countries (Egypt, Jordan and Lebanon), examining the impact of cash-based interventions on mitigating child protection risks.

Collaborations with the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) and the International Organization on Migration (IOM) advanced through the “Blueprint for joint action for refugee children” and an inter-agency survey on child protection and mixed movements.

Achieving durable solutions

Prior to COVID-19, an estimated 670,000 people in the region and Turkey were in need of resettlement in 2020, and the pandemic exacerbating existing vulnerability and protection concerns. UNHCR advocated the expansion of resettlement places during the Annual Tripartite Consultations on Resettlement and the meetings of the priority situations core group.

Despite heightened challenges, UNHCR and partners proposed some 23,000 refugees from the region for resettlement in 2020. The remote processing arrangements, which will be

maintained in 2021, helped increase procedural integrity, as well as the safety of refugees, UNHCR staff and host communities.

Existing complementary pathway programmes continued and new ones were established, including third-country scholarships. Partnerships were expanded to increase access to family reunification. The newly established regional contact group for complementary pathways has been instrumental in advancing this work, with over 70 representatives from resettlement States, complementary pathway programmes, research organizations and UNHCR operations sharing information and collaborating on advocacy efforts.

Between 2016 and 2020, over a quarter of a million Syrian refugees returned home. The COVID-19 crisis caused a reduction in returns, with some 38,000 Syrian refugees returning in 2020, a 60 per cent decrease compared to 2019. Nevertheless, a growing number of refugees are expected to return over the long term. With this in mind, UNHCR and partners strengthened preparedness and planning for returns, guided by the [Comprehensive Protection and Solutions Strategy](#) and the Global Compact on Refugees (GCR). In the Syrian Arab Republic, the Office provides returning refugees and other vulnerable populations with humanitarian assistance and other services through a network of community centres. In parallel, dialogue is underway with the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic and other stakeholders to address obstacles to voluntary return, such as concerns about access to humanitarian assistance.

Mobilizing support through strategic partnerships

UNHCR continued to strengthen strategic partnerships with local stakeholders to promote the inclusion of refugees in strategic planning and operations, including COVID-19 recovery plans. In this context, the Civil Society Network for Displacement and other partners provided support including through holding virtual dialogues on COVID-19 responses and civil society engagement in displacement-related policies.

In follow-up to the GCR and the Global Refugee Forum, UNHCR supported the matching of pledges and advocated with countries and partners in the region to align their priorities with the objectives of the GCR. Collaboration with academia deepened to improve data on the impact of displacement on refugees, as well as on the dynamics of protracted refugee situations in the region. UNHCR also extended support to the Arabic journal on displacement and its online platform.

The Office began implementing a plan to engage with cities in the Mediterranean region aimed at promoting the inclusion of refugees in policy development and responses. Engagement with private sector continued with a view to support economies in the region in ways that are inclusive of refugees, particularly in the context of COVID-19.

C. Financial information

The initial 2021 budget of \$2.6 billion for the region is marginally higher than the 2020 initial budget of \$2.6 billion, representing a less-than-1 per cent increase.

As at February 2021, some 9 per cent of the region's 2021 financial requirements are funded taking into consideration the indicative allocation of unearmarked and softly earmarked contributions.