UNHCR
The UN Refugee Agency

FACTSHEET

Legal Aid in Syria

January-December 2024

334,903

Internally displaced persons (IDPs), returnees and host community members benefited from UNHCR's legal aid programme

175,534 individuals reached through awareness-raising on legal matters

110,515 individuals received legal counselling

48,854 individuals benefited from interventions before courts and administrative bodies

6,794 Refugees and asylum-seekers benefited from UNHCR's legal aid

IMPACT OF LEGAL INTERVENTIONS

**BEFORE COURTS AND ADMINISTRATIVE BODIES*

20,813 individuals assisted in obtaining national identity cards

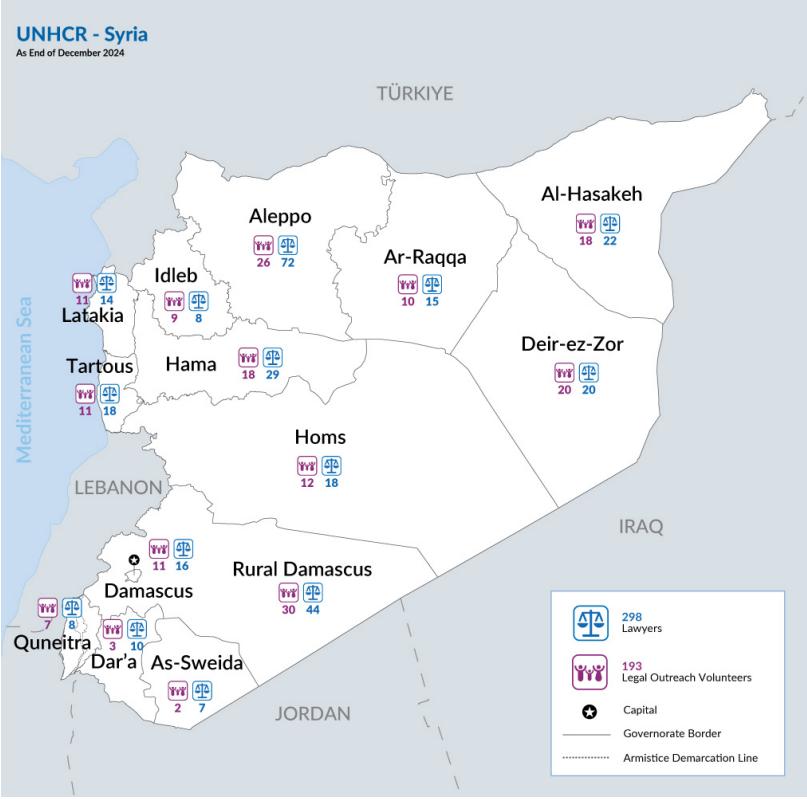
7,480 marriage events documented through courts

2,047 individuals assisted in obtaining family booklets

5,646 children assisted to be officially registered and obtained birth certificates

Legal services are provided in all **14** governorates, through UNHCR-supported community centres, mobile teams and partners' legal clinics. UNHCR also supports seven legal offices operated by legal partners in Damascus, Al-Hasakeh, Deir-ez-Zor, Aleppo and Hama Governorates.

Legal teams consist of **298** experienced lawyers who work closely with **193** legal outreach volunteers (ORVs). Legal ORVs include law students, trainee lawyers and senior lawyers - often members of the targeted communities - who voluntarily support the legal teams in disseminating information on available legal services and identifying and referring individuals in need of legal assistance.

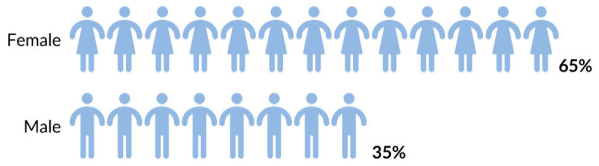


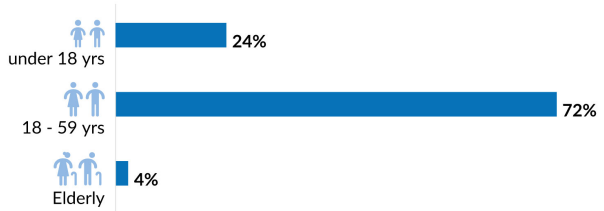
Legal assistance for IDPs, returnees and communities

By the end of 2024, UNHCR, through its partners, the Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC) and Syrian Development Organization, provided legal assistance to **334,903** vulnerable individuals among IDPs, returnees, and host communities. These are identified in need of legal support on the following legal matters:

- **Documenting vital events** such as births, marriages, divorces, and deaths;
- **Obtaining personal civil documentation,** including but not limited to identity cards, family booklets, and civil status extracts;
- **Supporting the attaining of housing, land, and property (HLP) rights** by facilitating the issuance of HLP documents;
- **Responding to protection risks encountered by most vulnerable individuals with a focus on women and children,** including risks arising from gender-based violence and custody, alimony, and inheritance disputes.

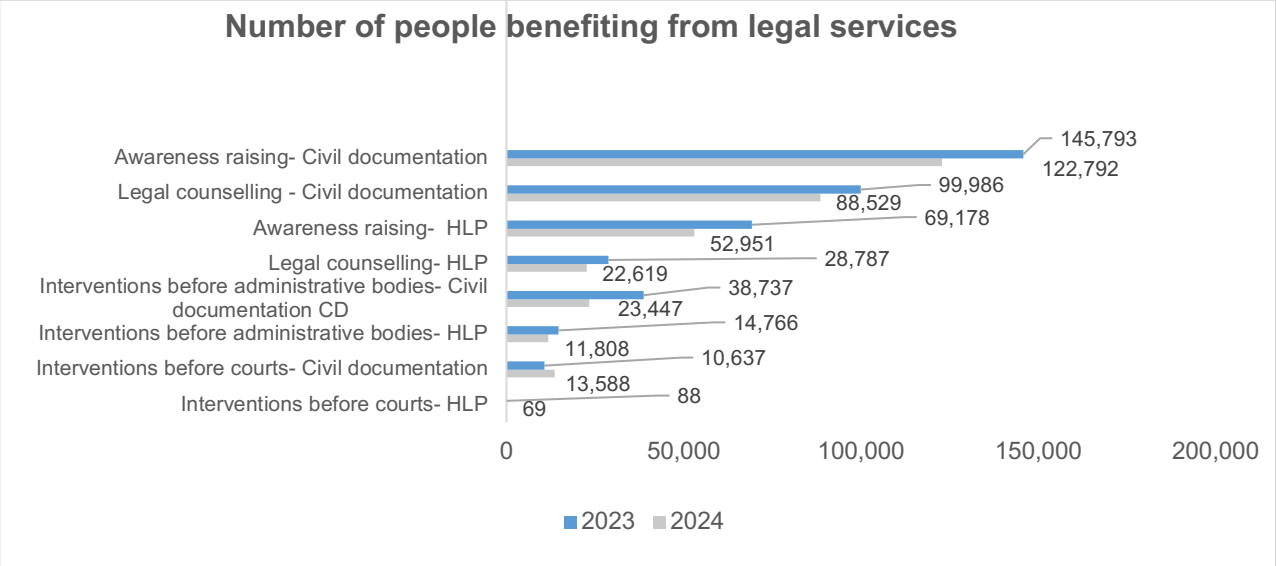
Gender and age disaggregation data indicate that 65% of the population who benefited from legal aid were females, while 35% were males.





Legal assistance includes individual **legal counselling, group legal awareness-raising** sessions, and **legal interventions and representation** before courts and other governmental administrative bodies, which provide legal-related services to people whom UNHCR is mandated to serve when having protection concerns to access their rights, such as the right to obtain nationality, access to justice, and housing, land and property rights.

The number of people benefiting from each type of legal assistance – to address civil or HLP documentation matters– is as follows:



Despite the expansion of legal assistance activities in 2024 to cover new districts throughout the country, such as Khan El Shih, Zebdeen and Al Shefonieh in Rural Damascus, and villages in Tartous and Latakia (Al-Tamima, Al-Midan, Beit Awan and Beit Halibiyah), the number of beneficiaries who were reached with legal services in 2024 have slightly decreased by 16% as compared to 2023 (where 400,000 individuals were reached). This is a result of a stricter and more complex application of consular fees – unlike in 2023 – along with an increase in the costs (from US$25 to US$50), which is now mandatory for registering events that were documented abroad but were not certified by the Syrian diplomatic missions.

These factors have constituted additional obstacles for Syrians, including returnees, and UNHCR's legal partners in processing interventions such as documentation of personal status events.
The Lebanon influx, along with the volatile security situation in Syria, and the forced suspension of legal activities as well as public institutions following the fall of the Assad regime on 8 of December 2024, have had an adverse impact on regular legal activities as well as overall humanitarian response in Syria.

Legal assistance for refugees and asylum-seekers

By the end of 2024, UNHCR provided legal assistance to ***6,794*** refugees and asylum-seekers on various legal matters.

UNHCR and legal teams provide legal assistance to refugees and asylum-seekers in Syria with an aim to:

- Intervene to halt **refoulement** for concerned individuals at risk of deportation;
- Support refugees and asylum-seekers in relation to **immigration matters**, including obtaining and renewing residency permits and acquiring exit visas;
- **Document vital events** for displaced and returnees, such as births, marriages, divorces, and deaths that occur inside and outside Syria;
- **Respond to protection risks encountered by vulnerable individuals with a focus on women and children,** including issues related to gender-based violence and best interest determination (BID) of unaccompanied and separated children.

Restoring capacities of national institutions

Civil documentation is essential for individuals in Syria to enjoy basic rights such as freedom of movement, access to education, health and livelihoods, and the facilitation of the return of Syrian displaced people. In efforts to enhance the capacities of relevant public institutions to issue documentation, UNHCR supports relevant departments such as civil registries, citizen service centres and immigration departments. Moreover, in 2024, UNHCR enhanced its support to include cadastral offices, aiming at enhancing access to HLP rights through facilitated issuance of HLP documents, and documenting HLP transactions.

Since 2017, UNHCR has supported **122** public institutions through rehabilitation, technical support, furniture, and solar panels. By the end of December 2024, the Directorate of Civil Affairs and the General Directorate of Cadastral Affairs reported that **3,463,358 civil and HLP documents were successfully obtained by Syrian citizens** across the country. Of this figure, **3,221,855** were civil documents, including birth certificates, identity cards and family booklets, while **241,503** were real estate documents, such as ownership and real estate records.

In 2024, UNHCR planned to provide support to **56 national facilities** through rehabilitation and/or provision of solar kits, technical equipment and furniture items.

However, due to the deterioration of the security situation in the country following the fall of the Assad regime and the subsequent incidents, only **nine public institutions were assisted; 30** projects are still ongoing, while the remaining ones were postponed or cancelled due to funding shortfalls.

Prefabricated unit of Civil Registry installed and equipped by UNHCR in Talddu, Homs ©UNHCR

Throughout 2024, field teams conducted monitoring visits to some UNHCR-supported institutions to verify the implemented project's quality and functionality. For instance, the teams visited the Talddu Civil Registry in Homs, which was supported by UNHCR in 2023 with the provision of prefabs and equipment. This registry serves around 500 people daily, providing essential services related to civil documentation. Due to its strategic location, neighbouring town residents can also benefit from the supported unit.

Legal assistance during national exams

Prior to the fall of the Assad regime, UNHCR's legal partners, SARC and Syria Trust - in coordination with the Ministry of Education and the Directorate of Civil Affairs - provided legal assistance to thousands of students who arrived from areas out of governmental control and Lebanon to sit their 9th and 12th grades national exams. The legal response covered Aleppo, Ar-Raqqa, Rural Damascus and Deir-ez-Zor Governorates - which received the highest number of students.

In 2024, over **11,000** students received legal counselling, and **6,000** attended legal awareness sessions, focusing on the importance of civil documentation. Out of **6,259** students who were supported to apply for their national IDs, **5,488** received them, while the remaining cases could not receive their IDs due to various reasons such as failing to collect the IDs, and proof of military service by male students over 18 years old – prior to the collapse of regime.

Students' response in Aleppo Governorate by SARC legal team. ©SARC

Students' response in Aleppo Governorate by the Syria Trust legal team. ©Syria Trust

Legal response during the Lebanese crisis:

The escalation of hostilities in Lebanon in late September 2024 resulted in an influx of Syrian and Lebanese arrivals into Syria. To respond to the urgent needs at the Syrian borders, UNHCR established a daily presence at its border health-protection support points, in cooperation with the Syrian Ministry of Interior/Directorate of Immigration and Passports. UNHCR's legal partners also maintained a presence at the crossing points to ensure that new arrivals were provided with legal assistance.

By the end of December 2024, some 58,700 legal services were provided at the Syrian border crossings with Lebanon to Syrians, Lebanese and other arrivals on issues related to civil documentation, access to territory, and settling legal status, in addition to different legal matters. Despite protection risks that the Syrian returnees encountered when entering the country, however, as a result of UNHCR advocacy, they were permitted entry upon handling their protection concerns, which they encountered at the borders on issues such as the 100$ exchange requirement, military service, security constraints, arrest warrant based on court cases, or other administrative procedures that existed against the considerable number of returnees. Further follow-up was initiated by the legal teams in the areas of return where the needed legal assistance was provided.

Legal advocacy:

UNHCR successfully advocated with the Ministry of Interior regarding several challenges encountered by Syrian returnees as well as refugees and asylum-seekers as per the below:

Syrian returnees and IDPs

UNHCR advocated with the concerned authorities to find solutions for Syrian returnees and IDPs, including consular fees and fines imposed for the delayed registration of civil events, as well as the mandatory US$ 100 currency exchange at the borders. These constituted financial burdens for many Syrians who were crossing to Syria from Lebanon.

As a result, fines for delayed documentation of personal events, along with the mandatory US$ 100 currency exchange requirement, were waived. The exchange requirement was initially suspended by the Syrian Cabinet until early December 2024 and was later fully rescinded following the collapse of the regime.

UNHCR also advocated for vulnerable individuals whose documentation of events occurred abroad - such as marriages and new births - and were required to pay a consular fee. Advocacy efforts and solutions were identified, including representation before administrative bodies, which resulted in the Directorate of Civil Affairs waiving the required fees.

Refugees and asylum-seekers:

Advocacy efforts also encompassed support to refugees and asylum-seekers with expired residency permits and the extension of short-stay residencies provided to Iraqi refugees and asylum-seekers residing in north-east Syria. Also, UNHCR advocated for Palestinians from Iraq to obtain an annual residency instead of the 3–6 validity of residency permit that was given to them. These efforts by UNHCR and its legal partners aimed to ease burdens on vulnerable individuals resulting from repeated visits to the immigration offices to submit renewal requirements.

Finally, following the issuance of the Amnesty Decree 27 of 2024, which pardoned many offences committed prior to its issuance, UNHCR successfully advocated with the Immigration Directorate to remove fines and prison sentences for refugees and asylum-seekers who overstayed their residency or entered the country illegally. As a result of this waiver, and upon conducting awareness-raising campaigns to relevant communities urging them to legalize their status, over 430 individuals were able to regularize their residency without paying fines or facing jail.

Capacity building activities:

In 2024, UNHCR and its legal partners targeted partner lawyers, particularly the newly recruited ones, and the legal outreach volunteers, with capacity-building activities which focused on voluntary return, international protection and legal response. These aimed to enhance partner capacities on UNHCR's role in return, conditions of return, potential challenges, the key humanitarian principles, refugee rights and obligations in the country of asylum, durable solutions, and the challenges that might affect the return of refugees and internally displaced. The capacity-building activities also highlighted the best practices and solutions governments can adopt to strengthen international protection, thus creating a conducive protection environment for return in Syria.

Workshop on return for partners lawyers. ©Legal unit/ UNHCR

In efforts to develop effective strategies for refugee protection and identify appropriate solutions for Syrian refugees and stateless individuals, UNHCR has provided capacity-building support to government officials and NGOs. This support aims to enhance their understanding of the international legal framework governing refugee protection, statelessness, and the relevant laws and resolutions.