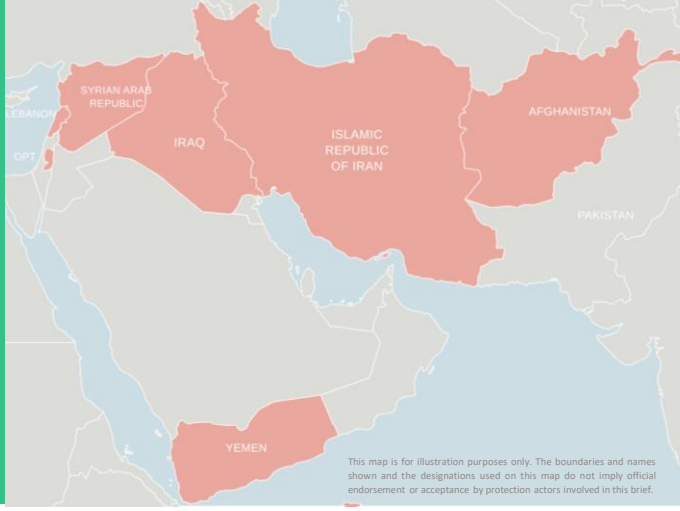
Inter-Agency Protection Advocacy Brief

Conflict Escalation in the Middle East and Beyond

28 February– 31 August 2026



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This brief is intended for States, policymakers and advocates working to protect the rights of populations affected by ongoing armed conflict in the Middle East. While cross-population in scope, it pays particular attention to internally displaced persons, refugees, migrants and returnees, reflecting the central role of forced displacement, migration and return dynamics in shaping protection risks faced by women, girls, men and boys across the region. It aims to highlight the most critical emerging or exacerbated protection risks, promote evidence-based support to specialised operational response, and support humanitarian diplomacy and advocacy to prevent further harm and strengthen protection outcomes.

01 · ADVOCACY MESSAGES

Parties to Conflict:

Protect civilians and civilian infrastructure: cease unlawful attacks on civilians, homes, schools, health facilities, water, energy and communications infrastructure, respecting international humanitarian law (IHL) in the conduct of hostilities, including when using new technologies in warfare, and international human rights law (IHRL), and **enforcing accountability mechanisms** through ensuring prompt, independent, impartial and transparent investigations into alleged violations of IHL and IHRL.

All Member States:

Redouble efforts to ensure respect for IHL and IHRL and promote accountability and compliance by all parties to the conflict. Adopt procedures and policies that reduce civilian harm and share good practices, including in the use of new technologies in warfare and by restricting or refraining from the use of **explosive weapons in populated areas** (EWIPA)**.** Endorse and implement the EWIPA Political Declaration.

Uphold admission to territory, access to asylum and protection against refoulement for all individuals in need of international protection**,** including through fair and efficient asylum procedures. Suspend forcible returns and deportations where conditions do not permit safe and dignified return while protection risks remain.

Strengthen protection-sensitive border and mobility responses including through adequate reception capacity, prevention of family separation, information provision in relevant languages, protection screening, and referral pathways for people at heightened risk, including GBV survivors, unaccompanied and separated children and trafficking victims.

Safeguard legal identity and uphold access to rights and remedies by expanding access to civil documentation and birth registration, facilitating legal stay and regularisation pathways, expanding housing, land and property (HLP) support, legal assistance and access to justice, including at borders and in areas of return and reintegration.

Member States, Donors, Humanitarian & Development Partners:

Place protection at the centre of humanitarian and development response by scaling up, restoring and sustaining flexible funding for life-saving protection services, including Gender Based Violence (GBV), Child Protection (CP), mine action, and legal assistance and by supporting inclusive national systems. Mainstream protection-sensitive measures across all sectors, promoting non-discriminatory access to assistance and services, and ensuring responses are safe, accessible and accountable to all affected populations.

Support strengthening inclusive, shock-resilient national protection and social protection systems to ensure equitable access to services, assistance and referral pathways for forcibly displaced people, returnees, migrants and host communities.

Ensure direct, flexible and predictable funding to local protection actors, including women-led organizations and other community-based protection structures, as direct first responders for at-risk groups affected by the situation.

Support conditions for voluntary, safe, dignified and sustainable returns by ensuring that returns are driven by informed and genuine choice and not by coercion, insecurity, deprivation of or restrictions on legal stay, withdrawal of services or arbitrary security practices. Invest in reception, reintegration, civil documentation, HLP support, mine action, livelihoods and essential services to enable sustainable reintegration in areas of return.

Scope and Methodology

This brief provides an inter-agency protection analysis of the consequences of the escalation of hostilities across the Middle East since 28 February 2026 for populations affected directly or indirectly by the hostilities. It builds on and complements the earlier Interagency Refugee Protection Overview, and adopts a cross-population lens, examining risks affecting refugees and asylum seekers, internally displaced people (IDPs), returnees, migrants, stateless persons, and host communities.

The analysis focuses on protection risks faced by populations in countries directly affected by the escalation in conflict – **Iran, Iraq, Lebanon, Syria** and **Yemen.** Alongside Syria, it also covers **Afghanistan** as countries affected by significant population movements (arrival and return) linked to the current situation. In addition, returns from **Pakistan** to Afghanistan are referenced.

While **hostilities have affected civilian populations and infrastructure across a broader range of countries in the region**, the above contexts have been prioritised due to the magnitude of the crises, the severity of protection needs and the operational presence of established inter-agency protection mechanisms in support to the affected countries. Given the scale and complexity, protection issues related to conflict in the **Occupied Palestinian Territory (OPT)** are presented separately in a dedicated section on Page 3.

Using an adapted version of the Global Protection Cluster's Protection Analytical Framework alongside monitoring and analysis gathered by protection partners through a variety of other tools, this brief identifies priority protection risks, existing capacities and key response gaps. Wider indirect regional impact on vulnerable populations and national protection systems is also noted.

02 · CROSS-REGIONAL SITUATION & PROTECTION CONTEXT

Since the escalation of hostilities on 28 February 2026, the wider Middle East has entered a period of heightened insecurity, regional volatility and a deterioration of civilian safety and protection conditions. While the situation has not resulted in large-scale refugee outflows, its consequences have extended well beyond the countries directly affected by the conflict and further expanded in the last months. Violence, significant internal displacement and other population movement, including of persons in need of international protection, have directly or indirectly affected most countries across the region, compounded by economic disruption and heightened security measures. This has had significant consequences for civilians, including the millions of refugees, internally displaced and stateless persons already living in situations of displacement before the escalation.

Despite the visible scale and recurrence of civilian harm, there remain profound gaps in ensuring respect for International Humanitarian Law (IHL) and accountability for violations. In **Iran** and **Lebanon**, the widespread use of explosive weapons in populated areas has caused large-scale civilian casualties, displacement and devastating damage to homes, schools, health facilities, water systems and other civilian infrastructure, driving acute protection risks and long-term consequences for recovery and access to essential services. In **Lebanon**, the ongoing conflict, characterised by continuous attacks and demolition operations of entire villages, are preventing many Lebanese, migrants, Syrian and Palestinian refugees from accessing their houses or temporarily or permanently returning to their homes. Conflict has also affected civilians in **Iraq** and **Yemen**, contributing to renewed insecurity and protection risks, and jeopardizing ongoing paths to stability or arduously negotiated truces. Wider **regional** repercussions have included renewed insecurity, disrupted livelihoods, economic pressures and growing constraints on national systems. At the same time, large-scale returns to **Syria** and **Afghanistan**, while each driven by distinct dynamics, are presenting persistent challenges related to security, housing availability, retrieval of personal documentation, access to services and livelihoods opportunities.

Lebanon ©UNICEF/Choufany

Across the region, protection actors report increasing risks linked to attacks affecting civilians and civilian infrastructure, internal displacement, refugee movements, complex migration flows, returns in adverse circumstances, explosive ordnance contamination, restrictions on movement, loss of documentation and legal status, and growing barriers to accessing services, assistance and livelihoods.

As detailed in this document, these risks are further exacerbated by discrimination, exclusion, gender inequality and shrinking protection space, with women, children, older persons, persons with disabilities and individuals lacking documentation or legal status often disproportionately affected. Repeated displacement, family separation, disruption of education and essential services, and prolonged exposure to violence and uncertainty are also generating significant psychosocial distress and increased demand for mental health and psychosocial support. In many contexts, women and girls often face additional barriers to safe mobility, access to livelihoods, services and participation in decisions affecting their lives, highlighting a strong relationship between socioeconomic vulnerability and protection risks.

Significant protection risks are increasingly driven not only by conflict itself, but also by the erosion of **social, economic and institutional coping capacities**. Many countries across the region were already managing protracted displacement situations, strained public services and fragile recovery processes prior to the current escalation. Economic shocks associated with the conflict, including disrupted trade, inflationary pressures and fiscal constraints, are further weakening governments' ability to sustain national protection and social protection systems. In many contexts, worsening socio-economic conditions are emerging as significant drivers of coping strategies that increase harm or threaten life, reduced self-reliance and increased pressure to return or move onwards under unsafe circumstances.

Across several contexts, economic pressures, insecurity and strained public systems are contributing to **restrictive legal and policy environments for non-nationals**, including barriers to access to asylum systems, to legal stay and documentation renewal processes, to inclusion in national services and to access to labour markets. Loss, expiry or non-renewal of legal stay and other personal documentation remain a key protection concern, undermining access to rights, services, remedies and durable solutions.

Protection Risks in the Occupied Palestinian Territory (OPT)

The escalation of hostilities across the wider region has generated **additional protection concerns in the Occupied Palestinian Territory (OPT).** The effects were significant, with the most pronounced impact occurring during the initial phase of the conflict escalation. In the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, people were killed and homes and vehicles damaged by falling munitions and debris linked to missile attacks and interceptions. In Gaza, the escalation also prompted temporary measures by the Israeli authorities, including the closure of all crossings, suspension of humanitarian movements in and around areas of military deployment, postponement of international staff rotations, and the suspension of medical evacuations and returns into Gaza. While the regional conflict escalation has had an additional impact, it is **not the primary driver of current protection risks in the OPT and does not define broader protection trends**. Given the scale and complexity of protection risks in the OPT, and the distinct drivers underpinning them, the OPT is addressed separately in this brief. This should not be interpreted as a reduction in the severity of protection risks facing Palestinians, which remain acute and widespread.

Palestinians continue to face severe and systemic protection risks in the context of the **prolonged Israeli occupation and associated policies and practices**. In **Gaza**, more than 11 months after the October 2025 ceasefire was announced, civilians continue to be killed and injured, while protracted displacement, displacement orders, extensive destruction of homes and civilian infrastructure, restrictions on movement and humanitarian access, and severe constraints on access to essential services continue to expose civilians to significant protection risks. In the **West Bank**, including East Jerusalem, militarized operations by Israeli forces, escalating settler violence, demolitions and displacement, settlement expansion, and extensive restrictions on Palestinian movement continue to drive protection risks and humanitarian needs, including by forcibly displacing Palestinian communities and restricting access to land, livelihoods and essential services. Across the OPT, operational constraints and bureaucratic impediments imposed by Israeli authorities, including movement restrictions, permit and visa limitations, checkpoint regimes, and administrative burdens, significantly reduce humanitarian actors' ability to reach vulnerable communities, deliver services, and maintain a protective presence. This includes heavily constrained and unpredictable entry of supplies to Gaza and limitations on the entry of critical items. These measures also limit access to legal, psychosocial, and other protection services, and contribute to a coercive environment that heightens protection risks for affected populations.

These interconnected concerns have characterized the protection environment for decades but have intensified significantly since October 2023. The protection environment remains highly fragile and susceptible to shifts in the broader regional context, as well as to political and security developments that may further exacerbate existing protection risks and humanitarian needs. Protection of civilians and civilian infrastructure, respect for international humanitarian law, and safe, sustained and unimpeded humanitarian access remain critical across the OPT. For further analysis, see resources produced by OHCHR, OCHA, UNRWA and UNFPA including through the Protection Cluster in the OPT.

03 · CROSS-REGIONAL EMERGING PROTECTION RISKS

The following identified protection risks have been prioritized using an adapted version of the Global Protection Cluster's Protection Analytical Framework, as well as drawing on protection monitoring and analysis tools by partners working with affected populations.

Attacks on civilians and civilian objects

Attacks on civilians and civilian objects, including the use of new warfare technologies and of explosive weapons in populated areas, have resulted in significant casualties, injury, displacement, destruction of homes and civilian infrastructure, and disruption of essential services across **Lebanon** and **Iran**, as well as in **Yemen**, **Syria** and **Iraq**. Women, children, older persons, persons with disabilities, IDPs, refugees, and migrants are disproportionately affected as damage to health facilities, schools, water systems and other civilian infrastructure limits access to healthcare, education, protection services and livelihoods.

In **Lebanon**, military operations by Israel have persisted after the ceasefire of April 2026, causing extensive civilian casualties and destruction particularly affecting areas in the South. Attacks on healthcare facilities have damaged or closed hospitals and primary healthcare centres, killed health workers, and significantly reduced access to maternal, newborn and Gender Based Violence specialised services. Infrastructure damage and insecurity have also forced Women and Girls Safe Spaces and other community centres to close, critically isolating survivors and limiting access to life-saving GBV response and other protection services. Recent monitoring indicates that over 84 per cent of schools in several districts in the South have been destroyed. Return is not possible in most affected areas due to ongoing conflict, shelling, and demolition operations, while explosive remnants of war further hinder recovery.

In **Iran**, strikes caused civilian causalities, injuries, and damage to critical infrastructure including more than 120,000 residential units, hospitals and schools, particularly affecting women, children and rural border communities, On 28 February 2026, on the first day of the recent escalation, 168 students were reportedly killed when a strike hit their primary school.

In **Iraq**, drone strikes targeting sites associated with Iranian opposition-aligned armed groups triggered repeated displacement for Iranian refugees residing in settlements, while insecurity and movement restrictions continue to disrupt access to health and child protection services. In **Syria**, strikes, shelling and missiles debris have continued to affect civilians and damage infrastructure, further undermining conditions for safe return and sustainable reintegration. In **Yemen**, more than 800 civilian casualties have been reported in 2026 alone, reflecting a continued pattern of non-compliance with the principle of distinction under IHL. The renewed conflict has further exacerbated risks for Yemenis, IDPs, migrants and refugees alike, including reports of strikes close to camps hosting thousands of displaced Yemenis, exposing already vulnerable populations to risks of death, injury, psychological distress, and renewed displacement.

> *I became a displaced person and a responder at the same time. I am supporting women during the day while trying to figure out where my own family will stay.*
>
> — Displaced caseworker, Lebanon

3,375
people killed and **33,806** injured in **Iran** (as of 11 June)

4,335 (incl. 391 women)
people killed and **12,277** injured in **Lebanon** including **253** children killed and **1,037** children injured

Mental health and psychosocial support needs

Mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) needs continue to outpace available services and remain chronically under-resourced. Across contexts, girls, boys, women and men all report increasing levels of anxiety, grief, hopelessness and emotional exhaustion linked to repeated displacement, separation from family members, destruction of homes, economic hardship and uncertainty about the future. In **Lebanon**, displaced families describe exhaustion and despair after multiple waves of displacement, including from sudden displacement orders. In **Syria** and **Afghanistan**, distress is closely linked to trauma and loss experienced during the crisis and displacement, as well as challenges associated with return and reintegration, while in **Iran, Pakistan** and **Afghanistan** it is further compounded by insecurity and uncertainty surrounding the modalities of return and documentation concerns.

In **Yemen**, years of conflict combined with renewed hostilities continue to place a heavy psychological burden on affected communities. In **Iraq**, gaps in MHPSS persist for IDPs, migrants, refugees and host communities, while protection monitoring conducted between May and August found that many refugees face emotional distress and trauma associated with the psychological impact of conflict, prolonged displacement and uncertainty. When left unaddressed, psychological distress can become a barrier to recovery and durable solutions, affecting people's ability to access opportunities, rebuild social and economic ties, sustain livelihoods, and successfully reintegrate following displacement or return. Despite growing needs, many people remain unable to access adequate MHPSS services and support.

Restricted movement, internal displacement, refugee movements and return under adverse circumstances

Conflict dynamics, particularly in **Lebanon** and **Iran**, have triggered large-scale displacement and population movements. Ongoing hostilities and associated insecurity, alongside conflict-related movement restrictions such as checkpoints, curfews, displacement orders, identity checks, and administrative barriers, have constrained civilians' ability to move safely, access essential services, and maintain family and community connections.

Deteriorating security conditions and limited alternatives have also prompted returns under adverse circumstances and onward movements. In **Iran**, most temporarily relocated individuals have returned to their areas of habitual residence, while large-scale returns of Afghans including refugees from **Iran** and **Pakistan** continue. Many returns are taking place under involuntary circumstances, into conditions that heighten protection risks and overwhelm reception capacities in **Afghanistan**.

Within **Lebanon** although more than 830,000 internally displaced people have reportedly returned to the south of the country, over 300,000 remain displaced and unable to return to their homes and communities due to continuous conflict, attacks and demolitions, extensive debris, insecurity, and widespread damage to homes and civilian infrastructure. An estimated 136,000 Syrian refugees have been secondarily displaced due to the hostilities (with 42 per cent remaining displaced by the end of June), impacted by expensive and exploitative rental practices and limited housing options.

The escalating hostilities, insecurity, and deteriorating living conditions in **Lebanon** have contributed to the return of Syrians under force majeure to **Syria**, alongside Lebanese who crossed the border, fleeing intense bombardment. Many returning Syrians face significant challenges upon arrival, including damaged infrastructure, explosive ordnance contamination, limited access to basic services, and housing and civil documentation issues.

In **Iraq**, insecurity has adversely affected internally displaced populations, refugees, asylum seekers, migrants and returnees, particularly in the Kurdistan Region, due to conflict-related curfews and administrative restrictions on movement. Those have disproportionately impacted refugees and asylum seekers from Iran.

Displacement, movement restrictions, and barriers to safe, informed, and dignified return and sustainable reintegration continue to generate protection risks and undermine access to services and livelihoods across the region. Women, children, refugees, asylum seekers, migrants, returnees, and internally displaced populations are particularly affected. Women and children face heightened risks of exploitation and abuse, especially when prolonged displacement results in stays in substandard informal sites or collective shelters. Restrictions on movement have also contributed to isolation, reduced access to assistance, confiscation and challenges in renewals of documents, and fear of arrest and detention among displaced populations, particularly non-nationals.

> *I hope to repair part of my damaged home so that my daughters and grandchildren can begin to rebuild their lives in dignity.*
>
> — Female returnee, fled southern Lebanon to Dar'a, Syria

> *Returnees need support with shelter, documents, and basic services because without these things they cannot integrate or live with dignity in Afghanistan.*
>
> — Undocumented returnee FGD in Kabul, Afghanistan

351,558
people remain internally displaced in Lebanon
5.54 million people are internally displaced in Syria

849,800
Syrians who crossed from Lebanon to Syria since 28 February 2026, of whom **19 per cent** women and **57 per cent** are children

1.78 Million (49% male & 51%female)
Syrians had returned from neighboring countries, alongside approximately **1.92** million internally displaced returnees since 8 Dec 2024

Lebanon ©UNHCR

Explosive ordnance contamination

Explosive ordnance, unexploded remnants of war, mines and other conflict debris continue to cause death, injury, displacement and barriers to safe movement, safe return, and sustainable reintegration, including in the context of movements prompted by the recent escalation. Across **Iran**, **Lebanon**, **Syria**, **Iraq**, **Afghanistan** and **Yemen,** returning families are particularly exposed when accessing homes, agricultural land, schools, and community infrastructure in contaminated areas. Children face heightened risks due to increased exposure, limited risk-awareness and ability to assess risk and the severe long-term consequences of blast injuries. Explosive hazards also compound psychological distress, secure access to land and property, and service-access constraints. In **Lebanon**, strikes, demolitions and damage in affected areas increase explosive-hazard risks for families returning temporarily to inspect homes, farmland or businesses and hinders safe return.

In **Yemen**, widespread contamination driven by protracted conflict and shifting frontlines exposes civilians to death and injury while restricting movement, access to land and essential services, and safe return for displaced populations. In **Syria**, mines or explosive ordnance have been identified in 29 per cent of assessed communities, with 60 per cent of contaminated locations reporting no ongoing demining activities; contamination affects agricultural land, routes and areas of return, contributing to fatalities, injuries and unsustainable reintegration. Along **Afghanistan's** border areas, landmines and explosive remnants of war on unofficial crossing routes pose significant risks to returnees. While contamination along the **Afghanistan–Iran** border remains a concern, recent **Afghanistan–Pakistan** clashes have created additional explosive ordnance hazards, potentially affecting border crossings. Children, farmers, returnees, IDPs, older persons, persons with disabilities, and households lacking adequate information are particularly at risk.

570
casualties of explosive ordnance - **173** killed, **397** injured of which **59** and **144** children respectively – in Syria since 28 February 2026

~5 Million
children live in landmine/ERW-contaminated areas in Syria

Restrictions to access to legal identity, documentation, remedies and justice

Across contexts, legal identity, documentation and access to remedies are protection risk multipliers: without documents, people face movement restrictions, detention, exclusion from services, inability to access Housing Land and Property (HLP) rights. Refugees, asylum seekers and migrants face challenges to legal stay with heightened risk of detention and deportation. Loss, confiscation, non-recognition, invalidation or inability to renew civil and other legal documentation continues to restrict access to rights, services, legal remedies and increases risks associated with involuntary returns variously across **Afghanistan**, **Iran**, **Pakistan**, **Lebanon** and **Syria**.

In **Iran** and **Pakistan**, restrictive documentation renewal procedures and routine verification of legal status contribute to a precarious legal stay and increase risks of deportation, refoulement concerns, and socio-economic exclusion for Afghan refugees and other undocumented Afghans. In **Lebanon**, legal and administrative barriers, including high costs, limit access to legal documentation particularly for Syrian and Palestinian refugees and migrant domestic workers, affecting their ability to access certain services and increase their exposure to forced return. These barriers also extend to barriers in accessing justice for violations resulting in death, injury, displacement and property destruction, where affected people have limited access to effective remedies and accountability mechanisms. Displacement-related documentation loss has further undermined access to employment, housing, and land and property rights, hindering durable solutions for both returnees and host-community nationals.

In **Afghanistan**, deportees from Iran and Pakistan report documents and belongings confiscated during return procedures, while returnees frequently face confiscated, lost or unrecognized civil and property documents, which impede access to housing, land and property rights, tenure security, legal remedies and public services. In **Syria**, documentation gaps remain among the most significant barriers for returnees to accessing essential services, particularly education and health, as well as legal processes and HLP rights, with implications for sustainable reintegration. Around 1 in 5 returnee households has a family member without essential civil documentation. In addition, lack of access to documentation affects access to legal processes (60 percent of communities), education (42 percent), HLP rights (34 percent).

In **Yemen**, more than 70 per cent of IDP households report that at least one family member lacks an identity document and over 40 per cent of displaced children lack birth certificates, mainly due to high costs and administrative barriers, limiting access to services, legal recognition and humanitarian support. In informal displacement sites in **Iraq**, only 28 per cent of IDP households assessed by IOM had full documentation for all family members. Although most refugees in Iraq report feeling safe, protection monitoring between June and August found that refugees significantly attribute their sense of safety to holding documentation.

> *"There are no national ID cards available in government offices… anyone who lost their ID due to the war, fleeing, or damage will not be able to get a new one.*
>
> — Male returnee, Aleppo, Syria

Gender-based violence

Gender-based violence is increasing across all contexts as displacement, returns dynamics, economic hardship, overcrowding, insecurity, inadequate shelter and service disruptions erode existing protection mechanisms. Women and girls face heightened risks of intimate partner violence, physical and emotional abuse, sexual harassment, exploitation and sexual violence, while barriers to reporting and accessing services remain widespread. Female-headed households, adolescent girls, women with disabilities, migrant and refugee women, undocumented women, widows, returnees and other displaced women face particularly elevated risks. In **Lebanon**, cumulative risks in collective shelters and outside formal shelters have been reported, including intimate partner violence, sexual harassment, exploitation due to limited privacy, unsafe WASH and inadequate lighting. Child marriage as a harmful coping mechanism targeting adolescent girls is also prevalent in **Lebanon** where families resort to it as a "survival strategy" to reduce the household's economic burden amidst total resource depletion. This risk is catalyzed by prolonged school dropouts and the lack of safe, gender-segregated spaces, leading families to view marriage as a means of "shielding" girls from public violence, despite being a harmful practice. In **Syria**, an estimated 8.6 million people require GBV assistance, most of them women and girls, while over 60 GBV service points reportedly closed during 2025–2026 due to lack of resources.

In **Yemen**, GBV risks remain acute, driven by displacement, economic collapse and eroding protection mechanisms. Child marriage is a particularly severe and well-documented concern, increasingly used by families as a negative coping strategy amid deepening poverty that will further rise due to the escalation. In **Afghanistan**, the institutionalized denial of women's and girls' rights is exacerbating protection risks and creating conditions that increase vulnerability to GBV. Restrictions on education, movement, employment and public participation also undermine access to services and constrain the meaningful participation of national female staff in the humanitarian response. In **Iran**, rising reports of intimate partner violence have been associated with worsening socioeconomic pressures. In **Iraq**, violence against women and girls remains widespread and largely under-reported. This is compounded by women's economic dependence on men and female labour- force participation that remains among the lowest globally. GBV risks are also exacerbated in displacement settings due to overcrowding, and lack of lighting as a result of fuel shortages linked to the escalation.

> *"If a woman has a husband or older son with her, people sometimes feel there is protection. Women alone feel exposed.*
>
> — Displaced female-headed household without shelter, Beirut, Lebanon

Children at risk of family separation, exploitation and harm

Across contexts, family separation is increasing where households move suddenly, cross borders under pressure, lack documentation, or split movement to protect income and assets. Repeated displacement, return movements and limited access to services increase the risk that children become separated from their caregivers, undermining their rights to family life. The ongoing interruption of schooling and increased school dropout rates deny children their right to education and remove an important protective environment, increasing vulnerability to child labour, child marriage and exploitation.

Between **Lebanon** and **Syria**, displacement, high transportation costs, fear of checkpoints and documentation gaps increase the likelihood of children being left behind with relatives or separated when caregivers move ahead. Risks, including of statelessness, are specifically acute for families with unregistered children, including those born in **Lebanon** without civil registration. In **Syria**, documentation barriers affect children's access to education, or while economic pressures may compel family members to remain behind in **Lebanon** to sustain livelihoods.

In **Afghanistan**, forced returns separate households and leave children without documentation or immediate access to education, healthcare and psychosocial support. Protection monitoring reported that 15 per cent of Afghan returnees experienced incidents of family separation between April and June 2026. Unaccompanied and separated children, children with disabilities, child-headed households, returnee children and children living or working on the streets face the greatest risks of violence, neglect, exploitation. *(Continued on next page)*.

Children at risk of family separation, exploitation and harm (continued)

Displaced children who are unaccompanied or separated face heightened risks of coercion, abuse, and exploitation. These risks are frequently compounded by the loss of civil documentation, limiting their access to protection services, legal assistance, and other essential support mechanisms. Similar protection challenges are faced by children on the move along the Horn of Africa Eastern Route who arrive in **Yemen**, many of whom lack documentation and are therefore exposed to increased protection risks and barriers to assistance.

At the same time, poverty, insecurity, school disruption, displacement and limited access to safe shelter and essential services compound economic and protection pressures on families, contributing to increased child marriage and child labour. In **Lebanon**, protection partners reported that children represented 26 per cent of Gender Based Violence survivors. Similar dynamics are identified in **Syria** and **Afghanistan**, where adolescent girls, undocumented children and those living in female-headed or severely indebted households are among those most affected. Children are at risk of hazardous child labour in agriculture, workshops, commercial premises and on the streets. These practices constitute serious violations of children's rights and can expose children to exploitation, violence and physical and psychological harm with lifelong consequences. **In Iraq,** protection monitoring found child protection concerns to be more prevalent in IDP camp settings, centring primarily on school non-attendance, children with specific needs and family separation. Child labour, child marriage and domestic violence remain ongoing concerns across displacement and return settings in Iraq.

6,029
Children separated from their caregivers since February 2026 in Afghanistan returning from Iran and Pakistan

340
schools damaged or destroyed in Lebanon
100,000 children risk missing the next schoolyear

Barriers to secure housing, land and property

The current conflict and forced displacement, and the legacy of previous conflicts, continues to expose affected populations to destruction of homes and property, forced eviction, dispossession, confiscation of assets and documentation, unresolved ownership and tenancy claims and barriers to recovering HLP rights. Displacement, poverty, rising housing costs, weak, absent or discriminatory legal frameworks and weak access to remedies increase tenure insecurity among IDPs, refugees, migrants, returnees, and – within those - female-headed households and low-income families. Across **Afghanistan**, **Iran** and **Pakistan**, refugees and returnees have reported theft of belongings, extortion, document confiscation and unlawful payment demands during displacement or return processes, which results in barriers to HLP upon return.

In **Lebanon**, damage to homes, businesses, farmland and infrastructure, rental inflation and eviction have forced families into overcrowded or unfinished housing, while reports include theft, harassment, sexual exploitation, confiscation of belongings and forced departures from shelters.

> *Everything starts with shelter because without shelter there is no privacy, no safety, and no stability.*
>
> — Female IDP, Beirut, Lebanon

329,208
of displaced individuals living outside collective sites in Lebanon

In **Syria**, widespread HLP challenges, including unresolved ownership and tenancy claims, loss of property documentation, and extensive damage to homes and infrastructure, continue to impede safe return and sustainable reintegration, while contributing to community tensions in areas of return. High rent and utility costs are forcing returnee families to make difficult choices between shelter and other basic needs. In **Yemen**, prevalent HLP issues, especially the lack of secure tenure at IDP sites, affect IDP households throughout displacement, contributing to evictions and pushing some families to live in open areas where women and girls face heightened risks of sexual violence. In **Iraq,** housing insecurity increases protection risks particularly for returnees: recent protection monitoring reports indicate that 35 per cent of surveyed returnees feared eviction, mainly due to inability to pay rent.

IDP Site, Iraq©IOM

Exclusion from services, assistance and protection

Across contexts, discrimination and denial of services based on nationality, displacement status, gender, disability, documentation status, ethnicity and socioeconomic vulnerability continue to restrict access to resources, services and humanitarian assistance. Refugees, migrants, returnees, women and girls, female-headed households and minority groups are particularly affected.

In **Lebanon**, Syrian and Palestine refugees, migrants, and undocumented persons report barriers to access shelter, rental accommodation, health care, legal aid and humanitarian assistance. Among displaced people outside collective shelters, women and adolescent girls without shelter spend hours searching for safe sanitation.

Persons with disabilities face specific protection risks during evacuation and displacement due to barriers to accessible information, transportation, services and assistance, often resulting in exclusion, family separation and reduced access to safety and support. In **Afghanistan**, restrictive measures and monitoring of women's participation reduce women and girls' inclusion in needs assessments and access to assistance, while returnee households identify food insecurity and service gaps as major stressors. Documentation requirements, movement restrictions and restrictive policy enforcement measures are increasingly limiting access to livelihoods, healthcare, shelter and humanitarian assistance for Afghans in **Iran** and **Pakistan**. Women face additional barriers where restrictive social policies and morality enforcement limit access to aid and public life. During recent protection monitoring carried out in **Iraq**, half of key informants reported observing discrimination when refugees attempt to access public services.

Exploitation, trafficking and forced labour

Across contexts, trafficking, forced labour and exploitative practices are increasing where debt, unemployment, legal insecurity, movement restrictions and lack of safe accommodation converge. In **Lebanon**, migrants abandoned by employers after displacement orders reported document retention, unpaid salaries and limited safe exit options; coercive control in informal shelters, fraudulent job schemes, requests for women's photographs for blackmail, irregular crossing fees and child labour. Reports also indicate an increased risk of sexual exploitation for displaced women and girls in Lebanon, increasingly forced into the unregulated job market by severe economic hardship, family financial pressure and livelihood disruptions, with rising rental prices also driving exploitation of women. **Yemen** remains a major transit and destination point for migrants along the Horn of Africa Eastern Route, with people on the move facing heightened risks of trafficking, forced labour and exploitation, compounded by fear of detention, limited access to essential services and reliance on smugglers and informal networks.

In **Syria**, returnees and displaced families face social tensions and discrimination in certain areas, alongside heightened risks of exploitation linked to HLP insecurity and limited access to livelihoods and basic services. In **Afghanistan**, involuntary returns reduce remittance income and leave indebted households vulnerable to exploitative labour, trafficking and child labour. Children, adolescent girls, female-headed households, undocumented persons and recent returnees face the highest risk where protection, legal aid and safe shelter are unavailable.

IDP Site, Iraq ©IOM

04 · EXISTING CAPACITIES & KEY GAPS

Existing capacities across the region remain significant, despite being increasingly stretched by conflict escalation, protracted and new displacement, sustained return trends, economic pressure and reduction of resources, including donor support. Affected communities continue to rely on family, kinship and community-based networks, while national and municipal service providers, protection actors, women-led organizations, community structures, and outreach volunteers remain critical entry points for information sharing, risk identification, referrals and immediate support.

National institutions and inter-agency coordination mechanisms bringing together international, national and local protection actors also continue to provide an essential foundation for protection monitoring and needs assessments, civil documentation support, legal assistance, and other specialized protection services. These capacities provide an important basis for response, but require sustained investment, flexible funding and stronger links with recovery and development actors to sustain their contribution. *Please see Annex for information on protection partners and funding gaps across highlighted countries.*

Capacities of the affected population

Affected populations continue to rely on community-based networks to manage escalating and ongoing risks. However, this capacity is eroding under the combined effects of conflict, displacement and socio-economic pressure. In **Syria** and **Lebanon** displaced and returning families rely on relatives, informal hosts, community representatives, peer networks and outreach volunteers for information and referrals. As these safety nets weaken, households are increasingly resorting to debt, reducing food, child labour, early marriage, exploitative work or involuntary return. Reduced breadwinning opportunities and shifting gender roles have also heightened GBV risks, particularly intimate partner violence. In **Iran**, Afghan households depend on informal work, borrowing and community support, but conflict-related livelihood disruption, depleted savings and documentation barriers are increasing risks of exploitation and eviction.

In **Afghanistan**, recent returnees rely on kinship networks and limited border assistance. Yet, such measures cannot compensate for the negative effects of depleted assets, family separation and lack of civil documentation, leading to widespread food insecurity, child labour and distress.

In **Yemen**, protracted displacement and economic collapse have increased reliance on informal work and debt, with heightened risks for children, IDPs, migrants, refugees and other marginalized groups. Across the region, women and girls face particular challenges due to increased unpaid care responsibilities, concentration in low-paid informal work and reduced access to education, services and peer networks.

Recent protection monitoring in **Iraq** found that nearly three quarters of refugee households reported being affected by the regional situation, primarily through reduced employment opportunities and increased living costs. A rapid protection assessment during the conflict found the crisis shaping migration dynamics mainly through its economic effects. As a result, the proportion of Iraqis preferring migration abroad rose from 21 to 39 per cent, while actual movement remains constrained by financial barriers, limited regular pathways and documentation challenges.

Afghanistan ©UNHCR/Oxygen Empire Media Production

Local mechanisms, systems & actors

Local protection actors remain the backbone of the protection response but are overstretched and underfunded. In **Lebanon**, community focal points and outreach volunteers, women-led organizations, municipalities and local leaders support information sharing, risk identification and referrals, accommodation, including for refugees, migrants, IDPs and other crisis-affected people living outside collective shelters. As local NGOs represent over 60 per cent of protection response actors in Lebanon, strengthening their capacities and resourcing is vital to sustaining protection dividends for affected populations. In **Syria**, local authorities, community leaders, local protection partners, teachers, health workers and outreach volunteers support area-based return analysis, HLP dispute resolutions, documentation referrals and community-based protection initiatives in return areas.

In **Iran**, refugee-led, women-led, faith-based and local networks help identify vulnerable Afghan households and link them to assistance, supporting them to overcome economic and administrative barriers. In **Afghanistan**, women-led community structures, local NGOs and local border/reception actors support returnee identification, referrals and documentation efforts amidst restrictions on women's participation and staff movement. In **Yemen**, community committees, women-led groups, local NGOs and community-based protection networks assist in referrals, mine-risk awareness, GBV and child protection services, despite insecurity and shrinking access. In **Iraq**, refugee households report relying heavily on informal community support mechanisms to meet their needs.

Institutional & response capacities

Government institutions and national systems are central to protection responses across affected contexts, supported by operational protection actors through protection monitoring, legal and documentation support, asylum system strengthening and return assistance, child protection, GBV and MHPSS services. However, conflict, economic pressures, rising needs and funding reductions are increasingly straining system capacity and reducing service coverage. Significant gaps in sex-, age- and disability-disaggregated data, continue to constrain targeted responses and informed policymaking. In **Lebanon**, national and local authorities continue to lead the response for displaced populations, but damaged infrastructure, funding shortfalls and access constraints limit service coverage, especially for refugee and migrants, and the offer of specialized protection services including for survivors of GBV. In **Iran**, national systems continue to provide education, health and other services for refugees, but socio-economic stress and other legal barriers affect inclusion and service delivery.

In **Syria**, authorities and protection partners support return and reintegration by facilitating access to civil documentation, supporting HLP rights, and providing protection and MHPSS services. Inter-agency and cross-border referral mechanisms help ensure continuity of protection services during return, particularly for individuals with specific needs. However, overstretched public services, damaged infrastructure, and constrained humanitarian capacity continue to limit recovery and strain absorption capacities in return areas. In **Afghanistan**, reception, border monitoring and documentation initiatives remain essential but struggle to keep pace with large-scale returns. Political restrictions continue to constrain development engagement and undermine longer-term investments in recovery. In **Yemen**, conflict, political fragmentation, and underfunding continue to limit the capacity of public institutions and local service providers to deliver protection and basic services.

Key gaps

Underfunded protection services, particularly the most specialized such as GBV, child protection, MHPSS, legal assistance, disability support, access to shelter for at risk populations, cash-for-protection and mine action services - are not keeping pace with growing needs. Funding reduction has resulted in reduced coverage and service closures in several contexts, while large-scale displacement, returns and renewed conflict are increasing the demand.

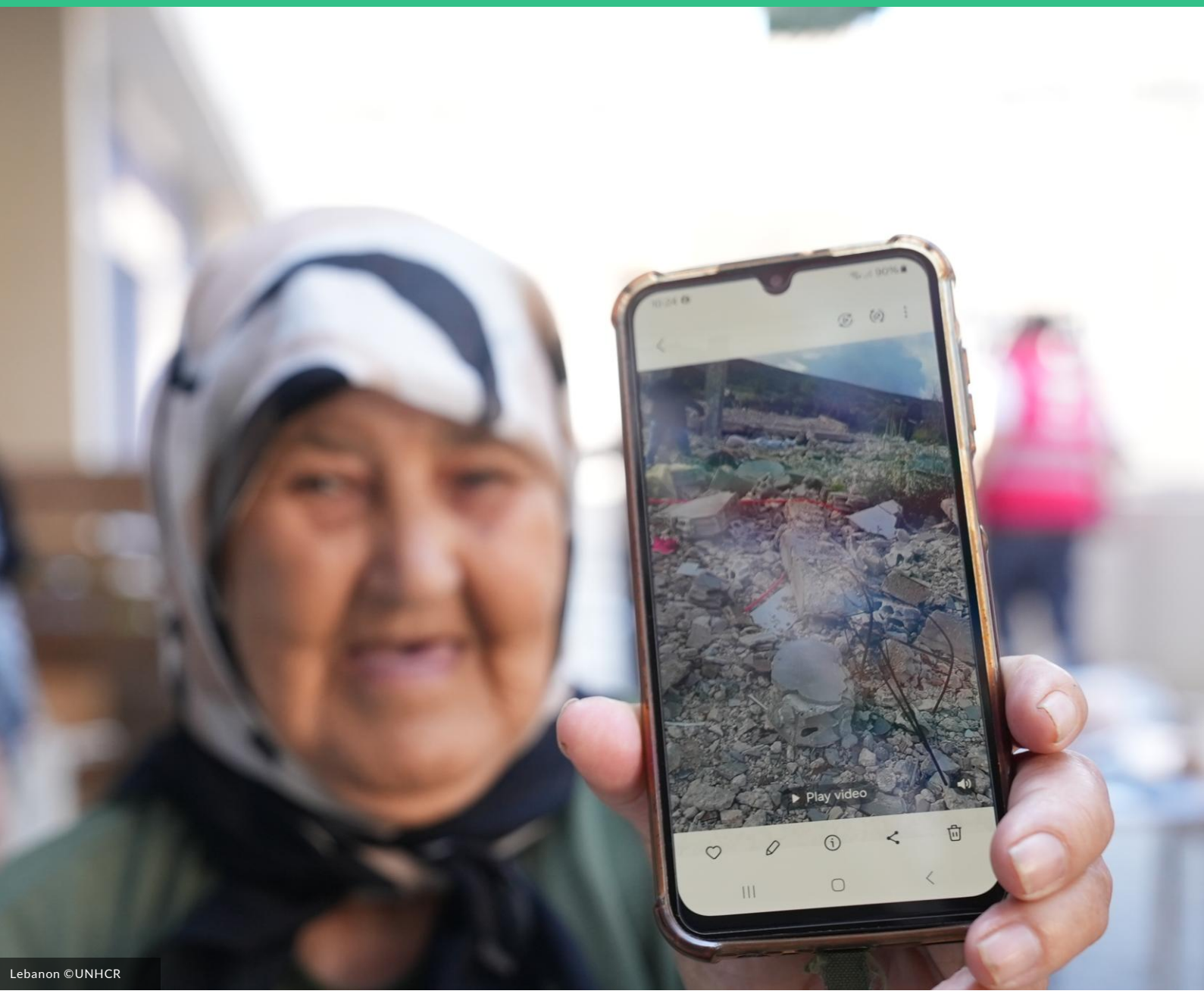
Weak reception, reintegration and case management continuity: large-scale internal displacement, refugee, migrant presence and return movements continue to outpace reception, referral and reintegration systems for IDP returnees as well as those returning across borders. Challenges in case management services, limited cross-border coordination and protection-sensitive reception arrangements increase the risk that children, GBV survivors and other vulnerable individuals lose access to support during displacement, return or onward movement.

Increasing gaps in essential services and protection mechanisms driving harmful survival strategies: economic hardship, displacement, loss of basic services, shelter insecurity and weakened protection systems are forcing affected households, particularly marginalized individuals, towards harmful coping strategies, including child labour, child marriage, exploitative and hazardous work, trafficking, unsustainable debt practices. In many instances, deprivation leads also to unsafe and premature return to areas of origin.

Personal and HLP Documentation: significant gaps in support to national Civil registration and HLP institutions, including overstretched civil registrars and land documentation services, leave many affected people without civil documentation, birth registration, or HLP support. Loss, expiry, non-renewal or confiscation of documents further restrict freedom of movement, impede access to services and rights, and undermine safe return and sustainable reintegration.

Gaps in refugee protection safeguards: Critical gaps in asylum systems and legal stay options in some refugee-hosting countries leave refugees and asylum seekers at heightened risk of detention, deportation, restricted access to national services and livelihood opportunities, generate premature returns under adverse conditions, or trigger onward movements.

Access restrictions and shrinking humanitarian space are undermining the delivery of life-saving protection services, including survivor-centred GBV and child protection interventions, leaving at-risk populations without safe reporting and response mechanisms. Insecurity, administrative barriers, movement restrictions, communication disruptions and damage to civilian infrastructure continue to constrain protection monitoring, assistance and service delivery, while reduced community engagement weakens risk identification and age-, gender- and disability-responsive programming.



Lebanon ©UNHCR

Nehmat, a displaced Lebanese woman, holds up a photo of her destroyed home: "It was bombed, and now there is nothing left."

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