Refugees and Asylum-seekers in Syria

January – December 2023

12,013 Refugees

4,867 Asylum-seekers

668 new individuals registered and **115** individuals recognized as refugees

Population Demographics

51% Female Refugees

49% Male Refugees

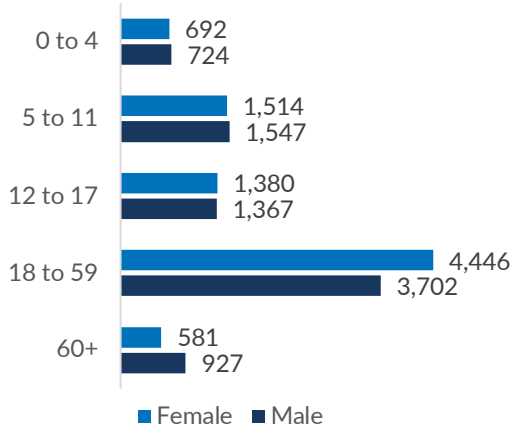
9% of refugees are elderly

43% of refugees are children

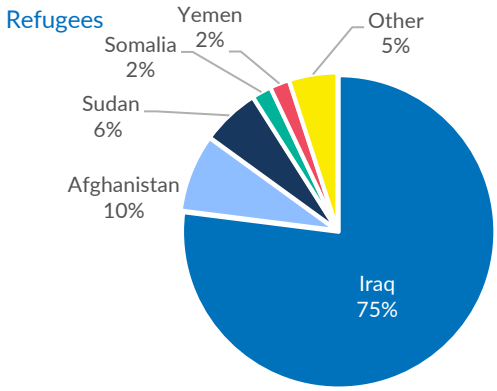
16,880 Total population

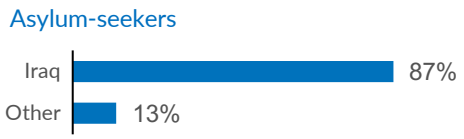
40% of refugees have special needs

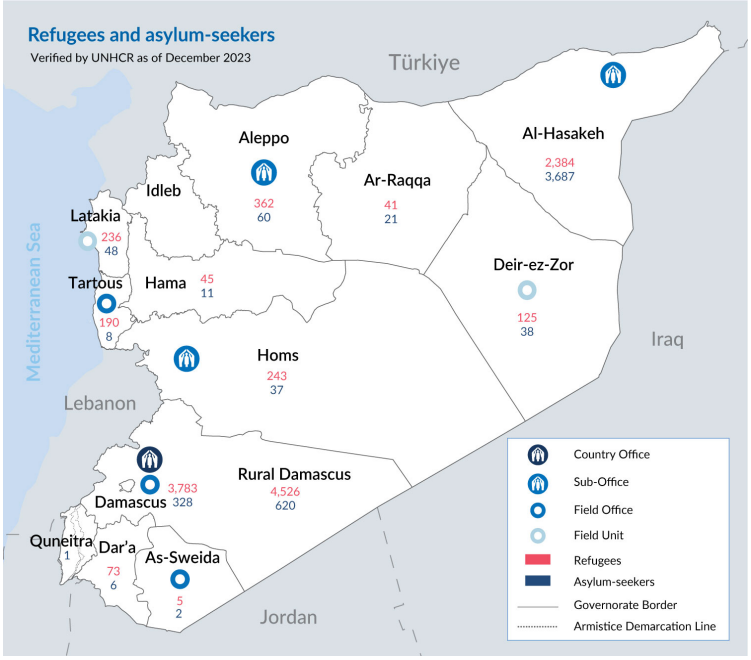
Age Distribution



Country of Origin







Registration and Identity Management

Registration of people seeking international protection is critical, as it enables the **early identification of individuals with specific needs** and their **referral to available protection responses**. Additionally, registration provides comprehensive population data needed for programme planning including shelter, food, health, water and sanitation, cash-based interventions and other forms of assistance.

UNHCR identification cards provided to refugees and asylum-seekers registered with UNHCR constitute proof of legal identity, can prevent arbitrary arrest and *refoulement*, and **facilitate greater freedom of movement**. The cards also enable refugees and asylum-seekers to apply for **legal residency, register vital events** (such as birth registration), and access basic assistance in Syria.

Between January and December 2023, UNHCR registered **668 individuals** (new registrations), mainly comprising Iraqi and Sudanese nationals. Additionally, **15,643 identification cards, including renewals were issued,** representing an 7% decrease compared to 16,815 cards issued between January-December 2022. **The decrease is mainly related to the bulk inactivation exercise that was carried out by year-end.** Description of registration helpline received **8,174** calls during the reporting period.

Refugee Status Determination

Refugee Status Determination (RSD) is the legal administrative process by which governments or UNHCR determine whether a person seeking international protection is considered a refugee under international, regional, or national laws. RSD is often a **vital process in helping refugees realize their rights under international law**. In agreement with the Government of Syria, UNHCR conducts RSD for asylum-seekers in the country.

By the end of December 2023, interviews were conducted for **130** cases (**265 individuals**), **144 cases** (**303 individuals**) were submitted for review, and **127 cases (250 individuals**) were reviewed. Decisions were taken for **113 cases** (**220 individuals**), out of which **67** cases (**127 individuals**) were recognized as refugees, and **46 cases** (**93 individuals**) were rejected.

An **RSD helpline** is fully operational, providing counselling on both the RSD process and the status of asylum-seekers and refugees' individual cases. By the end of December 2023, the RSD helpline had received **374** calls relating primarily to the status of individual cases and requests for cash assistance. The RSD unit is also participating in monthly community sensitization sessions to ensure asylum-seekers are informed and understand the RSD process in Syria.

Resettlement

UNHCR Syria identifies and submits resettlement cases to third countries for highly vulnerable refugees. By the end of 2023, **138** individuals were interviewed to determine their resettlement eligibility and **16** cases were submitted to resettlement countries. In addition, UNHCR facilitated the departure of **61** individuals under resettlement and complementary pathways.

Resettlement remains one of the most sought-after services by refugees. However, resettlement countries offer limited quotas, meaning that most refugees cannot be considered for resettlement to another country even if UNHCR believes it would be necessary for their protection or to reunite them with family members.

A 'resettlement helpline' offers regular counselling to refugees, providing accurate information on the status of individual cases and managing expectations. By the end of 2023, a total of **968 individuals** were offered counselling. In addition, community awareness sessions on general resettlement procedures and prospects in Syria take place every month. This ensures refugees and asylum-seekers are informed of the process and are protected from misinformation and potential exploitation. Over 161 refugee and asylum-seeker representatives and volunteers were reached through focus group-like discussions.

Community-based protection

By end of December 2023, there were **117** UNHCR-supported **community centres**, out of which one is located in north-east Syria, where many refugees and asylum-seekers reside. UNHCR-supported community centres are designed as a "one-stop shop" which is critical for people in need, particularly in remote areas where availability of services is scarce. Moreover, community centres cooperate with other facilities and service providers to ensure complementarity in service provision. Refugees and asylum-seekers have access to all UNHCR-supported community centres and can benefit from a wide variety of protection interventions.

UNHCR also engages **107 refugee outreach volunteers** (RORVs) of different nationalities in Al-Hasakeh, Aleppo, Damascus, Rural Damascus, Homs, Latakia, and Tartous Governorates. The RORVs promote community engagement and assist in mobilizing youth to design and lead community-led initiatives. Additionally, through follow-ups and home visits, the volunteers identify and respond to the needs of vulnerable households either directly or through referrals to community centres, and other service providers including charities, local organizations, and government entities.

Mental Health and Psychosocial Support

In 2023, **556** refugees and asylum-seekers received mental health and psychosocial support services (MHPSS), including individual and group counselling, with **11** refugees referred to specialized mental health services such as psychiatrists and psychotherapists.

During the year, UNHCR through its partners continued to provide MHPSS services, targeting **1,080** refugees with specific needs (older persons and persons with disabilities) with general and medical in-kind assistance. This assistance is provided to increase a sense of dignity, help prevent harmful coping mechanisms, and reduce the financial burden on families and caregivers. In addition, **123** refugees with specific needs received adult diapers.

UNHCR and partners conducted **800** social/recreational activities and awareness-raising sessions for **2,322** individuals.

Child Protection

In 2023, UNHCR and partners conducted awareness-raising sessions in Damascus as well as in Al-Hol camp and Tel Hamees in Al-Hasakeh Governorate, reaching **3,871 individuals (3,026 children and 845 caregivers).** The awareness sessions covered topics on various child protection risks. As a result of the awareness-raising sessions, a positive impact was observed by the child-friendly space facilitators including improvement of children's capacities and skillsets especially in areas where there is a lack of schools.

By end of December 2023, a total of **211** refugee and asylum-seeker children received tailored case management services. The main identified risks in north-east Syria were child labour, child neglect, and child maltreatment. In Damascus, the top risks were school drop-out and lack of documentation. Consequently, as a result of the provided services, positive improvements were observed by child protection case managers in the children's daily lives, including relationships at home and school, and in the children's psychosocial well-being.

During 2023, **eight** refugee and asylum-seeker children clubs and child welfare committees were established in Damascus, as well as in Al-Hol camp and Tal Hamees in Al-Hasakeh Governorate where the majority of refugee communities are located. The members of the child welfare committees and children's clubs received several trainings, including their role in the communities as well as child protection basics and referral mechanisms.

Gender-based violence

During 2023, UNHCR and partners identified and supported 154 refugee and asylum-seeker survivors of **gender-based violence (GBV)** with available multi-sectoral services (psychosocial services, livelihood opportunities, legal aid, and material assistance). Outreach volunteers helped to link the survivors with support networks within their communities.

Additionally, UNHCR conducted **150** GBV awareness sessions on psychological violence, deprivation of resources, opportunities and services, child marriage, sexual harassment, and physical violence, targeting **2,176** adolescent and adult women in Rural Damascus, as well as in Al-Hol camp and Tal Hamees in Al-Hasakeh Governorate. As a result of the awareness-raising sessions on behavioural change, higher levels of awareness and implementation of prevention measures designed by the communities were observed during the assessments conducted by GBV team members.

During 2023, **three** refugee **women's committees** consisted of 34 members of (22 Refugees, 6 Asylum-seekers & 6 Host Community) continued their community involvement in north-east Syria to enhance the role of women in decision-making and designing activities inside refugee camps, including for the prevention of GBV.

Cash assistance

Cash assistance continues to be the most efficient and dignified way to allow the people under UNHCR's mandate to meet their basic needs, especially in the prevailing economic situation. As of 1 March 2023, the multi-purpose cash grant – which refugees were already receiving – was extended to asylum-seekers when UNHCR had the resources to do so. Refugees and asylum-seekers currently have equal access to cash assistance, subject to their specific needs and vulnerability assessments. The legal status is no longer used as a criterion to determine eligibility for cash assistance.

Additionally, exceptional financial assistance (for urgent and unforeseen protection needs) continued during the reporting period. Multi-purpose cash grants (MPCGs) and winterization grants targeted both asylum-seeker and refugee families who were prioritized based on demographics and specific needs. The assistance was provided through a cash-over-the-counter modality.

By end of December 2023, **monthly multi-purpose cash grants** were provided to **5,795** households (**16,673 individuals**) for six cycles. In addition, a total of **6,480** households (**20,191**

individuals) including both refugees and asylum-seekers received two patches of winterization cash assistance.

Legal Assistance

Lack of identity and travel documents, irregular status, and **limited knowledge on national legislation and procedures** are the main legal challenges encountered by refugees and asylum-seekers in Syria, affecting their ability to secure residency and register vital events, as well as limiting their freedom of movement and access to basic rights and services.

In response to some of these challenges, UNHCR provides **legal assistance** on a range of issues such as *refoulement*, residency, civil documentation, registration of vital events (particularly birth registration), detention, exit visas, prevention and response to GBV, and child protection issues.

The legal assistance includes counselling and support for legal interventions before courts and administrative bodies as well as awareness-raising activities conducted either through direct sessions or printed materials to disseminate information and raise the awareness of refugees and asylum-seekers on the applicable laws and procedures.

In 2023, UNHCR legal assistance programmes provided support to **7,807** refugees and asylum-seekers on various legal matters. Also, **552** refugees and asylum-seekers children were assisted to be registered and get birth certificates.

Legal assistance on detention and refoulment

In 2023, UNHCR did not record detention of asylum-seekers and refugees in Syria for illegal entry or absence of residency permit. In 2023, 24 individuals were detained for suspicion of involvement in criminal actions. UNHCR intervened successfully and secured the release of 15 individuals from detention upon clearance from relevant authorities, and it continues to provide legal assistance to the remaining cases. UNHCR continued with its legal support and assistance to refugees and asylum-seekers in detention through regular visits, sensitization for immigration authorities and advocacy

Additionally, and although the Government of Syria generally respects the principle of non-refoulement, UNHCR efforts in advocating for non-refoulement for two refugees were not successful due to their involvement in serious criminal acts.

UNHCR will continue through its awareness raising activities reminding refugees and asylum-seekers of the importance and their obligation to abide by the laws and avoid any involvement in illicit activities. Furthermore, the SOPs on detention and risk of refoulement were updated to guide protection interventions by UNHCR's legal teams in this area.

Legal Advocacy

Following UNHCR's advocacy and consultation with the Directorate of Civil Affairs and the Directorate of Immigration and Passports, two circulars were issued waiving the fines imposed on delayed registration of vital events as well as fines imposed on delayed renewal of residency for refugees and asylum-seekers for a certain grace period (elapsed on 21 March 2023). As a result, **279** refugees and asylum-seekers succeeded in renewing their residency without paying the stipulated fines.

As a result of UNHCR's advocacy, Law No. 4 of 2023 was issued on 2 April, amending Law No. 2 of 2014 regularizing the entry, exit, residency of Arabs and foreigners in Syria. The new

law has included individuals holding refugee cards in Syria who do not hold passports or whose national passports expired. These can be exempted by the Minister of Interior from the requirement of holding a valid passport. Also, the new law **permanently** waived residency fees for refugees and their family members. These amendments are considered as a positive step by the Government of Syria and will enhance the protection of refugees and asylum-seekers who do not have identification documents. By the end of 2023, around **63%** of refugees and asylum-seekers (**6,683 persons**), were confirmed to be in possession of valid residency permits in Syria.

A leaflet was developed on the amended law for refugees and asylum-seekers and widely circulated by UNHCR Field Offices highlighting the new development and articulating procedures to benefit from the provision of the new Law.

Capacity-building

In coordination with the Diplomatic Institute of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA), UNHCR Syria conducted a two-day workshop, 24-25 January 2023, on International Protection for Refugees. The workshop was attended by **44** participants, mainly targeting diplomats assigned to multilateral settings and to countries hosting refugees. The workshop was also attended by participants from both the Ministry of Interior and the Ministry of Justice.

One of the sessions of the workshop on International Protection at the Diplomatic Institute of MoFA.© UNHCR