

Regional Flash Update #6

Syria situation crisis

24 December 2024

Key Highlights

- Inside Syria, UNHCR is engaging with caretaker authorities at border points and in key government offices which have resumed operations, including the Directorate of Social Affairs. Border presence and monitoring from inside Syria have been re-established.
- Refugee returns continue in relatively small numbers compared to the total Syrian refugee population in the region, but there is an increasing and regular trend. Turkish officials report that some 25,000 people have returned to Syria since 8 December. From all neighbouring countries, through official border crossings, around 51,000 Syrians have returned since 8 December. The number of Syrians returning in the last two weeks alone now surpasses the total number of Syrians who UNHCR monitored returning in the whole of 2023.
- On 19 December, UNHCR released the first [regional community feedback report](#) based on continuous engagement with Syrian refugees in neighbouring countries. Findings show that while many are interested in return, most have adopted a “wait-and-see” approach, emphasizing the need for clarity on several critical issues. Their primary concerns centre on the stabilization of the political situation, security conditions in their areas of origin, and access to essential services. UNHCR will conduct regular quantitative intentions surveys to track changes in perceptions and to ensure that planning and response is grounded in the priorities and concerns of refugees.
- On 19 December, UNHCR’s cross-border team in north-west Syria conducted their first mission to Idleb City since the fall of the Assad government. The mission included discussions with IDPs and returnees to hear more about their experiences and needs.



UNHCR and partner staff work on a memory game with a child at a UNHCR-support community center in Aleppo (11 December). © UNHCR/Hameed Maarouf

Country updates

Syria

The security situation across Syria remains multifaceted, with some areas stabilizing while others grapple with a lack of law and order, displacement, and major humanitarian needs. Transportation between As-Sweida and Damascus has resumed, mirroring the return to normal services in some areas. Humanitarian actors continue to address critical gaps in services, particularly for displaced populations and returnees.

As of 20 December, the IDP Taskforce reported that 728,100 IDPs have been newly displaced since 27 November, including 150,400 who are experiencing displacement for the second time. Approximately 6% of the newly displaced population (around 43,656 individuals), are people with disabilities. Most IDPs are currently residing in Idlib (265,500) and Hama (150,100) governorates. Some 421,900 people have returned to their areas of origin, primarily in Aleppo and Hama governorates.

UNHCR is engaging with the new authorities at multiple levels: in Damascus, UNHCR met with the immigration office at Jdaidet Yabous border crossing where authorities have already completed some minor maintenance work at the immigration facility. In Aleppo, protection teams engaged with several government offices which have resumed operations, including the Directorate of Social Affairs, Ibn Khaldoun Psychiatric Hospital, and the Social Insurance Department; and in As-Sweida, UNHCR visited Nassib border post and met with border officials.

In Aleppo, UNHCR partners who have resumed protection activities in the community centres conducted various prevention and recreational activities for children and caregivers. Livelihood start-up grants have been disbursed and core relief item kits issued to families displaced from Aleppo, Homs, and Hama. In Hassakeh, UNHCR partners conducted awareness sessions on housing, land and property rights, family booklets and IDs, marriage and child registration, and core relief item distributions. Awareness-raising activities on the prevention of sexual exploitation and abuse (PSEA) have restarted in Ar-Raqqa and Hassakeh, bringing the total number of people reached with PSEA information to 16,000 individuals. A partner also conducted awareness sessions on explosive ordnance for women and children in rural Tartous.

On 19 December, the UNHCR cross-border team based in Gaziantep conducted a mission to Idlib City, marking their first field mission to the area since early December. Many refugee returnees relayed that, upon returning to Syria, they found their homes either destroyed or uninhabitable, forcing them to live in tents, with extended family members, or pay exorbitant rental fees. The prevalence of unexploded ordnance was a significant concern, particularly for those with agricultural land or homes near former frontline areas. Other pressing needs included legal assistance, psychosocial support, and rehabilitation of schools.

In northeast Syria, there are still some 62,000 people displaced primarily from Aleppo, of whom more than 33,000 are living in 200 collective shelters. Around 29,000 people are hosted by the local community.

Lebanon

As of 20 December, official estimates for arrivals of Lebanese and Syrians to the Hermel Area in Baalbek Governorate remained at approximately 90,000 arrivals, of which some 20,000 are Lebanese. According to the Government's Disaster Risk Management Unit, this includes 39,321 people (mostly Syrians) living in approximately 175 collective shelters. Needs assessments and response efforts at the collective sites, including delivery of emergency relief items, are ongoing.

Over the past week, traffic at the Masnaa official border crossing point in Bekaa Governorate has calmed, with a steady flow of arrivals and departures, including vehicles. The number of people

unable to meet entry requirements and thus unable to enter Lebanon from Syria has been much lower than a week ago; there is currently a fluctuating group of approximately 100 to 300 people in the no-man's land each day, with many turning back to Syria through the official crossing point.

The Minister of Social Affairs, Hector Hajjar, undertook a mission to the Masnaa border in Bekaa on 20 December to assess the humanitarian conditions of newly arrived Syrians. The Minister [noted](#) that “as for the longstanding Syrian refugees, we can afford to wait a few more months for the situation in Syria to become clearer and for the new authorities to take control of the country. We are actively working to encourage voluntary return.”

Türkiye

On 24 December, the Minister of Interior [made several statements](#) underlining that returns should be voluntary, safe, dignified and orderly. To ensure efficient processing, six active border gates now operate on a 24/7 basis, with a combined daily processing capacity of 19,000 individuals, a substantial increase from the previous capacity of 3,020.

He also stated that, since 9 December, nearly 25,000 individuals have returned to Syria, mainly from Hatay, Gaziantep and Istanbul and predominantly heading to Aleppo, Idlib and Latakia. This figure includes nearly 7,000 single returnees and more than 4,100 families. Compared to voluntary returns in the two weeks before 9 December (which numbered around 3,500), returns have increased nearly seven-fold in the last two weeks.

Underscoring the importance of informed decision making, the Minister also noted that President Erdoğan has approved go-and-see visits for Syrians from Türkiye from 1 January until 1 July 2025, during which time a designated head of the family will be able to enter/leave the country three times within the six months.

Also in the last few days, the UNHCR Deputy Representative joined officials of the Presidency of Migration Management in a visit to border crossings in Gaziantep and Kilis (Karkamış / Jarablus, Cobanbey/ Al Rai and Öncüpınar / Bab al Salama). The delegation observed the voluntary return procedures at Karkamış / Jarablus and Öncüpınar / Bab al Salama crossings where UNHCR teams are present each day to monitor return processes. The visit to Çobanbey / Al Rai also assisted in preparations for initiating voluntary return processing through that crossing. The UNHCR delegation also identified operational improvement requirements at these locations, that would be considered internally for further support to PMM.

UNHCR continues to monitor return interviews in 12 provinces and at five border crossing points (Cilvegözü / Bab al Hawa, Zeytindalı / Jinderes, Yayladağı / Keseb, Öncüpınar / Bab al Salama, Karkamış / Jarablus). UNHCR teams will also be present at Akçakale / Tel Abyad border crossing point starting 24 December.

Jordan

On 23 December, media reports indicated that a source in the Ministry of Interior [announced](#) the return of 12,800 Syrians to Syria through the Jaber-Nassib border crossing since 8 December. There has been an increase in movements through the Jaber-Nassib border in recent days, including commercial movements, following [the announcement](#) that Jordan reopened the border crossing for trucks to facilitate trade. Some people were observed departing for Syria in hired cars or taxis. On 21 December, the Embassy of Syria in Amman [announced](#) free issuance of travel documents (laissez-passer), valid for one month and non-renewable, for those willing to return to Syria.

Some refugees living in camps have contacted the UNHCR return hotline expressing concerns that entire families would be required to return at the same time while the common preference is for individual family members to go first and assess conditions.

Iraq

The Al-Qaim border crossing has been partially reopened, allowing departures, while entry remains restricted to Iraqi nationals. Between 18 and 21 December, border authorities reported that around 185 Syrians had left through Al-Qaim border crossing and returned to Syria.

Meanwhile, the movement of Syrians through the Peshkhabour border crossing, located between Syria and the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KR-I), remains as usual, with approximately 400-600 arrivals to Iraq each day. Most Syrians crossing into Iraq through Peshkhabour are of Kurdish ethnicity and indicate that they are either visiting the KR-I temporarily to see family and plan to return to Syria afterwards or are returning to the KR-I from their visits to Syria. Between 15 and 19 December, some 270 Syrians seeking to permanently return to Syria crossed through Peshkhabour, the majority of whom hold 30-day visas (90%), which would allow them to re-enter the KR-I during the validity of their visa period. The average returns to Syria per day in December (69) to date is lower compared to November (96).

Egypt

As of 22 December, there are 148,113 registered Syrian refugees, accounting for 17% of the total refugee population in Egypt. Since the recent political developments in Syria, UNHCR has noted a rise in case closure requests from Syrian refugees. Between 8-19 December, UNHCR received 715 case closure requests comprising 1,194 individuals, averaging 71 requests per working day compared to the November average of 7 per working day. Most requests were filed by single male individuals (75%), originating from Damascus (50%), aged 18 to 59 (97%), and currently residing in Greater Cairo (87%).

For refugees in Egypt, regardless of nationality, closure requests are required when seeking exit clearance to depart. The decision to return from Egypt, which does not share a land border with Syria, is hence a particularly consequential one. A decision by the Government of Egypt taken on 30 June 2024 required all Syrians to extend tourist visas every three months outside the country. Although UNHCR-registered Syrians refugees holding asylum-based residencies are not impacted by these restrictions, the announcement had led to an eight-fold increase of re-activation requests per week of Syrians until December.

Useful links

- [Regional Flash Update #5, Syria Situation Crisis](#)
- [Regional Refugee Community Feedback about Developments inside Syria \(19 December\)](#)
- [UNHCR Position on Returns to the Syrian Arab Republic \(16 December\)](#)
- [Syria Situation Data Portal](#)

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