

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE OF THE HIGH COMMISSIONER'S PROGRAMME  
95TH STANDING COMMITTEE MEETING  
24 – 26 MARCH 2026

**Regional Update for the Middle East and North Africa  
NGO Collective Statement – Oral Statement**

Dear Chair, Distinguished Delegates,

This statement was developed through consultations with NGOs, including those led by forcibly displaced and stateless persons.

In 2025, the forced displacement context in MENA faced compounding crises of conflict, funding cuts and the erosion of established international principles. **Entering 2026, the conflict in Iran and across the wider region is threatening to devastate an already dire protection and humanitarian environment.**

NGOs are profoundly alarmed by the repeated possible violations of international humanitarian law in the conflict, with staggering civilian casualties and infrastructure damage. **Children, women, refugees and civilians now bear the human cost of years of unchecked violations which culminated in this violence.**

**We urgently call on all parties** to prioritize the protection of civilians, humanitarian workers, and civilian infrastructures, adhere strictly to international humanitarian law, allow people to seek safety across borders, and end the violence.

Even at the seventy-fifth anniversary of the Refugee Convention, we see a profound erosion in refugee rights and responsibility sharing principles for refugees in MENA.

**Commitments to Syrian refugees have steeply declined.** Resettlement quotas have dwindled. Deportations and forced returns to Syria are fast increasing. Basic infrastructure, essential services, and economic conditions are simply not yet sufficient in Syria to ensure dignified and sustainable living conditions.

We reiterate that international protection obligations remain owed to refugees until conditions for protection have **fundamentally and durably** ceased to exist. Rather than a premature focus on returns, we urge the international community to centre resources on improving peace and reconstruction in Syria. States are urged to restore responsibility-sharing and ensure all refugees in host countries have full access to asylum procedures.

Ongoing and renewed conflicts in **Lebanon** and **Yemen** continue to drive displacement. With reduced UNHCR presence, RLOs and other local actors have been forced to shoulder greater responsibility to ensure service continuity, while still lacking the funding and capacity-sharing support promised under the localization and Humanitarian Reset agendas.

In Gaza, the situation remains catastrophic.

To ease the extreme pressure on refugees in MENA, and enable localized responses, we urge collective action as follows:

**First, the legal uncertainty faced by many refugees in MENA must end.** The lack of formal legal status continues to hinder refugee access to essential services and sustainable livelihoods, and render them vulnerable to human rights violations. We welcome existing efforts to establish national frameworks

regularizing refugee status– but they should incorporate safeguards of non-refoulement prohibition, non-discrimination and legality.

**Second, we urge that donor governments, UNHCR, and other response actors must ensure funding constraints do not weaken access to gender-sensitive services.** Donors must prioritize funding for GBV and essential services targeting women and female-headed households.

**Third, we urge Member States to recognize that border externalization and deterrence measures have not reduced irregular movements but instead exposed at-risk populations to life-threatening violations.** Onward movements from across MENA are rarely a matter of choice. Redirecting resources toward protection, development, and localized solutions is essential to addressing root causes.

**Fourth, the international community must better enable refugee-led responses.** Even as local actors are forced to fill gaps, existing funding structures continue to relegate them as subcontractors rather than equal partners. Many RLO staff members are operating on volunteer basis to absorb growing needs. We urge international actors to expand innovative financing solutions in pooled grants, fiscal-hosting arrangements, and increase risk appetite in direct funding.

**Finally, international actors must do more to protect RLO and CBOs operating in MENA.** Many local organizations operate in restrictive civic spaces, placing refugee staff in added risk. We urge UNHCR to shift toward a more impactful complementary role for RLOs, integrating their operational needs into protection strategies, providing legal aid guidance and risk mitigation plans for at-risk RLO staff, and sharing expertise to help them navigate national regulatory environments.

This statement is available on [ICVANETWORK.ORG](http://ICVANETWORK.ORG).

Thank you.