

Regional Flash Update #4

Syria situation crisis

16 December 2024

Key Highlights

- In the last few days, several more UNHCR community centres inside Syria have re-opened, with approximately 82% of centres now delivering critical protection and assistance in all governorates. UNHCR is present at border crossings both inside Syria and in neighbouring countries.
- UNHCR teams in Aleppo travelled to Bab Al Hawa border crossing on 16 December for the first time in years, visiting the main border area, meeting with refugee returnees and listening to their expectations and priorities.
- On 16 December, UNHCR released an [updated position on returns to Syria](#), which underscores the principle of *nonrefoulement* (or no forced returns) and the right of Syrians to access asylum. While protection risks related to persecution by the former Government have receded, other risks for particularly vulnerable groups may persist or emerge.
- In light of the rapidly changing dynamics and evolving context in the country, UNHCR continues to monitor the population movements, and engage with refugee and IDP communities track intentions, address questions and ensure information is available.



UNHCR staff speak with women at a partner-run community centre in Aleppo about their needs following the recent offensive in the city (11 December). © UNHCR

Country updates

Syria

On 16 December, the first mission from UNHCR Aleppo to the Bab Al Hawa border with Türkiye from inside Syria took place. The journey was smooth with no road blockages or incidents reported. The UNHCR Aleppo team met with refugee returnees from Türkiye, who expressed happiness to be back in Syria. They originated from different areas in Syria, including Hama, Homs, Aleppo, and Idlib and identified shelter, unexploded ordinances and remnants of war, and lack of services and livelihoods as key concerns upon their return.

Coordinating closely with UNHCR Syria and Aleppo teams, the UNHCR cross border team from Gaziantep has conducted 139 assessments with Syrian returnees from Türkiye since 12 December. The data reveals that 80% of families are returning to their former homes in Aleppo, Idlib, Hama, and Damascus governorates. However, significant challenges persist. As observed at Bab Al Hawa, the primary barrier to returning home is the lack of access to housing and shelter. Those who do not return to their former places of residence mainly go to Idlib governorate. Improved security inside Syria and high living costs in Türkiye were cited as the main reasons for return. Refugee returnees' priority needs include long-term housing solutions, cash support to meet basic needs, and legal assistance with civil documentation.

The Emergency Relief Coordinator (ERC), Tom Fletcher, arrived in Syria on 16 December, crossing through the border from Lebanon. On the Syrian side, a UNHCR team and the Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC) met the delegation, briefing the ERC on the border situation, dynamics, and UNHCR's response for refugee returns and departures.

Lebanon

Three official border crossings in Lebanon continue to be open: Arida in the north and Qaa and Masnaa in the Bekaa. On the morning of 16 December, the Arida crossing faced temporary restrictions due to airstrikes on the Syrian side the previous day. Syrians have continued to travel from Arida into Syria but in relatively low numbers.

Syrians attempting to cross into Lebanon in general have to meet specific visa criteria. At Masnaa border, several thousand Syrians who did not meet entry requirements had become stranded in no-man's land during the last week. However, by 15 December, only a few people remained near the border unable to enter. UNHCR and partners provided immediate assistance to those stranded and is maintaining a response capacity should more people arrive.

On 14 December, the Minister of Social Affairs and humanitarian organizations (UNHCR, UNICEF, WFP and OCHA) visited Hermel-Baalbek in Bekaa. Discussions focused on the significant surge in new arrivals from Syria since 8 December, including Lebanese returning to Lebanon as well as Syrians entering irregularly. According to government sources, the total number of arrivals has reached approximately 85,000, including around 20,000 Lebanese. A comprehensive response plan for both populations (Lebanese and Syrians) is being put into place by humanitarian actors.

Türkiye

On 13 December, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan announced that Syrians are gradually beginning to return but that those wishing to stay in Türkiye are welcome to do so. The Minister of Interior provided detailed information during the budget talks at the parliament, stating that before 8 December daily returns were between 200 – 300 individuals, while over the last five days, daily figures increased to 1,300 – 1,850, reaching a total of over 7,600 from 9-13 December.

UNHCR Türkiye continues its monitoring of return processes at all three border crossings from Türkiye to Syria in Hatay province as well as other locations.

Jordan

In the preceding days, activity at the Jaber land border remained normal. A few buses were observed reportedly transporting individuals to the border with Syria. From 8-13 December, some 340 Syrian refugees registered with UNHCR in Jordan are estimated to have returned to Syria through the Jaber border. The number is based on data currently available to UNHCR and does not necessarily reflect the entire number of returns.

On the question of returns, UNHCR keeps regular communication with refugees through helplines and closely monitors digital channels both to understand the most common concerns and to identify rumours and misinformation. In addition to queries regarding availability of assistance and security conditions in Syria, some refugees have shared concerns about resettlement and extension of their asylum-seeker certificates in Jordan. Some refugees with stable incomes and those married to Jordanians expressed preferences to stay. Some indicated they were waiting for the winter to be over or are planning return around school semesters. Refugees also articulated issues regarding a lack of clarity on renewing and extending passports and other travel documents to return to Syria. UNHCR is working with the Government and partners to provide timely answers to these questions and concerns.

The UNHCR Representative to Jordan Maria Stavropoulou gave interviews to local news outlets [Jordan Times](#) and [Al Rai](#). While speaking about UNHCR's work in Jordan, the Representative reaffirmed the UNHCR's respect for refugees' right to voluntarily return to their home country in safety and dignity and stressed the importance of giving refugees the time and space to make decisions for themselves and their families.

Iraq

Since 8 December, the border crossing at Al-Qaim has been officially closed for entry to and exit from Iraq. Only exceptional cases of Iraqis in Syria entering Iraq, and Syrians in Iraq exiting to Syria are being approved after clearance from authorities.

Since 13 December, movements of Syrian visa holders through the Peshkabour border crossing between Syria and the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KR-I) have largely continued as usual with an average of 400 arrivals per day. Most Syrians crossing into Iraq are from Hassakeh and Raqqqa governorates and indicated they are coming to Iraq to visit family in KR-I and will return to Syria afterwards. However, some arrivals, particularly those holding a second passport, stated they are transiting through KR-I, using Erbil airport as a departure point for onward travel.

Useful links

- [Regional Flash Update #3, Syria Situation Crisis](#)
- [UNHCR Position on Returns to the Syrian Arab Republic \(16 December\)](#)
- [UNHCR Syria Representative Briefing note \(13 December\)](#)
- [Syria Situation Data Portal](#)

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