

# Introduction

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The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 laid bare the extreme vulnerability of migrants and refugees to economic and public health crises, while underscoring the essential role they play in societies and communities in their countries of origin and destination. They have appeared at the forefront of the pandemic response by providing essential services, including health care, cleaning, domestic work, agriculture and food production. Moreover, fears surrounding a potential dramatic drop in remittances during the pandemic have re-emphasised the crucial lifeline that remittances represent for families in several low- and middle-income countries.

The significant volume and complexity of migration in the Arab region, and the often protracted forced-displacement dynamics, underline the importance of policies, measures and response frameworks that reduce the vulnerabilities of migrants and refugees, and that build an environment which mitigates inherent challenges and harnesses benefits. The pandemic has reinforced the fact that countries need to accelerate their efforts to protect the human and labour rights of migrants and refugees, and to empower them as contributors to development, guided by roadmaps provided in global frameworks, namely the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable development, the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration, and the Global Compact on Refugees.

In this light, the present report builds on previous editions of the Situation Report on International Migration in the Arab Region, with a thematic focus on the plight of migrants and refugees in the COVID-19 crisis. It delves into how pre-existing structural barriers

and historical challenges exacerbate their vulnerabilities, and presents actionable recommendations to policymakers and practitioners on protecting and empowering migrants and refugees, and strengthening their resilience to adversities.

The present report follows a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative and qualitative analysis. It relies on multiple data sources, including statistical data from multiple United Nations entities, official government publications and information, United Nations reports, thematic studies and situation analyses, news resources, peer-reviewed academic literature, and primary data acquired through interviews. When relying on data from the Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA), the report uses the United Nations definition of an international migrant as “any person who changes his or her country of usual residence. A person’s country of usual residence is that in which the person lives, (...) where he or she normally spends the daily period of rest”.<sup>1</sup> This definition is used only for statistical purposes. As noted by UNHCR, refugees are defined and protected in international law. Refugees are people outside their country of origin because of feared persecution, conflict, violence, or other circumstances that have seriously disturbed public order, and who, as a result, require international protection. The term ‘migrant’, on the other hand, is not defined under international law and is sometimes used differently by different stakeholders. In the present report, ‘international migration’ refers to movement of persons who leave their country of origin, or the country of habitual residence, to establish themselves either permanently or temporarily in another country.

An international frontier is therefore crossed. This is distinct from forced displacement. Traditionally, the word ‘migrant’ has been used to designate people who move by choice rather than to escape conflict or persecution, usually across an international border. This can include finding work or pursuing education, but also for reuniting with family or other reasons. People may also move to alleviate significant hardships that arise from natural disasters, famine or extreme poverty. Those who leave their countries for these reasons would not usually be considered refugees under international law.<sup>2</sup>

**Chapter 1** provides an overview of the latest migration and forced displacement trends and figures in the Arab region and at the subregional level, in line with the first objective of the Global Compact for Migration, which calls for the collection and analysis of accurate and disaggregated data on migration as a basis for evidence-based policies. The chapter also includes information on remittances to and from the region, on the cost of sending remittances, and an overview of key factors influencing migration and forced displacement in the Arab region.

**Chapter 2** presents an update of policy developments and international efforts on

the governance of migration and forced displacement involving Arab countries between April 2019 and December 2020. Main policy areas under scrutiny include labour migration; irregular migration; trafficking in persons and smuggling of migrants; forced displacement and refugee protection; admissions, visas, residency permits and naturalization; expatriate and diaspora governance; and other measures and developments. The chapter also describes developments in global, interregional, regional, subregional and bilateral cooperation relating to migration and forced displacement that Arab countries have been involved in.

**Chapter 3** examines some of the structural challenges experienced by migrant workers prior to and during the COVID-19 pandemic in diverse areas, such as health, education, employment, mobility, and connectivity, and discusses how the pandemic has disproportionately impacted migrant workers and refugee communities across the Arab region. The chapter concludes with a set of policy recommendations drawn from countries’ experiences, which serve as a basis for collective work towards building forward for a better future for migrants and refugees in the region.