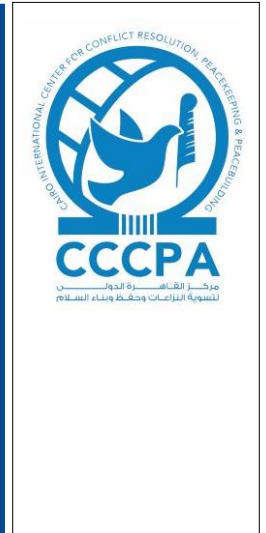
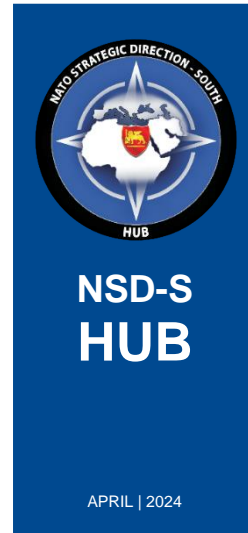




# Women, Children and Vulnerable Groups in Displacement Settings in the Middle East

ASSESSING DISPROPORTIONATE NEEDS AND INSECURITIES



The **NATO STRATEGIC DIRECTION-SOUTH HUB (NSD-S HUB)** was established at Allied Joint Force Command Naples in order to improve NATO awareness and understanding of common global challenges in the area of interest and to identify opportunities for cooperation with selected Partners, while contributing to the overall coordination of NATO activities and efforts.

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CCCPA is a Centre of Excellence, whose mission is to prevent, mitigate, and resolve violent conflicts including through building capacities and improving community level resilience to peace and security challenges. CCCPA also serves as the Executive Secretariat of the Aswan Forum for Sustainable Peace and Development, a high-level African owned platform aimed at strengthening the interlinkages between peace, security and development by bridging the gap between policy and practice.

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## ACRONYMS

CCCPA	The Cairo International Centre for Conflict Resolution, Peacekeeping, and Peacebuilding
CGS	Centre for Global Studies
CSTF	Iraq Cross Sector Task Force
HDPN	Humanitarian, Development, and Peace Nexus
IDPs	Internally Displaced Persons
MENA	The Middle East North Africa
MWMN	Mediterranean Women Mediators Network
NAPs	National Action Plans
NATO	The North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NSD-S HUB	The NATO Strategic Direction-South Hub
PAM	Parliamentary Assembly of the Mediterranean
SEA	Sexual Exploitation and Abuse
SMEs	Subject Matter Experts
UNSCR	United Nations Security Council Resolution
WIIS	Women in International Security
WPS	Women, Peace and Security

## BACKGROUND

The adoption of the WPS agenda has brought the plight of women in conflict settings to the fore, recognizing not only the disproportionate impact of conflict on them, but also the centrality of the roles they play in conflict resolution, peacebuilding and post-conflict recovery efforts. Due to its impact in exacerbating the vulnerabilities of women and girls, the crisis of forced displacement is integrated within the WPS agenda under the fourth pillar - “Relief and Recovery” -. This is reflected through the pillar’s emphasis on ensuring that the differentiated relief needs of women, girls and groups in vulnerable situations are addressed and met, with a particular focus on safety provision in camps, and access to needed humanitarian assistance. Despite existing efforts, the differentiated vulnerabilities of women on the move receive relatively marginal attention and are inconsistently addressed in WPS policies and programmes, with only a few National Action Plans (NAPs) integrating forced displacement into their strategic goals and planning.<sup>1</sup>

The impact of protracted conflict and violence on irregular mobility and displacement presents the Middle East with a complex set of interlinked challenges to peace, security, and sustainable development. Large-scale forced displacement in the region has been adversely impacting livelihoods, safety and security, with increasing threats of trafficking and smuggling. Furthermore, it has been placing an added pressure on the capacity of governments to host displaced persons, which raises the imperative of responsibility sharing, in addition to addressing the root causes of conflict. By the end of 2022, the Middle East North Africa (MENA) region had witnessed more than 16.2 million displaced persons which amounts to 23% of the global number of internally displaced persons (IDPs). This renders MENA the second highest concentration of IDPs, with 80% of displacement triggered by armed conflict and violence.<sup>2</sup> Currently, the region is witnessing a new high in forced displacement, with the disproportionate use of force in Gaza resulting in a dire humanitarian and displacement crisis, with civilians, in particular women and children, disproportionately impacted the burden of the escalation of hostilities.

Mindful of the above, the insecurities experienced by individuals pre, during, and post their displacement journey, particularly women, children, and groups in vulnerable situations, are aggravated, whereby displaced communities are exposed to compounded protection risks and exclusion. The inability to pursue employment opportunities and the lack of access to basic services trap displaced persons in a cycle of hardship and deprivation, threatening their survival and livelihoods. Furthermore, IDP and refugee camps are often sites of extreme insecurity for women and girls who are disproportionately affected by multiple forms of violence including sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA), sexual enslavement, kidnapping, and trafficking. In the same vein, the disruption of education as a result of displacement does not only compromise the development outcomes of children and youths, but also forces them to adopt negative coping mechanisms and exposes them to the risk of radicalization, and recruitment into armed groups and criminal networks. Such conditions also present a fertile ground for traffickers and smugglers to exploit the needs of affected

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<sup>1</sup> Zeynep Kaya, “Connecting Conflict-Related Displacement with WPS,” LSE Middle East Centre, May 4, 2020, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mec/2019/01/15/connecting-conflict-related-displacement-with-wps/>

<sup>2</sup> International Organization for Migration (IOM), Jun 22 2023. DTM Regional Snapshot: The Middle East & North Africa - Quarterly Report (January – March 2023). IOM, Middle East and North Africa. <https://dtm.iom.int/reports/regional-snapshot-middle-east-north-africa-quarterly-report-january-march-2023>

communities.

## INTRODUCTION

This Summary Report is the result of the Joint Expert Workshop titled “**Women, Children and Vulnerable Groups in Displacement Settings in the Middle East: Assessing Disproportionate Needs and Insecurities**” that was co-organized with the Cairo International Centre for Conflict Resolution, Peacekeeping and Peacebuilding (CCCPA), and took place in Naples in November 2023.

The workshop brought together Subject Matter Experts (SMEs) from the Middle East and beyond to engage in an interactive and action-oriented discussion on bridging the disconnect between the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda and forced displacement. It is also in line with both the NSD-S Hub and CCCPA’s priority of mainstreaming the WPS agenda in their areas of work. On its part, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) has been active in mainstreaming the WPS agenda, and more broadly the Human Security perspective, where the NATO Strategic Concept adopted at the NATO Summit in Madrid 2022 underscored the alliance’s commitment to integrating the agenda across all its core tasks. In the same vein, CCCPA has been active in advancing inclusive approaches that address the interlinkages between peace, security and a range of different issues such as sustainable development and displacement, bringing unique expertise from thirty years of working on peace and security issues in Africa and the Arab world.

The collaboration between the two entities is grounded in their respective commitment to address the challenges facing the region, in a comprehensive manner that advances mutual understanding and contributes to greater dialogue, and ultimately solutions. With the view of advancing the meaningful implementation of the WPS agenda, the workshop succeeded in:

- exploring the experiences of women, children, and communities in vulnerable situations in displacement settings in the Middle East, with the view of understanding their security and humanitarian needs;
- identifying key challenges in advancing the fourth pillar of the WPS agenda, and bridging the policy-practice gaps in responding to gender dimensions in the context of forced displacement; and
- putting forward recommendations on pathways to leverage the potential of the WPS agenda in advancing durable solutions to forced displacement.

### Panel 1: Connecting the Women, Peace and Security Agenda and the Displacement Crisis in the Middle East

This panel discussion included contributions from **Ambassador Soad Shalaby**, Director General, Egyptian African Centre for Women; **Dr. Loredana Teodorescu**, President, Women in International Security Italy (WIIS), Head, Mediterranean Women Mediators Network (MWMN); **Anna Cervi**, Member of MWMN; and **Assal Mahmoud**, Associate Program Officer, CCCPA, as moderator. This session explored the linkages between the WPS agenda and the ongoing displacement crisis in the Middle East, and the challenges in leveraging the potential of this agenda in advancing effective and inclusive frameworks for addressing forced displacement in the region.

Although the fourth pillar of the WPS agenda calls for ensuring that the differentiated relief needs of women, girls and groups in vulnerable situations are met, especially in relation to safety in camps and accessing humanitarian assistance, key implementation gaps remain which exacerbate the vulnerability of such groups. The Middle East region has the second highest concentration of IDPs, with most displacement in the region triggered by armed conflict, particularly in Gaza, Iraq, Libya, Syria, and Yemen. In these contexts, gender continues to influence experiences of forced displacement, where women and girls are disproportionately affected by protection risks, including SEA during their displacement journey, and when resettling and accessing humanitarian assistance. Against this backdrop, this session shed light on the potential of the WPS agenda as a framework for inclusive responses to forced displacement in the Middle East.

With conflict being the number one trigger for displacement in the Middle East, the panellists highlighted that there is a need for conflict-sensitivity in designing and implementing solutions for displacement. In this regard, conflict-sensitivity should also take into account conflict typologies in the region, particularly occupation, and the ways in which each typology hinders the implementation of the WPS agenda and exacerbates the crisis of forced displacement.

They also noted that the majority of displacement interventions in the region are not gender-responsive, and do not leverage the full potential of the WPS agenda. In particular, displacement interventions tend to focus on meeting the immediate protection needs of women and girls in displacement settings at the expense of their participation and inclusion. For instance, and despite the fact that reinforcing women's capacities to act as agents in relief and recovery is a cornerstone of the United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325, women are significantly underrepresented in camp committees, which limits their ability to influence decisions that shape camp life.

The panellists also emphasized that failure to recognize the different patterns of displacement in the region results in reducing the multiplicity of experiences of displacement amongst women. The majority of efforts aimed at advancing the implementation of the WPS agenda in the context of displacement primarily respond to the set of challenges women experience in camp settings such as access to humanitarian aid. Nonetheless, women who experience urban and out-of-camp displacement encounter a different set of challenges that necessitates a shift from humanitarian approaches to economic and developmental ones. Furthermore, meeting the needs of women in out-of-camp settings is even more challenging given that both humanitarian and development actors often lack direct communication channels with them and struggle to collaborate meaningfully with local and national authorities who lead service provision in such contexts.

The plethora of "widow camps" in the region, where women and children previously associated with terrorist groups reside, requires developing interventions that are sensitive to the gender-displacement-radicalization nexus. Discussions highlighted the deteriorated living conditions in these camps and the limited humanitarian access to them, which results in huge service provision gaps, leaving camp inhabitants, particularly children, vulnerable to exploitation and re-indoctrination. Furthermore, the need to advance gender-responsive and tailored disengagement, rehabilitation and social reintegration programmes for inhabitants of such camps, taking into consideration their degree of involvement, was also highlighted.

## Panel 2: Disproportionate Needs and Insecurities of Vulnerable Groups in Displacement Settings in the Middle East

This panel discussion included contributions from **Hon. Gennaro Migliore**, President Emeritus, Parliamentary Assembly of the Mediterranean (PAM), Director of the PAM's Centre for Global Studies (CGS), **Suzan Aref**, Former Coordinator, Iraq Cross Sector Task Force (CSTF) on United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325, Director, Women Empowerment Organization, **Dr. Jasmin Lilian Diab**, Director, Institute for Migration Studies, the Lebanese American University, and **Ingi Rahsed**, Associate Program Officer, CCCPA. The panellists shed light on the disproportionate needs and insecurities of different groups in displacement settings in the Middle East, and the complex set of interlinked challenges to peace, security and sustainable development brought about by protracted displacement in the region.

The Middle East continues to grapple with conflict-induced displacement whereby the region is faced with a challenging number of forcibly displaced persons, with the majority concentrated in various refugee and IDP camps. In these camps, women, children, and groups in vulnerable situations disproportionately encounter different protection risks including physical and sexual violence, SEA, trafficking, as well as discrimination, and exclusion. These poor living conditions might push displaced communities toward negative coping mechanisms, and render such groups susceptible to recruitment by extremist and criminal groups who exploit their grievances to instil their ideology and derive support for their malicious acts. This session unpacked the differentiated vulnerabilities and needs of people on the move in the Middle East, and their impact on exacerbating insecurity, while highlighting means to leverage the potential of the WPS agenda in advancing inclusive and durable solutions to conflict-induced displacement.

Efforts to address displacement challenges in the Middle East should go beyond one-size-fits-all approaches to tailored interventions that address the various experiences of displaced communities. Discussions highlighted the need for a nuanced understanding of the differentiated needs among the different displaced groups, and among displaced women themselves. For instance, in terms of return and reintegration, the experiences of women vary differently depending on a set of factors that predate their displacement journeys. Women who had better access to education and livelihood opportunities prior to displacement often find it easier to reintegrate into the labour market and secure sustainable economic opportunities. In the same vein, women who encountered sexual violence at some point during their displacement journey suffer from psychological distress and usually deal with stigmatization from their communities of return which limits their ability to reintegrate meaningfully.

With millions forced to leave their homes and lands in the backdrop of the current escalations in the region, humanitarian diplomacy is of paramount importance in influencing stakeholders to ensure humanitarian access and address pressing needs. In this increasingly polarized and fragmented landscape, the panellists underscored the urgent need for coordinating displacement responses, through information sharing mechanisms between humanitarian organizations and local and national authorities. Additionally, discussions highlighted the need for humanitarian diplomacy to be rooted in local priorities, while giving displaced communities the opportunity to shape aid responses. Towards this end, humanitarian diplomacy efforts should render equal attention to the process of humanitarian provision as well as its outcomes, including through enhancing community-based participation by fostering the involvement of



displaced and host communities in needs analysis and humanitarian programming.

Additionally, the speakers highlighted the need to move from crisis management toward prevention and preparedness. This could be achieved through a holistic approach that prioritizes the sequential shift from aid-centred humanitarian interventions to sustainable development approaches. In this regard, the panellists stressed the need to put national and local ownership at the core while financing, designing, and implementing interventions across the Humanitarian-Development-Peace (HDP) nexus. Furthermore, such interventions should account for the need to complement short-term humanitarian and immediate response with long-term recovery and development plans.

Discussions among the experts emphasized the importance of responsibility sharing and multilateral cooperation in delivering services to displaced persons, supporting host countries and devising solutions to forced displacement. This requires the redesign and recalibration of partnerships among host countries, countries of origin, donor countries, international organizations, and other stakeholders, with the view of leveraging the respective capabilities of each actor in materializing collective commitments related to easing the pressure on host communities, and creating a conducive environment for safe, dignified, and voluntary return.

## CONCLUSIONS

With displacement on the rise in the Middle East, the number of people at risk of being exploited through organized criminal networks or getting recruited by terrorist groups increases. In these contexts, women and children are disproportionately impacted, which warrants the need for connecting the WPS agenda to responses to the displacement crisis in the region. Against this backdrop, the workshop aimed to understand the synergies between WPS and responses to displacement, with the view of developing tangible recommendations for addressing the gendered dimensions of forced displacement. These recommendations include:

- Leveraging the WPS agenda as a framework for advancing effective and inclusive responses to forced displacement, particularly in relation to understanding the different patterns of displacement in the Middle East, and the multiplicity of experiences of displacement amongst women, children and groups in vulnerable situations;
- Advancing the meaningful implementation of the WPS agenda in the context of forced displacement, including through balancing between the protection of displaced women, and enhancing their participation and inclusion, particularly in relation to camp management and shaping aid priorities;
- Prioritizing tackling the root causes of conflict as a sustainable approach to addressing protracted displacement in the region and enhancing the conflict-sensitivity of displacement interventions;
- Placing context-specificity at the heart of responses to forced displacement in the Middle East, taking into account the different patterns of displacement in the region.
- Mainstreaming the gender-displacement-radicalization nexus across humanitarian responses targeting the “widow camps” that exist in different areas in the region;

- Utilizing humanitarian diplomacy as an effective tool to ensuring the uninterrupted flow of humanitarian aid, and addressing the pressing needs of affected communities, in light of the escalating hostilities in the region;
- Complementing short-term humanitarian and emergency responses with long-term recovery and development planning, and prioritizing the sequential shift from aid-centric humanitarian approaches to holistic gender-responsive economic and developmental approaches; and
- Promoting responsibility sharing and multilateral cooperation in fulfilling collective commitments aimed at advancing durable solutions to forced displacement.



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