



Remedying Displacement across Arab Lands

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Introduction

The severity of the Arab region's displacement crisis presents an urgent policy dilemma for Arab states, individually and collectively. Remedy and reparation have long been needed not only to alleviate the consequent suffering and loss, but also to deter such [gross violations](#) [\[AR\]](#)¹ in future.

At the time of the 1st Arab Land Conference (2018), the displaced and refugee Arab population across Arab states numbered at least 33.4 million, according to available data compiled by Habitat International Coalition's Housing and Land Rights Network (HIC-HLRN). By 2022, GLTN and UN Habitat [published](#) estimates, ranging from over 21 million to over 40 million displaced persons of all nationalities across the region.² However, by 2025, available figures actually indicate over 49.8 million Arabs³ deprived of their housing, land and property (HLP) and related rights in their own region, a number roughly equivalent to the entire population of Sudan.

This latest figure excludes the many migrants and refugees from other regions hosted in the Arab countries but does account for Arab households within the region living with displacement and dispossession due to conflict, occupation and war. The 2025 total also comprises 3.4 million so far displaced by climate change.⁴ As high as these numbers are, and likely to increase, they do not include persons displaced in the context of development and resettlement projects, or other forms of local forced evictions.

This upward trend in the number of victims marks a 38% increase in unremedied displacements over 2018. Even without the ominous increase by accounting for the climate-change displaced Arab citizens, the remaining 42.6 million show a net 27% increase in displaced persons from conflict, war and occupation since 2018. The interim reduction in numbers in certain countries, with returns and/or resettlement (e.g., Iraq, Libya and Syria) during the period, has been offset by new conflict-displaced others (e.g., Lebanon, Palestine, Sudan and Syria).

An Arab-region approach?

The crisis also poses an opportunity for cross-border cooperation to apply the [Pinheiro Principles](#)⁵ [AR] for restoring housing, land and property rights to millions of Arab citizens eligible for [reparation](#)⁶ [AR⁷]. Lessons learned over decades also point to the need for deep reforms in land administration among the remedial and preventive measures to be taken.

Also in 2025, the UN published its long-awaited [handbook](#) for implementing the Pinheiro Principles in the region⁸ [AR]. That guide offers another tool for formulating regional policy and implementation approaches at remedy and reparation for the tens of millions of displaced and dispossessed Arab households.

Regional approaches present several advantages:

- While international civil servant neutrality is still valued, an Arab regional approach would best address local specificity in local language and within a common culture.
- A regional normative instrument enshrining relevant state commitments and obligations could help fill housing and land policy gaps and harmonize normative dissonance across the region, whereas not all Arab states are party to the same legal regimes, regional systems, relevant treaties and other instruments.
- The cross-border impacts of conflict, environmental hazards and climate change call for interstate remedies that also cover HLP restitution.
- Operating from a base of knowledge shared regionally, local actors close to issues, including organs of the state such as local authorities and municipalities, could develop mechanisms of relevant collaboration.
- The proximity of regional actors means that long-term interests and accountability are likely built into outcomes.⁹
- Pooling regional resources of all kinds could optimize economies of scale to maximize remedial impact and measures to prevent future HLP rights violations.

Despite the magnitude and trending increase of the Arab displacement crisis, its known vectors, festering injustice and accumulating costs to victims, an Arab regional approach to HLP-restitution is still wanting. However, encouraging multilateral precedents are found in the post-war Balkans and Africa's Great Lakes Region. The latter example also elaborates on the Pinheiro Principles by proposing to use traditional dispute-resolution mechanisms and alternative forms of evidence¹⁰ such as geographical boundary markers, community mapping, and consulting witnesses to affirm HLP-restitution rights.¹¹

A potential framework for such a regional approach could be the 22-country Arab Regional Consultative Process on Migration and Refugee Affairs, which began in 2015. However, its current 12-theme focus omits the subjects of intra-regional refugees and displaced persons and HLP restitution.¹² The current UN Habitat [regional climate-change strategy](#) cites [one project](#)¹³ on

water ‘resilience’ of cross-border climate-displaced persons in Lebanon and Jordan, but offers no remedy for HLP losses.¹⁴

Understanding the vectors and impacts of displacement across the Arab states should encourage governments and civil society to close gaps in regional HLP restitution policy responses. Conversely, the lack of such remedy continues to sever the affected people’s relationship to their land, deepen social injustice, erode public trust in government and the international order, while relegating an Arab population as great as all Sudan to permanent penury and destitution.

Assessed needs and civil initiatives

Civil society initiatives have tried to fill—or, at least, identify—gaps in the efforts needed in the official sphere. In Yemen, the Arab Youth Sustainable Development Network (ASDN) [reports](#) the findings of research and consultations with relevant Yemeni actors on displacement due to land dispossession in the context of (1) political corruption and tribal rule before 2011 and (2) the impact of the current conflict.¹⁵ Their analysis has indicated conditions needed to restore displaced Yemenis’ HLP in the pursuit of restorative justice.

The security, legal and administrative challenges include realizing displaced women’s property rights, generating employment and restoring infrastructure. Nonetheless, ASDN urges reviving transitional-justice processes and activating the land registry in cooperation with affected persons within a recovery and reconstruction plan that enables lively civic participation and entrepreneurship. ASDN envisages engaging youth within a normative framework that promotes women’s rights and leadership, does justice to marginalized communities, pursues food sovereignty, and balances rural and urban development with the maximum of available resources.

The Insight organization, in Syria, has [typologized](#) displacement and HLP issues in northern Syria during the 14-years conflict in that country, not least the challenges facing returnees in restoring HLP rights. There, too, multiple discrimination disadvantages women in both displacement and return, often without legal support, or needed civil documentation.

In that context, foreign (Turkish) militias’ seizure of land and infrastructure has deprived northern Syria regions of their vital water resources, coupled with ongoing home confiscations, land grabs and ensuing displacement.¹⁶ [AR]¹⁷ On Iraq, Insight assimilates lessons learned from UN Habitat’s HLP-restitution practice in Sinjar.¹⁸

Deriving lessons and commitments from its 2024 regional Land Forum dedicated to remedying the pan-Arab displacement and dispossession crisis, HIC-HLRN promotes a collective civil society approach grounded in states’ human rights obligations.¹⁹ [AR] The Network’s efforts through its

[Violation Database](#), [Impact-assessment Tools](#) and [regular monitoring](#) have demonstrated also the need for greater awareness of the applicable norms, more-diligent reporting, and advocacy vis-à-vis governments across the region toward the goal of more-integrated and complementary HLP-restitution programs.

Endnotes

- ¹ The UN Commission on Human Rights (UNCHR) has classified forced eviction as a “gross violation” of human rights, in particular the right to adequate housing. See UNCHR, “forced eviction,” resolution 1993/77, 10 March 1993, <http://www.hlrn.org/img/documents/ECN4199377%20en.pdf> [AR]; and “Prohibition of forced evictions,” resolution 2004/28, 16 April 2004, para. 1, at: http://www.hlrn.org/img/documents/E-CN_4-RES-2004-28.pdf [AR].
- ² Mona Khechen and Petra Samaha, *Land Governance, Natural Resources and Climate Change in the Arab Region* (Nairobi: UN-Habitat, 2022), p. 92, citing UN Fund for Population Affairs (UNFPA) at 2019, https://arablandinitiative.glt.net/sites/default/files/2023-09/docs/land-governance-natural-resources-and-climate-change-in-the-arab-region-web_0.pdf. See Internal Displacement Monitoring Center (IDMC), “A Decade of Displacement in the Middle East and North Africa,” https://api.internal-displacement.org/sites/default/files/publications/documents/IDMC_MenaReport_final.pdf; and UNFPA Arab States, “Migration”, 28 May 2020, <https://arabstates.unfpa.org/en/topics/migration-1>, respectively.
- ³ “A Regional Approach to Remedy Displacement?” *Land Times/أحوال الأرض*, Issue 32 (May 2025), <http://landtimes.landpedia.org/newsdes.php?id=q25q&catid=ow==&edition=pWo=>.
- ⁴ The number is derived from comparing and combining multiple sources, including IDMC; UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), “[Refugee Data Finder](#)”; Othering and Belonging Institute, University of California at Berkeley, “[Climate Displacement and Resilience Database](#).”
- ⁵ Commission on Human Rights, Sub-Commission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities, “Housing and property restitution in the context of the return of refugees and internally displaced persons,” Final report of the Special Rapporteur, Paulo Sérgio Pinheiro, submitted in accordance with Sub-Commission resolution 2004/2, https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/552535/files/E_CN.4_Sub.2_2005_17-EN.pdf.
- ⁶ “Basic Principles and Guidelines on the Right to a Remedy and Reparation for Victims of Gross Violations of International Human Rights Law and Serious Violations of International Humanitarian Law,” A/RES/60/147, 21 March 2006, http://www.hlrn.org/img/documents/A_RES_60_147_remedy_reparation_en.pdf.
- ⁷ الجمعية العامة للأمم المتحدة، “المبادئ الأساسية والمبادئ التوجيهية بشأن الحق في الانتصاف والجبر لضحايا الانتهاكات الجسيمة للقانون الدولي لحقوق الإنسان والانتهاكات الخطيرة للقانون الإنساني الدولي”، A/RES/60/147، 21 آذار/مارس 2006، http://www.hlrn.org/img/documents/A_RES_60_147_remedy_reparation_ar.pdf
- ⁸ United Nations, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat), *Housing and Property Restitution for Refugees and Displaced Persons: Implementing the Pinheiro Principles in the Middle East and North Africa* (Nairobi: UN Habitat, 2025), https://arablandinitiative.glt.net/sites/default/files/2025-02/docs/mena-handbook-advance-version_en.pdf.
- ⁹ As learned in such situations as the 2004 Asian tsunami and aftermath, external agencies produced inadequate housing and provided temporary relief, but pulled out and remain unaccountable for the problems they left behind. See HIC-HLRN, *Battered Islands*, report of Fact-finding Mission No. 9 to tsunami-affected areas of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands (New Delhi: Housing and Land Rights network, 2006), https://www.hlrn.org/img/publications/battered_island_final.pdf.
- ¹⁰ Great Lakes Protocol on Property Rights of Returning Persons, International Conference on the Great Lakes Region, 30 November 2006, <https://icglr.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/Protocol-on-Property-Rights-of-Returning-Persons.pdf>.
- ¹¹ Barbara McCallin, “The role of restitution in post-conflict situations. In Land and post-conflict peacebuilding,” in John Unruh and Rhodri C. Williams, eds., *Land and Post-Conflict Peacebuilding* (London: Earthscan, 2013), p. 107, https://environmentalpeacebuilding.org/assets/Documents/LibraryItem_000_Doc_151.pdf.
- ¹² International Organization for Migration (IOM), “Arab Regional Consultative Process on Migration and Refugee Affairs (ARCP),” <https://www.iom.int/arab-regional-consultative-process-migration-and-refugee-affairs-arcp>.
- ¹³ Adaptation Fund, “Increasing the resilience of both displaced persons and host communities to climate change-related water challenges in Jordan and Lebanon,” <https://www.adaptation-fund.org/project/increasing-the-resilience-of-both-displaced-persons-and-host-communities-to-climate-change-related-water-challenges-in-jordan-and-lebanon/>.
- ¹⁴ UN Habitat, Regional Office for Arab States, *Climate Change Strategy for the Arab Region 2022 – 2025* (Nairobi: UN Habitat, 2022), p. 17, <https://unhabitat.org/climate-change-strategy-for-the-arab-region-2022-2025>.

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- ¹⁵ “HIC-HLRN at 3rd Arab Land Conference: Restoring HLP Rights across the Region,” *Land Times/أحوال الأرض* Issue 32 (May 2025), <http://landtimes.landpedia.org/newsdes.php?id=q21t&catid=ow==&edition=pWo=>.
- ¹⁶ *Defiled in Northern Syria: Rights to Housing, Land, Water and Livelihood* (Cairo: HIC-HLRN and Insight, 2024), <https://www.hlrn.org/activitydetails.php?title=Defiled-in-Northern-Syria:-Rights&id=qGpkaQ==>.
- ¹⁷ تدينس الحقوق في الشمال السوري، السكن، الأرض، المياه، سبل المعيشة (القاهرة: شبكة حقوق الأرض والسكن – التحالف الدولي للموئل وجمعية إنسايت، 2024) <https://www.hlrn.org/arabic/activitydetails.php?title=%D8%AA%D8%AF%D9%86%D9%8A%D8%B3-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AD%D9%82%D9%88%D9%82-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B4%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%84-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%8C&id=qGpkag>.
- ¹⁸ UN Habitat, *Emerging Land Tenure Issues Among Displaced Yazidis from Sinjar, Iraq: How chances of return may be further undermined by a discrimination policy dating back 40 years* (Nairobi: UN Habitat, 2015), https://unhabitat.org/sites/default/files/documents/2019-04/emerging_land_tenure_issues_among_displaced_yazidis_from_sinjar_iraq.pdf; United Nation – Iraq, “Recognition of Yazidi Land Ownership in Sinjar A Historic Achievement underscoring UN and Iraqi Joint Efforts,” 15 April 2025, <https://iraq.un.org/en/292797-recognition-yazidi-land-ownership-sinjar-historic-achievement-underscoring-un-and-iraqi>.
- ¹⁹ “Land Forum VIII: Remedies for Displacement,” *Land Times/أحوال الأرض* Issue 31 (December 2024), <https://landtimes.landpedia.org/newsdes.php?id=q2tk&catid=ow==&edition=pWk=>.