



The Middle East

Bahrain
Egypt
Iraq
Israel
Jordan
Kuwait
Lebanon
Oman
Qatar
Saudi Arabia
Syrian Arab Republic
United Arab Emirates
Yemen

Recent Developments

The Middle East continues to be marked by mounting tension over the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the war on international terrorism and the continued global dialogue over Iraq. As a consequence, the concept of national security has emerged as a predominant concern throughout the region, directly affecting policies concerning the entry and stay of asylum-seekers and refugees. Moreover, the pace of resettlement has slowed significantly. Resettlement decisions take longer, and departure dates have been set back, as security controls are tightened in the countries accepting refugees. Political uncertainty in the region has created the risk of further emergencies.

On a more positive note, the successful negotiations between Iraq and Iran regarding refugee repatriation has created some opportunities for refugees to return home. In addition, more than



two hundred Yemeni refugees have repatriated voluntarily from the Syrian Arab Republic. The ongoing talks between the conflicting parties in Sudan are also a source of hope for the large number of Sudanese refugees living in the Middle East region. The government of Yemen requested ExCom membership and the request is currently under consideration by ExCom. UNHCR, in close co-operation with the authorities in Yemen, started the registration campaign to document all urban refugees residing in the main cities.

Strategic Objectives

The protection situation in the Middle East is complex. Whereas three countries – Egypt, Israel and Yemen – have acceded to the 1951 Convention and the 1967 Protocol, the vast majority have not, nor have they passed refugee-related domestic legislation that meets international standards.

There are also large groups of stateless persons and a significant number of Palestinian refugees who fall under the mandate of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), which further complicates the situation. Although most of the Middle East countries host large numbers of Palestinian refugees, these persons are not mentioned here, as they do not fall under UNHCR's mandate.

One of UNHCR's strategic objectives for the region is, therefore, to encourage countries to accede to the 1951 Refugee Convention and its Protocol. One way of achieving this objective is by raising awareness of refugee issues among authorities, national NGOs and the general public through the press and other public information activities. By doing this, UNHCR hopes to strengthen the capacity of governments and humanitarian organisations to promote and establish national asylum procedures and develop domestic legislation.

UNHCR will provide international protection by conducting RSD and by trying to identify durable solutions for the refugees. UNHCR will also provide assistance to refugees and asylum-seekers in the region. The Office will continue to build on the work accomplished in recent years to reduce the backlog of asylum applications. Moreover, to discourage individuals from using asylum procedures to move to other countries for economic reasons, UNHCR will try to improve and harmonise regional policies on assistance criteria and resettlement submissions. UNHCR staff will also maintain close contact with the staff in the neighbouring countries for cross-reference of asylum applications, where necessary. UNHCR will continue to pursue with the governments of the asylum countries unhindered access to refugees and asylum-seekers in detention. Care will be taken to ensure that gender concerns are addressed and urgent assistance needs are met.

Due to the limited prospects for voluntary repatriation and local integration, resettlement to third countries is often the only viable durable solution. Host countries continue to look to UNHCR to facilitate resettlement in a timely manner. They also point to resettlement as a tangible indicator of international-burden sharing. UNHCR has committed itself to redoubling its efforts to ensure timely resettlement submissions for resettlement countries to decide on. However, since 11 September 2001, the departure of refugees accepted for resettlement has almost come to a halt, due to tighter security controls and longer processes in countries that accept refugees for resettlement.

Operations

In **Egypt**, the combined effect in 2002 of efforts to clear the accumulated backlog of asylum applications and a slowing down of resettlement departures was a significant increase in the refugee population in need of care and assistance (up 21 per cent during the first half of the year). As of 1 July 2002, a total of 8,794 refugees (mainly from Sudan) were assisted by UNHCR. Unless the rate of resettlement departures returns to pre-September 2001 levels, the gradual increase in the number of beneficiaries will continue. UNHCR will explore the possibility of jointly registering asylum applicants in co-operation with the Government and providing



Yemen: Refugees from Somalia in Al Gahin Camp.
UNHCR / P. Kessler



them with temporary documentation. If successful, the joint registration will form part of the local capacity building project to gradually hand over asylum responsibilities to the Government. However, UNHCR will continue – for the foreseeable future – as requested by the Government of Egypt, to conduct RSD and resettlement processing.

In **Iraq**, there are around 23,000 Iranian refugees and 13,000 Turkish refugees. The voluntary repatriation of Iranian refugees started in July 2002, and by the end of September 2002, a total of some 1,000 Iranian refugees had voluntarily repatriated with UNHCR assistance. The repatriation is expected to continue during 2003. The returnees will be provided with assistance for travelling back to their respective places of origin. While facilitating and assisting the voluntary repatriation of these refugees, UNHCR will continue its interventions with the Islamic Republic of Iran and Iraq to facilitate the voluntary repatriation of Iranian refugees from Al Tash Camp. For those unable to return to their country of origin, UNHCR will continue to seek resettlement opportunities in third countries.

UNHCR will also complement the Government's assistance programmes by providing limited assistance, such as the provision of water and medical services to these refugees. The recent announcement by the Government of Turkey regarding new measures adopted by its parliament – abolishing the death penalty and granting social rights to the Kurdish community in Turkey – shed new light on the possible future repatriation of some of the Turkish refugees in Iraq.

In **Jordan**, UNHCR provided international protection to some 1,000 refugees and several thousand asylum-seekers (mainly Iraqi) awaiting RSD. The most vulnerable and needy among the recognised refugees, including women and children, will continue to receive basic assistance, pending a more durable solution.

In **Lebanon**, UNHCR will continue to clear the existing backlog of asylum applications, thereby reducing the waiting period for RSD. Recognised refugees – over 3,000, mostly Iraqis – are generally allowed to reside in Lebanon for a one-year period. During this time, UNHCR is expected to find another solution for them, which, in the absence of

the option of local integration or any prospects of voluntary repatriation, is considered to be resettlement. UNHCR will also continue to provide basic assistance to vulnerable and needy refugees. The Lebanese authorities regard the resettlement programme and the provision of assistance to refugees as an integral part of international burden sharing, and resettlement is, therefore, seen as indispensable to preserve the institution of asylum in Lebanon. To further raise awareness of refugee issues, UNHCR will, as in previous years, conduct protection and refugee law workshops for interested government and law-enforcement officials during the year.

In **Saudi Arabia**, some 5,000 Iraqi refugees continue to be accommodated in the closed Rafha camp. The census conducted by UNHCR among the Rafha camp population in early 2002 indicated that of the current population of some 5,000 persons, 3,000 wished to be resettled in a third country. Given the chance, the other 2,000 would opt to remain in Saudi Arabia until such time that they could return to their country of origin. The Government of Saudi Arabia has agreed to allow the group of 2,000 to remain in Rafha refugee camp if the other 3,000 are resettled. UNHCR will continue to work closely with the refugees, the Government of Saudi Arabia and traditional resettlement countries to achieve this dual-track solution for the Rafha camp population.

UNHCR will continue to provide international protection to several thousand urban refugees as well as asylum-seekers arriving in Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.

In the **Syrian Arab Republic**, UNHCR's primary focus is to provide international protection to persons of concern, especially as no national refugee-related legislation has yet been passed. UNHCR will continue to provide modest assistance to some 3,500 recognised refugees, prioritising vulnerable groups.

By the end of September 2002, some 200 Yemeni refugees were voluntarily repatriated with UNHCR assistance and a few hundred more have expressed their wish to return to Yemen. UNHCR will continue to facilitate the voluntary repatriation

of Yemeni refugees, while pursuing resettlement for refugees of other nationalities who are unable to return to their country of origin. These activities have had a positive impact on the Government's attitude towards refugees and UNHCR, which in turn has led to greater tolerance towards non-Palestinian refugees and is increasing the space for refugee protection.

In **Yemen**, UNHCR will continue its limited assistance programme comprising primary education, health and vocational training as well as basic health assistance to roughly 10,000 refugees living in the refugee camps. UNHCR also conducts refugee status determination and, when possible, assists with voluntary repatriation. As requested, UNHCR will provide technical assistance and training to facilitate the Government of Yemen's assumption of refugee-related responsibilities, such as screening, registration and documentation. Following the establishment of the Refugee National Committee, UNHCR organised a number of promotions and training activities to enhance the body's campaign and strengthen its role. UNHCR, in close collaboration with relevant Yemen authorities, launched the registration campaign to document all urban refugees residing in Yemen, UNHCR will continue this exercise aiming at improving the protection condition of refugees. In conformity with the wish of the Government of Yemen, UNHCR will provide support deemed necessary to the authorities to establish a national legislation dealing with refugees in the year 2003. During 2003, UNHCR believes that up to 1,000 Somali new arrivals will seek refuge in Yemen.

Budget (USD)	
Country	Annual Programme
Egypt	3,400,450
Iraq	2,857,250
Israel	58,000
Jordan	1,529,689
Lebanon	2,939,736
Saudi Arabia	1,559,666
Syrian Arab Republic	1,737,126
Yemen	4,014,292
Total	18,096,209