



The Middle East

Recent developments

Four situations shape UNHCR's programme in the Middle East: the unabated flow of asylum-seekers and migrants from the Horn of Africa to Yemen; the Sudan situation and its impact on Egypt, the Syrian Arab Republic (Syria) and Jordan; the Iraq situation and its impact on surrounding countries hosting Iraqis; and the impact on host countries of the exceptionally protracted situation of Palestinian refugees.

The Middle East has been a generous host to refugees for decades, yet national security concerns in the region are testing States' traditionally tolerant attitude towards refugees and asylum-seekers. At the same time, there has been some reluctance on the part of resettlement countries, since the events of 11 September 2001, to accept refugees for resettlement from the Middle East.

Voluntary repatriation is a limited option for the major refugee groups in the Middle East until a political solution is achieved in the countries of origin, involving sufficient stability to allow for a secure and dignified return.

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



Meanwhile, the Middle East is continuing to receive more asylum-seekers. Since the 2003 Iraq war, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria have received a steady flow of Iraqis who are currently covered under the temporary protection regime. Week by week, as more Somali asylum-seekers and migrants risk the dangerous sea crossing to Yemen at the hands of people smugglers, many deaths at sea go unreported. Yemen continues to accept generously approximately 1,000 Somali and Ethiopian asylum-seekers per month.

UNHCR will seek to address the refugee situation in the Middle East with an increase in funding for assistance programmes in Yemen to meet the needs of the most vulnerable, and an increase in protection staffing in the region to bolster internal and external protection work, as well as capacity-building efforts.

Strategic objectives

UNHCR will support States to strengthen the protection space for refugees, asylum-seekers and

other persons of concern in the region. Where States have acceded to the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol, efforts now need to be directed at improving the practical implementation of the Convention, through the establishment of national legislation and structures to manage refugee and asylum issues. UNHCR will continue to advocate for other States to accede to the 1951 Refugee Convention and Protocol. UNHCR will also gradually strengthen its own protection capacity in the region to better support Governments and civil society institutions.

Working in close cooperation with the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) and all concerned stakeholders in the Middle East, UNHCR will strive to further address the protection problems faced by Palestinians living outside UNRWA's areas of operations.

Progress towards political solutions will in time open up humanitarian solutions for refugees in the Middle East. UNHCR will support durable solutions for Somali refugees in Yemen through the framework of the Comprehensive Plan of Action. The Office will continue to support the



Jordan: A UNHCR community services staff member with an Iraqi family living in Ruwaished camp. UNHCR / M. Cierna

reintegration of Iraqis who have chosen to return to Iraq through the establishment of community-based projects in returnee areas, recognizing that obstacles to return are significant and that some Iraqis may be returning to a situation of further internal displacement. Legal work on resolving the status of stateless persons, documentation and property issues, will support sustainable solutions for returnees and displaced persons in Iraq and the region.

UNHCR cannot achieve results alone; the Office will work to strengthen complementary partnerships with governmental and established civil society partners such as the League of Arab States and the Organization of the Islamic Conference, as well as reaching out to new partners such as universities and important public figures. There will be a renewed focus on public information and external relations activities to raise awareness amongst governments and civil society institutions on refugee issues and the role of UNHCR. It is a challenge in the subregion to try to put asylum issues firmly on the agenda when national security concerns and the Palestinian

problem preclude substantive discussion of such issues.

Operations

It is 25 years since **Egypt** ratified the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol. While its observance of the principle of *non-refoulement* has been admirable over the years, Egypt has maintained important reservations to the Convention and these affect the situation of refugees (personal status, access to primary education, public relief and assistance, social security and labour legislation). UNHCR will continue working with the Government of Egypt towards withdrawing the reservations and adopting domestic refugee legislation and structures to support national refugee status determination in accordance with its obligations as a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention. It has been over 50 years since UNHCR established an office in Egypt, but UNHCR still registers asylum-seekers and conducts refugee status determination, and would like to

encourage and support the authorities to gradually take over these activities. Egypt is host to around 70,000 Palestinian refugees and over 20,000 refugees from Sudan and Somalia, mainly in urban areas. UNHCR will continue to provide assistance only to the most vulnerable refugees, including refugees with HIV/AIDS, targeting assistance through the new UNHCR multifunctional gender and age teams established in 2005 in partnership with NGOs. The main beneficiaries of UNHCR's resettlement programme will remain refugee women-at-risk, survivors of torture, disabled or traumatized refugees for whom treatment is unavailable in Egypt, and separated children for whom resettlement is found to be in their best interest. In view of political progress in Sudan, refugee status determination for Sudanese asylum-seekers has been suspended, although all Sudanese asylum-seekers are provided with identity documentation with an entitlement to apply for a six-month renewable residence permit. UNHCR will support the voluntary repatriation of refugees from southern Sudan.

UNHCR has an Honorary Representation in **Israel** to support the Government with the registration and status determination of asylum-seekers in the absence of national refugee legislation. The Office will explore the possibility, through training sessions and workshops, of involving the authorities in the practical application of asylum procedures, presently dealt with by UNHCR. It will also explore areas of legislation to enhance the protection of asylum-seekers and refugees (such as asylum-seeker visas, border procedures, and amendments to social security legislation) in the absence of fully-fledged national refugee legislation.

Jordan has demonstrated a high level of tolerance towards Iraqi refugees and migrants on its territory, and currently hosts some 250,000 Iraqis, most of whom arrived before the war in 2003 and are now covered by the temporary protection regime. Jordan is also host to over 1.7 million Palestinian refugees (covered by the mandate of UNRWA). Most Iraqis in Jordan are in urban areas, putting pressure on social infrastructure, yet return is a limited option for many, and opportunities for resettlement are also limited (in 2006, it is expected that 1,700 Iraqi and 185 non-Iraqi

refugees will be in need of resettlement). UNHCR is planning self-reliance programmes for urban refugees (these are designed to benefit host communities so as to ease tensions). Activities for camp-based refugees are also planned, to ease the effects of confinement, although opportunities for self-reliance are limited. A regional approach is required to achieve comprehensive solutions for Iraqis in Jordan and other countries in the region as they face common obstacles to return. A comprehensive approach is also required for Iranian Kurdish refugees who for many years were in Al Tash camp in central Iraq but fled during and after the war due to insecurity. Some of the group are now in Ruwayshed camp in Jordan. UNHCR will continue working with the Government of Jordan in 2006 to promote accession to the 1951 Refugee Convention and the 1967 Protocol, exploring the possibility of support for the creation of a national registration system for refugees, and supporting relevant ministries' practical efforts to protect and assist refugees and other persons of concern in Jordan.

The law in **Lebanon** does not ignore refugee issues but it still lacks a legal definition of a refugee. UNHCR will continue to carry out activities to enhance awareness of international refugee law and asylum procedures among the authorities and civil society institutions. Lebanon is host to over 400,000 Palestinian refugees (covered by the mandate of UNRWA), and efforts to encourage Lebanon to accede to the 1951 Refugee Convention are constrained by this situation. Lebanon does not wish to be regarded as a country of asylum nor to promote the integration of refugees in view of the implications for the Palestinian situation. Lebanon is also host to Iraqi refugees covered by the temporary protection regime and to Sudanese refugees. Iraqi and Sudanese asylum-seekers registered with UNHCR reside mostly in urban areas, have no right to work and are largely dependent on the Office's assistance. For most refugees in Lebanon, local integration is not an option and until conditions improve in Iraq and allow for voluntary repatriation, resettlement is the most realistic durable solution.

Neither **Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, Oman** nor the **United Arab Emirates** are signatories to the 1951 Refugee Convention or its 1967

Protocol. UNHCR will therefore continue to work on strengthening the Gulf countries' adherence to practical refugee law principles. There has been increasing understanding of international refugee law principles among government counterparts and NGO partners, which has resulted in improved access for UNHCR to asylum-seekers in the Gulf States. UNHCR will continue awareness-raising work with civil society partners and through the media. In Saudi Arabia UNHCR has invited the authorities to consider alternative residence arrangements for the 440 Iraqi refugees who remain in Rafha camp after the repatriation of 4,800 refugees between 2002 and 2003. The presence of refugees is temporarily tolerated pending a solution, and there are limited opportunities for local integration. Saudi Arabia is already host to over 240,000 Palestinian refugees, who fall outside UNRWA's remit. Kuwait and Saudi Arabia are also host to large numbers of stateless Bedouins whose situation is precarious due to their lack of legal status. Neither Saudi Arabia nor the Gulf States are party to the 1954 Convention relating to the Status of Stateless Persons or the 1961 Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness.

The **Syrian Arab Republic** is not a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention or the 1967 Protocol and does not officially recognize refugees under UNHCR's mandate. Yet the authorities do generally respect attestations issued to asylum-seekers registered with UNHCR and show considerable tolerance towards persons of concern to the Office. UNHCR will continue awareness-raising and capacity-building activities with a view to encouraging Syria to accede to the 1951 Refugee

Convention, following positive signals in 2005. There are an estimated several hundred thousand Iraqis in Syria, presently covered by the temporary protection regime; many of them arrived in Syria from 2004 onwards due to the deteriorating conditions in Iraq. Syria is also host to over 420,000 Palestinian refugees (covered under the mandate of UNRWA) as well as asylum-seekers from Sudan, Somalia, Afghanistan and some North African countries. More restrictive immigration regulations have been introduced and UNHCR will seek to ensure that asylum-seekers are not negatively affected. Legal aid is provided to asylum-seekers and refugees in detention and assistance is provided to vulnerable groups of asylum-seekers who approach UNHCR, for example with housing for single women and income-generating activities for female-headed households.

Budget (USD)	
Country	Annual Programme Budget
Egypt	4,569,179
Iraq	2,151,057
Israel	93,200
Jordan	2,098,883
Lebanon	3,204,282
Saudi Arabia	2,348,944
Syrian Arab Republic	1,885,381
Yemen	5,168,295
Total	21,519,221