SEVEN DECADES IN EGYPT
FOREWORD
by Pablo Mateu
UNHCR Representative to the Arab Republic of Egypt and to the League of Arab States

In many ways the history of UNHCR in Egypt mirrors the constant change and adaptation that has defined UNHCR's development as an organization. In 1954, when UNHCR established its presence in Cairo, it was a fledgling organization with a restrictive mandate and limited resources. Events that year marked a turning point however, with the entry into force of the 1951 Refugee Convention, and the award of the Nobel Peace Prize received by UNHCR for its work in Europe during the immediate post-war years.

UNHCR's presence in Egypt has also run in parallel to the development of Egypt from a young republic to a major political force in the Arab world, with important milestones in recent forced displacement history: Decolonization and the adoption of the 1967 Optional Protocol and the OAU Convention in 1969, resettlement in the context of the October War, African arrivals in the 1970s and 1980s, refugees in urban settings in the 1990s, and the 2000s' wars in Iraq, Libya, and Syria.

It is highly politicized work – at the crossroads of Africa, Europe, and the Middle East – and has exposed a paradox that lies at the heart of the UNHCR: That of a non-partisan, non-political organization working at the heart of local, regional and world politics. UNHCR in Egypt has, as elsewhere, had to tread a fine line between working in partnership with government, while asserting its moral and mandated authority in the fulfilment of the country's humanitarian obligations.

From the outset, my Office has operated in Egypt at the invitation of its government. These pages are a testament to a partnership, one that since 1954 has been based on sincere cooperation and frank dialogue. It is a record of our achievements, but also the challenges that we have encountered along the way, in ensuring that some of the world's most vulnerable populations are assisted and protected.

This unique retrospective is above all a tribute to the people of Egypt. I am reminded of words attributed to the great Egyptian writer Naguib Mahfouz: "Home is not where you were born. Home is where all your attempts to escape cease." Over many decades, as amply illustrated throughout the book, home has for hundreds of thousands of people escaping fear and persecution, been Egypt and the remarkable generosity of its people.

I would like to end by paying tribute to the UNHCR staff members who have served in Egypt, especially the locally recruited staff. Every day we are reminded of the pioneering work of our early colleagues with the 1954 Memorandum of Understanding that continues to guide the partnership between UNHCR and the Government to this day. A partnership that my staff dedicate themselves towards every day, in the protection, assistance, and search for solutions for those we serve.

I hope you enjoy the book.

Pablo Mateu

UNHCR Representative to the Arab Republic of Egypt and to the League of Arab States

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS
Thanks to all those who made this project possible

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INTRODUCTION

Egypt has a long history of providing sanctuary to refugees and welcoming immigrants, its unique location at the crossroads of Africa, the Middle East and Europe giving it special prominence as a destination for many diverse communities. Early arrivals in the last century included Armenians, Russians, Greeks, Israelis, Jews and North Africans. During the Second World War, the country offered shelter to tens of thousands of displaced people, in particular Yugoslavs, Greeks and Italians.

Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, UNHCR’s primary purpose in Egypt was to resolve the plight of refugees and stateless people from Armenia and Russia. During the same period, a growing number of exiles from the Middle East and Africa began to take up residence in Egypt. The country also provided a home for Palestinian refugees who were uprooted during the conflict surrounding the creation of the state of Israel in 1948, and following the 1956 Suez Crisis.

After the Free Officers Movement gained power in 1952, with the subsequent removal of both the British and the country’s monarchy, Cairo became a hub for third-world liberation movements under President Nasser. At least twenty African liberation movements had a presence in Cairo in the late 1950s and early 1960s.

Moreover, during these and the coming decades, Egypt was one of the foremost providers of high-quality education in the region, and through to the 1990s many thousands of students from other parts of Africa and the Middle East were enrolled in the Egyptian education system, many of them at the prestigious Al-Azhar University in Cairo. By the beginning of the 1990s, Egypt’s refugee population had changed considerably. The old community of Armenian and Russian émigrés was steadily diminishing. And most of the exiled liberation movements that had previously established their headquarters in Egypt had left Cairo, in many cases because their quest for independence had been won. The new refugees arriving in the city now originated predominantly from countries in the Horn of Africa, fleeing political violence and human rights abuses.

In 1991, UNHCR’s office in Cairo was upgraded to Regional Office for the Middle East, with responsibility for refugee management in the entire region. It was also responsible for liaising with the League of Arab States (LAS) regarding refugee policy in the Arab world. Around this time, Egypt implemented one of the largest UNHCR resettlement programmes worldwide.

By the early 2000s, UNHCR hosted refugees of over 30 nationalities. During this period, UNHCR Egypt received the most individual refugee status determination (RSD) applications of all UNHCR offices worldwide.

In the past decade, Egypt’s longstanding population of refugees from the Horn of Africa has been joined by two groups from nearby and war-torn countries in the Middle East — Iraq and Syria. During the same period, the country has experienced a large influx of people escaping violence or hardship in neighbouring Libya.

Egypt’s importance in the international refugee arena has been, however, far more than simply its role as a destination for those seeking sanctuary. Since the establishment of the United Nations in 1945, the country has played an active role in the effort to develop national, regional and global responses to the refugee issue. The country was the only African state represented on the drafting committee of the 1950 Committee on Refugees and Stateless Persons, and was a founding signatory of the 1951 UN Refugee Convention.

UNHCR and the Government of Egypt signed a Memorandum of Understanding on 10 February 1954. This document authorized the establishment of UNHCR’s first field operation in Africa. It also outlined the responsibilities of the government and of UNHCR towards refugees and asylum-seekers in the country. Since 2014, the Egyptian Ministry of Health has granted refugees and asylum-seekers access to public health services similar to those granted to Egyptian nationals, and at the same cost. UNHCR and its partners support education as a protection tool, including early childhood education, primary, preparatory and secondary education. The Egyptian Ministry of Education allows Sudanese, South Sudanese, Yemeni and Syrian students access to public schools on an equal footing with Egyptians. UNHCR provides training for teachers and supports the refurbishment of schools with higher numbers of refugees.

The agency also supports refugee livelihoods by providing grants for small businesses and by developing their skills to match those needed in the labour market.

Since the start of its work in the country, resettlement has been a core activity of UNHCR in Egypt, which strives to identify the most vulnerable refugees for resettlement. UNHCR Egypt remains a unique operation due to the diversity of refugees in Egypt, of 65 nationalities, coupled with the urban environment of one of the largest cities in the world.
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Muhammad Boukry
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Said Halim
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Assad Khan Sadry
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El Manchaoui
1951
Cornelis Arnold Pompe
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Amir Abbas Hoveyda

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During the 19th century, Egypt allowed foreigners of varied backgrounds to settle in the country and sizeable, wealthy foreign trading communities began to develop, including Armenians, Greeks, Italians, Jews and North Africans. The growth of these populations was spurred by the strategic importance of the Suez Canal, which was completed in 1869, but in the early twentieth century it was conflict and war, not trade, that drove waves of movement into Egypt. Whereas the number of foreigners living in Egypt in the 1850s stood at around 15,000, by the end of this period after the First World War this figure soared to more than tenfold.

Over the first quarter of the 20th century, a series of crises prompted movements to Egypt — the Greco-Turkish wars of 1897 and 1919; the Armenian Genocide under the Ottomans in 1915; the First World War, breaking out in 1914; and the Russian revolutions of 1917, with the country’s subsequent civil war. These movements enlarged pre-existing groups of foreigners in Egypt as well as led to the establishment of new communities.

In the wake of the First World War, Egypt continued to receive refugees, building on the country’s 1917 commitment to grant foreigners political asylum when it gave refuge to members of Russia’s aristocracy. As well as providing practical assistance to refugees, Egypt played a key role in international efforts to shore up a systematic, international framework for the protection of refugee rights, helping to draft the 1933 Convention Relating to International Refugees, which, while ill-fated, was a landmark step towards today’s fully fledged international treaties on refugee protection.

The Second World War brought new asylum-seekers to Egypt, including more Greeks, Italians and Yugoslavs. Egypt coordinated with foreign governments to afford them protection, setting up aid organizations that would morph into new agencies working towards the long-term assistance and protection of refugees.

The conclusion of the Second World War did not mean the end of strife in the region, however, and the 1948 foundation of the state of Israel brought with it population flows, the legacy of which continues to pose issues today. Many Palestinians came to Egypt and, while this group would be catered for by a specialized UN agency, UNRWA, their displacement remains a central factor affecting the refugee situation in the current era.

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The Ottoman Empire, which at its zenith had controlled most of Southeast Europe, along with much of Western Asia and North Africa, was by the start of the 19th century beginning to creak. Nationalist movements across its territories brought it to a collapse by the early 1920s, but it was Greece that first broke out of the empire when it achieved full independence in 1832. Hostility between Greeks and Turks, as well as the Greeks’ desire to unite ethnically Greek enclaves inside Turkey with mainland Greece and to repossess the islands of the Aegean, led to substantial population movements over the following decades.

The 1897 Greco-Turkish War was focused on the status of the island of Crete and the Second Greco-Turkish War, from 1919 to 1922, was an unsuccessful attempt by the Greeks to win territory from the Ottomans, who had been gravely weakened by their loss in the First World War. During the First World War, Ottoman Turks harassed ethnically Greek villages and elsewhere orchestrated campaigns to forcibly remove Greeks from western Anatolia. Many of the men were drafted into labour battalions during the war and some subjected to death marches.

By 1922, most of the Greeks in Asia Minor had either been killed or fled, most to Greece but many to Russia and elsewhere. Egypt, with an already established Greek community largely based in Alexandria, became a sanctuary to many, and by the time of a 1927 census the number of Greeks living in Egypt had swollen to just under 77,000. They set themselves up as shopkeepers, grocers and cotton merchants and strengthened their community through the establishment of community organizations in whichever towns and cities they found themselves in. Many of the Greeks remained in Egypt until they started to leave following the 1967 War.
The removal and killing of Greeks by the Ottomans was part of the same policy that led to the Armenian Genocide, the systematic extermination of some 1.5 million Armenians by the government of the Ottoman Empire began in 1915. Men were rounded up and massacred or died through forced labour. Women, children and the elderly were subjected to forced deportation to far-flung parts of the empire, with robings, beatings and murders common along the way. Others were marched to their deaths into the desert of Syria.

For many Armenians fleeing the horrors of their homeland, Egypt was an obvious destination for sanctuary, as there was an earlier history of Armenians living in Egypt. Indeed, Egypt's first prime minister, Nubar Pasha, who first took office in 1878 and occupied the position three times until 1895, was Armenian, the son of a merchant from Smyrna.

In September 1915, approximately five months after the beginning of the genocide, a flotilla of warships rescued several thousand Armenians who had resisted being rounded up by the Ottomans and signaled their plight from atop the mountain Musa Dagh, within sight of the Mediterranean. More than 4,000 Armenians, over a third of them children, were saved and transported to a refugee camp set up at Port Fouad, near the entrance to the Suez Canal. They lived there until 1920, when return was possible, although many subsequently opted to settle in Lebanon.

Others of the refugees entering Egypt assimilated themselves into the pre-existing Armenian communities in Cairo and Alexandria, and Armenian churches and religious organizations helped the new arrivals as they built new community centres and schools to accommodate the influx. The Armenian General Benevolent Union, founded in 1906 by prominent Egyptian Armenians, was among other organizations that helped to support the refugees. In 1917, the Armenian population in Egypt was just under 13,000, and the number continued to rise until it hit a peak of around 17,200 a decade later.
At the end of 1914, with the Ottomans defeated on the Russian front, many Jews moved from Palestine to Egypt. Around three years later, the Jewish population was estimated at 60,000 mainly concentrated in Egypt’s two biggest cities: Cairo and Alexandria. Most of the Jews had come from former territories of the Ottoman Empire: Turkey, Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, Iraq, Yemen, as well as Russia and Italy.

By September of 1915 more than 11,000 Jewish refugees had reached Alexandria. Many heading for Egypt, where in 1917 the country’s sultan, Hussein Kamel, had first formally granted political asylum in the country, receiving Russian families who were escaping the Bolsheviks.

There had been a Jewish population in Egypt even in Ptolemaic and Roman times, and notwithstanding the expulsion of as many as 100,000 Jews from Alexandria in the early fifth century AD under the recently Christianized Byzantine empire, the population went on to play a role in Egyptian society as an integrated but often autonomous community. In modern times, while the majority of Egyptian Jews post-1919 did not hold Egyptian nationality, they had an important role in the economy and several individual Jews, from a community that numbered some 80,000, would spearhead the movement promoting Egyptian nationalism. Thus it was that René Qattawi, leader of Cairo’s Sephardi community, backed the 1935 creation of the Association of Egyptian Jewish Youth, which went under the slogan “Egypt is our homeland, Arabic is our language.”

With the founding of the Israeli state in 1948, and the Arab-Israeli War that followed the same year and in which Egypt took part, relations between the Jewish community and the Egyptian people and state became strained. The Lavonian affair, an Israeli conspiracy to disrupt peace in Egypt in 1954, worsened the climate for Jews in the country still further, and hastened the emigration of many, as would the 1956 Suez Crisis, which led to the deportation of many Egyptian Jews. Of those that had remained, the great majority would leave the country in the wake of the 1967 War, which led to a still-greater souring of relations between Egypt’s Jews and the rest of the country.

The two 1917 revolutions in Russia – the first in February and the second in October of the Gregorian calendar – and the civil war that followed brought the country into chaos and led to mass displacement as Russians sought to leave the country. A wave of White Russians (counter-revolutionaries comprising Cossacks, the bourgeoisie and others opposed to the Bolshevik restructuring of the country) fled to nearby countries, with some making the journey to Egypt.

Somewhere between a million and two million Russians left, many heading for Egypt, where in 1917 the country’s sultan, Hussein Kamel, had first formally granted political asylum in the country, receiving Russian families who were escaping the Bolsheviks.

A stateless woman holds her expired Soviet passport, eastern Ukraine (2009). ©UNHCR/Greg Constantine

A Jewish choir of Rabbi Moshe Cohen at Samuel Menashe synagogue in Alexandria (c. 1950). ©Association Internationale Nebi Daniel
The bloodshed and upheaval of the First World War led to unprecedented numbers of people fleeing, mainly in Europe, and it was in the wake of this disaster that the modern definition of "refugee" was formed. The League of Nations, formed in 1920 largely as a bulwark against future global wars, may have failed in its primary mandate of staving off another world war, but its work, along with that of the International Labour Organization, was key to founding a system of administration for refugee affairs.

Passports had not been in common use prior to the First World War, with many countries requiring no travel documentation for entry. The war, however, led to the closure of all borders, and as countries began to issue newly introduced passports, this posed a problem for refugees who had left their own countries and, shut out, found themselves unable to gain documentation from their home states. The League of Nations stepped in to help refugees get hold of travel documentation through the introduction of "Nansen passports," passports that were issued by national authorities but on the basis of guidance from the League of Nations.

Named after Fridtjof Nansen, the Norwegian High Commissioner for Refugees and former polar explorer, the passports were introduced alongside formative criteria of refugee status — that refugees are in need of protection, facing threats to their life or wellbeing. The definition distinguished between those prompted to flee by virtue of danger and those leaving their country for an improved livelihood or other reasons.

Egypt was an important player between the two world wars in the movement to recognize and address refugee problems, as well as the hands-on help that the country offered during this period by receiving refugees from Greece, Armenia, Russia and elsewhere. In October 1933, Egypt participated in the Intergovernmental Conference on Refugees convened in Geneva, the upshot of which was the first international attempt to create a comprehensive legal framework for refugees.
The 1933 Convention Relating to the International Status of Refugees was not only a landmark in the recognition of refugee rights but also a milestone in the broader history of international human rights legislation, with only the 1926 Slavery Convention as a precursor in terms of a voluntary system of international supervision of human rights.44

Drawing on earlier legal precedents around the responsibility for injuries to aliens and the protection of national minorities, the Convention looked to establish a secure grounding for refugee protection, with the goal that the Nansen International Office should be replaced by a simpler but more comprehensive framework.45 Importantly, the Convention was intended to put in place binding obligations upon signatory states rather than, as in previous agreements, non-obligatory recommendations.

In October 1933, it was five countries, namely Belgium, Bulgaria, Egypt, France, and Norway that concluded the convention in Geneva.46 Egypt's presence at the three-day meeting was not only a testament to the importance it attached to refugee protection, but it was also an indication of the status Egypt held as a key player within the Middle East and North Africa region. Although Egypt was one of the first five signatories to the Convention, it did not ratify it.47 Other states such as Belgium, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, Denmark, France, Great Britain, Italy, and Norway did, significant reservations notwithstanding. Nevertheless, the convention paved the way for the development of today's International Protection regime. More importantly, it was owing to the Convention that the principle of non-refoulement, which protects refugees from forcible return to countries where their lives might be in danger, acquired the status of international treaty law. Thus, Egypt's role in concluding the convention played a significant role towards full recognition of refugee rights and host country obligations.

While the Convention was in some respects flawed (its scope was limited to groups already identified as refugees under the protection of the League of Nations) as well as stymied by the meagre number of countries that ratified it, it represented an important step forward for the international refugee protection movement. It was the first international agreement to guarantee refugees the right to non-refoulement, which protects refugees from forcible return to a country in which they will likely be at risk. Other important rights afforded to refugees by the Convention included socio-economic rights such as the right to work, the right to social welfare and the right to education.48

Against a backdrop of increasing anti-alien feeling in many European countries as economic downturns and political instability fostered antipathy towards refugees, the Convention is testament to undaunted hopes for a comprehensive international refugee protection framework. Importantly, it introduced the concept of countries freely agreeing to international supervision of national compliance with human rights, a key prerequisite of the work of future agencies such as UNHCR.
Egypt’s involvement in the Second World War as a theatre of battle came through the failed invasion of the British-held country by Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany in the Western Desert Campaign. Italy’s Mussolini launched an assault into Egypt by troops stationed in Libya in September 1940, although his hopes of making inroads into the country were decisively quashed by British forces in December of the same year, and Italy was forced to look to Germany for assistance with the goal of taking Egypt, affording vital access to the Suez Canal.

A subsequent to-and-fro of desert territory between Germany’s Afrika Korps and Allied forces began in the spring of 1941 and continued until near the end of 1942, culminating in the Second Battle of Alamein, which was a decisive win for the British. The defeated Axis powers were pushed out of Egypt into Libya, and ultimately into Tunisia, where they were defeated again.49

While Egypt was scene therefore to battle activity that had a profound effect on the unfolding of the Second World War, the country as a whole was greatly impacted by the movements of refugees from other theatres of war. The invasion of Eastern Europe and the Balkans by Axis and Soviet powers near the start of the war sent thousands of refugees fleeing south and eastwards to escape the turmoil. Many fled across the Mediterranean, traveling from island to island seeking safety.48 There were large scale evacuations of refugees from Poland, Greece and the Dodecanese Islands southwards in 1941, and these movements prompted the British government in 1942 to set up the Middle East Relief and Refugee Administration (MERRA), which coordinated with regional governments, including Egypt’s, to help absorb these movements of people.8

MERRA built camps in Syria, Palestine and Egypt, where tens of thousands of people from all over Europe sought refuge.8 As well as receiving help from the respective local governments, MERRA was assisted by other groups such as the International Migration Service, the Red Cross, the Near East Foundation and the Save the Children Fund.51 The organization was active in administering the refugee camps for around two years before, in 1944, MERRA was absorbed by the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA) and became the new agency’s Balkans mission.51

Egypt was a founding member of UNRRA, which had an office established in Cairo.46 In April 1944, an agreement was signed between UNRRA and the US and British military authorities, laying out how UNRRA’s assistance in Greece, Yugoslavia and Albania was defined, which underlined the importance of the Egypt office.43

Although UNRRA’s mandate was broader than purely dealing with the refugee issue (it was to help member governments in giving relief to the victims of war; help assist member states in the rehabilitation of industry and agriculture; and help facilitate the return home of those displaced by enemy action), its Balkan mission continued to operate the refugee camps that had been opened during its incarnation as MERRA.51 These camps would remain open until the end of the war, whereupon most refugees returned home, although some opted to integrate themselves within Egyptian society.50
Thousands of Yugoslav refugees were housed at El Shatt camp in Sinai (1944).

©The Library of Congress / Otto Gilmore
SECOND WORLD WAR
REFUGEE CAMPS
IN EGYPT

International forces worked with the Egyptian authorities to set up a number of refugee camps, beginning in early 1944, some of which would house refugees including former military personnel from the Royal Yugoslav armed forces, until the Second World War had ended.

One such camp was El Arish in northern Sinai, some 150km southwest of Gaza City and a former residence of King Farouk. El Shatt was Egypt’s largest refugee camp, located north of Suez, out of which three groups were resettled to Argentina and Australia in 1948.

Amriya camp was located 20km west of Alexandria, and included many Yugoslavs among its refugees.

Moses Wells camp, spread out over a hundred acres of desert on the coast of southern Sinai, was a temporary home to Greek refugees for a period of three years. After the war ended they were gradually repatriated to Greece over the following two years, with assistance through UNRRA.

Tolumbat was a camp for Yugoslav mothers and children located on the Bay of Aboukir, about 30km from Alexandria just inshore from the Mediterranean Sea.

Upon arrival at any of these camps, refugees registered with officials and would receive an identification card that, as well as showing the refugee’s name and nationality, identified their educational and work history, as well as any particular skills they possessed.

In the MERRA camps refugees could expect to receive a half portion of army rations each day. In some camps, refugees were able to work to earn some income from using their skills, such as carpentry, painting, shoemaking or textiles work, to earn a little money from other refugees. Refugees in camps near urban areas were free to trek into town and city centres, perhaps to use basic shops, go to a cinema or just have a break from the monotony of camp life.
El Shatt was the largest of Egypt’s refugee camps, covering roughly 260 square kilometres, and served as a temporary shelter for around 25,000 people from the region of Dalmatia, now in modern Croatia, then Yugoslavia, who had fled ahead of the German invasion of 1944.

The Allies were unable to accept so many people fleeing into Italy, so it had been decided by the British army to transfer non-combatant refugees first to Bari and then to Taranto. Amid heavy fighting between the Allied forces and the Germans, the decision was made to transfer the refugees to Egypt, which was then under British control.

El Shatt had been set up by MERRA, which ran it for the first four months. In May 1944 UNRRA officially absorbed MERRA and took control of the camp. A UNRRA report explained how the camp was a microcosm of Yugoslav civic society: “For reasons of efficiency, El Shatt was broken into five separate bases, each one maintaining some degree of self-sufficiency, corresponding to a small village in Yugoslavia.”

Running of the camp was done between the refugees themselves and UNRRA representatives. UNRRA handled supplies, maintenance and general supervision of camp activities. There were also independent agencies involved in running the camp and British voluntary agencies worked through the Council of British Societies for Relief Abroad.

The refugees of El Shatt, most of whom would eventually return to Europe after the war, tried to continue living life as normally as was possible—the community set up schools, workshops and even published a newspaper. Tents were used as churches and the prominent Croatian composer Josip Hatze, then in his sixties, who was famous for his cantatas and song cycles, oversaw choral performances. Some 300 marriages were celebrated in the camp and more than 470 children were born there.

EL SHATT: “LIFE AS NORMAL” IN A CAMP ABROAD

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The end of the Second World War saw most of the refugees who had found shelter in Egypt return to their homelands. Several thousands, however, did not return straight home, for political reasons. Others, however, started to be repatriated to the new Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia from 1946.

Egypt had been just one of several countries in the Middle East that hosted refugees during the conflict — many Greek refugees had been harboured in Aleppo, Syria, and between 100,000 and 300,000 Poles had escaped from the threat of the Nazis and found refuge in Iran.

Most of these refugees, as with those that had fled to Egypt, often via Italy and Greece, would return either to their initial homeland or to third countries. Scattered across the Middle East there are memorials to the many hundreds of refugees who either died on their journeys to safety or while sheltered in refugee camps. Today, however, the refuge given to Europeans by the region is largely forgotten.

On 29 September 1945, fire broke out on the British motorship Empire Patrol as it made its way from Port Said to the Greek island of Castellorizo with returning Greek refugees. Thirty-three people died in the ensuing disaster, 14 of them children. Most of the 497 refugees on board had come from either El Shatt camp or Nuseirat camp near Gaza in Palestine. The fire started in one of the ship’s holds, causing a panic that hampered attempts to put it out. The conflagration ran rapidly through the ship, which was panelled with wood throughout. Many passengers threw themselves into the water before help later arrived from HMS Trouncer, which was 90km away when the fire took hold.
The two world wars brought unimaginable suffering and carnage across swathes of several continents. When peace came and the dust settled, stark questions were left. Chief among them, naturally, was the question of how countries could work together to avoid a repeat of these conflicts, and this led to the formation of the United Nations in 1945. Another question, enormously pressing in the light of the vast numbers of people who had been displaced by both wars, was what new steps could be taken in terms of refugee protection and assistance. With Egypt the temporary home to so many refugees displaced by these crises, the country played an active role in efforts to develop national, regional, and global responses to the refugee issue.

In 1947 there was another transformation in the makeup of aid organizations, with UNRRA’s refugee elements morphing into the International Refugee Organization (IRO). The IRO was mandated with rendering “legal and political protection” to refugees, and there were essentially two types of stateless people that the organization had to deal with — first, those refugees such as the White Russians who had been deprived of their nationality and thus had become stateless by law; and second, those refugees who had retained their nationality by law but were de facto stateless by virtue of refusing to have any contact with their home governments.

The IRO ceased operations in 1952 and was officially shuttered the following year. By then, its responsibilities had largely already been taken on by the Office of the High Commissioner for Refugees and the Intergovernmental Committee for European Migration, both of which were established in 1950s.

Parallel to these organizational evolutions were shifts in the challenges faced. Egypt and the region would encounter obstacles in providing assistance and restitution to displaced people, in particular responding to the Palestinian exodus. The radical shift that Egypt would undergo as it switched from a protectorate monarchy to a socialist state also dramatically changed the country’s landscape as a haven for migrants and refugees.
Over the course of the last century, many Palestinians sought refuge in Egypt due to its proximity or family connections there. The largest numbers of arrivals were triggered by two of the most significant events to occur in the region: the 1948 Arab-Israeli War and the 1967 War. Smaller numbers of Palestinians had also journeyed to Egypt in the 1930s and after the 1956 Suez Crisis.

In 1948, about 3,000 Palestinian refugees arrived in Port Said and Alexandria by boat, while another 10,000 to 15,000 fled to Gaza, then under Egyptian military control. They were initially housed in temporary camps such as Qantara Sharaq near the Suez Canal and Azarita near Alexandria, where they were only allowed to leave if they had a guarantor based elsewhere in Egypt, usually through a business or family connection.* These camps were dismantled within four years of the refugees’ arrival.** Under Nasser, Palestinians were treated on the same basis as nationals in terms of access to employment, education and residency. In 1954, a law was passed granting them the right to work as teachers, and in 1962 it became legal for Palestinians to work in the public sector. For the 50,000 Palestinians residing in Sinai, Nasser also set up employment projects.
Furthermore, Egypt ratified the 1965 Casablanca Protocol, in which Arab host states pledged to treat Palestinians living in their countries on par with nationals. Although these measures served to ease the integration of Palestinian refugees into Egyptian society, both this and the solution of resettlement in another country were seen to undermine their right to return: by 1952 most Arab governments were against the resettlement of Palestinian refugees, and indeed, resolutions adopted by the League of Arab States in 1952 called for the deferral of their resettlement in favour of the preservation of Palestinian identity and the restoration of their basic rights.  

Broadly speaking, Palestinians arriving in Egypt between 1948 and post the 1967 war received residence permits ranging from one to 10 years. The duration of the permit was determined by a number of factors including whether the person held a travel document issued by the Egyptian authorities, resided in the country for a number of years, and had a source of income.  

In 1978, two administrative regulations were issued which obliged Palestinians in Egypt to obtain residency and employment through the same channels as other foreigners. Those studying at universities were required to pay fees in a foreign currency, like others from abroad. These measures aligned their status with that of the Sudanese after the abrogation of the Wadi Al-Nil Agreement.

Decree No. 24, Article 5, issued by the Minister of Education on 22 January 1992, granted children of Palestinians working for the Egyptian government, military or in the public sector, access to free primary education, and in 1997 health insurance was extended to Palestinian children enrolled in public schools.

Following Israel’s occupation of Sinai and the Gaza Strip in 1967, Israeli authorities demolished parts of Rafah in 1970, forcing its residents to flee. Some were sent to Al-Arish in northern Sinai, while others ended up in the so-called “Canada Camp” in Rafah. This was a housing project built by Israel in 1972 to house displaced persons, named after the Canadian UN peacekeepers who had formerly occupied the site. The refugees were provided with food rations and some financial assistance, as they were unable to work in Egypt and had to pay to renew their visas every six months. According to the 1979 Camp David Peace Treaty, the refugees were supposed to be repatriated to Gaza, but it was not until 1989 that a mechanism for their return was established. The last occupants of the camp were returned to the Gaza Strip in 2000.

In 1999, there were about 70,000 Palestinian refugees living in Egypt. Although they found themselves outside the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) area of operations, the Government of Egypt was dealing with them in accordance with resolutions and decisions adopted by the League of Arab States. UNHCR was liaising with the GoE for the regularization of their status, release from detention, enrolment into universities and other educational institutions, in close coordination with the UNRWA office in Cairo. These joint efforts with UNRWA and other parties concerned yielded some positive results for some holders of Israeli-issued visitor cards, who were authorized to transit the Egyptian territory on their way to Gaza and back to their country of residence. In terms of asylum policy, Palestinian refugees were covered under a special regime. They were provided with different residence permits depending on mixed factors (e.g. their date of arrival in Egypt, the purpose of their stay, the nationality of their spouse and their employment records).

Today, Palestinians living in Egypt are dispersed throughout cities and towns across the country. Although there are no official government figures, the number of Palestinians has been fluctuating at the average of 80,000.
The office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) created

The Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees adopted by the United Nations

Coup by the Free Officers Movement overthrows the monarchy in Egypt

Egypt becomes an independent republic

UNHCR & Egypt sign a Memorandum of understanding (MoU)

UNHCR opens an office in Cairo

Care International begins work in Egypt

First Sudanese Civil War

Sudan gains independence from Egypt and the UK

President Nasser nationalizes the Suez Canal; British, French & Israeli forces attack Egypt during the Suez Crisis; UN Emergency Force is dispatched to Sinai

Catholic Relief Services (CRS) starts operations in Egypt

Syria and Egypt unite to form the United Arab Republic (UAR)

Coup in Sudan brings General Ibrahim Abboud to power

As the dark shadow of the Second World War began to lift, through the 1950s the international community began looking to establish and consolidate meaningful protocols that could offer long-term solutions and protections within the refugee area. The United Nations had been established in 1945 and it was in 1950 that the UN Refugee Agency, known as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, was founded. From the outset, Egypt played an active role in the effort to develop national, regional and global responses to the refugee issue. The country was the only African state represented on the drafting committee of the 1950 Committee on Refugees and Stateless Persons and was a founding signatory of the 1951 UN Refugee Convention, for which it was also on the drafting committee. UNHCR opened an office in Egypt in 1954, the first field operation in Africa, and the same year a memorandum of understanding was signed between Egypt and UNHCR. The work of the office was at first focused on assisting the remaining White Russian and Stateless people living in Egypt. UNHCR also addressed the situation of refugees in the country’s Canal Zone and was a source of advice and assistance to those people, predominantly Egypt’s Jews, who left the country in the wake of the Suez Crisis and changes to the country’s nationality law.

Egypt underwent radical changes during this period, becoming an independent republic in 1953 after the 1952 revolution that put power in the hands of the Free Officers Movement, led by Mohammed Naguib and Gamal Abdel Nasser, which overthrew the monarchy.
Founded in 1950, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees began activities in 1951 with a focus to help millions of Europeans who had fled or lost their homes, some of whom were in Egypt, in the aftermath of the Second World War. UNHCR was set up with a broader protection mandate, and with fewer operational responsibilities, than its predecessor, the International Refugee Organization. Technically limited to assisting European refugees, Egypt was the only government in the Middle East that the IRO concluded an agreement with.

The development of UNHCR was a gradual process, with an evolution of seven years before the Executive Committee of the High Commissioner's Programme was established in 1958. The Advisory Committee on Refugees was set up by the Economic and Social Council in 1951, its purpose being to advise the High Commissioner, upon request, on the exercise of functions of the office.

Fifteen states were chosen by the Economic and Social Council to form the Advisory Committee, which included both members and non-members of the United Nations, many of which had received large numbers of refugees in the wake of the Second World War. Initially, there were no plans to involve UNHCR in funding assistance activities, and the early High Commissioners operated from very limited funds, mostly from private sources. The life of UNHCR was extended for a further five years from the start of 1954 before becoming a better-funded agency able to give aid assistance rather than act in a more advisory role.

Egypt's refugee policy in these early years was characterized by three important principles, all of which have remained in place until today. First, the authorities considered refugees as temporary, and fast resettlement to other countries was the preferred solution. Second, the preference was no longer opting to create camps; instead, refugees found their own shelter, settling mainly in the urban sprawl of Cairo and the Mediterranean city of Alexandria. Third, the authorities empowered UNHCR to be the lead in refugee affairs.

This final principle, that the Egyptian state has preferred to cede responsibility for refugee issues to UNHCR and limit its own involvement in the arena, led to its entering into an agreement with UNHCR in 1954 that opened the way for the agency to identify, register and assist refugees in Egypt. The same year, UNHCR funded the construction of a home for elderly refugees in Egypt, began supporting refugees with financial assistance, vocational training and education, and started to give information and advice to those who were destined for resettlement elsewhere. A key facilitator of this agreement was Amir-Abbas Hoveyda, an economist and former Prime Minister of Iran who as UNHCR's Chief Liaison Officer visited Egypt to negotiate the Memorandum of Understanding.
On 10 February 1954, Egypt signed a Memorandum of Understanding with UNHCR, a key event that authorized the establishment of an office in Cairo, the agency’s first field operation in Africa. The Memorandum opened the way for UNHCR to assume responsibility for refugee registration, documentation, status determination and the identification of resettlement opportunities in other countries.

Responsible for the drafting of the Memorandum was Amir-Abbas Hoveyda, an Iranian who after working for UNHCR in the 1950s returned to Iran, where he entered politics and later became Iran’s longest-standing prime minister between 1965–1977.

While in Cairo in 1953, Hoveyda met with Egyptian officials to make enquiries about the opening of a branch office there under the same terms as UNHCR branches elsewhere. The signing of the Memorandum the following year set in motion the activities of UNHCR Egypt for the next seven decades.

The 1951 Refugee Convention was a landmark treaty and is the key legal document that forms the basis of UNHCR’s work. It defines the term “refugee” and outlines refugee rights, such as freedom of religion and movement, privileges to work and education. It also underscores a host government’s obligations to refugees. A key provision stipulates that refugees should not be returned to a country where they fear persecution. It also spells out people or groups of people who are not covered by the Convention.

In May 1981, Egypt ratified the Convention and its 1967 Protocol, but with reservations to five provisions: personal status; rationing; access to primary education; public relief and assistance; and labour legislation and social security. Refugees would not be afforded the right to be admitted to public schools, although in 1992 the government introduced legislation allowing the children of certain refugees to receive public education.

Egypt did not make a reservation against the articles of the Convention that protect refugees’ rights to employment. However, legislation introduced in 1982 would create barriers to entry of the labour market for refugees as it requires the prospective employer of a refugee to prove that no Egyptian national is available to undertake the work before an employment permit is issued.

In 1980, Presidential Decree 331 of 1980 adopted the Convention as domestic law. The country’s reservations, however, remained, motivated by, as it stated in its original response, a “general reservation to avoid any obstacle which might affect the discretionary authority of Egypt in granting privileges to refugees on a case-by-case basis.” Article 12, relating to personal status, “provides that the personal status of a refugee shall be governed by the law of the country of his domicile or, failing this, of his residence.” This contradicted the Egyptian civil code and, Egypt argued, “the competent Egyptian authorities are not in a position to amend this.”

Notwithstanding the country’s reservations, Egypt was instrumental in creating the 1951 Refugee Convention. Egypt was notable for being one of just two non-western members of the drafting committee, along with Turkey. The Convention was motivated by largely Eurocentric concerns, prompted by the fate of Europeans who had been forced to leave their homes during the Second World War. Egypt’s participation in the Convention, therefore, was indicative of its willingness to engage in a broader international agenda.

EGYPT AND THE 1951 REFUGEE CONVENTION

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UNHCR OPENED ITS OFFICE IN EGYPT

UNHCR opened its branch office in Egypt in February 1954, the same month that the Memorandum had been signed. Gerrit Jan van Heuven Goedhart, the then High Commissioner, reported: “The establishment of a UNHCR branch office in Cairo has enabled me to get first-hand information on the scope and characteristics of the difficult cases problem in Egypt. My Office is endeavouring to find solutions for most of the cases known at present.” He also noted that talks were under way in connection with establishing homes for a number of aged refugees using money from the UN Refugee Fund and that investigations were being made over whether a pension scheme could be applied in Egypt as well as other countries in the region.

Cornelis Arnold Pompe, a Dutch lawyer, assumed in June 1954 the role of the Cairo office representative. The Egypt office’s responsibilities would widen five years later as, in February 1958, Egypt and Syria joined together to form the United Arab Republic, a union initially proposed by Syria’s leaders as a step towards a larger pan-Arab state but also an attempt to shore up their power against the perceived threat of Communism. The union would only last until 1961, splintered by Syria’s military coup of September that year, but over these intervening years Cairo’s UNHCR office became the UNHCR Representation to this United Arab Republic.

EARLY REFUGEE OPERATIONS IN EGYPT

In the early 1950s, the largest number of mandate refugees in Egypt were the White Russians and others originating from the exodus from Russia in the wake of the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution; stateless people of Armenian origin who had fled the Ottoman-waged genocide of Armenians between 1915 and 1917; and Jews who had fled Germany to escape Nazi persecution and genocide.

One of the first activities of the Cairo branch office was to work with the Egyptian government and the World Council of Churches (WCC) to resettle more than 4,500 non-Arab refugees, mostly Russians and European Muslims, from Egypt to third countries. UNHCR assisted with registration and the processing of emigration for these refugees, some of whom were still residing in Abbassieh camp and had previously been processed by the IRO. Abbassieh had housed refugees recognized as such since 1947 and in 1954 the request had come for the camp to be dismantled.

In the report of the High Commissioner from the Seventh Session, Supplement 16 (A/126 and Addendum) New York, 1952, it was stressed that “the very large number of Arab refugees in Egypt, Syria and Jordan, and their relatively difficult economic conditions, are necessarily the main preoccupations of the governments.” The report continued, that while “the countries of the Near and Middle East — ie Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria — are faced with serious problems of their own ethnic refugees, they are devoting very considerable efforts, with the help of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East, to finding solutions for the Arab refugees. There are, however, in each of these countries small numbers of other refugees who are the concern of the Office of the High Commissioner.”

Covering the period from June 1952 to May 1953, the High Commissioner’s report of January 1954, A/2394, noted that, “the number of refugees in Egypt is greater than in any other part of the Middle East. Although the precise number of refugees within the mandate of my Office has still not been established, it appears that it is approximately 3,000. This includes refugees who arrived before and after the Second World War.”
Finally, the High Commissioner’s report stated that, “the Egyptian government has shown great interest in the problem of the refugees within the mandate of my Office” and that when a representative visited to look at what solutions might be made available to these people, “the government gave every possible assistance and cooperated closely with him to establish a working arrangement for the future.”

UNHCR, in cooperation with the Refugee Section of Egypt’s Ministry of the Interior, undertook a systematic registration of refugees, as a step towards being able to give them legal assistance. The High Commissioner reached an agreement with the Egyptian government that enabled registered refugees to obtain residence permits and certain state benefits. Even for illegal entrants the High Commissioner secured some relief by arranging with the authorities for them to be granted temporary permits that might later be renewed.

THE FIRST SUDANESE CIVIL WAR

In 1955, the first Sudanese civil war erupted. The fighting, which lasted nearly two decades, resulted in the deaths of some half a million people and forced hundreds of thousands more to flee their homes. Many people affected by the violence fled to Egypt because of the historical connections between the two neighbouring countries. For decades, the British government had administered North Sudan and South Sudan as separate regions, but after the Second World War the two areas were merged into a single administrative region. However, the South had not been consulted, which led to a growing sense of disenfranchisement.

This sentiment came to a head in the run-up to the country’s independence from Anglo-Egyptian rule in 1956, as more of the country’s administrative services and power were placed in North Sudanese hands. The outbreak of these tensions was a civil war that would run from 1955 to 1972, sparked initially by a series of military mutinies that were at first uncoordinated but developed into an organized and costly secessionist campaign by those seeking independence for the south.

While a peace was struck in 1972, unrest would continue until the outbreak of fresh fighting and the second civil war in 1983, a conflict that would last for a further 22 years until South Sudan achieved independence in 2011. Throughout these troubles, Egypt was a safe haven for many people caught up in the violence of its southern neighbour. The intertwined history of the two countries, as well as their adjacent geography, made Egypt an obvious place for those affected to seek refuge.

THE SUEZ CRISIS

UNHCR’s establishment of an office in Cairo in 1954 coincided with the burgeoning of a political tussle over control of the strategically and economically invaluable Suez Canal, a confrontation that in 1956 would lead to the invasion of Egypt by Israel, the United Kingdom and France, what is known in Egypt as the Tripartite Aggression.

In its first year of operations, the Egypt office received a request from the British authorities. They asked that the organization support, or intervene, on behalf of refugees, including Palestinians, stateless and potentially Yugoslavs who were employed by the British Army at their installations in the Suez Canal Zone. These people would face serious problems with regard to their residency after the evacuation of the British forces as per the Evacuation Agreement made between the United Kingdom and Egypt and the handover over the zone to Egyptian authorities.

In response, UNHCR gave the British a copy of the Statute and explained that UNHCR was only concerned with refugees staying in Egypt and that it was not clear whether the workers in question would be admitted to stay in Egyptian territory. Amid-Abbas Hoveyda expressed concern over the sensitivity of the issue and its potential to damage future relations with the Egyptian government. To many, the problem was seen as one caused by the British and that as a result it was theirs to solve.

The Suez Crisis had been a problem smouldering for many decades and indeed there had been diplomatic tensions even from the canal’s opening in 1869. But as the economic worth of the canal had increased and nationalism had flourished, hand in hand with Egypt’s 1952 revolution, conditions were right for the tinderbox to explode. The outbreak of armed violence came after President Nasser nationalized the Suez Canal Company on July 26, 1956.

While the violence lasted no more than a week, it brought heavy military and civilian damage. The Western Allies’ attack on Port Said, in particular, left many homes destroyed and resulted in a civilian population left homeless and without food. The United Kingdom’s defence minister said that British casualties “did not exceed 85, of whom not more than 20 were killed.” But the tally of Egyptian casualties was starkly greater, with estimates suggesting that 500 - 3,000 Egyptians were killed in just two days of fighting at Port Said.

The first call for help immediately after the aggression was made by the Egyptian Red Crescent and transmitted to all national societies by the International Committee of the Red Cross. The Suez Crisis provoked important humanitarian engagements from different sides, Arab as well as Western. Two of UNHCR’s long-term partners had been working in Egypt during the 1950s: CARE Egypt came into being in 1954 with a nationwide school-feeding programme, and in 1956 President Nasser invited Catholic Relief Services (CRS) to Egypt to provide relief to those affected by the Suez Crisis.
Egypt emerged the winner of the Crisis. The United Kingdom's prime minister, Anthony Eden, had misjudged American sentiment towards military action, and British troops were forced to pull out of Egypt. He resigned his post two months later, in part on health grounds but also due to being suspected of having misled Parliament over the extent of Britain's collusion with France and Israel in the affair.

In Egypt, suspicion and hostility towards groups connected with the invasion resulted in mass expulsions. President Nasser's government arrested hundreds of Egyptian Jews on suspicion of spying for Israel and seized hundreds of Jewish-owned businesses. Around 25,000 Jews were either forced or pressured to leave the country, reducing their population to about 15,000, or around a third, by the end of 1957. Their departure was hastened by the adoption of the Egyptian Nationality Law in 1956, which amended the original Egyptian Nationality Law of 1926. Article 1 of the new law stated that "Zionists," a term which was never clearly defined but which in practice could be applied to any Jewish person, were barred from being Egyptian nationals.

With the help of the International Committee of the Red Cross, many of the Jews in Egypt left the country. In the years following, large numbers of Armenians, Greeks and Jews, known collectively as Mutamassiruun, or "Egyptianized" foreigners, left the country as a result of President Nasser's seizure of foreign assets and the redistribution of land belonging to members of these immigrant groups.

In February 1957, Auguste Lindt, who was then the High Commissioner, had stated in a report to the United Nations Refugee Fund that, "Another emergency problem is now arising: that of refugees from Egypt. There is no doubt in my mind that those refugees from Egypt who are not able, or not willing to avail themselves of the protection of the government of their nationality fall under the mandate of my office."

In light of this, UNHCR gave legal advice and assistance to some 36,000 Egyptian Jews, as well as other groups who felt compelled to leave. UNHCR assisted these communities through facilitating the provision of residence permits and travel documents to allow for emigration.

The High Commissioner determined that, Jews fleeing Arab countries, in 1957, and later in 1967, were refugees under the UNHCR mandate.

Meanwhile, however, although UNHCR was a growing force in the region it operated on a very limited budget. The Egypt office had just three staff members and an average budget over the period of some $10,000 a year.
1960s

UNHCR Egypt’s Representative Omar Sharaf and staff at 8 Dar El Shefa Street, Garden City (1964). ©UNHCR
While the 1950s was a time of consolidation in terms of the international community more firmly coming to grips with the refugee issues that lingered in the wake of the Second World War, the 1960s brought fresh challenges around flows of refugees, notably resulting from the fallout of the erosion of colonial powers across Africa and Asia.\(^1\)

> Egypt played a pivotal role as decolonization triggered the rise of nationalist movements and civil wars across the continent, leading to conflicts that produced tens of thousands of refugees. As a leader in the Third World and pan-Arab movements, Egypt opened its doors to refugees from across Africa and offered sanctuary to political dissidents and exiles. Many African politicians or their families also found refuge in Egypt. These included the families of Ghanaian revolutionary Kwame Nkrumah and Congolese independence leader Patrice Lumumba.\(^2\) Furthermore, Cairo was the incubator for the birth of the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF)\(^3\) and provided refuge to the first Tunisian president, Habib Bourguiba.\(^4\)

The change of refugee movements from Europe to Africa prompted amendments to the Refugee Convention and a dedicated refugee protocol for Africa, the Organisation of African Unity’s (OAU) Convention Governing Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa.\(^5\) Meantime, Egypt faced disruption of its own with the shock assault by Israel of the 1967 War.\(^6\)

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In the first part of the 1960s, the population of concern to UNHCR in Egypt was relatively small and the caseload of the staff was manageable, at much the same level as through the 1950s. UNHCR provided assistance to the stateless Armenian population, focusing on their resettlement to Australia, France, Canada and the United States. The stateless persons remaining in Egypt continued to receive financial assistance for health, education and livelihoods initiatives, with some of them choosing to establish small qahwas (coffee houses) selling local staples such as foul (cooked fava beans) and falafel.

The largest number of refugees to take up residence in Egypt over the period were people escaping armed conflicts and political violence in Sudan and the Horn of Africa. The First Sudanese Civil War, which went on until 1972, had erupted in 1955, just before the country gained its independence. The catalyst was anger on the part of southerners who had been promised, but subsequently denied, regional autonomy. Half a million people, most of them civilians, died in the fighting, while hundreds of thousands more were forced to flee their homes, most of them escaping to the neighbouring countries of Egypt, Ethiopia, Kenya and Uganda. Egypt was an attractive sanctuary for many of these refugees, partly due to its relatively well-developed economy and educational system but also because of the close historical connections between the two countries.

Education was a major part of UNHCR’s programme in Egypt, helping to facilitate thousands of students, who had fled to the country from Angola, Cameroon, Tanzania and Ethiopia, to continue their studies. During this period, more than 20,000 students from other parts of Africa were enrolled in the Egyptian education system, many of them at the prestigious and historic Al-Azhar University in Cairo, arguably Sunni Islam’s foremost seat of learning.

In 1964, Ethiopia and Sudan entered into an extradition treaty, prompting UNHCR Egypt to begin RSD the following year for Eritreans who had fled the turmoil of contested Ethiopian territory. The process meant that if an individual or family met the international legal definition of a refugee, they were then entitled to humanitarian assistance and could apply for resettlement.
Tunisia had also found in Cairo a boon to its aspirations to independence. The country’s first president, Habib Bourguiba, fled to Egypt for safety in 1945. Cairo became his base for a successful independence campaign, and the city was also a place of asylum for his main rival, Salah bin Youssef, who fled there in 1959. Bin Youssef would later be assassinated in Germany after travelling there for medical treatment.

Mahmoud Harbi, the architect of Djibouti’s independence movement, sought sanctuary in Egypt between 1958 and 1960 after openly clashing with the French. Harbi, a charismatic nationalist and pan-Somalist, was killed, along with several of his associates, in a mysterious plane crash shortly after his return to Djibouti in 1960.

That same year the ELF was founded in Cairo by Eritrean exiles, drawing inspiration from the Algerian revolution. Militant opposition to Ethiopia’s reign had begun in the late 1950s, with the founding of the short-lived underground Eritrean Liberation Movement (ELM) in Port Sudan, members of which tried — but seemingly failed — to engage with Eritrean students in Cairo.

Egypt has frequently served as a refuge for Sudanese revolutionaries, unsurprisingly given that the two neighbouring countries share much of an intertwining history. Sudan’s October Revolution of 1964, which brought the downfall of the military regime of Ibrahim Abboud and led to a four-year democratic interregnum, was in part nurtured by activists who found support and safety in Cairo. Egypt played a similar role around the time of the 1985 uprising that saw an end to the country’s second military dictatorship, under Gafar Nimeiri, and has been home to many other political exiles from Sudan since then.

By the early years of the decade, some 20 African liberation movements had a presence in Cairo. Reflecting the importance that Egypt gave to the issue, a Bureau for African Affairs was established in the president’s office to support liberation movements. The leftist Gamal Abdel Nasser, whose power had itself been secured by revolution and the shrugging off of foreign influence, gave welcome to independence-seeking revolutionaries across the Middle East and Africa as colonial powers saw their grips weaken. Egypt supported these groups as a result of pan-Arab and anti-imperialist sentiment, and the country was attractive to revolutionaries in-the-making because of its status as a centre of excellence for higher education in the Third World. Cairo became an ideological hot house for many young radicals from across Africa, the Middle East and beyond, who would go on to effect significant change in the world.

Egypt already had a reputation as fertile ground for fomenting revolution. Perhaps the most famous African leader to have found sanctuary in Cairo was the Algerian revolutionary Ben Bella, later that country’s first president. Bella arrived in Cairo in the early fifties and stayed until 1956, a formative and critical period for his movement, the National Liberation Front. Shielded in Egypt from the French authorities, he subsequently became key to Algerian independence.

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Situated on the Red Sea between Ethiopia and Sudan, Eritrea became an Italian colony in 1889. The United Kingdom took control of the territory in 1941, and after the Second World War it was absorbed into a federation with Ethiopia and was eventually annexed by that country.

Militant opposition to the annexation began in 1958, with the founding of the ELM, which was violently quashed by the Ethiopian authorities in 1962.

Two years earlier, another resistance movement, the ELF, had been established in Cairo, where around 300 exiled students from Eritrea had taken up residence.

The ELF went on to become the kernel of the early days of the Eritrean independence movement, but was ousted by the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) in 1981. It was this group that emerged as the principal Eritrean liberation front to lead the country to victory against Ethiopia.

In 1993, the Eritrean people voted to establish an independent state. This, however, was not the end of the country’s troubles. In 1998, a border dispute with Ethiopia escalated into a devastating two-year war.

Meanwhile, in Eritrea itself, the government became increasingly repressive, launching a programme of indefinite military conscription that was to prompt a growing number of people to escape from the country, some of them moving first to Sudan and subsequently to Egypt.

The Fish Garden has been a go-to backdrop for Egyptian film directors for decades. Its role in the real-life drama of Eritrea’s push for independence is less well remembered.

In the upscale Cairo island district of Zamalek, close to the river, is an aquarium and grotto garden known as the Fish Garden. A manicured stretch of green fields between the apartment blocks, it's a popular place to take children after school, and for young couples to wander. The grounds were first landscaped in the eighteenth century as part of a khedivial garden and in the 1900s it became home to an extensive collection of African fish under the stewardship of a British army officer and zoologist, Captain Stanley Flower.

The park has a curious connection, though, to one of Africa’s youngest states as the place where the first “official” meeting of the ELF took place.

The Eritrean nationalist Woldeab Woldemariam sought refuge in Cairo in 1953 after seven assassination attempts made against him. Woldeab, a teacher, activist and journalist, was the founder of the first newspaper in Tigrinya and a leader of the pro-independence party known as “Eritrea for Eritreans.” From his self-imposed exile in Egypt he spearheaded radio broadcasts to Eritrea from Cairo. Before long, Cairo became a nexus for Eritrean independence groups, garnering support from Eritrean students in Egypt as well as refugees living there.

Eritreans had been coming to Cairo for higher education for a long time; the historic Islamic university there, Al-Azhar, even had a corner set aside for Eritreans. This continued into modern times, and by the 1950s there were over a hundred Eritrean students at Al-Azhar and increasing numbers attending secular state universities under an Egyptian government scholarship scheme, many of whom were members of the Eritrean Student Association (ESA), which was formed in 1951.

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Egypt was one of the founding nations of the OAU, established in 1963. The aim of the OAU was to defend the sovereignty and integrity of African states, to help countries to work together to improve economic and social conditions for their populations and to eradicate all vestiges of colonialism in Africa. It was also through this body that work was carried out to create a regional instrument that specifically addressed the situation of refugees in Africa. Such an instrument was urgently needed by African nations to manage the refugee populations fleeing conflicts generated by the decolonization process.

In March 1964, the then Deputy UN High Commissioner for Refugees, Prince Sadruddin Aga Khan, travelled to Cairo for the first session of the Asian-African Legal Consultative Committee (AALCC) on the rights of refugees. This meeting, the location for which pointed to Cairo’s role as a key global influencer, had an important impact on the drafting of the 1969 OAU Refugee Convention.

Significantly, Egypt expressed for the first time its reservations to the 1951 Convention’s refugee definition, which it said did not cover those forced to flee their country due to external subversion. This point was made again in a 1967 meeting of the AALCC, resulting in an official recommendation that the new definition of a refugee should take into account specific aspects of the refugee situation in Africa which were the result of colonialism.
The High Commissioner had a personal connection to Egypt through his ancestor, the Fatimid Caliph al-Mu'izz, who founded Cairo in the tenth century, and both he and his father owned houses in Egypt. The Aga Khan was especially close to the Egyptian career diplomat Omar Sharaf, who in 1961 became UNHCR’s Egypt Representative, having been Deputy Representative of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees for the Middle East from 1961 to 1966. As Sharaf’s tenure as Representative came to an end, the High Commissioner personally lobbied on his behalf to the government for an extension of his term.

Prince Sadruddin visited Egypt as High Commissioner in March 1967, and stated during the following Executive Committee meeting: ‘I had the occasion, early in March, to examine the situation in the United Arab Republic, where I had the privilege of discussing problems of common interest with President Nasser and members of the Government. As a result of my visit I am happy to report that the Government of the United Arab Republic has decided, for the first time, to make a contribution of LE3,000 to the voluntary funds programmes of UNHCR’.37

Egypt’s role as a leading light for African nations was spread over several sectors, not least education. Throughout the 1960s, student refugees from across the continent came to Egypt to continue studies disrupted by political upheaval at home, guided by its reputation for high-quality education. Meantime, education played a major role in UNHCR’s programme, a focus that would intensify into and during the 1970s.
As growing numbers of African refugees arrived in Egypt during the early 1960s, spurred by instability in the wake of the continent's gradual decolonization, limitations of the 1951 UN Refugee Convention were becoming increasingly apparent. In 1964, the annual meeting of the AALCC took place in Cairo, and was the first time that Egypt noted the 1951 Convention was not sufficient to adequately cover the refugee situation in Africa.

Whereas the 1951 Convention had been shaped by the needs of Europe in the wake of the Second World War, new challenges faced countries where refugees from Africa were fleeing civil wars and post-colonial struggles. Therefore a new protocol relating to the Statute was created, which removed geographic and time restrictions that had applied to the 1951 Convention. Notably, the 1951 Convention had held only for people whose circumstances were "a result of events occurring before 1 January 1951." The Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees was adopted by UNHCR in 1967. Egypt became one of its 146 signatory countries in May 1981.

THE OAU CONVENTION

At the end of the decade, Egypt signed the OAU’s Convention Concerning Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa. The OAU Convention, which was adopted in September 1969 and entered into force in June 1974, expanded the definition of refugee in similar vein to the 1967 Protocol. In the Convention's own words, it noted with concern the constantly increasing number of refugees in Africa and reflected the deep concern of States for refugees and their desire to establish common standards for their treatment.

The Convention was expressly "anxious to make a distinction between a refugee who seeks a peaceful and normal life and a person fleeing his country for the sole purpose of fomenting subversion from outside." The interpretation of this proviso was arguably moot and Egypt, as noted earlier, was in many respects a place of sanctuary and nourishment for African revolutionary movements throughout the decade.

However, the definition of a recognized refugee would also "apply to every person who, owing to external aggression, occupation, foreign domination or events seriously disturbing public order in either part or the whole of his country of origin or nationality, is compelled to leave his place of habitual residence in order to seek refuge in another place outside his country of origin or nationality."
The Arab-Israeli War of 1967 delivered a powerful blow to Egypt’s national psyche. The political turmoil caused across the wider region was significant, with hundreds of thousands of people uprooted by the conflict. Thousands of Palestinians fled the West Bank and about 153,000 Syrians left the Golan Heights to become refugees. Across the Arab world, Jewish minorities were either expelled or chose to leave with these refugees going to Israel or Europe.

In Egypt, the aftermath of the conflict was characterized by sharpened political sensitivities towards minority groups, including refugees and asylum-seekers. The following year, the Government of Egypt officially requested that UNHCR resettle most of the 15,000 stateless persons living in Egypt. A resettlement mission was sent to Egypt under the auspices of Caritas, the Catholic relief and development organization, to assess 100 refugees for resettlement in Belgium.

The departure of the Jewish community, whose members had been leaving the country in large numbers since the 1950s, accelerated in the wake of Israel’s victory in the 1967 War. Consequently, UNHCR Egypt worked in conjunction with the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS) to determine whether or not UNHCR’s mandate for protection applied to the Ashkenazi and Sephardic communities in Egypt.

In response to the growing refugee needs brought about by new arrivals, UNHCR Egypt began disbursing financial support and assistance towards the costs of education. This had become particularly critical from 1967 onwards, when the Egyptian authorities changed the relevant regulations so that all non-national students, even those with residence permits, were charged full tuition fees.

In 1969, UNHCR’s Executive Committee approved $57,000 for assistance and counseling for various groups of refugees, including stateless Armenians.
1970s

Congested traffic in Cairo, Egypt (1 February 1979). ©UN Photo / B. Wolff
1970s

1970  Anwar Sadat becomes president of Egypt
1972  Civil war in Sudan ends. Addis Ababa Agreement brings autonomy to southern Sudan
1974  High Commissioner for Refugees Sadruddin Aga Khan visits Egypt
       Emperor Haile Selassie overthrown by a military junta in Ethiopia
1976  Caritas Egypt begins to support refugees in Egypt
       Egypt and Sudan sign the Wadi Al-Nil Agreement, allowing citizens to live and work in either country without seeking a visa or work permit
1977  Mengistu Haile Mariam comes to power in Ethiopia
       War between Somalia and Ethiopia breaks out, ending the following year
1979  St. Andrew’s Refugee Services (STARS) is founded
       Peace treaty between Israel and Egypt
       The International Conference on the Situation of Refugees in Africa held in Arusha, Tanzania

The nature of Egypt’s refugee problem changed during the 1970s from one concerned with long-term support of ageing Armenian and European refugees to providing educational support to younger Africans fleeing civil war in the Horn of Africa. Ongoing political strife had displaced hundreds of thousands of people, mostly into neighbouring countries, but Egypt was located some distance away from these conflicts and did not therefore receive a large influx of displaced people crossing its border to seek shelter. A significant effort was made by African nations to tackle the refugee problem at the 1979 Arusha conference, which made clear the need for international solidarity in order for African countries to meet their obligations to refugees and displaced persons.¹

Meanwhile, the beginning of the decade saw significant change in Egypt when, after the sudden death of President Nasser, Anwar Sadat became president. Sadat’s foreign and domestic policies aimed to liberalize the economy to attract foreign investment, opening a new political course for the country.²

Secretary-General Kurt Waldheim making a statement on his arrival at Cairo Airport on 6 June, 1974. Seated next to him is Ismail Fahmy, the Egyptian Minister of Foreign Affairs of Egypt. ©UN Photo/Yutaka Nagata

¹ UNHCR
² Seven Decades in Egypt
ARMENIAN AND RUSSIAN ISSUES LINGER

In the first half of the 1970s, several UNHCR projects were financed to continue the support of aged and disabled people among Egypt's long-standing communities of refugees from former Ottoman provinces and Europe, including Armenians and Russians.

A June 1970 UNHCR report noted: "For the past two years refugees of concern to UNHCR, principally persons of European origin, Armenians and other stateless people, have been affected by events in this part of the world. For those too old to migrate or having difficulty maintaining an adequate standard of living, temporary assistance will continue to be provided until 1971."

Rising living costs in Egypt not only meant that more refugees required financial assistance, but that longer-term projects were not implemented. Funds were instead used to prioritize local settlement assistance in the form of vocational training, monthly grants or medical help, as well as counselling and social work services. In addition, UNHCR financed annuities, rent subsidies, housing, establishment grants, medical care, relief and scholarships. Language instruction and assistance in becoming established in trades and small businesses were also covered.

A consistent problem for UNHCR Egypt included a lack of partners to work with, so the operation existed as its own implementing partner, effectively transferring funds directly from its accounts to beneficiaries. As the numbers of African refugees grew, organizations were created to help meet the growing needs of refugees in Egypt.

Organizations dedicated to funding ageing Armenians and their descendants helped to finance care for Egypt's stateless people: the Jinishian Memorial Programme and the Karagheusian Commemorative Cooperation provided thousands of dollars in critical assistance. Major funding went towards the creation of more housing for the elderly and funding for local settlement.

As UNHCR had pushed for the resettlement of many stateless people in the 1950s and 1960s, those remaining were considered unlikely to leave Egypt due to old age, and thus required indefinite financial assistance. However, the Government of Egypt had regarded resettlement to other countries as the preferred solution from the very beginning, as it took the view that refugees should reside in the country only temporarily and that they and their children should not be integrated and acquire Egyptian citizenship.  

A letter regarding a resettlement appointment with the Australian Embassy Migration Office (1977). ©UNHCR Archives
Throughout the 1970s, the African continent was in the throes of conflicts generated by strategic interests and centuries-old rivalries. The Cold War scramble for Africa and its oil reserves meant that almost every state around the Red Sea had reversed its allegiances between the superpowers of the USA and the Soviet Union during this period. Ethiopia and Somalia had their own particular conflict concerning the contested Ogaden region, which Somalia sought to reclaim from Ethiopia – the colonial borders that had been drawn across the region did not account for ethnic kinship.

In Eritrea, the struggle for independence was already raging as a bloody war. But the region's unrest was magnified when, in 1974, the Emperor of Ethiopia, Haile Selassie, was overthrown by a military junta. A group of soldiers known as the Derg seized power from the ageing Emperor and established a highly authoritarian government that was responsible for widespread human rights abuses during a civil war that displaced thousands of Ethiopians.

The Ogaden War was an invasion launched by Somalia in July 1977 in a bid to capture the disputed region of Ogaden, which had been considered Ethiopian territory since 1948. With support from the Soviet Union and Cuba, Ethiopia was able to recapture most of the region by March 1978, forcing the Somalis to withdraw. Refugees, mainly ethnic Somalis, but also many Ethiopian Oromo, poured into camps in Somalia, feeling the war as well as the widespread human rights abuses carried out under Mengistu’s “Red Terror”. However, starting 1988, the flow of movement was reversed, with more than 600,000 Somalis seeking refuge in Ethiopia and Djibouti over the next three years after civil war broke out in Somalia between the northern and southern tribes.

The year 1977 saw the overthrow of Emperor Haile Selassie in a coup d'etat staged by a revolutionary military council known as the Derg. The violent elimination of opposition groups by the Derg became known as the “Red Terror”, so named by Mengistu Haile Mariam in 1977 in a speech following his election as chairman of the Derg. Mengistu announced the start of the violent campaign in response to the “White Terror” political killings of the Derg by rival opposition groups. The period was characterized by extreme brutality mainly concentrated in urban areas, particularly Addis Ababa, Gondar, Asmara and Dessie, which was largely carried out by security forces, although the state also made use of militias and armed citizens. The number of casualties of the ‘Red Terror’ period is contested, but according to Amnesty International, up to 500,000 people were killed while some of those who managed to escape sought refuge in Egypt.
The Sudanese had a history of migration to Egypt long before they started to flee there as refugees as a result of the civil war in the 1950s and 1980s. In the nineteenth century, Sudan was considered part of Egypt, and both countries were ruled as one by a British governor. Sudanese from the north in particular used to travel to Egypt for their education, on business, and for medical treatment or for holidays. There was also a Sudanese expatriate community that was well integrated into Egyptian society, thanks to the shared language and culture, and cemented through intermarriage with Egyptians.

In 1976, Sudan and Egypt signed the Wadi Al-Nil Agreement of free movement. The terms of this agreement meant that nationals of both countries were given unrestricted movement across the border, in addition to access to employment, education, health services and property ownership rights. Although Sudanese were not present in large numbers as asylum-seekers and refugees until the 1990s, those in Egypt enjoyed favourable treatment on par with that of nationals.
At the start of the 1970s, Eritreans — then labelled as Ethiopians, as Eritrea would not become independent from Ethiopia until 1993 — constituted the largest number of new refugees coming to Egypt. The arrival of some 400 refugees from other African countries in 1974 increased the Egyptian refugee population to some 4,000 individuals.

Ethiopians began fleeing in large numbers after the 1974 coup brought the military council known as the Derg to power, ushering in a wave of political repression and violence. Most Ethiopians fleeing political violence and conflict in the country had initially sought refuge in neighbouring states, particularly Sudan. But some refugees, particularly those from middle-class backgrounds, were able to travel to Egypt, where they could continue their education or apply for third-country resettlement.

Separately, conflict in Sudan had made the country less attractive to refugees from other countries. In 1972, the High Commissioner for Refugees launched a relief programme for southern Sudan, following the ratification of the Addis Ababa Agreement, which ended the Sudanese Civil War. The funds received for the programme covered the repairing of roads, hospitals and schools in preparation for the repatriation of some 180,000 Sudanese in neighbouring countries, as well as some 500,000 internally displaced persons.

UNHCR assistance, which had been mainly devoted to stateless Armenians and refugees of European origin, began being offered to an increasing number of these African refugees, a majority of whom were students. With so many new arrivals, UNHCR Egypt recognized a need to raise awareness of refugee issues among the Egyptian public, and in 1974 drafted its first public information strategy.

In 1975, USD 646,000 was allocated under the annual programme to meet the varied needs of groups, including students from a number of African countries in Egypt and aged stateless persons or refugees. A major allocation of USD 211,000 was made to promote the local settlement of people of various origins, such as stateless Armenians and refugees of European origin, through housing assistance, medical care and the adjustment of regular monthly allowances and annuities.

In the course of 1975, the influx of refugee students, especially to Egypt and Sudan, necessitated the supplementation of the original allocation by about USD 350,000. As well as expanding its provision of educational grants, UNHCR also recruited two new social workers in 1975 in order to support vulnerable members of the new community.

By the end of 1978 the number of refugees had increased from 4,000 to 5,000, and as it was expected that new arrivals would continue at a steady pace, the 1979 programme budget was increased from USD 364,000 in 1978 to USD 402,000.

Resettlement assistance was provided to a small number of refugees, for whom counselling was especially important. During 1977 and 1978, for instance, some 100 refugees were resettled from Egypt.
In order to help African refugees cope with financial barriers, UNHCR and other agencies funded a scholarship scheme that made possible education for several thousand refugees at secondary and university levels, for the whole decade.

Following the 1972 Addis Ababa Peace Agreement between Egypt and the South Sudan Liberation Movement, Sudanese students could attend Egyptian universities for free under a new scholarship programme. Between 1972 and 1982, 100 Sudanese students a year participated in the scheme. Through the 1980s, the programme would be expanded, taking in 300 students a year.

By the end of the 1970s, Egypt was supporting thousands of African students, mostly from Ethiopia and Eritrea, in addition to other groups including stateless Armenians and refugees of European origin. Although they were not allowed to stay in Egypt after completing their studies, government ministries, particularly the Ministry of the Interior and the African Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, provided scholarships to allow African students to complete their studies in Egypt.

Additionally, Egypt hosted South African and Namibian students sponsored by the UN Educational and Training Programme for South Africans, a scheme to make university available to students barred from it in apartheid regimes.

The UNETPSA programme ran between 1968 and 1990, and provided financial assistance for the education and training of students from South Africa and Namibia who were victims of apartheid. The programme granted scholarships to students to train in a variety of disciplines in institutions around the world, with a view to their eventual return to South Africa or independent Namibia where they could be involved in the political, economic and social development of their country. The grants were made for secondary level education, university education and vocational training. While many of those assisted under the programme were refugees, UNETPSA was not conceived as a ‘refugee’ programme. However, a March 1970 agreement between UNHCR and the Centre Against Apartheid specified that UNHCR would provide educational assistance to bona fide refugees up to the first level of secondary education, while the Centre Against Apartheid would provide assistance at the higher level of secondary education and above.
Between 1967 and 1979, the refugee population in Africa had more than tripled from 800,000 to over 3,000,000. In the face of this unprecedented increase, a host of delegations from around the world converged on Arusha, Tanzania in May 1979 to undertake a global review of the refugee situation in Africa and seek ways to improve it. The conference, which was co-sponsored by the OAU, the Economic Commission for Africa and UNHCR, brought together numerous actors concerned with the refugee problem, including governments, intergovernmental agencies and non-governmental organizations, around the idea that “the granting of asylum is a peaceful and humanitarian act.” Among the issues discussed were that of burden-sharing and the awareness among Africans that international assistance was only reaching a limited proportion of African refugees.

The conference made important recommendations in the educational sphere, calling for the movement of refugees for study, professional training or resettlement to be “facilitated by African states in a spirit of African unity”; for refugee children to be afforded the same access to elementary education in their host country; for African states to ensure refugees access secondary and technical education; and for providing refugees with higher education facilities either in their country of asylum or elsewhere.
The 1980s were landmark years for the Government of Egypt in respect to the signature of important international treaties. It was also a decade full of political upheaval in sub-Saharan Africa. The Horn of Africa was the site of numerous large-scale refugee movements as war, famine and mass displacement caught the world’s attention. In Somalia, northern rebels took up arms against the military junta of President Siad Barre, who had been in power since 1969. In 1983, the government of Sudan imposed a hard-line implementation of Sharia law, with Nimeiri declaring himself Imam of the people, and a second civil war broke out in the south. In 1984, Ethiopia, along with the whole of the Sahel region, was hit by a severe drought that affected millions of people. And, in 1989, Omar Bashir took power through a coup in Sudan.

As a result, an increasing number of asylum-seekers arrived in Egypt in need of support. By the end of the 1980s, some African students had gained access to Egyptian universities, while others were successfully resettled by UNHCR Egypt in the United States, Canada and Australia. Eritreans and Ethiopians fleeing the wars in Ethiopia and the repression of the Mengistu Haile Mariam regime continued to make up the majority of the refugee population in Egypt during this decade, until UNHCR Egypt first began registering Somali refugees in 1988. By the end of the decade, Somalis had become the largest national refugee group, followed by Sudanese, who mostly came from the south.
The focus of UNHCR’s Egypt office was increasingly determination of refugee status, interventions on behalf of refugees and the improvement of the legal status of refugees in the country, as well as substantial pioneering work in helping push for national legislation to apply international rules.

In 1980, Egypt ratified the OAU’s 1969 Refugee Convention, followed by the ratification of the 1951 Convention and its 1967 Protocol in 1981. Egypt expressed reservations to provisions in the 1951 Convention concerning access to labour legislation and social security (art. 24), access to primary education (art. 22 (1)), access to public relief and assistance (art. 22), rationing (art. 20) and personal status (art. 12(1)). That same year, the government passed Law Number 137 that required all foreigners in Egypt to obtain a work permit for employment, refugees included. In spite of the increasing numbers of new arrivals, the authorities viewed refugees as having a temporary presence in Egypt and thus not in need of permanent legal protection.

In light of the ratification of the refugee convention, UNHCR continued to urge the government to create national asylum legislation. In 1984, Presidential Decree Number 188 issued a formal call for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to establish a permanent Committee for Refugee Affairs, which resulted in the establishment of the Department of Refugee Affairs within it. The committee’s role would be to assess asylum requests and to deliver a recommendation to the ministry, which would make the final decision regarding recognized refugee status. The decree is yet to be implemented.

Over the course of the 1980s, Egypt signed a number of international treaties, including the African Charter on Human and People’s Rights (1984), the Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (1986) and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) (1989). According to Egyptian law, any international treaty signed by the government becomes the force of domestic law, according to Article 151 of the 1971 constitution.
The African refugee crisis had become a global responsibility by the 1980s, with a large percentage of the 10 million refugees worldwide originating from African countries. UNHCR has been concerned with the issues of refugee aid and development and returnee aid and development since the late 1970s. Over a five-year period, five conferences dedicated to African refugees took place — the 1979 Arusha Conference, a 1980 International Conference on Refugees in Sudan, two International Conference on Assistance to Refugees in Africa conferences, ICARA I and II, held in 1981 and 1984, and their follow-up, known as “Refugee Aid and Development.”

UNHCR called for the first ICARA meeting in 1981. Egypt was one of only a handful of Arab countries to participate (the others were Djibouti, Somalia and Sudan), with a delegation led by the then minister of foreign affairs, Boutros Boutros-Ghali, and pledged one million dollars to UNHCR.

While the first ICARA conference focused primarily on emergency assistance, the second, jointly organized by UNHCR and UNDP in Geneva in July 1984 under the theme of “Time for Solutions,” linked humanitarian aid to refugees with the need to help host countries develop their social and economic infrastructures, as well as promoting voluntary repatriation of refugees to their homelands.

As the Egyptian delegation to the conference stressed: “The concept of additiveness was a key element of this debate. It refers to the request by low-income host countries that refugee assistance of all types should be over and above — additional to — the normal development assistance they would receive if they had no refugees on their territory.”

ICARA I ultimately failed to satisfy host states in Africa by not meeting their expectations for additional resources.
In the mid-1980s, a combination of war, famine and drought in the Horn of Africa wrought suffering on a previously unseen scale, with an estimated death toll of approximately one million people, and millions of others left on the verge of starvation. The extent of the humanitarian disaster was evident by mid-1984, but it was the BBC television news reports by Michael Buerk and cameraman Mohamed Amin that brought the catastrophe to western public attention. Buerk described the scenes of dying families huddled in feeding camps as “a biblical famine in the 20th century.”

ICARA II may have disappointed African host states, but the humanitarian disaster that unfolded after was a stimulus for relief, as organizations and donors found it hard to stand on the sidelines. Government repression, conflict with rebel groups, drought and famine were the principal causes of large-scale refugee migration, but other factors, such as conflict in Ethiopia and forced resettlements within the country, and upheaval in South and North Sudan, also contributed to generating refugees.

A second civil war in Sudan broke out in 1983. Triggered by the implementation of draconian Sharia law (drastic criminal punishments were introduced and financial systems depending on interest were outlawed) by Sudan’s president, Gafar Nimeiri, the conflict left an estimated two million people dead, four million people displaced within the country and almost hundreds of thousands seeking refuge outside its borders. In 1985 Nimeiri was removed from office by the Sudanese army, but the war would continue until 2005.

Singer Bob Geldof organized musicians to form the group Band Aid and recorded the “Do they know it’s Christmas?” single in November 1984. This was followed by USA for Africa’s single “We are the World” in March 1985 and in July 1985 by the Live Aid fundraising concerts. Watched live by a vast television audience, the concerts took place simultaneously in London and Philadelphia in front of a combined stadium audience of approximately 172,000. Stars that took part included Mick Jagger, David Bowie, Stevie Wonder, Michael Jackson, Elton John, George Michael, Tina Turner, Bob Dylan and Queen. The concert raised more than $100 million that went towards relief efforts for the Ethiopian famine.
Ethiopians fleeing the repression of the Mengistu regime continued to make up the majority of the refugee population. To support the large numbers of students among them, UNHCR scaled up its scholarship programme, allowing Ethiopian students to graduate from renowned public universities in Cairo and Alexandria, such as the American University in Cairo. Grants covered living expenses, tuition fees and supplementary costs such as books, uniforms and supplies. The scholarships were flexible and open-ended, allowing for students to re-take exams if they failed.

Students who had originally sought asylum in Sudan, Djibouti and Somalia were able to come to Egypt to continue their education. Some had been transferred with the support of UNHCR, with the specific purpose of allowing them to come to Egypt, while others came of their own volition. However, refugees whose arrival in Egypt was not arranged by UNHCR offices in the country of first asylum were not provided with material assistance.

In addition, 150 Chadian students who lost scholarships and funding from home due to the political situation in their country were supported by UNHCR.

In 1982, student refugee committees for Ethiopian students in Cairo and Alexandria were created. These committees represented every major Ethiopian ethnic group and regularly coordinated with UNHCR.

By the end of the decade, out of the approximately 20,000 African students living in Egypt, UNHCR Egypt supported 300 refugee students, out of 700 UNHCR scholarships provided to students in the MENA region in total. Many of the Ethiopian scholarship recipients were from the refugee camps in eastern Sudan.

African students on scholarships in Egypt were expected to depart the country after completing their studies. In the midst of rising unemployment, the government declared its commitment to securing jobs for Egyptian graduates first and foremost. It simply could not afford for African refugees to compete with Egyptian counterparts in the marketplace. Options for Africans were therefore limited: refugees could voluntarily repatriate or go back to the country of first asylum. Mainly were resettled, acceptance rates were over 90 per cent, with the United States, Canada and Australia the receiving countries.
Towards the end of the 1980s, asylum-seekers from a wider number of countries started arriving in Egypt. The most notable single group were 600 Somali nationals, who arrived in 1988, fleeing government oppression. A rebel group, the Somali National Movement (SNM), had emerged in Somaliland in the 1980s, opposing the military junta of President Siad Barre, which had seized power in 1969.

As the needs grew, more humanitarian organizations began working with vulnerable refugee communities in the country, including Save the Children, Refuge Egypt and Caritas Egypt.

Egypt's refugee issues came against a wider backdrop of escalating refugee numbers. While in 1975 there were 2.8 million refugees worldwide, by the end of the 1980s the refugee population had grown to nearly 15 million.

By the end of the 1980s, Egypt provided a home for two distinct refugee populations: elderly Armenians and Russians who had arrived during and after the First World War, and exiles from countries in the Horn of Africa that had been affected by political violence, human rights abuses and natural disasters. In the following decade, this latter group was to become UNHCR's main preoccupation.
Today, the refugee committee in Alexandria has a broad range of activities—looking after young and senior students, organizing extra lessons, taking care of medical problems and organizing sports events. In addition, the committee has set up a Unicef-UNDP project to help African students facing difficulties. The project, which is funded by Unicef, is a great opportunity for the committee to help more students.

Positive reputation

At the moment, students are most concerned about the cost of living. Inflation is high, and they are not allowed to look for part-time work. “What we get doesn’t match what we need to live on,” says Abid. “We’re not happy.” “You can hardly make ends meet,” says Fukiki. But Fukiki, who arrived in Egypt from Bangladesh only a year ago, is grateful to complain. “I really think we’re doing well. People are going up, but we’re not great. And anyway, we manage by helping each other.”

Much of this mutual assistance occurs spontaneously and informally, the refugees club together to buy books and sometimes share the money they have between themselves. “We help each other by giving each other different involvement,” says Abid. “In the community, you are always looking for something better, and when a large number of refugees are involved, the community becomes stronger.”

Refugees—March 1988

...and have achieved considerable academic success.

In theory, there are a number of other options open to the refugee students: they can voluntarily return to their country of origin, go home to their native land, or continue their studies in the UK or Switzerland. But in reality, few of these possibilities are viable. Education is a growing problem, and the best that many secondary school leavers can hope for is a job as an office boy or taxi driver. The Government is committed to finding a job for every Egyptian graduate, and has devised that it cannot afford to allow refugee students to return to their native country after completing their studies.
The overwhelming majority of students choose the last of these alternatives.

According to UNHCR Resettlement Officer Sonia Merly, in the last five years, only “a handful” of refugee students have expressed an interest in going home. Conversations with the students suggest that this situation is unlikely to change in the immediate future. Many share the feelings of the refugees who say, “I have no expectation to repatriation generally — it’s one solution for refugees, but it’s not an option for everybody. You grow to live in a certain way, and the impression the prospect back home are not good to you and your family, so they would not come if I returned. In fact, for me, repatriation could sound like becoming a refugee one more time.”

Returning to the country of first asylum is another option. During their time in Egypt, the refugees developed a very positive view of three countries, considering them “safe, hot, and full of hardship and disease.” “What would I do there,” asks one student in Cairo, “I’m educated now. Should I go back and sit in a refugee camp. My mind has changed. How can I go back?” According to an UNHCR official, going back to the country of first asylum would be regarded as a failure by many. I would still be homeless if I went back to a country that wasn’t my home land, so I might as well go somewhere where the prospects are better.”

There are three particular countries where the prospects are seen much better: Austria, Canada, and the USA. According to Sonia Merly, in recent years, about 6 to 10 refugees in Egypt have expressed a wish to go there for resettlement. As these figures suggest, resettlement is not confined to the academically successful refugees. According to UNHCR Education Counsellor Tahsin Ekkad, there are several students who have developed practical skills through vocational training or find that they are accepted more easily than those with degrees.

There is no doubt that the refugees in Egypt have high expectations of resettlement. In the words of one, “This is a good time. You can study, get a career, and earn enough to have a good life and send some money back to your family.” For some at least, such expectations are fulfilled. Sonia Merly recently travelled to Canada, and she reports that the former students she met seemed to be doing well, and had managed to find work in the areas for which they had been trained in Egypt.

But can scholarship programmes in Egypt be assessed solely on the basis of individuals’ circumstances? Should they provide financial aid to students who

1990s

Refugee children and scouts (1996). ©UNHCR / Panos Moumtzis
During the 1990s, Egypt’s refugee population changed considerably, while the work of UNHCR expanded both in terms of its activities in Egypt and in the region.

In 1991, UNHCR’s Egypt office was upgraded to a regional office for the Middle East overseeing refugee management in the entire region. The office was also responsible for liaison with the League of Arab States and acted as a focal point for the Palestinian issue and the Middle East peace process.

Education for refugees continued to be central to the agency’s programmes and advocacy in Egypt, and in 1992 the Egyptian Ministry of Education granted children of Libyan, Jordanian and Sudanese origins access to public education.

Instability in the Horn of Africa and the civil war in Sudan continued to push refugees to flee to Egypt. The number of refugees registered with UNHCR – of more than 15 nationalities, including stateless Armenians – grew from 1,991 in 1990 to 6,553 persons in 1999. The largest number of these people came from Sudan, followed by Somalia and Yemen. Smaller numbers of refugees and asylum-seekers also came from parts of West Africa, Iraq, and Afghanistan.

The considerable numbers of new asylum-seekers made RSD and resettlement a central component of the operation. In 1994, the Egyptian government asked UNHCR to undertake RSD for Sudanese nationals, whose number was steadily increasing, from 755 in 1994 to 2,577 in 1999. This increase was especially observed among new arrivals from southern Sudan since 1995.

To keep up with this increase, UNHCR made efforts in 1999 to strengthen its RSD capacity and expedite refugee resettlement for eligible refugees. This aimed at providing them with durable solutions, with the support of traditional resettlement countries, and reducing the irregular movements of asylum-seekers in the region.

Over the course of the decade, UNHCR Egypt implemented one of the organization’s largest resettlement programmes worldwide; the Middle East Resettlement Project.
In 1991, UNHCR’s office in Egypt became the centre for services for the Middle East and North Africa, responsible for protection, programmes and administration, finance, public information and external relations, as well as training and information systems. It also became responsible for liaising with the League of Arab States and functioning as a participant in the ongoing Middle East peace process.

Egypt was an attractive candidate for the role of regional hub for several reasons. The country’s transcontinental location straddling Africa and Asia and its position along several mixed migration routes made it a strategic choice for setting up operations. UNHCR’s longstanding presence in the country also meant that it had consolidated a breadth of experience that it could apply to the region more broadly. Egypt also enjoyed political stability and steadiness that made it a secure place to conduct operations from, compared with some of the country’s unstable neighbours.

In its role as a regional office, UNHCR Egypt helped oversee the Middle East Resettlement Project. By the end of the decade, the office was helping to relocate some 5,500 refugees from the Middle East to third countries from the region.

The office’s role also extended to ensuring capacity-building of local authorities and NGOs in order to help them assume greater legal and administrative responsibility for refugees. It supervised UNHCR’s operations in Syria and Lebanon, particularly around external relations, information and training.

UNHCR continued to develop its relationship with governments in the region, national institutions, non-governmental organizations and the broader civil society with a view to promoting refugee law.

In November 1992, the “Cairo Declaration” on the Protection of Refugees and Displaced Persons in the Arab World was issued. From 16 to 19 November, a forum was convened in Cairo to elaborate the declaration at a seminar organized by the International Institute of Humanitarian Law in collaboration with the Faculty of Law of Cairo University, sponsored by UNHCR. This followed three previous seminars dedicated to developing refugee law in the Arab world, which were held in San Remo in 1984, Tunis in 1989 and Amman in 1991. In 1994, the Arab Convention on Regulating Status of Refugees in the Arab Countries was adopted by the League of Arab States.

With the adoption by the Council of the League of Arab States of the Cooperation Agreement with UNHCR in September 1999, additional cooperative arrangements were worked towards by UNHCR with the League of Arab States to cover common areas of concern relating to refugees and persons in need of international protection in the Arab region.

Prior to the development of these legal instruments and cooperative frameworks, Egypt applied to children, women and girls who were refugees and asylum-seekers the same provisions as included in the Convention and the Protocol for refugees in general. It emphasized, however, as a signatory of the “Cairo Declaration,” the need to provide special protection to women and children as well as the importance of efforts to reunite the families of refugees and displaced persons.
The community of elderly Armenians and Russians in Egypt was steadily diminishing. In December 1999, only 160 elderly stateless persons, mostly over 65 years old, remained of concern to UNHCR. For many of them, assistance from UNHCR and its main implementing partner, Caritas continued to be a lifeline. They came to Egypt after the First World War and the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, mainly between 1922-1924. All the members of this group of stateless persons were receiving UNHCR medical support, subsistence allowances and protection support. Some descendants were able to obtain the Egyptian nationality and, thus, were considered as integrated. 

Stateless Armenian and Russian refugees at an old people’s home in Cairo (1980s/90s). ©UNHCR

Stateless Armenian and Russian refugees enjoying a day out in Cairo (1980s/90s). ©UNHCR

Stateless Armenian and Russian refugees enjoying a day out in Cairo (1980s/90s). ©UNHCR
For several decades Egypt had been home to a small Somali community who chose the country for its proximity to both Somalia and to the Gulf states, where many expatriate Somalis worked, as well as for its educational opportunities and its Islamic culture.

In January 1991, the regime of Siad Barre in Somalia was overthrown by a coalition of local clans. The violent civil war that followed saw thousands killed by fighting or by war-induced famine, while tens of thousands more were displaced.⁵

UNHCR Egypt first began registering Somali refugees in 1988, with an early group of arrivals comprising some 600 people. Following the outbreak of civil war, the numbers of Somali refugees in Egypt began to increase significantly, and Somalis quickly became the largest national refugee group in the country. The number of Somalis increased from 1,320 in 1991 to a high point of 6,066 by the end of 1993.⁶ They came either directly from Somalia or from Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries where they had been living previously. Many of them were from urban backgrounds and were well-educated.

Those who transited through Sudan, Libya, Yemen, Dubai or Saudi Arabia, and could be regarded as irregular movers, also benefited from Egypt’s liberal admission policy and usually faced no problems with Egyptian officials at passport control posts, whose attitude was described as tolerant.
Continued unrest in Sudan prompted a large number of Sudanese to seek asylum in Egypt and elsewhere in the region. In March 1994, with a growing number of Sudanese arriving, the Government of Egypt asked UNHCR to begin registering and screening Sudanese asylum-seekers “to assist the neediest among them lest they engage in activities incompatible with law and order or get mobilized by organizations advocating violence.”

The following year, however, the Wadi Al-Nil Agreement between Sudan and Egypt, which had given Sudanese unrestricted access to education, health services, property ownership, and employment was suspended by Egypt, following an assassination attempt on President Mubarak in Addis Ababa in June 1995. The attempt was believed to have been made by Sudanese Islamists. This put the rights of the Sudanese on par with any other foreigner in Egypt.

At the same time, the backlog for unprocessed asylum applications was mounting, with some 3,000 cases pending. To process these cases, UNHCR hired several consultants in November 1995. Most of the applications were submitted by Sudanese asylum-seekers and over 60 per cent of those accepted were former internally displaced persons from war-torn areas in Southern Sudan. The following two years saw a slight decrease in the number of Sudanese asylum seekers approaching the office before suddenly picking up again at a weekly average of 200-500 new arrivals in the summer of 1998.
In 1995, Egypt opened its first refugee camp in over forty years in Salloum, on the border with Libya, to accommodate stranded Palestinians who were expelled from Libya. Since 1994, Libya’s leader Muammar Gaddafi had been threatening to expel Palestinians, who numbered about 30,000, in protest of the signing of the 1993 Oslo Accords between the Palestine Liberation Organisation and Israel, and to highlight the failure of the peace process to provide the Palestinians with a homeland to return to. In September 1995, Gaddafi ordered the expulsion of roughly 5,000 Palestinians, dismissing them from their jobs and confiscating their homes.

Only Palestinians with valid travel documents were able to pass through Egypt to travel on to the Gaza Strip or the West Bank; the rest remained in a makeshift camp operated by UNHCR and its partners, which in October 1995 was hosting some 600 people. The following year, UNHCR continued to monitor and assist approximately 200 Palestinians, providing basic relief items to vulnerable persons. UNHCR supplied the camp with bottled drinking water, but maintaining hygiene standards was an issue given the camp’s isolated location in the desert. Salloum was officially closed in 1997, after the Libyan authorities relocated all remaining 200 Palestinians from the Salloum border point to Tobrouk.

The refugee situation in Egypt was reflective of a much broader trend, namely the urbanization of the global refugee population. For many years, refugees in the developing world had been accommodated in organized camps and settlements or had been allowed to take up residence alongside the local population in rural areas. But that scenario was changing rapidly, and a growing proportion of the world’s refugees were now making their way to major cities — Nairobi in Kenya, Khartoum in Sudan, San José in Costa Rica and Peshawar in Pakistan.

By living in such urban locations, refugees were able to access better economic opportunities (usually in the informal sector), enjoy a less restricted way of life and make the connections required to move on to other countries and continents. In Egypt, the choice to live in Cairo was reinforced by the government’s decision not to establish any refugee camps, by the capital city’s domination of the country’s economic, social and cultural life, and by the services provided there by UNHCR, including the prospect of being accepted for resettlement in a developed country. With the exception of Alexandria in the north of the country and Aswan in the south, Cairo was the destination of choice for African refugees arriving and residing in Egypt.
Perhaps the most significant change to UNHCR operations in Egypt during the 1990s came in 1997, when the organization introduced its Policy on Refugees in Urban Areas, which stressed self-reliance among refugees living in urban settings. The policy's emphasis on self-reliance was a consequence of changing criteria for assistance as UNHCR faced a global funding crisis, which was directly felt in operations across Africa. Egypt's $2.34 million budget in 1997 had dwindled to $1.49 million by 2001. With an ever-growing number of new arrivals — by 1998, Sudanese were registering at UNHCR Egypt at a rate of 250 to 500 a week — the shrinking budget would later lead to tensions between UNHCR and beneficiaries over the delivery of services.

A 1997 study had found that a refugee family in Cairo needed $5,300 a year to cover their total living costs. And, yet, the steady decrease in assistance, in conjunction with reduced access to education and healthcare, had a profoundly negative impact on refugees. The self-reliance policy advocated that care and maintenance be strictly limited to cases where self-reliance was not possible. For Egypt, this included the majority of the stateless population. Additionally, the policy suggested refugees should be assisted through national health and education services, as a means to not create parallel structures. According to the policy, asylum-seekers should not receive assistance from UNHCR, but instead should depend upon local services as they await RSD. Finally, UNHCR operations were encouraged to maintain a high level of transparency as a means to communicate realistic expectations to beneficiaries.

NGOs and community organizations criticized the policy on its release, noting that national infrastructure provided inadequate services to Egyptians, let alone the refugee community. In 2001, former Representative Stefan Sperl was sent to Cairo to review the policy’s implementation. Sperl argued that such a drastic change in assistance was only truly possible if refugees had found a durable solution whereby they could enjoy employment and equitable access to services. In Cairo, where resources were already scarce for everyone, significant cuts in assistance would make the situation much worse. Instead, Sperl advocated burden-sharing between resettlement countries, UNHCR and Egypt.
IMPROVEMENTS IN STATUS DETERMINATION, DOCUMENTATION AND RESIDENCY

In 1996, Egypt’s Ministry of Interior issued a decree that granted refugees a three-year residence permit. Prior to its implementation in 1998, recognized refugees had received Refugee Identification Cards (RIDs) with accompanying residence permits that were processed by the Directorate of Immigration and Refugee Affairs. The process was time-consuming and required refugees to surrender their passports for confirmation of identity, which many opposed. RIDs also had to be renewed every three to six months. The 1996 decree would lead to the eventual creation of different coloured identification cards corresponding to a person’s status either as an asylum-seeker or a recognized refugee.

While being dealt with as prima facie cases was the standard procedure for Sudanese asylum-seekers in other host countries, due to the large numbers of refugees in Egypt UNHCR conducted individual RSD in Egypt.

With a clear need for more staffing to handle a growing case-load, UNHCR hired consultants to tackle a backlog of 3,000 asylum cases, most originating from Southern Sudan. As a result of its increased capacity to carry out RSD interviews towards the end of the decade, UNHCR Egypt was able to interview some 2,900 cases (5,400 persons) during 1999.

In spite of the efforts made by the office to simplify the procedure and to increase its processing capacity, the number of newcomers since the summer of 1999 created additional pressure on the office. Refugee applicants had to wait for 10 months to be interviewed by UNHCR. As a result, many asylum-seekers found themselves in very precarious situations due to the expiration of the validity of their visas in Egypt and their acute social and medical needs. Appeal applicants were also facing a long waiting period to be interviewed by RO Cairo.

To address the protection gap created by the waiting period to have an RSD interview conducted, UNHCR held several meetings with the competent authorities, including the MFA, to stress the problems faced by asylum seekers and to regularly clarify to authorities the length of time to be interviewed by UNHCR. Discussions to find ways to bridge this gap carried over into the beginning of the next decade.
UNHCR assistance to the most destitute refugees included the provision of subsistence allowance, healthcare and education assistance. Some 5,000 refugees and stateless persons benefited from this assistance in the course of 1999. However, given the high cost of living, refugees could hardly cover the amount of their rent with this assistance and needed to find other resources to meet the cost of food and basic household necessities. Restrictions on refugees’ rights to work further exacerbated this problem, and with daily living costs rising, vulnerable refugees were forced to depend more on UNHCR than previously.

**HEALTH**

In terms of healthcare, refugees could only benefit from a limited number of services. While the government offered free healthcare to citizens, non-citizens were required to pay a fee for accessing many healthcare services. In 1992, a comprehensive agreement was reached that made Caritas UNHCR’s main social and medical care provider for all refugee groups. Through Caritas, UNHCR provided assistance to refugees in this field by refunding part of their medical expenses. In 1999, around 4,200 refugees and 115 stateless persons benefited from this assistance.

UNHCR’s assistance for asylum-seekers was limited to the provision of emergency medical assistance in line with its 1997 policy on urban refugees. This emergency medical assistance was provided until October of the same year by Caritas. As a result of insufficient funding, the Joint Relief Ministry at the All Saints Cathedral agreed to take over pro bono this responsibility until the end of December 1999. As of October 1999, and in accordance with the above-mentioned policy on urban refugees, asylum-seekers could also benefit from trauma counselling and treatment through a small Egyptian partner (El Nadim Centre). Asylum-seekers experienced difficult socio-economic conditions as they waited for their RSD interview, although some of them found some form of employment in the informal sectors of the economy (tolerated work without permit). The large Sudanese and Somali communities in Egypt, as well as relatives abroad, were also providing them with some additional support. But both communities were also regularly showing signs of compassion fatigue. As a result, over a year time, refugee applicants have had to change their place of living five or six times. Several Church groups were providing some limited assistance (education, medical and food packets) to refugee applicants coming from African countries.

**EDUCATION**

In 1992, the Ministry of Education issued a decree permitting Sudanese, Jordanian and Libyan asylum-seekers’ children to access public education. This was especially important in light of the fact that many new arrivals were families with young children. To help address rising demand, the Sacred Heart Church in Abbasiya, Cairo, established an education programme for Sudanese children. Other religious institutions also offered various forms of educational assistance. UNHCR implemented through its partners educational assistance programs. The assistance was provided in the form of a yearly education grant to all refugee children whose parents could not afford to meet the registration or tuition costs. The grant covered up to 70 per cent of the actual schooling costs. After undertaking a costly examination at the Ministry of Education aimed at evaluating their educational level, refugee children were enrolled in private primary and secondary schools. Although they had no access to free public education, they were in many respects receiving a better education than many local children. Over the course of 1999, some 1,219 children benefited from UNHCR’s assistance in this sector and it was estimated that 65 per cent of refugee children had access to education.
For students in higher education, various opportunities existed, although few in number and only for candidates with qualifications unattainable for many. These included UNHCR Egypt's scholarship programme, which lasted until 1995, and the American University in Cairo's African Graduate Fellowship and Assistantship programme, which offered a variety of fellowships reserved for full-time graduate students from African countries pursuing certain degrees. UNHCR also intervened on behalf of several cases to the board of education to provide some scholarships to some refugee students.

Opportunities for language and vocational training became more widespread in the 1990s. The British Council and local organizations joined Caritas and the Don Bosco Institute in offering a wide variety of programming for refugees. Courses became available outside of Cairo, as well, with Alexandria, Tanta and other cities also offering programmes for refugees.

RESETTLEMENT

Over the course of the decade, the Egypt office implemented one of the largest UNHCR resettlement programmes worldwide, and the possibility to get resettled served as a major factor for refugees to come to Egypt.

Resettlement had gained momentum since 1998 with the increased resettlement places made available by traditional resettlement countries, notably the United States, Canada and Australia. At the same time, as the number of refugees in Egypt grew, departures increased from 196 in 1997 to 2,500 in 1999. In 1998 alone, 1,364 refugees departed from Egypt. The number increased by 76% (2,479 persons) in 1999 compared to 1998: 1,624 Sudanese refugees and 772 Somali refugees were resettled mainly to the USA, Canada and Australia. These departures were also made possible because of UNHCR's decision to increase its workforce in 1999 to conduct initial RSD interviews and resettlement processing. As a result, a significant resettlement backlog was cleared for the region as well as for Egypt itself, and that year 5,495 persons were resettled in third countries from the Middle East during the course of the year. Before their departure, refugees could approach UNHCR to receive a small cash grant. Some 2,468 refugees benefited from UNHCR departure grants before being resettled to third countries during 1999.

Refugees from Yemen, Sudan and Ethiopia at All Saints' Cathedral and St. Andrew Joint Relief Ministry run courses in woodwork and African craft (1988). ©UNHCR/Trygve Bølstad
A Sudanese refugee steps out of a three-room apartment that she shares with her family in Kilo 4.5 in Cairo (2007). ©UNHCR / Thomas Hartwell

2000s
At the turn of the new millennium, UNHCR Egypt received more individual RSD applications than any of the organization’s offices worldwide. This could be traced back to the outbreak of the Iraq War and internal conflict in Sudan’s Darfur region in 2003, which turned millions of people into refugees and displaced persons, many of whom fell under the mandate of Egypt’s regional office. Despite the end of the second Sudanese civil war with the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) in 2005, the repercussions of the crisis continued to be felt in Egypt throughout the whole decade, as reflected by the increasing number of asylum applications from Sudanese nationals. In 2008, UNHCR carried out repatriation operations for a total of 1,300 refugees, mainly from South Sudan and Iraq. In 2009, it introduced a new policy for refugee protection in urban areas.

The fighting and upheaval in the region led to a sharp increase in refugee numbers in Egypt, and by the mid-2000s the country hosted some 20,000 refugees, mainly from South Sudan and Darfur. Meanwhile, in 2003 UNHCR Egypt office changed its designation to become the Regional Representation to the Palestinian Authority and the League of Arab States.

The Center for Migration and Refugee Studies was established at the American University in Cairo (AUC) in 2000. High Commissioner for Refugees Ruud Lubbers visited Egypt in 2002. Catholic Relief Services (CRS) became an implementing partner in 2003. Saddam Hussein toppled in Iraq in 2003. The Four Freedoms Agreement was signed between Egypt and Sudan in 2004.

War breaks out in Darfur in western Sudan in 2004. The People’s Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A) ends with the signing of the CPA in 2005. A demonstration outside UNHCR office in Cairo was violently dispersed by Egyptian security forces in 2006. A people-smuggling route stretching from eastern Sudan through Sinai and into Israel begins to take root in 2007. High Commissioner for Refugees António Guterres visits Egypt in 2007. Repatriation of 1,300 refugees, mainly from South Sudan and Iraq took place in 2008. UNHCR issued a new policy focused on increased protection for refugees in cities, replacing the 1997 Urban Refuge Policy in 2009.

The fighting and upheaval in the region led to a sharp increase in refugee numbers in Egypt, and by the mid-2000s the country hosted some 20,000 refugees, mainly from South Sudan and Darfur. Meanwhile, in 2003 UNHCR Egypt office changed its designation to become the Regional Representation to the Palestinian Authority and the League of Arab States.
The first decade of the new millennium saw substantial changes in UNHCR operations in Egypt. In 2000, only 156 elderly stateless Armenians remained, most of whom were widows who had arrived in Egypt between 1914 and 1926. By 2008, only 77 remained. \(^1\) Care for this group was increasingly provided by other organizations, such as Caritas, which was active with this community and others. At the same time, conflicts around the globe prompted Yemenis, Sierra Leoneans, Libyans and many others to seek asylum in Cairo, in addition to the continued arrival of refugees from Ethiopia, Sudan and Somalia. In 2001, UNHCR Egypt had the greatest number of individual RSD applications of any UNHCR operation worldwide. With increasing numbers, waiting times for status determination also grew considerably.

Although clan rivalry continued to undermine peace negotiations in Somalia, the number of Somalis approaching UNHCR Egypt in 2001 was half that of the year before. In 2003, the Sudanese made up 73 per cent of asylum-seekers in Egypt. By the end of 2004, there were 14,999 Sudanese refugees recognized by UNHCR Egypt. By the middle of the decade, Egypt hosted 18,111 registered refugees — 76 per cent of them came from the Darfur region in Sudan. UNHCR made dedicated protection interventions to properly assess individual cases but was only able to provide assistance to 50 per cent of the refugees, and the assistance covered less than half of their basic needs.

REFUGEE APPLICATIONS ACCELERATE

Since gaining independence in 1958, Iraq had been engulfed in armed conflict and crisis, including an eight-year-long war with Iran in the 1980s and its invasion of Kuwait in August 1990. In 2003, the invasion of Iraq, led by a US-coalition, culminated in the removal of Saddam Hussein from power and a subsequent eruption of sectarian violence. One of the principal results of Iraq’s protracted crisis was the exodus and fleeing of many citizens, primarily to countries in the region but also to more distant parts of the world. According to some estimates, in 2002, prior to the Iraq War, slightly less than half a million Iraqis had already sought asylum outside Iraq, while many thousands more had taken up residence abroad as both regular and irregular migrants. \(^2\) Thousands of Iraqis were drawn to Egypt in the hopes of an affordable cost of living and access to resettlement opportunities. These refugees were able to blend into Egyptian society relatively easily due to the common Arabic language, and settled in the Cairo suburbs, Alexandria and other parts of Egypt.

Initially, they had been able to enter Egypt on one-month tourist visas obtained in Iraq that could be extended once they arrived in Cairo. This became more difficult from late 2006 onwards, when Egypt began to ask Iraqis to attend face-to-face visa interviews at the country’s consulates in either Amman or Damascus. Only those who were able to demonstrate a $50,000 investment in an Egyptian enterprise to obtain residency were spared this requirement. As a result, the number of new arrivals diminished rapidly.

The scale, visibility and impact of the complex migration flows from Iraq increased dramatically as a result of the sectarian violence instigated by the February 2006 bombing of the al-Askari Mosque in Samarra, northwest of Baghdad. By 2007, two million Iraqis had fled the country to take refuge in neighbouring and nearby countries, most notably Jordan and Syria, but also Lebanon, Turkey, the Gulf states and Egypt.

By 2010, an estimated 40,000 Iraqis were living in Egypt, with some 6,500 registered with UNHCR. \(^3\)
Following a visit by Assistant High Commissioner Søren Jessen-Petersen to Cairo in 2000, Representative Mohamed Boukry continued to urge the Egyptian government to assume responsibility for the reception, registration and documentation of refugees and asylum-seekers. UNHCR argued that such a move would set a vital precedent in the MENA region and in Africa at large, in addition to boosting Egypt’s own national security. These efforts bore fruit when in April of the same year, UNHCR and the authorities established a national steering committee to study the potential gradual transfer of responsibilities from UNHCR to the government. National ministries involved included the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Interior. However, the committee was disbanded soon after its establishment.
In 2001, the Division of International Protection (DIP) in Geneva granted an increase in funding to tackle Cairo's RSD backlog. UNHCR introduced a fast-track procedure for RSD. Eligible asylum-seekers included single female heads of households, older applicants, former government officials, unaccompanied minors, victims of torture and disabled applicants. UNHCR headquarters sent an emergency team to Cairo to assist with registration, RSD, programme and community services. Further support provided by the United Nations Volunteer Programme proved indispensable.

With the growth in the Sudanese refugee population, the government officially informed UNHCR that it was not willing to take part in refugee processing. This came despite a 2004 acknowledgement from the Permanent Representative of Egypt to the UN that, in light of the Cairo office's funding shortfall, the government was prepared to review its capacity for burden-sharing of the refugee issue.

In June 2003, DIP suspended its funding for RSD in Egypt, and the Egypt office was forced to fund RSD entirely out of its own budget. Consequently, conducting individual RSD for Sudanese applicants was no longer a financial option.

The signing of the Four Freedoms Agreement in January 2004, coupled with peace talks to potentially end the Sudan war, led UNHCR to suspend RSD for Sudanese asylum-seekers from June 2004. New arrivals, however, were still able to register for asylum.

The Four Freedoms Agreement shared some of the rights previously accorded to Sudanese citizens under the 1976 Wadi El Nil agreement between Egypt and Sudan, such as property ownership and employment. The agreement also granted them access to education and health services. However, an assassination attempt against former Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak in 1995 by assailants alleged to be Sudanese resulted in its annulment.
In 2000, a shrinking budget impacted UNHCR’s capacity to fund healthcare programmes. Reimbursements for medical expenses were cut in half and chronically ill refugees struggled to afford medication.

In February 2005, following advocacy efforts by UNHCR, the Sudanese Women’s Union, and the National Council on Population and Development, all foreigners residing in Egypt were allowed access to public primary and preventative healthcare services following the issuance of a regulation by the Ministry of Health. In 2006, UNHCR also partnered with the National Council for Childhood and Motherhood to support medical clinics in areas with a high concentration of refugees. In 2007, the government granted refugees the right to access public mental health services, including inpatient services.

In December 2000, the Ministry of Education extended the right to attend Egyptian primary public schools to all refugee children. This important measure was effectively a lifting of Egypt’s reservation to article 12(1) of the 1951 Convention. However, in order to benefit from the opportunities unlocked by this decree, refugees had to present a birth certificate, a valid passport, a valid national identity document (including identification as a refugee), an original school certificate from the country of origin, and a letter from UNHCR, all of which proved cumbersome for refugees. As a result, the vast majority of refugee students continued their education in community and private schools.

When CRS became an implementing partner, UNHCR scaled up its education programme to unprecedented levels since the mid-1990s. Through its work with CRS, UNHCR was able to provide educational assistance to 2,300 refugee students, in addition to assisting 500 refugees with vocational training in fields such as sewing and electrical repair. By 2003, out of the 17,000 children of concern to UNHCR, over 4,000 were enrolled in a public, community or private school in Egypt. From 2005 to 2006, the number grew to 4,199. UNHCR’s support came in the form of grants used to pay tuition and school supplies. In 2008, UNHCR helped almost 900 refugees access vocational training institutions.

In 2004, Egypt was one of ten countries where UNHCR headquarters launched a gender and age mainstreaming pilot project. The project’s goal was to ensure that all aspects of UNHCR’s operation, from protection to assistance, considered issues related to gender and age.

As part of the initiative, sexual and gender-based violence was identified as a key and largely unaddressed protection concern. To ensure a coordinated response in Egypt, UNHCR hosted a sexual and gender-based violence workshop in July 2004 followed by the creation of a working group with additional sub-working groups to address the needs of survivors.

In 2006, Ma’an, a Sudanese women’s organization, partnered with UNHCR to identify cases of sexual and gender-based violence, in addition to HIV/AIDS coordination. UNHCR set up a breakfast-feeding programme in refugee schools and established a community resource structure aimed at addressing incidents of sexual and gender-based violence and ensuring survivors’ confidential referral to appropriate local services.
In August 2004, tensions between UNHCR and the Sudanese community grew. What started out as a peaceful demonstration on August 25 took a violent turn after more than 200 Sudanese protesters outside UNHCR's offices, pelted windows with rocks and attempted to gain access to the building. The protest was fuelled by dissatisfaction with the halting of RSD for Sudanese asylum-seekers and cuts in assistance.

In September 2005, just over a year later, tensions flared again. Sudanese refugees began a sit-in in Mostafa Mahmoud Square near UNHCR's office in Mohandessin, once again arguing that they were being unfairly denied services, including resettlement opportunities. The protest grew in numbers and lasted until December when almost 3,000 Sudanese were camped outside. After rounds of failed negotiations between UNHCR and community leaders, the sit-in was forcibly dispersed by the police on December 29. Twenty-eight protesters were killed, some of them children.

The events at Mostafa Mahmoud Square prompted UNHCR Egypt to move its offices to the 6th of October City on the outskirts of Cairo. The new office was inaugurated on World Refugee Day in June 2006. Following the incident, UNHCR took steps to re-establish trust with Cairo's refugee communities by holding regular meetings with community-based organizations. Discussions centred on issues of concern, notably that UNHCR did not communicate effectively with refugees and asylum-seekers. The refugee community also expressed their hopelessness at permanently settling in Egypt due to the restrictions they faced.

At the same time, partners became integral to UNHCR's ability to assist larger-than-ever numbers of refugees and asylum-seekers in Egypt. UNHCR began to work more closely with government ministries, non-governmental organizations and community-based organizations to meet the needs of a highly diverse refugee community.
Always an integral part of UNHCR’s operations in Egypt, the Egypt office became increasingly concerned that Egypt’s reputation as a resettlement hub was acting as a “pull factor” for refugees in the region. A reduction in resettlement opportunities, combined with a dramatic climb in refugee numbers in the late 1990s and 2000s, created anxiety and dissatisfaction among refugees in Cairo as the chances of being resettled dwindled.

Historically, resettlement was considered one of the main durable solutions for refugees in Egypt. UNHCR’s caseload had remained fairly stable as the number of refugees resettled roughly matched the number of new arrivals. Due to Egypt’s reservations to key provisions in the 1951 Convention, local integration was not a possibility for most refugees and asylum-seekers.

From 1997 to 2003, UNHCR resettled 12,051 refugees from Egypt, mostly to Australia, Canada, Finland and the United States. It maintained close relationships with most Western embassies, all of which retained resettlement processing capacities. Collectively, the number of opportunities for resettlement was around 4,000 refugees per year, and in 2004 there were nearly this many departures.

With the signing of the Four Freedoms Agreement and the rights it spelled out for the Sudanese in Egypt, and the signing of the CPA between the Government of Sudan and the SPLM in 2005, UNHCR Egypt anticipated that resettlement would be geared towards Somali, Ethiopian and Eritrean refugees.

In 2000, Egyptian movie star Adel Imam became a UNHCR Goodwill Ambassador. Imam coordinated closely with UNHCR staff in Egypt to learn about the plight of refugees and asylum-seekers in the Arab world. With his unmatched popularity across the region, Imam was positively received by refugees and policymakers alike. Imam is probably the most famous actor in the Arab world with an impressive record of over a hundred films. For millions of Arabs, he is an instantly recognizable figure and his work for UNHCR raised awareness in the region at a time when the plight of refugees was far from the top of the agenda.

In April 2000, Imam went on a UNHCR mission to Yemen, bringing attention to the refugees there who were fleeing conflict in the Horn of Africa.

Since then, Imam had twice travelled to New York, hosted gala dinners, and recorded radio and TV spots to shed light on the refugee cause. He also collaborated with other UNHCR Goodwill Ambassadors, such as Angelina Jolie. Together, they both visited a school for refugees in Egypt in December 2003.

Imam has the ability to speak to a huge audience across the whole of the Middle East. In many of his films, he played characters who were downtrodden, oppressed and ridiculed, but revealed them, often through great comedy, to be brave, enduring, and human. Perhaps this experience is part of what attracted him to UNHCR, an organization whose mission sees every person as an individual deserving of compassion and respect.
Coordination between the League of Arab States and UNHCR has been important for dealing with the MENA region’s displacement problems, which have been especially trying in recent years.

The region has continued to face extensive levels of displacement, particularly throughout the past seven years. With three system-wide, level-three emergencies in Iraq, Syria and Yemen, the Arab region alone hosts 53 per cent of the refugee population worldwide and 67 per cent of the world’s total forcibly displaced persons. Difficult security conditions, coupled with instability in many parts of the region, remain a major challenge.

At the same time, several countries in the region have become important points of transit along the irregular migration routes taken by refugees and migrants.

To that end, UNHCR is working closely with the League of Arab States and its members to enhance the protection space for refugees and asylum-seekers, focusing on advocating for access to safety and protection from refoulement. Other areas of focus include reinforcing registration and RSD, promoting legislative frameworks, addressing the risks of statelessness, ensuring security from violence and exploitation, and working towards finding durable solutions, including the upscale of resettlement programmes.

UNHCR and the League of Arab States also organize regular sectoral, regional, ministerial, high-level and expert meetings and capacity-building sessions to enhance the dialogue with the concerned authorities on refugees and provide assistance in developing their policies.
In 2009, UNHCR revised its 1997 Policy on Urban Refugees, known as “Refugee Protection and Solutions in Urban Areas” and replaced it with a new policy focused on “increased protection for refugees in cities and mainstreaming refugees into national institutions where possible.”

The revised policy was built upon the lessons learned from its 1997 predecessor, notably the difficulty for refugees to become self-reliant while unable to access the formal labour market, and the recognition of the rapid global urbanization of refugee populations that necessitated new solutions.

In light of this, the 2009 policy asserted that cities are legitimate spaces for refugees to reside in and exercise their rights and sought to increase the protection space afforded to them in their urban environment. It also promoted livelihoods, local integration, and refugees’ access to health and education services, as well as capacity-building of public services to reinforce existing delivery systems.

In addition, the updated policy was based upon the principles of Age, Gender and Diversity Mainstreaming (AGD) in order to respond to the specific conditions faced by different groups such as women, children, the elderly, and unaccompanied and separated minors, within urban settings in Egypt.

The presence of refugees from across Africa and the Middle East made the Egyptian capital a focus for research on urban refugees. Numerous researchers have spent time in Cairo to investigate issues facing refugees living in urban environments, including the challenges and the policies created to address them.

"It is like law. Law reacts to conditions, to the political situation or to the environmental situation," said Ibrahim Awad, director of the Center of Migration and Refugee Studies (CMRS) at the American University in Cairo. "The same with refugees; it is the conditions that create the demand for research." This research can play a crucial role in helping organizations to better assess the challenges asylum-seekers face in developing nations, and to bring their supporting agencies to reconsider their strategies.

CMRS was established in 2000 and expanded in 2008 into a regional centre examining international movement, whether voluntary or forced, economic or political, individual or collective, temporary or permanent. Part of AUC’s School of Global Affairs and Public Policy, it offers multi-disciplinary courses and research programmes, and its activities include graduate education, research and outreach activities.

The CMRS research programme includes a systematic and comparative inventory of the situation regarding migration and refugee movements across the Middle East and North Africa, as well as in-depth studies of emerging issues in the region. The centre’s outreach enables it to disseminate knowledge and sensitize audiences about refugee and migration issues. It also offers services to the refugee community in Cairo and transfers its expertise in this area to other international institutions.
A people-trafficking route from eastern Sudan through Egypt and into Israel takes hold

Refugees from Eritrea, Ethiopia and Sudan among other African countries, began moving across Egypt’s Sinai Peninsula towards Israel around 2005. The numbers increased rapidly from 2007 onwards, and by the end of 2010 more than 33,000 of them had arrived in Israel, attracted by the prospect of better economic opportunities and an erroneous belief that it is easier to be resettled from there.20

For many Sudanese refugees, the resentment accrued from the Mostafa Mahmoud Square protests and subsequent dispersal in December 2005, coupled with a sharp reduction in the number of resettlement places available, were decisive factors in their decision to leave Egypt.21 Despite the signing of a CPA in Sudan in 2005, refugees living in Egypt were generally reluctant to return to their home country, citing the destruction of the economy and their fears of further outbreaks of violence. Accordingly, a growing number of Sudanese refugees and asylum-seekers began to leave Egypt for Israel by irregular means. The price of the journey, around $1,500 at the time, was regarded as a price worth paying if it provided a pathway to an easier resettlement solution.

Within a year, a full-blown smuggling market had emerged for people wishing to travel via Egypt to Israel. Reports estimated that over 12,000 people had claimed asylum in Israel since 2006, most of them Sudanese and Eritreans who crossed from Egypt.21 Labelled as “infiltrators” and obliged to submit individual asylum applications, even if they had already been recognized as refugees by UNHCR in Cairo, their expectations were rarely fulfilled.

At the same time, Israel began to return them to Egypt and passed a new law on migrants in 2012 to stem the flow of new arrivals.22

The movement of refugees from Egypt to Israel was characterized by extreme risks as well as grave human rights’ violations. The smugglers responsible for organizing the journey initially charged between $1,500 and $3,000 to guide people to the border with Israel. But after arriving in Sinai, the refugees often found themselves at the mercy of traffickers who threatened to harm them, demanded much higher sums of money and issued menacing ransom demands to relatives in the diaspora.22

In some cases, refugees were kidnapped or abducted from refugee camps in Sudan and Ethiopia and brought to Sinai against their will, with the specific intention of extorting money from their families. In other cases, refugees undertook the journey voluntarily but found themselves under the control of armed groups.

The movement of refugees from Egypt to Israel persisted for less than a decade. It came to a near-halt in 2013, after Israel completed a border fence to stop the flux of people.22
Children from the Nuba Mountains at a ceremony marking the anniversary of the war that forced them to flee (2014). ©UNHCR / Aly Hazzaa
The series of uprisings that swept across the Arab world at the end of 2010 and into 2011, known as the “Arab Spring,” had a pronounced effect on Egypt’s refugee population. While Tunisia and Bahrain suffered civil unrest, Syria, Libya and Yemen descended into civil war after opposition protests gave way to armed conflict. Egypt’s own uprising prompted President Hosni Mubarak to step down in February 2011 after nearly three decades in power. This was followed by the country’s first ever democratic elections in 2012 and the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood to power. Shortly after, mass demonstrations broke out against then-President Mohamed Morsi’s rule, culminating in his deposition in July 2013 by General Abdel Fattah El-Sisi. The latter was later elected president in 2014 and has presided over the country since.

Despite the instability that prevailed in the wake of the 2011 uprising and its aftermath, UNHCR continued to provide support to refugees in Egypt. This came at a time when the civil war in Libya caused a sudden mass movement of Libyans and foreign nationals into neighbouring Egypt and Tunisia. At the same time, the war in Syria drove scores of refugees into the country in the largest national exodus since the Second World War and the war in Yemen led to huge losses of life and forced large numbers of refugees to seek safety in other countries, including Egypt.

The decade was characterized by mass displacement movements across the region, increased irregular departures from Egypt’s Mediterranean coast and larger numbers of unaccompanied and separated children arriving from the Horn of Africa. It also witnessed positive developments in granting refugees access to public health services and education. By the end of 2019, there were more than 245,000 registered refugees and asylum-seekers with UNHCR in Egypt.
The beginning of the 2010s saw continued unrest in Sudan, where armed conflict had broken out again between the Army of Sudan (SAF) and the Sudan People’s Liberation Movement North (SPLM-N), a northern offshoot of the southern movement. Intermittent violence dragged on, displacing tens of thousands of civilians. In 2011, as promised in the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement, South Sudan voted in a referendum to become a sovereign state, with 98 per cent of voters choosing to leave Sudan.

Another regional crisis of immense magnitude was triggered by the devastating civil war in Yemen, which raged on after the failure of the political transition hoped to bring stability to the country in the wake of the Arab Spring. Yemen’s Houthi rebels, who had fought a number of uprisings against the country’s earlier president Ali Abdullah Saleh, took control of Sanaa in early 2015. In response, Saudi Arabia led a coalition of a dozen other countries in March 2015 to counter Houthi rebel advances. The human toll of the Yemeni war has been astronomical, with reports estimating that at least 100,000 people had been killed by the fighting, including 12,000 civilians since March 2015. Thousands more have died from preventable illnesses and malnutrition, and as of March 2019, some 80 per cent of Yemen’s population was reckoned to be in need of humanitarian assistance or protection.

Meanwhile, the number of new arrivals of unaccompanied and separated children arriving in Egypt from other parts of Africa, mainly from Eritrea, increased significantly prompting UNHCR to expand its child protection activities.

The combined force of conflict, natural disaster, oppression, and other drivers of displacement meant that at the start of 2019, UNHCR’s refugee population in Egypt comprised 132,871 Syrians, 41,771 Sudanese, 15,442 Ethiopians, 15,931 Eritreans, 14,622 South Sudanese, 6,994 Iraqis, 7,164 Somalis, 8,108 Yemenis and others from more than 50 other nationalities.

A residential building in Taiz, Yemen, damaged and abandoned during the civil war (2016).
©UNHCR / Asmaa Waguih
CRISIS IN LIBYA AND REOPENING OF SALLOUM

In February 2011, large numbers of people began to flee Libya to Egypt, prompted by the unrest that broke out with the uprising against President Muammar Gaddafi. As Libya collapsed into war, sub-Saharan Africans suffered targeted attacks after it became known that some had worked as mercenaries for the Gaddafi regime. Egyptians were also among those fleeing. In response, the Salloum Camp on the Egypt-Libya border was reopened in 2011 to house people forced to flee Libya. By June 2011, more than 356,000 people had entered Egypt through the Salloum crossing, many of whom were migrant workers. Although a mix of nationals and Sudanese from Darfur made up the majority of the sub-Saharan African population, many Ethiopians, Eritreans and Somalis who had reached Libya with hopes of crossing the Mediterranean into Europe also found themselves in Salloum. By the end of 2011, UNHCR had set up six huge tents to house 2,200 people and was focused on providing assistance and protection for health and security concerns, as well as cases of gender-based violence.

At the same time, the Egyptian government refused access to its territory for those fleeing Libya, making resettlement the only durable option for recognized refugees. Most refugees in Salloum were resettled to the United States and Europe. As the situation in Libya improved, UNHCR announced that newcomers to the camp would be considered as asylum-seekers but would undergo an RSD interview and consequently could not be considered for resettlement.

By the end of 2013, the majority of people eligible had been granted refugee status in Egypt and were awaiting resettlement in France, Finland, Denmark, Canada, Germany, Norway, Slovakia, Switzerland and Sweden.

Two groups of remaining refugees were moved to Cairo in January and mid-May 2014, with UNHCR providing them with financial assistance for up to four months and with services covering health, registration, community services and protection. By August 2014, UNHCR had started its last formal process of registering and conducting RSD interviews for the last members of the camp, enabling 85 asylum seekers to be recognized as refugees and to finally leave Salloum by the end of October, when the camp closed.

Migrants, refugees and Libyans make their way from Libya into Egypt via the Salloum crossing (2011). ©UNHCR / Frederic Noy
A Sudanese refugee from Darfur at Salloum Camp prior to its closure in October 2014. ©UNHCR / AMR DIAB

Refugees continue to learn and work their trades at Salloum Camp (2013). ©UNHCR / AMR DIAB
Syrians began to flee armed conflict between government and rebel groups in 2011, after protests plunged into violence in March of that year. In the decade that followed, more than 400,000 lives were lost to fighting.6 

The massive scale of the Syrian refugee crisis has displaced the largest number of people since the Second World War, with at least 6.6 million people internally displaced and over 4.8 million fleeing across the country’s borders at the peak of the crisis.

Syrians started seeking asylum in Egypt in 2012. The numbers increased significantly from 12,800 at the end of 2012 to 19,000 by the end of 2013.8 By the beginning of 2015, Egypt hosted 138,212 recognized Syrian refugees, the fifth largest Syrian refugee population in the world.8 Syrian refugees in Egypt come from different regions and socio-economic and religious backgrounds, and around a fifth of them are children. As a result of the Syrian crisis, UNHCR Egypt is now assisting the largest number of people in its history.

The Egyptian government estimates that there is at least half a million unregistered Syrian nationals living among the Egyptian community. It is not compulsory for Syrian nationals to register with UNHCR in Egypt, and those who consider that they have no need for protection or humanitarian assistance from UNHCR may not approach the agency. Therefore, it is believed that the Syrians who register with UNHCR are the most vulnerable and in need of assistance.

Many Syrians chose to come to Egypt because of the relative ease of entry.10 Prior to 2013, Syrians did not require a visa to enter the country. The strong historical relationship between the two countries—which, together formed the United Arab Republic from 1958 to 1961—also helped to facilitate arrivals. In addition, Syrians were granted access to public education and healthcare facilities by the government, enabling them to freely utilize these essential services. A range of actors also stepped in to support refugees, from international agencies to community and faith-based organizations, as well as local community members.10
To meet the needs of the Syrian community in Egypt, UNHCR scaled up its programmes and assistance significantly, providing much-needed food, health, education and financial aid to refugees. UNHCR enhanced registration procedures in Cairo and provided mobile registration units in Alexandria and Damietta, where large numbers of Syrians resided. However, the political upheaval in Egypt of mid-2013 had a strong bearing on the protection environment for Syrian refugees, who were perceived by some to have supported the newly-ousted Muslim Brotherhood. Public attitudes towards Syrian refugees hardened, and support provided to them shrank.

In July 2013, the government imposed entry restrictions on Syrian nationals, requiring them to have a valid visa and security clearance prior to entering Egypt. This sharply reduced the access of Syrian nationals to asylum in Egypt.

In September 2014, UNHCR initiated a yearly socio-economic assessment to understand the reality of the situation of Syrian refugees in Egypt. The first assessment, which subsequently served as a baseline to track future changes, concluded that as a result of the increasingly protracted crisis in Syria and neighbouring countries, the refugees had exhausted their savings, fallen into debt and resorted to negative coping mechanisms. Hence, one of the assessment’s most significant findings was a need to enable refugees to attain greater self-reliance and to gain access to sustainable livelihood opportunities.
Egypt is currently home to one of the world’s largest urban refugee populations. Refugees and asylum-seekers are largely concentrated in Greater Cairo, Alexandria, Damietta and a number of towns on the north coast. In recent years, however, Egypt’s tough economic conditions have considerably increased the vulnerability of both refugees and their host community members. This is further compounded by the lack of a stable source of income and soaring inflation, which means that basic needs are barely covered. Other challenges include limited livelihood opportunities and the language barrier facing non-Arabic-speaking refugees. Many refugees also lack access to sustainable formal education that can support their development.

In addition, a significant number of refugees and asylum-seekers rely on humanitarian assistance to meet their basic needs and to cover the costs of medical or psychosocial support.

In 2017, UNHCR recorded the highest number of new arrivals in Egypt. Almost 40,000 individuals sought asylum in Egypt, approximately 18,000 of whom were from Syria. The continuous increase in new registrations of Syrian refugees, which at the end of 2018 stood at 132,871, coupled with funding constraints and inflation, hampered UNHCR’s ability to assist all those in need, especially the non-Syrian population.

Refugees from Syria, Ethiopia and Eritrea engage in different activities in Cairo (2017).
© UNHCR / Scott Nelson
By 2015, some four million Syrian had sought refuge in neighbouring countries, inevitably placing strain on already overstretched public services and infrastructures of host countries. The challenges of the Syrian refugee crisis triggered a new approach to deal with the impact of the crisis, combining humanitarian and development response into a single coherent plan, known as the Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan (3RP), in line with national plans and priorities. It was co-led by UNHCR and UNDP.

The 3RP comprises one regional plan, whose aim is to ensure consistency in response planning and implementation and enhance advocacy efforts at global and regional levels. It covers five country chapters: Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey, Iraq and Egypt.

Since its inception, the 3RP has become a model in terms of taking a more comprehensive approach to large-scale forced displacement, providing a strategic programming platform for humanitarian partners to respond to the Syrian emergency at the regional level and in host countries like Egypt.

The Egypt chapter in the 2019-2020 3RP focused on strengthening the capacity of existing national and local systems to prevent and respond to the protection needs of refugees and impacted communities. It aimed to secure refugees' access to basic rights, including formal education and healthcare, and aiding families to improve their living conditions and strengthening their ability to withstand adverse economic circumstances.

However, nearly 46 per cent of UNHCR Egypt's registered refugee and asylum-seeker population, who came from Sub-Saharan Africa, Yemen, and Iraq fell outside the scope of the 3RP. Therefore, in 2018, UNHCR and appealing partners launched the Egypt Response Plan (ERP), a sister appeal to ensure equity in protection services and humanitarian assistance for refugees and asylum-seekers of all nationalities living in Egypt and to support host community members.

In 2019 UNHCR and partners and the Government of Egypt appealed for USD 53.7m and USD 110.5m respectively to meet the needs of refugees and asylum-seekers with a strong focus on protection, public health, education, food security, basic needs, and livelihoods. Priority areas included mainstreaming access to services such as health and education for all refugees, along with strengthening the prevention and response to Gender-based Violence (GBV) and child protection.
UNHCR supports the Government of Egypt’s continued efforts to maintain access to asylum and protection space. Egypt is a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol, but does not have yet a legislative framework to manage asylum. Under the 1954 Memorandum of Understanding (MoU), registration and RSD responsibilities were delegated to UNHCR, with the Government retaining the responsibility of issuing residence permits for persons who were registered with UNHCR.

Over the years, UNHCR Egypt has witnessed a constant increase of persons seeking refugee protection. In 2010, the office had a registered population of 39,306 people which grew nearly sixfold to 244,910 by the end of 2018. This was partly due to episodes of instability and civil wars in some countries such as Sudan, South Sudan, Eritrea, Ethiopia and Syria, but also because of its geographical location along mixed migration routes, making it a significant departure and transit point to Europe. Nevertheless, some population groups remained stable during this decade, such as the Iraqis and Somalis. Other groups, however, sustained an increase over the years such as the Eritrean and Ethiopian communities. The Sudanese population also doubled, from 22,511 in 2010 to 43,003 in 2018. In order to keep up with the increasing numbers, the RSD Unit increased its staffing, eventually becoming the largest UNHCR-mandated RSD operation globally in 2018.

Throughout this decade, 51,000 RSD interview were conducted and 36,000 decisions were delivered with an overall recognition rate of 70 per cent. The lowest numbers were recorded in 2010 with 1153 cases interviewed and about 1000 decisions delivered, while the highest were recorded in 2018 with 13,200 interviews conducted and about 7000 decisions delivered.

Despite the increase in staffing, the total population awaiting RSD still outnumbered the capacity of the office to process in a timely manner. This called for a more strategic use of RSD, which the office adopted in line with UNHCR’s 2015 new strategic direction for RSD, developed to respond to the increased number of individual applications. When appropriate, traditional RSD procedures are reserved for specific categories of persons in need, such as those in detention, and for potential resettlement or exclusion cases. In cases where the individual is assured all of the safeguards of refugee status, including protection from refoulement and access to rights, there may be very little distinction in practical terms as to whether RSD is undertaken or not.
In 2016, UNHCR and the Egyptian Ministry of Health and Population (MoHP) signed two Memoranda of Understanding (MoU), thereby extending access to national health care services to refugees and asylum seekers of all nationalities. This milestone agreement enabled them to access public primary, secondary, and emergency healthcare on equal footing with Egyptian citizens and relieved them of some burdensome costs of private medical care.

The signing of the MoU was the culmination of years of arduous effort by UNHCR to develop a mainstreaming strategy with the objective of fully integrating refugees and asylum-seekers seeking medical care into public health facilities. The strategy also aimed to standardize healthcare access and improve healthcare provision for the refugee community in Egypt.

Another pillar of this strategy was to simultaneously support national efforts to improve the quality of healthcare services provided by public health facilities to meet the needs of both refugees and the host population. This was carried out through capacity building and provision of equipment, such as the donation of $1.4 million worth of medical equipment to 19 public hospitals in Egypt in 2018 in liaison with the MoHP.

The mainstreaming of refugees of all nationalities into the public health system is regarded as one of the most important outcomes of UNHCR’s long-standing cooperation with the Egyptian government and a testament to its generosity towards the forcibly displaced persons it has hosted over the years.
UNHCR’s education programme in Egypt has evolved considerably to meet the needs of diverse refugee populations. Today, Syrian, Sudanese, South Sudanese and Yemeni refugees and asylum-seekers enjoy access to education in public schools and advocacy efforts to extend the same rights to the remaining nationalities, such as Somalis, Eritreans and Ethiopians continue.

In 2012, under a presidential decree, Syrian refugees and all those affected by the Syrian crisis were permitted full access to public education on par with Egyptians. Syrians have also been granted access to higher education, although current requirements for admission present a barrier to many students. For example, students must present a secondary school certificate in order to enroll in Egyptian universities, requiring either the submission of a Syrian-accredited and stamped document or sitting the final year exams of the Egyptian High School certificate (Thanaweya Amma).

In October 2016 and January 2018, the High Commissioner Filippo Grandi met with the Egyptian Minister of Education to advocate for the inclusion of all African, Iraqi and Yemeni refugees into the Egyptian public school system. UNHCR also provided capacity-building in the form of smart classroom systems to support the Ministry of Education in improving the quality of education in targeted public schools. Education partners have also been mapping public schools in neighbourhoods with high concentrations of refugees, looking at the potential for enhancing capacity and assisting the government in building additional schools or classrooms.

Sudanese refugees attend class at Kukukaka School in Nasr City in Cairo, which, with UNHCR funding, provides a certified Sudanese curriculum to students from Kindergarten through secondary level (2014). ©UNHCR / Scott Nelson

Syrian refugee children participate in classes at the Metalfakian Centre in 6th October City, Cairo (2014). ©UNHCR / Scott Nelson
Although the asylum environment in Egypt is generally conducive, refugees' ability to access the formal job market is limited, forcing some of them to seek employment in the informal sector, which can put them at risk of exploitation among other risks. At the same time, assessments conducted by UNHCR have underscored the importance of enabling refugees to attain greater self-reliance and to reduce their likelihood of resorting to negative coping mechanisms to survive.

In this context, UNHCR supports self-initiated and managed businesses as a safe livelihood alternative. Target businesses are those which have potential for development and with a possibility of including other refugees in their supply chain. To ensure a sustainable outcome, UNHCR cooperates with national and international partners in the implementation of its livelihood's strategy.

UNHCR also provides eligible refugees and asylum-seekers with training and micro-grants for start-ups. In 2019, 2,926 refugees and asylum-seekers received guidance on labour market opportunities, 1,113 attended diverse trainings for livelihoods and economic inclusion, and 493 refugees were assisted in starting and/or enlarging their businesses.

**DAFI Scholarship**

Higher education is an integral part of UNHCR’s education strategy since it represents a critical transition towards the pursuit of sustainable futures for refugee youth. UNHCR’s higher education scholarship programme, DAFI (Albert Einstein German Academic Refugee Initiative), plays a crucial role in the implementation of this strategy. Since its inception in 1992, the DAFI programme has supported over 18,000 refugee students in 54 countries in accessing higher education. In 2019, the MENA region hosted 28 per cent of all DAFI students, with the largest DAFI country programmes being in Jordan, Egypt and Lebanon.

The cost-effective scholarship programme in Egypt has allowed for an almost steady increase in the number of DAFI students since 2014, growing from 30 to 499 in 2019. Participating higher education institutions included five private entities such as the October university, 23 public entities, and 12 higher education institutes. In 2019, the top five fields of study were Medical Science and Health-related studies, Engineering, Social and Behavioural Science and Law.

Dawood Mayom, a South Sudanese refugee, recounts how the DAFI scholarship helped him pursue postgraduate studies at the American University in Cairo (2019).

A Syrian refugee makes wooden furniture in a small workshop in Alexandria (2016).

**LIVELIHOODS AND EMPLOYMENT**

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Resettlement is not only a collaborative venture that requires the participation of many actors and is a testament to global solidarity, but also a critical protection tool that provides protection and solutions for refugees who face specific or urgent protection risks, and refugees in Egypt are no exception. Historically a transit country for refugees and asylum-seekers from sub-Saharan Africa and Iraq, Egypt started processing Syrian refugees as well for resettlement in 2014 as part of a regional strategy that aimed to address the ongoing emergency by placing a greater emphasis on durable solutions.

UNHCR receives both internal referrals from within the organization and external referrals from local NGOs. In order to be submitted for resettlement by UNHCR, individuals or families must meet the preconditions for resettlement consideration and fall under one or more of the UNHCR resettlement submission categories. After a thorough assessment of each case, UNHCR refers the most vulnerable refugees or asylum seekers to the national resettlement programs. In 2019, there were 4,617 resettlement submissions from Egypt, the fourth largest submissions globally by country of asylum.

Among UNHCR’s aims for its resettlement programme were increasing its capacity to address the mixed migration issue across the Mediterranean, increasing the number of resettlement countries involved and expanding the number of submissions. Increased resettlement places would not only provide life-saving protection and solutions for those being resettled, but also free up resources for UNHCR to do more for those remaining in countries of asylum around the world.

CASH-BASED INTERVENTIONS

When people are forced to flee their homes, they leave with the bare essentials, losing not just their personal belongings, but also their ability to earn and spend in the process. This can in turn put them at greater risk of resorting to harmful coping strategies, such as survival sex, child labour, family separation and forced marriage. In order to address these important protection risks, UNHCR uses cash-based interventions (CBIs) to provide protection, basic needs, education, shelter, health and livelihoods to the most vulnerable refugees and asylum-seekers. Not only can CBIs reduce the likelihood of turning to negative coping mechanisms and other types of exploitation and abuse, but they also enable refugees to determine their own priority needs in a dignified manner that keeps the power of choice in their hands. In addition, they directly benefit the local economy and can contribute to peaceful coexistence with host communities.

In Egypt, which is one of UNHCR’s 10 largest operations delivering cash assistance, a 2018 vulnerability assessment found that 77 per cent of surveyed refugee families had difficulty meeting their most pressing basic needs, 27 per cent were food insecure, and 36 per cent cited the high cost of education as reason for not attending school. Therefore, UNHCR strove to provide cash assistance to the most vulnerable refugees and asylum-seekers, with over 15,000 vulnerable families receiving monthly unconditional cash grants in 2019 and an average of 13,300 families assisted on a monthly basis. Moreover, 48,414 refugee and asylum-seeker students received UNHCR education grants for the academic year 2019/2020.

Since CBIs represent an important component of a much broader and interlinked network of activities and services provided by UNHCR to provide protection and assistance to the most vulnerable, studies are conducted on a regular basis to assess their impact. According to one such study, receiving cash decreased the likelihood of families using negative coping strategies in Egypt. Furthermore, ten percent of households not receiving cash assistance spent from their savings, while this figure was likely to be less than half if they received cash assistance. Hence cash assistance led to savings and asset formation. Perhaps the most significant impact was observed among UASC who reported that cash allowed them to move to more physically secure areas, led to fewer incidents of violence, and allowed them to pay for their own food and transport, thus rendering them less susceptible to exploitation by others. To maintain an efficient and impact cash programme, UNHCR partnered with the Egyptian Post Office to ensure that refugees can collect their cash grants at any of the 4,060 Post Office branches across Egypt.
Communications with Communities (CwC) is a key element of UNHCR’s response to meet the information needs of people affected by displacement and ensure that their opinions and suggestions inform policy decisions. CwC is built on the premise that no refugee community is homogeneous—displacement affects individuals differently, giving rise to different information needs, preferred channels, and trusted sources.

UNHCR Egypt’s communication with communities’ strategy is guided by UNHCR’s age, gender and diversity (AGD) policy, which emphasizes the full participation of the refugee community in decisions that affect them, and enjoy their rights on an equal footing with others. This policy is also a foundational component of UNHCR’s commitment to accountability to affected persons (AAP). AAP rests on four pillars: participation and inclusion, communication and transparency, feedback and response, and organizational learning & adaptation.

Therefore, UNHCR Egypt works to diversify its communication tools channels to include women, men, girls and boys of diverse backgrounds, ensure their access to timely, accurate, and relevant information on their rights and entitlements, and its partners’ programmes. It also seeks to gauge their formal and informal feedback in a systematic manner to inform interventions, planning, priority setting, course corrections, and evaluation.
IRREGULAR DEPARTURES FROM EGYPT’S MEDITERRANEAN COASTLINE

In 2013, Egypt emerged as a key transit and departure point for refugees and migrants from Syria and the Horn of Africa who were trying to reach Europe, with some starting their journey from Sudan. While several migrants chose to keep moving towards Libya where they attempted to reach Europe via sea, others chose to depart for Europe directly from the Egyptian coast.

These routes were used both by refugees fleeing persecution and by migrants who left their home countries for socio-economic reasons. Movements were often irregular and in many cases both groups depended on smugglers to cross borders.

Changing political dynamics in the Horn of Africa and in the Middle East led to a major increase in migration flows into the north African states that border the Mediterranean, as migrants attempted to reach Europe via the sea. In 2014, the numbers crossing the Mediterranean soared to a new high of 219,000 arrivals, with thousands more estimated to have perished during the journey.23 Whereas in previous years most of those travelling had been socio-economic migrants, in 2014 more than half of those making the crossing were from refugee-producing countries, primarily Syria and Eritrea.

Although the vast majority of Mediterranean crossings took place from Libya, organized smuggling networks were also active along the Egyptian coastline, and since 2013 departures from Egypt have become increasingly common. Migrants reported paying fees of between $2,000 and $4,000 per person for crossings taking place from Alexandria and other coastal locations in the Nile Delta. There were also reports of Egyptian nationals attempting to migrate to Europe via these crossings.24

In view of the rising number of migrants departing via sea and the attendant rise in fatalities, Egypt passed law No. 82/2016 on Combating Illegal Migration & Smuggling of Migrants in late 2016. Coupled with increased border management, Egypt curbed irregular migration through its borders, with the Egyptian government stating that not one case of irregular migration was recorded since.
On September 21, 2016, a trawler boat carrying about 500 refugees and migrants heading from Egypt to Europe capsized off the coast of the port city of Rashid. The disaster claimed the lives of at least 200 people and many of the bodies recovered were those of children.

The smugglers had vastly overloaded the boat to which refugees and migrants had made their way by smaller craft. The disaster came against an already awful backdrop. According to IOM figures, around one in twenty people attempting irregular crossing of the Mediterranean around the time of the Rosetta sinking died in their bid. Over 17,000 people died or went missing in attempted crossings between 2014 and 2018.

Shortly after the Rosetta disaster, Egypt passed a new law on Combating Illegal Migration & Smuggling of Migrants and upscaled its efforts to bring irregular migration through its borders to a halt.

In recent years, child protection has become a particular focus for UNHCR Egypt due to increased numbers of unaccompanied and separated children (UASC) arriving in the country from the Horn of Africa on their way to urban centres such as Cairo or further in Europe. In 2013, UNHCR developed a three-year regional child protection project to be implemented in Egypt, Ethiopia, Sudan and Yemen. The initiative, called “Live, Learn & Play Safe,” was the first child protection project developed by UNHCR as a regional response rather than a country-level programme. It sought to improve the conditions and well-being of refugee and asylum-seeking children and protect them from life-threatening actions such as onward movement and trafficking.

Unaccompanied children are often driven to make their way from camps in Ethiopia, Somalia, Sudan or South Sudan where they are housed due to protracted conflicts, political instability or lack of security in their countries of origin. The adverse circumstances unaccompanied children find themselves in can expose them to abuse and violence, especially sexual assault for girls; discrimination; exploitative child labour; dangerous onwards movement and detention. In addition, without family to support or care for them, it becomes difficult for them to access basic services. The risk of trafficking or kidnapping also increases among children who move onwards under irregular conditions.

Mixed movement from the Horn of Africa has grown in volume. Coupled with the youth bulge in these countries, this has led to an increase in the number of children on the move. As a result, children now make up a majority of forcibly displaced populations in the region.

UNHCR Egypt aims to address both immediate and long-term needs for refugee and asylum-seeking UASC. It provides prevention and response activities for children at risk through access to best interest procedures and quality case management, temporary alternative care arrangements, specialized child protection services, cash assistance and community-based protection. In addition, UNHCR aims to strengthen national child protection systems and works towards capacity building in the child protection sector.

UNHCR Egypt and its partners also strive to enhance community outreach and awareness-raising activities in order to increase the identification of refugee children at risk and ensure their timely access to age and gender-sensitive services. In 2017, UNHCR Egypt developed a case management and community mentorship programme to ensure that UASC benefit from adequate community-based alternative care arrangements and regular monitoring visits.
In 2015, the world was said to have been facing the biggest refugee and displacement crisis of our time. Although forced displacement kept hitting new record highs in the years that followed, 2015 was one of the deadllest years on record for migrants and refugees crossing the Mediterranean. Huddled in small, overcrowded dinghies, they embarked on dangerous journeys in the hopes of finding safety and a better life in Europe. While some of them survived, many others sadly did not.

This inspired two Egyptian athletes, Omar Nour and Omar Samra, to collaborate with DHL, UNHCR and UNDP to raise awareness about the plight of refugees. The duo, popularly known as O2, announced their participation in the world’s toughest row—the Atlantic Challenge, in 2017. In their announcement, they revealed that they would dedicate their row to drawing the world’s attention to refugees everywhere. However, eight days into their journey, the pair was hit with towering waves that caused their boat to capsize. What started out as a quest to shed light on refugees and the dangers they face when crossing the open sea towards safety turned into a horrifying first-hand experience of how unforgiving their journey could be. O2 spent the following 12 hours floating in the rough seas in a small rubber raft before they were rescued by a cargo ship which re-routed in answer to their mayday call.

Following this unexpected twist of fate, it was decided that O2’s experience would be turned into a documentary. Titled Beyond the Raging Sea, the documentary did not only capture the pair’s brush with death, but it also featured refugees who recounted how they went to desperate lengths in their search for safe refuge for their families and themselves. Directed by globally-renowned director Marco Orsini, Beyond the Raging Sea debuted at the 2019 edition of El Gouna Film Festival, receiving a standing ovation as the curtains closed. It is expected to hit movie theatres in 2021.
Over the last seven decades UNHCR Egypt has been proudly serving refugees and asylum-seekers by providing protection and humanitarian assistance to those forced to flee their homeland.

In a message commemorating the 70th anniversary of UNHCR, High Commissioner Filippo Grandi said:

“We are proud of our work but with the number of refugees and displaced rising every year, this is not a birthday to be celebrated.”

The continued presence of our agency means that the root causes of forced displacement have not been resolved, upending the lives of millions of people around the world and forcing them flee their homes in search for safety.

In Egypt, as in every other place it is needed, UNHCR will continue to deliver on its mandate; protecting and assisting refugees and the forcibly displaced, but we look forward to the day no one has to flee their homes. We look forward to the day the international community puts an end to forced displacement.
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