

# The Middle East

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

## Recent Developments

In the wake of the terrorist attacks in the United States on 11 September 2001, with the ongoing response targeting terrorist groups and, possibly, more than one country thought to be harbouring terrorists, UNHCR and other humanitarian agencies rapidly updated contingency plans for possible large-scale population displacement in the region. In addition to emergency preparedness, UNHCR is continuing to pursue its main objectives in the Middle East region: to expand refugee protection space while filling the existing gaps in terms of protection and assistance; to promote the accession of States who are not yet parties to the 1951 Convention and the 1967 Protocol; and to promote institution-building aimed at developing national asylum legislation and procedures.

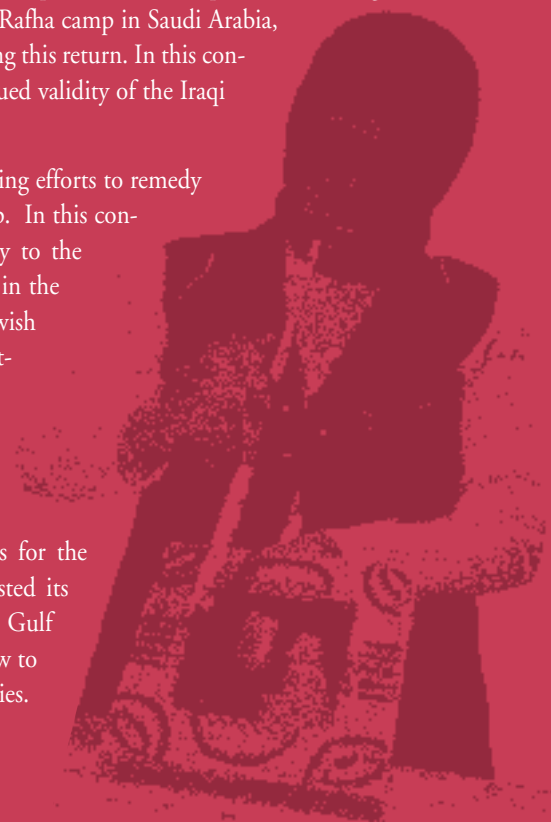
In October 2001, UNHCR regained access to refugees and asylum-seekers currently in detention in Lebanon. The lack of such access had been a matter of serious concern to the Office as well as to international human rights groups and NGOs over the past months. Intensive efforts are now under way to interview all detained asylum-seekers and to determine their status, while at the same time expediting the resettlement of refugees who meet the relevant criteria.

In the Syrian Arab Republic, a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between UNHCR and the Syrian Government is expected to be signed before the end of 2001. The MOU will provide UNHCR with more solid footing to carry out its protection mandate in the country.

In Iraq, UNHCR is trying to facilitate the implementation of a bilateral agreement signed between the Governments of the Islamic Republic of Iran and Iraq in March 2001. This agreement foresees the voluntary repatriation to the Islamic Republic of Iran of up to 5,000 refugees from Iraq, and a similar number repatriating in the opposite direction. Meanwhile, UNHCR has been distributing repatriation forms to some 14,000 Iranian refugees in Iraq, who have expressed their wish to repatriate. UNHCR staff will soon start providing counselling services to these refugees to ensure that they can make an informed decision. At the same time, discussions are continuing with the Government of Iraq, in order to define UNHCR's role in the repatriation process. In August 2001, the Iraqi Government expressed its willingness to receive all Iraqi refugees remaining in Rafha camp in Saudi Arabia, and asked UNHCR to consider facilitating this return. In this context, the authorities reiterated the continued validity of the Iraqi Amnesty Decree No. 110 of June 1998.

In Saudi Arabia, UNHCR has been making efforts to remedy the deteriorating situation in Rafha camp. In this context, UNHCR proposed an exit strategy to the Saudi authorities for gradual integration in the Kingdom of those refugees who do not wish to resettle or repatriate, as well as the resettlement of those refugees who meet the necessary criteria. In October, the Government of Saudi Arabia decided to accept UNHCR's proposal.

In line with Action 2 recommendations for the Middle East region, UNHCR has adjusted its presence in the member states of the Gulf Co-operation Council (GCC) with a view to focusing more on core mandate activities.





Staffing structures in Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates were revised in this context. As the regional co-ordination centre for the Gulf region, the supervisory role and regional responsibility of the UNHCR Office in Saudi Arabia were strengthened.

### Strategic Objectives

A top priority for the UNHCR offices in the region at present is contingency planning for potential population movements in the region, following the September terrorist attacks in the USA. While this represents an important strategic reorientation, UNHCR is maintaining its other key objective to provide international protection to refugees and asylum-seekers and to increase support for UNHCR's work.

**Accession to the 1951 Refugee Convention and the 1967 Protocol:** So far, Egypt, Israel and Yemen are the only countries in the region which are signatories to the 1951 Refugee Convention and the 1967 Protocol. This creates a complex protection situation compounded by the presence of large groups of stateless persons and a significant number of Palestinian refugees who fall under the mandate of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA). To encourage countries to accede to the Refugee Convention and Protocol,

UNHCR will raise awareness of refugee issues among authorities, national NGOs and the general public through presentations and public information activities.

**National Institution-Building and Refugee Law Promotion:** In view of the above, intensive efforts are being made to build up the capacity of local authorities and indigenous humanitarian organisations, as well as to promote the establishment of national asylum institutions and develop domestic asylum legislation. The training of governmental and local NGO representatives in emergency preparedness is particularly important, given the increasing role played by Middle Eastern Governments and aid agencies in various crises in Central Asia, Eastern Europe and Africa.

**Refugee Women and Children:** Meeting the special needs of refugee women and children will continue to be a prime objective for all programmes in the region. Taking into account the specific conditions in each country, UNHCR's work for refugee children will focus on ensuring access to primary and post-primary education. Measures of support may include financial assistance to cover education fees, provision of school materials, payment of incentives to government teachers, as well as coverage of transport costs to enable refugee children to attend school. More female staff will be made available to



Egypt: Refugees from Yemen, Sudan and Ethiopia attend woodwork and crafts' classes. UNHCR/T. Bøistad.

interview or counsel women refugees and asylum-seekers. In addition to material assistance provided on a needs basis, UNHCR will offer vocational training to promote local integration, economic self-sufficiency (especially for female heads of family) as well as active representation of women on refugee committees and in all other aspects of community life.

**Durable Solutions:** While pursuing durable solutions for refugees in the region, UNHCR continues to extend care and maintenance assistance to vulnerable refugees including women and children. Although third country resettlement remains the most viable durable solution, opportunities for organised or spontaneous voluntary repatriation have increasingly become available, as witnessed in the recent return of some Iranian, Turkish Kurd, Yemeni and Iraqi refugees.

As a result of Action 2, care and maintenance assistance was prioritised in the course of 2001 to target mainly the most vulnerable and needy refugees and asylum-seekers in the region. UNHCR continues to seek the involvement of national NGOs able to take over certain responsibilities. This strategy has been successful in Kuwait where the Zakat House plays a major role in assisting refugees.

## Operations

UNHCR has operations in eight countries in the region, namely Egypt, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, the Syrian Arab Republic and Yemen.

In **Egypt**, there are some 6,000 refugees registered with UNHCR who live in urban areas. In addition, the country is hosting some 70,000 Palestinian refugees. As opportunities for self-reliance are very limited, UNHCR provides basic assistance to some 5,000 of these refugees, mostly of Sudanese, Somali and Yemeni origin. This limited assistance, comprising a subsistence allowance, primary/intermediate education, medical care and vocational training, is extended only to the most needy refugees, who are found to be eligible by a joint Needs Assessment Committee. Meanwhile, UNHCR is continuing to screen and counsel the long-staying refugees and to identify appropriate durable solutions for them, in order to reduce their dependency on the Office's assistance. None of these refugees are economically self-reliant, and none have integrated locally (i.e. been granted permanent residency) despite UNHCR's efforts in that direction

involving the formation of partnerships with the relevant competent authorities, NGOs and other bodies. At present, political, social and economic conditions in Egypt continue to militate against success in these efforts.

**Iraq** hosts some 125,000 refugees, of whom some 37,000 are assisted by UNHCR. This includes 24,000 Iranian refugees in Al-Tash camp and in five refugee settlements in the south and centre of the country; 13,000 Turkish Kurd refugees in Makhmour camp and five refugee settlements in the north of the country, as well as 92,000 urban refugees, the majority of whom are Palestinians. Pending a breakthrough in talks between the Iraqi Government and the United Nations on the implementation of Security Council Resolutions related to arms monitoring, the humanitarian situation in the country remains volatile. UNHCR thus needs to continue its activities to complement the assistance provided to refugees by the Government under the Oil-for-Food programme, and, at the same time, to ensure basic protection of refugees and asylum-seekers. Assistance will focus on the special needs of refugee women and children. With regard to repatriation, UNHCR has offered to help implement the bilateral agreement signed by Iraq and the Islamic Republic of Iran in March 2001. This will include vocational skills training and self-help activities, which will be useful when the refugees return to their country of origin. Meanwhile, UNHCR is counselling refugee families wishing to repatriate, in order to ensure that they can make an informed decision.

Third country resettlement will remain the main durable solution for the large number of Iranian Kurd refugees in Al-Tash camp for whom there are no prospects of local integration or repatriation. Persons with particularly pressing protection needs will be given priority.

Activities to promote refugee law were only recently introduced in Iraq. Given the complex political and economic situation in the country, the authorities are preoccupied with other problems. Nevertheless, there are signs of a positive trend: the Government has participated in UNHCR's Global Consultations and it supports UNHCR's initiative to introduce refugee law courses at the Faculty of Law at the University of Baghdad and the Foreign Ministry's Diplomatic Institute.

In **Jordan**, UNHCR provides international protection to over 1,000 recognised refugees and almost 6,000 asylum-seekers awaiting refugee status determination. The most vulnerable and needy are provided with basic care and maintenance assistance. Given the lack of scope for local integration in Jordan and the limited opportunities for voluntary repatriation or spontaneous return, resettlement is the only option for many refugees. UNHCR aims to build on the existing Memorandum of Understanding between UNHCR and the Government, spelling out specific agreed practices for refugee protection. Refugee women, children and other vulnerable groups are given priority in refugee status determination procedures, care

and maintenance assistance and resettlement processing. Unaccompanied minors are provided with safe and appropriate accommodation in local institutions and are given special attention in terms of counselling, assistance and home visits.

In **Lebanon**, over 3,000 refugees, mainly Iraqis and Sudanese, are registered and are being assisted by UNHCR. In addition, some 3,400 asylum-seekers are awaiting refugee status determination by UNHCR in the absence of readily accessible domestic asylum procedures. Due to the strict application by the Lebanese Government of its immigration legislation, asylum-seekers and persons recognised as refugees by UNHCR risk detention and deportation, often to Syria, on the grounds of illegal entry and residence in the country. UNHCR will continue to negotiate a Memorandum of Understanding with the Lebanese Government to facilitate its operations in Lebanon and allow it to carry out its protection mandate in an effective manner. Meanwhile, basic care and maintenance assistance will be provided to needy refugees.

In **Saudi Arabia**, 5,000 Iraqi refugees have been living in the closed Rafha camp since early 1991 without any likely prospect of durable solutions. This state of affairs remains a cause for grave concern at UNHCR. There has been a sharp rise in the number of refugees suffering from depression as a result of years of internment and the suspension of resettlement processing. Similarly, the number of attempted suicides was higher in 2001 than in 2000. The hunger strike started by a group of refugees in June 2001 lasted for several months. A UNHCR survey carried out in September 2001 showed that some 2,200 refugees wished to stay in Saudi Arabia until there is a fundamental change of circumstances in the country of origin. The remaining 2,900 refugees reiterated their desire to be resettled in a third country. UNHCR therefore suggested that the authorities might consider authorising a temporary stay for refugees who want to remain in the country, and this has since been agreed upon by the Government of Saudi Arabia. Meanwhile, UNHCR will continue to work in close co-operation with the traditional resettlement countries to resume resettlement processing for the remaining refugees in Rafha camp.

In **Kuwait**, UNHCR will continue to provide protection to some 2,700 urban refugees, a large number of whom are assisted by a national NGO. Furthermore, UNHCR will protect and assist some 560 refugees in the **United Arab Emirates**, as well as very small groups of asylum-seekers and refugees in **Bahrain, Oman and Qatar**.

UNHCR's operations in the **Syrian Arab Republic** will focus on providing basic assistance to the most needy among the 3,400 recognised refugees of mainly Iraqi and Sudanese origin. In addition, some 1,000 asylum-seekers are currently awaiting refugee status determination. Support measures will include material assistance, basic education, vocational training for selected refugees as well as legal and social counselling. In providing such

assistance, the Office will pay particular attention to the needs of refugee women and children. The same targeted approach will be adopted, as far as possible, in the processing of asylum claims and the pursuit of durable solutions such as resettlement or voluntary repatriation. Following the closure of El Hol camp and the UNHCR field office in the governorate of Hasake, the refugee assistance programme for the residual refugee population in the area will continue to be implemented through the office of the local governor. In 2001, UNHCR reached an agreement with the Faculty of Law at the University of Damascus on the introduction of a Refugee Law course, which was taught in Arabic. The course proved popular among post-graduate students, and similar courses are planned for 2002. Training will also continue for government officials and NGO staff, covering refugee law and asylum concepts and principles.

UNHCR's activities in **Yemen** will focus on protection, capacity-building among government counterparts, voluntary repatriation and consolidation of care and maintenance assistance, with a strong emphasis on self-reliance among camp-based Somali refugees. UNHCR will provide international protection to asylum-seekers in Yemen and their cases will be examined, along with those of recognised refugees, for resettlement. Priority will be given to vulnerable women. For the purpose of reinforcing UNHCR's partnership with the Government, the National Committee for Refugee Affairs will be provided with technical and financial support to carry out the screening and registration of Somali refugees. Furthermore, the Committee will be engaged in substantive discussions about the current government policy of recognising Somali arrivals on a prima facie basis. The care and maintenance assistance to some 10,000 Somali refugees in Al Kharaz camp will continue. However, the emphasis will be on helping the Somalis to attain a reasonable level of self-reliance. Voluntary repatriation of Somali refugees will continue by air to Mogadishu and Hargeisa. Plans for transport by sea have not materialised due to the lack of shipping companies willing to operate between Yemen and Somalia.

#### BUDGET (USD)

Country	Annual Programme
Egypt	2,930,340
Iraq	3,051,038
Israel	10,000
Jordan	1,580,104
Lebanon	1,782,357
Saudi Arabia	1,601,093
Syrian Arab Republic	2,060,498
Yemen	3,233,365
Regional Activities <sup>1</sup>	325,000
<b>Total</b>	<b>16,573,795</b>

<sup>1</sup> Includes scholarships for refugee students in countries in the Middle East and the regional consultations on population displacement.