

The Middle East

Recent Developments

In the Middle East UNHCR continues to face several complex challenges linked to the impact of the economic sanctions imposed on Iraq, the stagnation of the Palestinian-Israeli peace process, and the situation in southern Sudan.

In Iraq, the living conditions of the entire population, including refugees, have deteriorated continuously over the past ten years. The sanctions have led to increased internal displacement and contributed to the outflow of Iraqi nationals into neighbouring countries and into Europe. Large numbers of Iraqis have approached UNHCR offices in the region seeking refugee status as a way to legalise their stay outside Iraq. Conversely, about 1,200 Iraqi Arabs returned from the Islamic Republic of Iran with assistance from UNHCR during the first nine months of 2000, bringing to nearly 3,800 the total number of returnees since August 1999. This occurred after the Government passed an amnesty law in 1999 granting Iraqis who had left the country illegally exemption from prosecution if they returned.

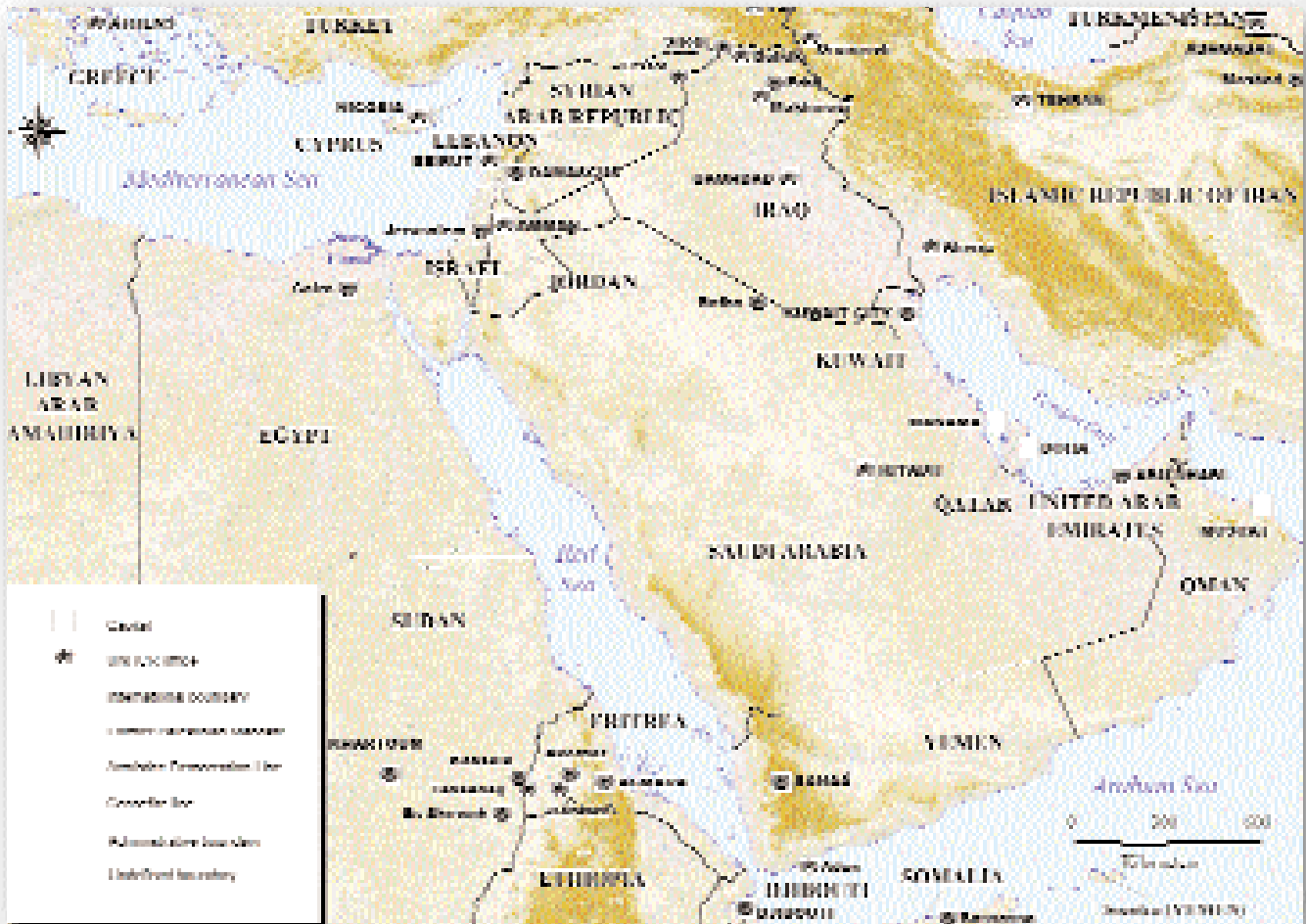
In 2000 UNHCR continued to encourage dialogue between the Governments of Iraq and the Islamic Republic of Iran on the subject of repatriating their respective displaced populations.

In May, Israeli forces withdrew from southern Lebanon, marking an end to two decades of occupation. Some 6,500 Lebanese, both civilians and some members of the South Lebanese Army (SLA) and their families, crossed into Israel, and 2,200 ex-SLA members surrendered to the Lebanese authorities.

On 27 June 2000, UNHCR and the League of Arab States signed a co-operation agreement intended to enhance collaboration between the two organisations.

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





It is hoped that this agreement will enable the League of Arab States to assist UNHCR in developing regional legal instruments for the protection of refugees.

As opportunities for local integration and voluntary repatriation in the Middle East are likely to remain limited, third country resettlement continues to represent the only viable solution for a large number of refugees. However, UNHCR continues to follow developments in the countries of origin in case opportunities for voluntary repatriation arise. In order to reduce irregular population movements, UNHCR will also continue its efforts to streamline and harmonise the criteria and procedures for asylum, resettlement processing, and assistance in the region. The fact that countries in the region provide temporary asylum but without the right to work has led to an increased number of refugees and asylum-seekers leaving on their own for Western Europe, North America and Australia.

The processing of applications for resettlement of recognised refugees continued during 2000. UNHCR strengthened its capacity to interview and process those asylum-seekers who qualify for resettlement, but there is still a backlog of requests.

At the regional level, UNHCR actively promotes the accession by governments to the 1951 Convention and the 1967

Protocol. UNHCR also continues to work on institution-building through training of national authorities and awareness campaigns.

Financial constraints in 2000 reduced assistance to refugees in Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, and Egypt for education, health, vocational training and self-help projects. This caused asylum-seekers and refugees to move independently to other countries where assistance was more readily available.

Strategic Objectives

UNHCR's objectives for 2001 are to: provide international protection and basic assistance to asylum-seekers and refugees in camps and urban areas; give refugee women and children better access to education, vocational training, and activities designed to lead to economic independence; develop exit policies by helping governments and local NGOs build up the expertise to meet the needs of asylum-seekers and refugees; develop a comprehensive protection approach for refugees and asylum-seekers in Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon in order to harmonise the guidelines and procedures governing refugee status determination, resettlement processing, and assistance to urban refugees; conduct public information campaigns to increase awareness of refugee issues; and secure financial and other support from governments, foundations and the public.



Operations

In **Egypt** there are nearly 7,340 registered refugees living in urban areas. As opportunities to gain economic independence are limited, UNHCR provides humanitarian aid for 5,250 refugees, mostly Sudanese, Somalis and Yemenis. The most vulnerable of these, particularly women, children and the elderly receive counselling from an implementing partner at UNHCR's behest. Other assistance includes medical aid, a subsistence allowance for the most needy, and education grants to partially cover the costs of primary education. UNHCR plans to restructure its operations in 2001 to better enable the Cairo office to focus on the refugee situation in Egypt. The new structure will improve co-ordination with the League of Arab States in the promotion of regional refugee instruments, and with the Palestinian Authority. UNHCR will continue to strengthen local capacity building through the training of national officials and national NGOs. In addition, a Memorandum of Understanding will be drawn up by UNHCR and the Government of Egypt to transfer the responsibility for registration and refugee status determination to the relevant Egyptian authorities. UNHCR will maintain its advisory role as well as its role as a Regional Service Centre for all UNHCR offices in the region.

Of the more than 127,000 refugees in **Iraq**, UNHCR assists almost 36,000, including nearly 24,200 Iranian refugees in Al-Tash camp and five refugee settlements in southern and central Iraq, and about 11,660 Turkish refugees in Makhmour camp and five refugee settlements in Dohuk in northern Iraq. Iraq also hosts some 90,000 Palestinians of whom 39 persons are assisted by UNHCR. For the population in Al-Tash camp the Iraqi Government provides basic food and medicine under UN Security Council Resolution 968, while UNHCR provides complementary assistance including medicine and sup-

plies for primary school classrooms. In the north, the Government provides basic assistance for the camp while UNHCR provides complementary aid. The economic sanctions, already in place for ten years, continue to affect negatively the lives of both Iraqi nationals and refugees, forcing UNHCR's assistance programme to adapt to the increasing needs arising from general economic and social decline and ill health. In 2001 large numbers of Iraqis are expected to leave the country, as they did in 2000, due to hardships brought on by the embargo. UNHCR likewise expects that the harsh living conditions in Iraq will continue to trigger the spontaneous return of Iranian refugees living in the centre and the south of the country, and of Turkish refugees in the north. UNHCR will continue to facilitate dialogue between Iraq and the Islamic Republic of Iran on the issue of the voluntary repatriation of Iranian refugees, Kurds and Ahwazis. A similar approach will be taken with regard to the return of Turkish refugees. UNHCR's presence in northern Iraq has been consolidated in one office in Erbil, although a small presence will be maintained in Dohuk to provide counselling and logistical support for the refugees in the five settlements there.

The High Commissioner's visit to **Israel** in May 2000 helped to highlight UNHCR's protection mandate in the country. UNHCR will continue to provide protection and assistance for individual refugees. Once Israel has established a national refugee commission in 2001, UNHCR will be able to pursue its efforts, through training and awareness campaigns, to assist the Israeli authorities to assume their responsibilities towards the refugees. UNHCR will continue to look for durable solutions for a few individuals residing in Israel.

UNHCR's office in **Jordan** provides international protection and assistance to some 1,175 urban refugees, primarily of Iraqi origin. Although not yet a party to the 1951 Convention and

its 1967 Protocol, the Government of Jordan maintains a co-operative attitude towards UNHCR. Refugees are not allowed to remain in the country on a long-term basis, therefore almost all recognised refugees have to be resettled in third countries within six months of being recognised as refugees by UNHCR. In July 2000, the Ministry of the Interior issued a directive to the Public Security Department giving UNHCR access to asylum-seekers in detention and exempting them from the Residency and Foreigners Affairs Law No. 24 of 1973. Asylum-seekers are thus considered temporary visitors until UNHCR makes a decision on their application for refugee status. UNHCR has stepped up the processing of refugee status determination and resettlement requests by employing more staff on a short-term basis.

UNHCR's objectives in **Kuwait** are to provide international protection and assistance to a registered population of some 2,500 refugees, consisting mainly of Afghans, Iraqis, Palestinians and Somalis, with a primary focus on urban refugees. UNHCR will continue to push for third country resettlement as a lasting solution to their predicament. Out of an estimated 117,000 Bedouins (stateless persons) some 800 persons were registered with UNHCR. The Office is in discussion with relevant government officials on the question of the Bedouins; counselling will be offered to those who request it. The NGO partnership was strengthened in 2000 with the signing of co-operation agreements with two local organisations.

In **Lebanon** UNHCR provides protection and assistance for some 3,500 refugees of Iraqi and Sudanese origin. The detention of asylum-seekers and refugees constitutes a major challenge for UNHCR. Every month the Office receives 400-450 asylum requests mainly from Iraqi nationals, most of whom move irregularly into the country. UNHCR will continue to focus on reducing the backlog of asylum applications, accelerating the processing of resettlement requests, and promoting the adoption of a refugee law.

Saudi Arabia hosts some 5,600 refugees, including 5,400 Iraqis who have been living in Rafha camp since 1991, and 160 Afghan refugees. UNHCR monitors their well-being and the assistance provided by the Government. Although repatriation has slowed significantly (only 27 refugees returned in 2000) resettlement operations, which had been suspended since 1997, have resumed. UNHCR's office in Riyadh acts as the co-ordination centre for operations in the six countries of the Gulf Co-operation Council. It will continue to provide protection for urban refugees and to assess claims for refugee status submitted by individual asylum-seekers in Bahrain, Oman and Qatar.

UNHCR's office in the **Syrian Arab Republic** provides international protection and assistance to more than 3,500 urban refugees (mainly from Iraq, Yemen, Somalia and Sudan) living

in Damascus; and to some 510 Iraqi refugees living in the El Hol camp situated in the north-eastern governorate of Hasake. The refugee population in El Hol camp is expected to decrease through resettlement. While the future of the camp is being reviewed, UNHCR will continue to provide food, medical care and education. UNHCR supports most of the urban refugees in Syria with a monthly subsistence allowance, health care and educational assistance.

The United Arab Emirates hosts some 500 recognised refugees originating mainly from the Islamic Republic of Iran, Iraq, Somalia and Uganda, as well as a number of Palestinians. Although the Government is not a signatory to the 1951 Convention and has not yet established procedures for refugee status determination, the local authorities allow refugees to stay, at UNHCR's request, pending the identification of a durable solution. UNHCR will continue to provide international protection to refugees while their assistance needs are met primarily by local NGOs. UNHCR will continue to enhance awareness of its activities and programmes and increase its visibility through private sector fund-raising activities.

UNHCR's office in **Yemen** provides humanitarian assistance for some 13,000 Somali and other refugees, mostly in the Al Gahin camp in the south. Despite financial difficulties, UNHCR will attempt to transfer the entire refugee population from Al Gahin to a new site in Kharaz where living conditions and access will be much improved. The repatriation of some 650 Eritrean and Ethiopian nationals, who fled the recent conflict in the Horn of Africa, is expected to continue in 2001. UNHCR, in close co-ordination with the relevant authorities, will provide legal and administrative assistance to the newly created national refugee commission, with the aim of finding permanent solutions to the problems of refugees in Yemen. In order to promote awareness of its mandate, UNHCR intends to provide training for government officials dealing with refugees issues.

BUDGET (USD)	
Country	Annual Programme
Egypt	3,765,161
Iraq	3,150,530
Israel	10,000
Jordan	1,679,384
Kuwait	759,613
Lebanon	2,699,785
Saudi Arabia	1,470,302
Syrian Arab Republic	2,191,708
United Arab Emirates	187,400
Yemen	3,278,563
Regional Projects ¹	466,800
Total	19,659,246

¹ Covers scholarships for refugee students in countries in the Middle East, enhancement of the evaluation function in CASWANAME and the regional consultations on population displacement.