

**Country Operations Plan
2000-2002**

Part I Executive Committee Summary

(i) Context and beneficiary populations

UNHCR's presence in Syria started as part of the emergency response to the human displacements resulting from the 1991 Gulf War and subsequent internal disturbances in Iraq. The main objective for UNHCR by then was to provide protection and assistance to around 8000 refugees hosted in the El Hol camp in the governorate of Hasake, North-East Syria. This initial caseload was followed, in 1992, by an influx of Somali refugees in the aftermath of the collapse of the State of Somalia and the arrival, in 1995, of a large group of Yemeni military officers and their family members fleeing the civil war between North and South Yemen. Subsequently, a steady flow of asylum-seekers originating mainly from Iraq, Sudan, Somalia and Afghanistan continued to enter Syria and to approach UNHCR seeking protection from persecution.

Iraqis represent the majority of asylum-seekers approaching UNHCR in Syria. The tense situation prevailing in neighboring Iraq, combined with the worsening of the living conditions continued to force people to flee seeking international protection and/or better prospects for their future. Similarly, Sudanese, members/sympathizers of opposition movements originating mostly from Southern Sudan, as well as nationals of other Arab and non-Arab countries, Afghanistan and Iran in particular, continued to enter Syria claiming persecution in relation to their political activities or their religious or ethnical affiliations.

Syria is neither a signatory of the 1951 Convention nor the 1967 Protocol and there is no government structure or procedure to determine refugee status. Moreover, the relatively liberal policy for the admission and stay of Arab nationals in Syria is not systematic and, when applied, is merely viewed as "hospitality" towards Arab guests not amounting to the granting of asylum. It only offers a relative, informal and temporary measure of protection providing unlimited stay and free education, but not preventing the deportation of the person in case of illegal entry, or if found undocumented or in case she/he commits an offense, regardless of its seriousness. Furthermore, given the economic difficulties and the security concerns facing Syria, combined with the heavy burden taken by Syria in providing care to Palestinian refugees as well as the IDPs' problem resulting from the occupation of the Golan Heights, the prospects of local integration for non-Palestinian refugees in the country are virtually non-existent.

Given the continuous flow of asylum-seekers entering Syria, the absence of a protection legal regime and asylum structures in the country, and in view of the significant reduction of the El Hol camp population, UNHCR's activities have gradually shifted in emphasis from emergency relief to the El Hol camp refugees to a more traditional protection and assistance work.

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The overall objective for UNHCR in the country is to provide protection and assistance to persons in need of it, to seek durable solutions for them, to advocate the protection concepts and to gradually build the capacity of the local partners in dealing with asylum issues.

In this context, UNHCR strives to determine the status of asylum applicants, to exercise its mandate for those found to be in need of international protection, to assist the most needy among them and to identify and implement the appropriate durable solutions for them. In parallel, the Office works towards disseminating the asylum concepts among selected audiences and strengthening its relationship with the government and other local partners.

UNHCR is present in two locations in Syria: i) the main Office of the Chief of Mission in Damascus and ii) a field office in Hasake, staffed by one Field Assistant, with the responsibility to monitor border movements as well as the implementation of the assistance programme to the residual caseload staying in the Hasake province.

Three groups of people are of concern to UNHCR in Syria and benefit from its presence in the country:

a) A continuous flow of asylum-seekers, originating mostly from Iraq, Sudan, Afghanistani and Somalia, submitting their claims to UNHCR Damascus and who need to be heard and have their status determined. As of the end of February 2001, the number of asylum-seekers whose status is yet to be determined is of 3408 persons/1487 cases, most of whom are Iraqis, Sudanese, Somalis and Afghans.

b) A residual caseload of 267 Iraqi rural refugees staying in the governorate of Hasake most of whom have been granted refugee status in 1991 on *prima facie* basis.

c) A group of 2964 urban refugees, staying in Damascus and other urban areas, who have been recognized under UNHCR mandate following individual refugee status determination procedures. The main nationalities among urban refugees are Iraqis (1285 persons), Yemenis (747), Somalis (446), Afghans (240) and Sudanese (97).

The last two groups need to be protected, to be assisted, as appropriate, through local partners and to find a suitable durable solution to their problems.

In addition, UNHCR Syria endeavors to gradually enlarge the protection space, to build the capacity of the authorities in dealing with asylum issues and in managing assistance and to sign a cooperation agreement with the Syrian government providing the Office with a more solid footing for carrying out its mandate.

The asylum situation in Syria is similar to that prevailing in Lebanon and Jordan. All three countries are not parties to the international refugee instruments. All three are hosting large numbers of Palestinian refugees, have restrictive policies towards non-Palestinian refugees and asylum seekers and do not allow their long-term integration. Based on these similarities, all three offices strive to harmonize their criteria and

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standards, to share information and to coordinate their interventions and programme within a "situation" oriented approach.

With regard to policy and protection related issues, UNHCR Damascus deals with the Department of International Organizations of the M.F.A, the Department of Immigration and Passports of the MoI and relevant security branches. With regard to the design and implementation of the assistance programme, the main partners of UNHCR are the Syrian Red Crescent Organization (SRCO), the Syrian Women Association (SWA) for urban refugees and, for the rural refugees staying in Hasake, the Office of the Governor of the province.

All the above institutions, along with academia and journalists, are UNHCR's targets for capacity building activities, including training, presentations, information sharing, roundtables, coordination meetings, and regular advocacy interventions and contacts as appropriate.

There is no well-established NGO tradition in Syria. However, UNHCR's non-governmental partners in the implementation of assistance activities to urban refugees play an important role in caring about needy people, proved commitment, gained a great deal of experience in dealing with refugees, and contribute a considerable support to UNHCR's positions and programme.

A good atmosphere of cooperation and dialogue exists among UN agencies in Syria. Regular inter-agency retreats and meetings offer good opportunities to share information, to coordinate interventions on issues of common interest such as administration and staffing. The ongoing CCA/UNDAF process as well as the annual Report of the Resident Coordinator are being conducted in harmony among all agencies. During the year 2000, the UN system in Syria initiated a conceptual framework for a potential UN support to the post-peace scenario in terms of rehabilitation and reconstruction in the expectation of a positive outcome of the Middle-East peace negotiations. In addition, UNHCR succeeded during the year 2000 to bring all UN agencies in the country to agree on a joint UN contingency plan to serve as a common response to eventual human displacement emergencies.

(b) Selected Programme Goals and Objectives:

UNHCR Goals, objectives and activities during 2002 will be directed towards 3 beneficiary populations and one theme:

- Beneficiary population # 1: Asylum-seekers;
- Beneficiary population # 2: Rural refugees in Hasake;
- Beneficiary population # 3: Urban refugees; and
- Theme # 1: Protection advocacy and capacity building.

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Beneficiary population # 1: Asylum-seekers

Name of Beneficiary Population: Asylum-seeker	
Main Goal(s): <input type="checkbox"/> Providing protection pending final status determination	
Principal Objectives	Related Outputs
<input type="checkbox"/> Asylum-seekers have easy access to a fair and sound refugee status determination procedure	<input type="checkbox"/> All persons seeking asylum are given the opportunity to submit their claims and to be heard <input type="checkbox"/> Refugee status accurately determined
<input type="checkbox"/> Asylum-seekers are protected against deportation/refoulement during the RSD process	<input type="checkbox"/> Individual protection issues timely resolved <input type="checkbox"/> Life threatening situations are prevented
<input type="checkbox"/> The specific needs of vulnerable asylum-seekers are adequately addressed and gender related inequalities are prevented	<input type="checkbox"/> Vulnerable cases are early identified and treated in accordance with UNHCR standards <input type="checkbox"/> Women/girls asylum-seekers are treated the same way as men/boys
<input type="checkbox"/> The backlog of cases awaiting status determination is cleared	<input type="checkbox"/> The waiting period for assessing an asylum claim is reduced
<input type="checkbox"/> Asylum-seekers are aware of the limits of UNHCR's mandate	<input type="checkbox"/> Information leaflets about the RSD process systematically distributed to asylum-seekers
<input type="checkbox"/> The RSD procedures meet international standards	<input type="checkbox"/> The eligibility staff receive adequate training and coaching

Beneficiary population # 2: Rural refugees in Hassake

Name of Beneficiary Population: Rural refugees in Hassake	
Main Goal(s): <input type="checkbox"/> Achieve durable solutions to the residual caseload of refugees in Hassake and phase-out UNHCR's presence	
Principal Objectives	Related Outputs
<input type="checkbox"/> The beneficiary population is adequately protected	<input type="checkbox"/> The Hassake refugees are treated in accordance with UNHCR standards
<input type="checkbox"/> Refugees receive the planned assistance and vulnerables among them have their specific needs met	<input type="checkbox"/> The assistance package is regularly distributed <input type="checkbox"/> Additional care is provided to minors, handicapped and elderly refugees
<input type="checkbox"/> The assistance is implemented through more cost effective arrangements	<input type="checkbox"/> The budget of the assistance programme is reduced

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<input type="checkbox"/> All possible durable solutions are actively pursued and implemented	<input type="checkbox"/> The number of beneficiaries by year end is close to nil
<input type="checkbox"/> The government approve the local settlement of some cases among the residual population	<input type="checkbox"/> Some refugees achieve local integration and are no longer in need of UNHCR's assistance
<input type="checkbox"/> A hand –over plan is agreed upon between UNHCR and the authorities	<input type="checkbox"/> The hand-over plan is ready for implementation

Beneficiary Population # 3: Urban refugees

Name of Beneficiary Population: Urban refugees	
Main Goal(s):	
<input type="checkbox"/> Providing protection and, when needed, assistance <input type="checkbox"/> Achieving durable solutions	
Principal Objectives	Related Outputs
<input type="checkbox"/> The relationships with the Syrian government are further enhanced	<input type="checkbox"/> Beneficiaries adequately protected
<input type="checkbox"/> The non- refoulement principle is adhered to by the authorities	<input type="checkbox"/> Life threatening situations prevented
<input type="checkbox"/> The cases eligible for resettlement under UNHCR criteria are timely processed	<input type="checkbox"/> Resettlement achieved for eligible refugees <input type="checkbox"/> Government aware of UNHCR's burden sharing approach
<input type="checkbox"/> Repatriation facilitated for volunteering refugees	<input type="checkbox"/> Repatriation is taking place in conditions of safety and dignity
<input type="checkbox"/> Self-reliance activities revitalized	<input type="checkbox"/> Pilot projects of self-reliance are set-up
<input type="checkbox"/> Needy refugees, especially vulnerable and children among them, receive adequate assistance	<input type="checkbox"/> Needy refugees feeling safe and dignified
<input type="checkbox"/> The specific needs and interests of women refugees are better identified	<input type="checkbox"/> Gender related gaps are narrowed
<input type="checkbox"/> Refugees obtain identification documents in agreement with the Govt	<input type="checkbox"/> Refugees feeling safe and secure

Theme # 1: Protection / advocacy and capacity building

<p>Beneficiary Population/Theme: Protection advocacy and capacity building</p>	
<p>Main Goal(s):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> The government and NGO's capacity to deal with asylum issues enhanced and their involvement in the process increased <input type="checkbox"/> Increased awareness about asylum concepts among selected audiences 	
Principal Objectives	Related Outputs
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Protection standard for asylum-seekers and refugees improve through the effective implementation of the Memorandum of Understanding 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> A government/UNHCR coordination system is established <input type="checkbox"/> UNHCR's interventions on protection issues are positively taken into consideration
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> The asylum concepts are disseminated among decision makers, academia and journalists 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Brochures, posters and other PI materials targeting selected audiences are produced and distributed <input type="checkbox"/> Presentations on asylum issues are planned and implemented
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Government officers become conversant with the registration and status determination work 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Concerned Government staff trained
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Implementing partners coordinate efficiently and manage the programme effectively 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> UNHCR support and training to partners provided