



# Surviving in the city

A review of UNHCR's  
operation for Iraqi  
refugees in urban areas  
of Jordan, Lebanon  
and Syria

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## Executive summary

In recent years, large numbers of Iraqi citizens have left their country, escaping the violence and turmoil afflicting their homeland. Many have taken up residence in urban centres of neighbouring and nearby states, including Amman (Jordan), Beirut (Lebanon), Aleppo and Damascus (Syria).

While UNHCR's task in responding to this situation has been facilitated by the generous admission policies of those three countries, the organization had not planned for this scenario and was unfamiliar with the challenge of dealing with such large populations of urban refugees.

The task was also complicated by a number of additional factors, including its limited presence and standing in the Middle East, the absence of refugee laws and institutions in the countries of asylum, as well as their overriding preoccupation with other issues, including the Palestinian refugee question, national security and regional geopolitics.

Despite these difficult circumstances, the UNHCR operation for Iraqi refugees in Jordan, Lebanon and Syria has many achievements to its credit. Taking advantage of US and international interest in the Iraqi situation, the organization mobilized substantial resources, rapidly scaled up its activities, deployed high-quality teams to the field and addressed the specifically urban characteristics of the operation in an innovative and flexible manner.

Particular successes have been recorded in a number of the areas examined in this review: the establishment of efficient registration and reception systems; the introduction of effective community outreach and communications mechanisms; the use of new technologies in the distribution of assistance to refugees; and the formulation of creative external relations and public information opportunities.

As a result of these activities, as well as the administration of a large refugee resettlement programme and the provision of extensive support to national structures that provide services to refugees, the protection space available to Iraqi refugees in Jordan, Lebanon and Syria has expanded considerably.

But the situation remains a fragile one. First, the expansion of protection space has been based largely on understandings and agreements between UNHCR and the authorities which are yet to be institutionalized and which might be reversed if negative developments were to take place in the political, economic or security environments.

Second, the majority of Iraqis do not have any immediate prospect of finding a solution to their plight. Most of them consider that current conditions in Iraq prevent them from repatriating, while a significant number state that they have no intention of returning there under any circumstances.

Only a limited number of the refugees can expect to be accepted for resettlement, and yet those who remain in the three countries of asylum have almost no prospect of

local integration or gaining secure residency rights, both of which have been effectively ruled out by the authorities.

A final concern derives from the very real prospect that the funding available to UNHCR and its partners will decline in the months and years to come. The question now looming over the operation is whether it will be possible to maintain the protection space that has been established in recent years if there are inadequate resources available to assist the refugees and to support the services on which they rely.

# 1. Introduction to the review

## **Iraq in crisis**

1. Iraq has been in a state of conflict and crisis throughout much of the time since it became a republic in 1958, but the country did not feature very prominently on the global political agenda until 1990, when it invaded Kuwait and was struck by a counter-offensive launched by a coalition of armed forces led by the USA.

2. In subsequent years, Iraq and its people were confronted with a series of upheavals: economic sanctions, mounting pressure from the international community in relation to weapons of mass destruction, a second US-led military intervention in 2003, the removal of the longstanding regime of Saddam Hussein, the dissolution of the country's armed forces and an eruption of criminality and sectarian violence, making the country almost impossible to govern and intimidating large segments of the population.

3. One of the principal manifestations of Iraq's protracted crisis has been the exodus of its citizens, primarily to neighbouring and nearby countries, but also to more distant parts of the world. According to some estimates, in 2002, prior to the second Gulf war, some half a million Iraqis had already become refugees, while many thousands more had taken up residence abroad both as regular and irregular migrants.<sup>1</sup>

4. The scale, visibility and impact of the movement out of Iraq increased in a particularly dramatic manner as a result of the violence instigated by the February 2006 bombing of the Al-Askari Mosque in Samarra, north-west of Baghdad. Massive numbers of people were now obliged to abandon their homes, some of them moving to other parts their own country while others crossed the border to take refuge in neighbouring and nearby countries, most notably Jordan and Syria, but also Egypt, Lebanon, Turkey and the Gulf states.

5. In response to these developments, UNHCR convened a major international conference on Iraqi refugees and displaced persons in April 2007 and reinforced its efforts to meet their need for protection, assistance and durable solutions. This was clearly reflected in the organization's growing budget for Iraqi refugees, which jumped from \$40 million in 2005 to \$271 million in 2008. In 2009 UNHCR is appealing for more than \$300 million to cover its operations throughout the region, with an emphasis on expanding its presence and activities in central Iraq.

## **Focus of the review**

6. In mid-2008, the Director of UNHCR's Regional Bureau for the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) proposed that the Policy Development and Evaluation Service

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<sup>1</sup> Geraldine Chatelard, 'Migration from Iraq between the Gulf and the Iraq wars (1990-2003): historical and socio-spatial dimensions', Compas Working Paper No. 68, University of Oxford, 2009.

(PDES) should undertake an independent review of UNHCR's increasingly extensive operation for Iraqi refugees in Jordan, Lebanon and Syria. Planning for the review commenced in the third quarter of 2008, but implementation was delayed by other PDES priorities. As an interim measure, PDES undertook and published a preliminary analysis of UNHCR's role in realizing protection space for Iraqi refugees in the three countries concerned.<sup>2</sup>

7. By the time that the study was published, some significant developments had taken place in relation to UNHCR's policy priorities. In December 2008, UN High Commissioner for Refugees António Guterres announced his intention to focus particular attention on the issue of 'urban displacement' and to examine this topic in more detail at the December 2009 meeting of his annual Dialogue on Protection Challenges.

8. Observing that a growing proportion of UNHCR's beneficiaries were to be found in cities and towns, and recognizing the dynamic nature of the urbanization process, the High Commissioner suggested that the humanitarian community had not yet adjusted to this new reality and now had to reconsider traditional, camp-based responses to the problem of mass displacement.

9. This theme was taken up by the Assistant High Commissioner (Operations) in a January 2009 presentation given to Cities Alliance, a global coalition of municipalities and development partners committed to urban poverty reduction:

Too many of the underlying assumptions, the analytical tools and the operational approaches that guide our work are based on the outmoded notion that refugees and displaced people belong in camps, where their needs are best and most easily met through the provision of direct and dedicated humanitarian services. We have not yet thought through the full challenge of operating in cities, where displaced populations are intermingled with other urban residents and where the activities of humanitarian agencies must evidently be supportive of - rather than separate from - those of the authorities and development actors.

10. In view of these developments, PDES concluded that its review of the UNHCR operation in Jordan, Lebanon and Syria should focus on issues arising from the fact that the overwhelming majority of Iraqi refugees in those countries both originated from urban areas in their country of origin and have taken up residence in urban areas in their countries of asylum.

11. More specifically, and with the intention of informing the discussion on urban displacement at the December 2009 meeting of the High Commissioner's Dialogue, PDES decided that the review should focus on key lessons learned from the Iraqi refugee operation and the identification of effective practices that might be replicated in urban refugee programmes elsewhere in the world. In order to meet these objectives, the report adopts a thematic and comparative approach, and does present

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<sup>2</sup> Anne Evans Barnes, 'Realizing protection space for Iraqi refugees: UNHCR in Syria, Jordan and Lebanon', *New Issues in Refugee Research*, No.167, January 2009.



separate accounts and assessments of UNHCR activities in the three countries under review.

### **Methods and constraints**

12. In accordance with UNHCR's Evaluation Policy, this review has adopted a participatory and beneficiary-focused approach, based on the principle of age, gender and diversity mainstreaming (AGDM). The team responsible for the review consequently conducted a large number of individual, household and focus group discussions with refugee women, men, boys and girls, drawn from the many different communities that constitute the Iraqi refugee population.

13. The team also undertook visits to many refugee homes, neighbourhoods and community centres in order to gain a first-hand impression of their living conditions. At the same time, the team interviewed a broad cross-section of other stakeholders, including UNHCR, UN and NGO staff members, national and local government personnel, as well as representatives of the media and academia.

14. Despite these efforts, the team encountered some inevitable constraints in undertaking the review.

15. First, while the team was able to visit the Middle East for an extended period (18 April to 8 May 2009) this was barely sufficient to enable an in-depth examination of the UNHCR operation, given the three countries and four cities concerned, as well as the enormous size and diversity of the refugee population.

16. Second, the team was unable to visit Iraq itself, and could therefore not undertake a first-hand assessment of conditions in the country of origin.

17. Third, and at a more conceptual level, it has proved difficult for the team to focus solely on the urban dimensions of the Iraqi refugee situation, given the many broader operational and policy issues raised by the UNHCR operation in the region.

18. Fourth, it became apparent in the course of the review that some of the specificities of the operation derive from the high levels of donor support that it has received, coupled with the fact that all three countries are middle-income states, have functioning public and private services and well-developed infrastructures. The lessons learned from this UNHCR operation and the effective practices established there may consequently be of somewhat limited relevance to the organization's activities in countries which do not benefit from these conditions.

19. Fifth, the team that has undertaken this review has made every effort to prepare a report which is relatively brief and non-technical in nature. While each of the themes reviewed in the following chapters of this report could easily have been the subject of a separate and far more exhaustive evaluation, it has not been the objective of the current review to examine or assess the operation at that level of detail.

20. Finally, and again in the interests of brevity and clarity, the current report will soon be supplemented by a complementary paper, identifying the key findings and recommendations of the review. This paper will provide a benchmark against which UNHCR responses to the review can be assessed.

21. The team that undertook this review consisted of four members: Jeff Crisp, Jane Janz and José Riera of PDES, and Shahira Samy, an Arabic-speaking consultant who specializes in Middle East refugee issues and who is a Research Fellow based at the University of Oxford. The team wishes to express its gratitude to MENA and to UNHCR staff members in Aleppo, Amman, Beirut and Damascus, all of whom made enormous efforts to facilitate and support its work.

## 2. The policy context and operational environment

### UNHCR's urban refugee policy

22. UNHCR's policy on refugees in urban areas has had a long and somewhat troubled history. In March 1997, the organization introduced a policy on this issue, primarily as a result of concerns about the growing cost of assisting refugees in urban areas, the belief that such assistance induced refugees to move from camps to cities, and a sense that urban refugees often developed a 'culture of entitlement' which manifested itself in the form of harassment and violence against its staff.

23. Once issued, the policy statement came under immediate attack from a number of NGOs and human rights organizations, who felt that the document discriminated against those refugees who wished to take up residence in a city rather than a camp, that it failed to recognize their right to international protection and that it tended to regard them as troublemakers.

24. In response to these criticisms, UNHCR withdrew the original policy statement, introduced an amended version in December 1997, and promised to assess its implementation after a two-year period. When reminded of this commitment at the October 1999 meeting of the Executive Committee, the Assistant High Commissioner announced that the organization intended to launch such a review and, if necessary, to revise the policy again on the basis of its findings and recommendations.

25. Since that time, UNHCR has undertaken a desk-based survey of its urban refugee policy, has conducted numerous field-based evaluations and workshops concerning its implementation, and has produced three entirely different internal drafts of a new policy statement. At the time of writing (June and July 2009) the latest of these drafts had been set aside and an entirely new policy paper was under consideration.

26. While the delay in the completion of a new policy statement is partly a result of organizational difficulties, such as the regular rotation of staff and redistribution of Headquarters responsibilities, it is also symptomatic of the inherently complex nature of the urban refugee issue and the questions that it raises. For example:

- should urban refugees be provided with protection and assistance by UNHCR in countries where they have the option of residing in camps or are obliged to do so by the country of asylum?
- does the provision of such assistance act as a 'pull factor', attracting refugees to urban areas?
- at what level should such assistance be provided in relation to the local standard of living;
- what steps can be taken to ensure that only those urban refugees who are in real need of assistance receive it?

- should the assistance provided to urban refugees be given in cash or in other forms?
- to what extent should UNHCR support public services in urban areas in view of the pressure which refugees may place upon them?
- what kind of reception, registration and security arrangements are required to uphold the rights and dignity of urban refugees, while ensuring that such situations are managed in an orderly manner?
- under what circumstances should UNHCR conduct individual refugee status determination in urban areas?
- should UNHCR provide urban refugees with vocational training and livelihoods support in countries where they are officially barred from the labour market?
- how can UNHCR ensure that it has access to the most vulnerable urban refugees, rather than those who are most articulate, mobile and best organized?

Many of these generic issues have arisen in the Iraqi refugee operation and are examined in following sections of this review.

### **The operational environment**

27. UNHCR's response to the Iraqi refugee situation has been shaped by several characteristics of the operational environment in the Middle East.

28. First, the organization has traditionally had a rather low profile and standing in the region, due to a number of factors: the limited number of refugees that fall within UNHCR's mandate; the much greater number of Palestinian refugees assisted by UNRWA; the prime importance which states such as Jordan, Lebanon and Syria attach to the Palestinian issue and their internal security; and their relatively limited interest in refugee protection issues and the work of UNHCR.

29. While UNHCR did play an important role in addressing the 2006 displacement crisis that followed Israel's invasion of southern Lebanon, the magnitude and urgency of that operation deflected the organization's attention from the growing outflow from Iraq. Moreover, the early contingency planning undertaken by UNHCR was based on the false assumption that any Iraqi refugee exodus would be managed in a traditional manner, by accommodating the new arrivals in camps in the border areas of asylum countries. As a result of these and other factors, UNHCR's response to the crisis was delayed.

30. During the past two years, however, the organization has succeeded in gaining lost ground, winning the confidence and trust of the governments concerned and putting in place a very effective and innovative programme. Much of the credit for these gains must be given to the MENA Bureau and the high-quality teams that it has established in all four of the cities visited in the course of this review.

## **Number and profile of refugees**

31. A second key characteristic of the operational environment has been the sheer number of refugees concerned - much larger than UNHCR normally encounters in urban areas. The actual size of the refugee population, however, is the subject of some debate. According to government estimates, the figure stands at 450,000 in Jordan, 50,000 in Lebanon and 1.1 million in Syria. But the number of refugees registered with UNHCR is considerably smaller: around 52,000 in Jordan, 10,000 in Lebanon and 206,000 in Syria at the end of March 2009. Because the Iraq-Syria border has remained largely open, and because there is considerable to-and-fro movement across that border, it is difficult to establish with any clarity how many Iraqis habitually reside in Syria.

32. Third, in responding to the Iraqi refugee crisis, UNHCR found itself in the unusual position of dealing with a largely (but by no means exclusively) middle-class refugee population in middle-income countries. While it would be misleading to generalize on this matter, it is evident that many of the Iraqis who have left their homeland in recent years previously lived in urban areas, are well educated, had good jobs in their country of origin and lived a reasonably comfortable lifestyle there.<sup>3</sup> In Jordan, for example, 35 per cent have a university degree and professionals outnumber manual workers by three to one.

33. Indeed, people with this profile have been the prime targets of attack by the militia forces and criminal gangs that have flourished in Iraq. In interviews with the refugees, it also became clear that they had benefited considerably from the subsidized food, education and health care provided in Iraq. As a result, their expectations of life in exile have been unusually high.

34. It is also important to note that cities such as Aleppo, Amman, Beirut and Damascus are relatively prosperous and expensive when compared to cities such as Accra, Khartoum, Nairobi or New Delhi, where UNHCR has also worked with urban refugee populations. On one hand, this has required the organization to assist the Iraqis more generously than is normally the case in urban contexts. On the other hand, the relatively sophisticated and reliable infrastructure that is found in the Middle East has enabled UNHCR to take initiatives (such as the distribution of cash assistance by means of ATM cards) that might not be viable elsewhere.

## **The political context**

35. The UNHCR programme for Iraqi refugees has been strongly influenced by the delicate nature of the political context. The Middle East in general, and Iraq in particular, are areas of global strategic significance. The large number of Iraqis who have left their homeland are a very visible symbol of the crisis that has afflicted the country in recent years.

36. Needless to say, the states that have been directly involved in this crisis, by virtue of the troops which they have deployed in Iraq, have a very significant interest in addressing the refugee situation, not least by providing high levels of funding and resettlement places. Certain countries in Western Europe have also been concerned to

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<sup>3</sup> The Iraqi refugees in Jordan tend to be more prosperous than those in Syria, while Lebanon has a higher proportion of working class single men.

limit the number of Iraqis moving to and seeking asylum on their territory, and have consequently taken a special interest in the UNHCR programme.

37. Within Jordan, Lebanon and Syria, UNHCR's efforts in relation to the Iraqi refugees have been constantly overshadowed by the longstanding nature of the Palestinian refugee issue and the threat that it is deemed to pose to national and regional security. At the same time, the sectarian nature of the violence inside Iraq and the presence of Sunni Muslims, Shia Muslims and Christians and other minorities such as Sabeans, Mandeans and Yazidis amongst the refugee population have led to fears that the Iraq conflict might be 'exported' to the countries to which they have fled. Fortunately, those fears have proven to be unfounded.

38. UNHCR has encountered some important commonalities and differences in the three countries under review. In terms of commonalities, these states share a number of important characteristics: they do not have extensive experience in dealing with non-Palestinian refugees or in working with UNHCR; they are not signatories to the 1951 Refugee Convention or its 1967 Protocol; they lack refugee legislation and institutions and have influential security services. As a result, expanding the limited 'protection space' available to the refugees and to UNHCR in the region has been an important objective.

39. With regard to differences, Lebanon stands out with respect to the relative diversity of its different communities and political parties, as well as the important role played by the private sector in the provision of services such as education and health care. In this respect it differs significantly from Syria, where the state plays a leading role in public life and where the government has a difficult relationship with a number of the countries that fund UNHCR. Jordan, on the other hand, enjoys considerable support from those countries and is perhaps most directly concerned by the conflict in Iraq by virtue of the very strong historical, economic and political ties that bind the two countries.

### **Mobility patterns**

40. A further characteristic of the Iraqi refugee situation is to be found in the complex pattern of mobility that exists in the region. In its early days, the movement of people out of that country was perceived by many as a classic refugee exodus, in which people fled for their lives in large numbers and at short notice in response to very immediate dangers. While this scenario is not entirely inaccurate, and while the conflict in Iraq evidently provides the backdrop to the departure of so many of the country's citizens, it has also become clear that this movement is more complicated in nature and has some of the characteristics of a 'mixed migration':

- Iraqis have been migrating and fleeing to neighbouring and nearby countries for several decades and the Iraqi communities found in cities such as Aleppo, Amman, Beirut and Damascus predate the removal of the Saddam Hussein regime;

- Lebanon does not share a border with Iraq, and a considerable proportion of the Iraqis who arrived there in 2006 and 2007 were young men who moved on from Syria in order to access the informal employment opportunities available there;<sup>4</sup>
- while some of the people who have left Iraq have done so in response to the conflict and to access resettlement opportunities, others are essentially temporary visitors who go to neighbouring and nearby states to access healthcare and education services, to perform pilgrimages or simply to go shopping in markets where the choice of goods is wider than in Iraq;
- despite the difficulties and dangers involved, some refugees from Iraq make trips back to their homeland (although not necessarily to their previous place of residence) in order to assess the situation there, to visit relatives, to collect their pensions or to examine or sell any property which they left behind;
- some Iraqi families, especially the more prosperous, have deliberately split their families, enabling dependents to enjoy the security and services available in Jordan and Syria, while the breadwinner spends more time in Iraq;
- a significant number of the refugees enjoy close links with members of the global Iraqi diaspora which extends to places such as the Gulf states, Europe, North America and Australia – a network that has been both activated and expanded as a result of the Iraq conflict and the refugee resettlement programme.

### **Complexity of the operation**

41. It has become something of a cliché for evaluations of UNHCR activities to refer to the ‘complex operational environment’ in which the organization is obliged to work. Refugee situations, especially when they take the form of large and sudden emergencies, are by their very nature demanding, and difficult to address in an effective manner.

42. In the case of the Iraqi exodus, the complexity of the situation has arisen not so much from the size of the influx or the speed with which refugees fled to neighbouring and nearby countries. Rather, it is to be found in the fact that the vast majority of the new arrivals made their way to the capital cities and other urban centres of asylum countries where the political and legal environment was not particularly conducive to the task of providing refugees with protection and solutions. This review seeks to examine and assess UNHCR’s response to this situation.

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<sup>4</sup> In the last nine months, most newcomers have entered Lebanon legally and by air, directly from Iraq.





### 3. Protection space

#### A challenging environment

43. The protection environment confronting UNHCR and the Iraqi refugees in Jordan, Lebanon and Syria has not been an easy one. None of the three countries are signatories to the 1951 UN Refugee Convention or its 1967 Protocol and all lack national refugee legislation and institutions that deal with asylum issues. As a result of their long and difficult experience with the Palestinians, they are sensitive to the economic, political and security implications of large-scale refugee influxes. As stated in an earlier study by PDES:

Even though each of these states is party to international human rights instruments with provisions relevant to refugees, the continued presence of Palestinian refugees on their territories has made them wary of becoming party to refugee-related legal instruments... They fear that other refugee populations, like the Iraqis, if accorded the rights set down in the 1951 Convention may too end up remaining on their soil indefinitely.<sup>5</sup>

44. In addition to these general concerns, the arrival of large numbers of Iraqis posed some particular challenges to the states and societies of the region. The refugee exodus was massive in scale, took place in a short period of time and had its most tangible and visible impact in the capital cities of the three countries concerned. Given the escalating violence taking place in Iraq, moreover, there was an understandable fear amongst the citizens of those countries that the new arrivals would bring their sectarian conflicts with them.

45. The Iraqi refugee situation also arose in a difficult economic environment. After the influx had peaked, food and fuel prices rose sharply. Significant numbers of Jordanian, Lebanese and Syrian migrants were beginning to return from the Gulf States, depriving their home countries of remittances and adding to the number of people in search of scarce jobs. Within all three societies, some people attributed their hardship to the refugees' arrival and were consequently hostile to their presence.<sup>6</sup>

46. Given all of these considerations, host country responses to the Iraqi refugee influx were surprisingly positive. Jordan and Syria were particularly generous in admitting the new arrivals and allowing them to take up residence in urban areas. But before long, and as the scale and impact of the exodus became apparent, those countries introduced a series of visa and residency rules which, at the request of the government in Baghdad, placed new restrictions on the Iraqis. In Lebanon, meanwhile, significant numbers of Iraqis found themselves in detention and threatened with deportation.

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<sup>5</sup> Anne Evans Barnes, *ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> A number of studies have demonstrated that the price rises that took place at this time were caused primarily by policies of economic liberalization and deregulation, coupled with changes in the global market for commodities such as oil and food.

47. This chapter examines UNHCR's response to this difficult situation, focusing on a notion that has gained widespread currency amongst humanitarian organizations working in the region, that of 'protection space'. The chapter provides a brief examination of this concept, assesses the extent to which such space has been preserved and expanded since the beginning of the operation, and asks what can be done in future to consolidate the protection gains that have been made.

### **A new concept**

48. The notion of protection space is a relatively new one, and one which has become particularly associated with the Iraqi refugee operation. It is not a legal concept and has no formal or agreed definition. According to the PDES paper already cited, protection space can be understood as "an environment which enables the delivery of protection activities and within which the prospect of providing protection is optimized."<sup>7</sup>

49. Building on this conceptualization, the current review defines protection space to mean the extent to which there is a conducive environment for the internationally recognized rights of refugees to be respected and upheld.

50. The protection space that exists in any given situation is determined by a number of different variables, including:

- the attitudes and perceptions of the authorities with regard to refugees;
- the policies and practices pursued by the state in relation to refugee rights;
- the attitudes, perceptions and actions of the host population and civil society with regard to refugees;
- the extent to which UNHCR is willing and able to act in accordance with its mandate for refugee protection and solutions;
- the extent to which refugees themselves feel protected and respect the obligations that are placed upon them by virtue of their status;
- the extent to which UNHCR and other humanitarian actors are able to function and to deliver services to refugees.

51. To establish a standard against which the expansion and contraction of protection space can be measured, some relevant benchmarks can be found in a UNHCR paper prepared for the April 2007 International Conference on Addressing the Humanitarian Needs of Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons inside Iraq and in Neighbouring Countries.

52. This document defined "the most critical elements of protection for Iraqis arriving in neighbouring countries and seeking refuge... regardless of the formal status conferred." They included: (a) access to safety and *non-refoulement*; (b) non-penalization for illegal entry; (c) permission for temporary stay under acceptable conditions; (d) registration and the identification of protection vulnerabilities; (e)

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<sup>7</sup> Anne Evans Barnes, *ibid.*

access to durable solutions, including resettlement; (f) availability of humanitarian assistance to persons with specific needs; and (g) access to essential services and opportunities for self-reliance.

### **Increased protection space**

53. Employing the analytical framework outlined above, the current review concludes that the protection space available to Iraqi refugees in Jordan, Lebanon and Syria has expanded in a number of respects since UNHCR launched its operation. This assessment is based on a variety of indicators, including:

- the limited instances of *refoulement* throughout the region;
- the continued ability of Iraqis to leave their own country and to access the territory of neighbouring states, despite the introduction of new controls and restrictions;
- the ability of Iraqis to access health and education services in their countries of asylum;
- the ability of some Iraqis to work in the informal sector despite formal limitations on employment;
- reduced levels of detention for violations of immigration laws, especially in Lebanon;
- a growing willingness on the part of the authorities and security services to recognize the documents provided to refugees by UNHCR;
- improved opportunities for UNHCR and its implementing partners to establish a presence and to undertake operational, monitoring and outreach activities;
- improved delivery of and access to services such as healthcare and education.
- an enhanced dialogue between UNHCR and the authorities on protection and other issues;
- the establishment of a resettlement programme that has provided a durable solution to a significant number of refugees;
- the absence of serious or widespread protection incidents as a result of conflict between Iraqi refugees and host populations or within the refugee community itself.

### **Explaining the change**

54. In 2006 and 2007, human rights organizations issued a series of reports and press releases on the Iraqi refugee situation with alarming headlines such as 'Scant refuge in Jordan'; 'Syria to block Iraqi refugees'; and 'Bleak choices for Iraqi refugees in Lebanon'. In the last 18 months, such statements have become far less common, offering further support to the notion that the protection space available to refugees in

these countries has been expanded. How can this trend be explained and what lessons can be learned from recent experience in the Middle East that might be applied to other parts of the world?

55. First, it would be highly misleading for UNHCR and other members of the international community to take sole credit for this achievement, as it is apparent that the protection offered to Iraqi refugees has been rooted in the strong religious, cultural and social ties that link the countries of the region.

56. There has evidently been a high level of concern about the political, economic and social impact of the influx, hence the unwillingness of the three countries to contemplate the solution of local integration. But at the same time, there has been a remarkable level of popular and political empathy for the plight of Iraqis, reinforced by a strong awareness of the need to maintain good relations with Iraq, which remains an important regional actor. In the words of one highly-placed Jordanian, "when the Iraqis go home, we want them to leave with good memories of the time they spent in our country. We do not want them to have a grudge against us."

57. Second, the expansion of protection space in the Iraqi refugee context can be ascribed to the way in which the principle of international solidarity and responsibility-sharing has been effectively operationalized. Without the large amounts of funding provided by the donor community, both bilaterally and through humanitarian organizations such as UNHCR, the three countries would clearly have struggled to make their urban space and services available to the refugees. And without that funding, large numbers of vulnerable Iraqis might have fallen into destitution, obliging them to return to Iraq on an involuntary basis or to resort to other negative coping mechanisms.

58. The principle of responsibility-sharing has also been activated in relation to resettlement. In interviews with government officials and other stakeholders in the three countries of asylum, it became apparent that the resettlement programme is regarded as both a substantive and symbolic gesture of support for their efforts to cope with the refugee influx. As such, it has contributed to the expansion of protection space.

59. Third, UNHCR and its partners have made an important contribution to this positive trend. To summarize some observations made in other parts of this review, that contribution has been based on:

- the active and personal efforts of the High Commissioner to raise international awareness of the Iraqi refugee situation, coupled with an effective external relations strategy;
- UNHCR's ability to mobilize international funding, not only for its own programme but also to support the structures and services of the three countries of asylum, as well as other humanitarian and UN agencies;
- high-quality teams in the field, effectively supported by Headquarters, which have undertaken a wide range of operational, training and public information activities, all of which have reinforced host country capacity to manage the refugee influx.

60. Fourth, the expansion of protection space can be linked to a shared sense that the emergency phase of the operation is over, and that systems have now been put into place to address the refugee situation. At the same time, some modest improvements in the security situation inside Iraq, coupled with the current readiness of many refugees to visit their homeland (if only on a short-term basis) have enabled the three countries of asylum to adopt a somewhat more relaxed attitude to the refugees' presence than was the case in the earlier days of the operation.

### **Another side of the protection coin**

61. It would be wrong to conclude from the preceding analysis that the protection environment in Jordan, Lebanon and Syria is now wholly benign. While there have certainly been some positive developments in relation to the treatment of refugees and the activities of UNHCR and its partners, three issues continue to cast a shadow over the Iraqi refugee situation.

62. First, Iraqi refugees continue to experience a range of protection problems, as can be deduced from reports submitted by UNHCR offices in the region. One, for example, states that "on 19 March, the office was informed of the deportation of 22 Iraqi refugee men in one day. Most of them were arrested and deported for working... Their family members have remained without documentation due to the deportees being sent back to their country of origin with their family passports." ...

63. Another report states that "security incidents affecting refugees are reportedly on the rise. They are now targeted by unknown Iraqi militia groups. Some Iraqi families are apparently changing their homes in a bid to avoid these threats. None of the refugees reported these incidents to the police as they fear further problems or deportation."

64. Second, it would be misleading to approach the issue of protection space from a solely legal and political perspective, focusing on the actions of the authorities in relation to issues such as admission, *non-refoulement* and detention. Protection also has some important social, economic and psychological dimensions, and in these respects many Iraqis continue to be highly vulnerable.

65. As explained elsewhere in this review, most Iraqis can only find work in the informal sector, where they are at risk of exploitative and dangerous conditions of employment. The income and assistance they receive is barely adequate to pay the high costs of rent, utilities and other essentials. Some refugee children and young people claim that they are subject to discrimination by their classmates and teachers, and in any case are dropping out of school in order to work and supplement the family income. The Iraqi refugee 'community' remains a divided, fearful and traumatized one. Most of its members are unwilling to return to their homeland, but do not have any immediate or realistic prospect of an alternative solution. As a result, their lives are very much in limbo.

66. Third, the protection space that has been established in the region remains an uncertain one, based to large extent on understandings and practices that are yet to be institutionalized in law or in formal policy commitments. In the words of one commentator, the protection system for Iraqi refugees in the Middle East remains a

“non-codified and non-binding regime of ‘toleration’ which contributes to a sense of helplessness and uncertainty.”<sup>8</sup>

67. There is a consequent risk that the gains that have been made might be reversed, especially if funding for the refugee operation diminishes, if a deterioration of the situation inside Iraq leads to new influxes, or if serious security incidents involving Iraqis were to take place in any of the three countries of asylum. The unpredictable impact of the global financial and economic crisis on those countries, not to mention the political and military volatility of the Middle East, reinforce the aura of fragility that surrounds the region’s protection space.

### **Consolidating protection space**

68. At the global level, UNHCR has a statutory responsibility to “promote international protection” for refugees. But what does that responsibility mean in the specific context of the Iraqi refugee situation? And what can UNHCR do to consolidate the protection gains that have been made in recent times?

69. There is an evident need to go beyond the set of understandings and practices that currently support the protection space that is to be found in the region. In the words of a senior UNHCR staff member, “we were right when we decided against any attempt to impose the full refugee regime on the Iraqi refugee situation, but we have gone as far as possible with the ‘tolerance’ regime.”

70. How should the organization respond to this situation? On one hand, UNHCR could now adopt a more formal and principled approach, encouraging the states concerned to sign the 1951 UN Refugee Convention and other relevant instruments, and urging them to respect international norms and standards. But there is no guarantee that such a strategy would be successful, and a risk that it would undermine the goodwill and cooperative relationships that UNHCR has been able to establish with the countries of asylum over the past few years.

71. An alternative approach to the consolidation of protection space would be to accept the limitations of the Middle East situation and to pursue an essentially pragmatic path, in the hope that the positive understandings and practices that have emerged in recent years will become further entrenched and eventually institutionalized. But this would entail the effective endorsement of loose and regionally-specific arrangements (‘regime’ would be too strong a word) which are out of line with the international standards that UNHCR strives to uphold.

72. In this context, a three-pronged UNHCR strategy is required to consolidate and hopefully further expand the protection space that has been established in Jordan, Lebanon and Syria.

73. First, UNHCR should encourage, enable and support those countries in bridging the protection gaps that exist within the region. In doing so, the organization should continue to employ those means that have met with considerable success since the operation was launched in 2006-7: high-level engagement, quiet diplomacy, training and capacity-building with both government and non-governmental bodies, coupled

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<sup>8</sup> Confidential NGO report made available to UNHCR.

with an active programme of outreach and advocacy in relation to the public, civil society and refugees themselves.

74. While there are 'big ticket' protection and solutions issues on which it will be extremely difficult for UNHCR to gain any traction (such as a formal commitment to local integration on the part of the authorities) an incremental expansion of the protection space remains a realistic objective.

75. Second, UNHCR should interpret the notion of protection space in the broad sense employed by this review, taking full account of its economic, social and psychological dimensions. Thus in addition to 'classical' protection concerns such as admission, registration, detention and deportation, UNHCR and its partners should strengthen their efforts to make inroads on a broader range of issues, such as exploitative employment, child labour, survival sex and domestic violence.

76. Particular efforts should be made to rethink the notions of 'vulnerability' in the Middle East and urban context, where young single men, for example, may be particularly susceptible to protection and welfare risks such as detention and irregular onward movement. As explained in Chapter Five of this report, UNHCR's community services personnel, described by one senior staff member in the region as "the multi-functional Swiss army knife of the organization," have a particularly important role to play in this respect.

77. Third, if UNHCR is to be effective in its efforts to achieve this objective, then it must continue to pursue the task set out in the first sentence of its Mission Statement: "UNHCR is mandated by the United Nations *to lead and coordinate* international action for the worldwide protection of refugees and the resolution of refugee problems."

78. Recent experience in relation to the Iraqi refugee operation has demonstrated that refugee issues are global issues, and that international solidarity, manifested in the form of resettlement places, bilateral support to host governments and the mobilization of humanitarian resources can help to carve out a larger protection space than initially seemed attainable.





## 4. Reception and registration

### Challenges and achievements

79. In February 2007, UNHCR announced that all Iraqis outside of their own country would be considered as refugees on a *prima facie* basis. This development, coupled with the growing prospect that a significant number of Iraqis would be accepted for resettlement, had a marked impact on the design of the organization's operation. In the absence of national asylum laws or procedures in Jordan, Lebanon and Syria, and without formal reception facilities run by the authorities or NGOs, UNHCR was obliged to play a central role in the tasks of reception, registration and documentation.

80. At that time, moreover, the UNHCR offices in Amman, Beirut and Damascus were understaffed, unprepared and ill-equipped to receive and register massive numbers of refugees. An emergency situation ensued, with hundreds of the new arrivals congregating outside those offices each day, desperate for any help that UNHCR could provide.

81. By February 2009, just two years later, UNHCR had registered over 320,000 Iraqis and referred close to 70,000 for resettlement.<sup>9</sup> In Syria, the waiting period for non-urgent new registration interviews has been reduced to seven to ten days, with up to 10 per cent of new applicants receiving 'fast-track' appointments which minimize their waiting time. In Jordan, the waiting period is now two to three days, while in Lebanon it is less than a week. Considering the large number of refugees involved, these are major achievements.<sup>10</sup>

82. When UNHCR launched its operation in early 2007, it was confronted with a wide range of reception and registration challenges: providing refugees with physical access to the organization's premises; finding sufficient space to receive and register all of the new arrivals; recruiting a large number of registration and resettlement staff and providing them with appropriate training; making sure that effective Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) were formulated and implemented; and addressing the security concerns of refugees, the local population and UNHCR staff.

83. In the view of many stakeholders interviewed in the course of this review, those challenges have on the whole been overcome as a result of organizational competence and cooperation. Working closely together, the Iraq Support Unit, the Division of International Protection Services (DIPS) and the Division of Operational Services (DOS) at Headquarters have liaised effectively with the Branch Offices in Amman, Beirut and Damascus, enabling rapid adjustments and corrective measures to be made with respect to the issues of reception and registration.

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<sup>9</sup> This figure also includes Iraqis in Egypt and Turkey.

<sup>10</sup> The number of interventions required of UNHCR has actually been much greater, given the large number of registration renewals that have been undertaken.

## **Reception arrangements**

84. A key feature of the UNHCR operation in all three countries has been the significant amount of attention given to the task of establishing efficient, effective and dignified reception arrangements. The positive outcome of these efforts represents a considerable achievement in view of the sheer numbers involved.

85. In Amman and Beirut, separate reception and registration areas have been established adjacent to UNHCR's offices, while in Damascus, a dedicated registration centre has been established in the suburb of Douma, just under 20 kilometres from the Branch Office. While the Douma centre is the most impressive of these facilities, owing to its sheer size and technological sophistication, numerous examples of effective practice can be found at all of UNHCR's facilities. These include:

- efficient appointments and renewal systems that avoid long waiting periods and overcrowding;
- the permanent presence of Community Services and Protection staff, working in a multifunctional team approach;
- the capacity to distribute emergency assistance on-site, if needed.
- fast-track systems for vulnerable refugees, minimizing their waiting times and the inconvenience they experience;
- child-friendly spaces, equipped with toys, games and drawing materials;
- individual booths for interviews, equipped with closed-circuit TV and 'panic buttons' to protect staff security;
- generally helpful, efficient and clearly identifiable security personnel;
- information videos, anti-fraud posters and information leaflets in Arabic, conveying guidance about the registration process, hotlines and other matters;
- clean and spacious amenities, including separate areas for men and women, water fountains and lavatories.

86. An important question to be asked is whether such exemplary arrangements could be established in other urban settings. While UNHCR should aspire to replicate such facilities elsewhere, it is unlikely that this would be possible without similarly large investments in staff and infrastructure.

## **Registration**

87. According to one UNHCR staff member interviewed in the course of this review, "unless you get registration right, you get everything else wrong." As this statement suggests, registration provides the important moment at which a refugee first comes into formal and substantive contact with UNHCR and is given the opportunity to explain his or her situation and needs. What happens during the registration process can have major implications for a refugee's future life.

88. In the Iraqi refugee context, registration has assumed a particular importance because of the way it has been linked to resettlement and protection. Using a system referred to as 'enhanced registration', UNHCR has adopted an approach that goes well beyond the traditional collection of basic biodata and which encompasses issues such as resettlement needs, vulnerabilities, circumstances requiring urgent protection interventions and referrals for counselling and services. At the same time, by virtue of the introduction of 'exclusion triggers', the registration process identifies those individuals who might not qualify for refugee status as a result of acts they might have committed in the past.

89. One of the more innovative aspects of the Syria operation has been the use of mobile registration, providing UNHCR with the ability to register those refugees residing in governorates outside Damascus and even enabling at-home registration in certain circumstances. As a result of the mobile registration initiative, UNHCR learned that large numbers of refugees were residing in the northern city of Aleppo, a discovery that led to the establishment of a UNHCR office in that location. Mobile registration has certainly proved its worth as a form of outreach and should be replicated where possible in other urban settings.

90. Another lesson to be learned from the Iraqi refugee operation is the importance of providing timely and ongoing guidance to registration clerks, many of whom are relatively junior and who are engaged on UN Volunteer contracts. In the enhanced registration model, they are called upon to make important judgment calls with potentially significant consequences for the refugees they are registering. As the 'gatekeepers' of the protection function, registration personnel require and merit appropriate levels of support and guidance.

### **Registered and non-registered Iraqi refugees**

91. One question that has emerged from the Iraqi refugee operation is whether registration should be a precondition for the receipt of assistance. In Lebanon and Syria, receiving food and other benefits is contingent upon registration with UNHCR. The UNHCR office in Amman, however, extends certain types of assistance to Iraqis whether or not they have registered. According to staff members there, an Iraqi who does not register with UNHCR remains a *prima facie* refugee. Consequently, they should not be obliged to register if they do not wish to do so, and should not be penalized for taking this decision.

92. Other UNHCR staff members, both in the region and at Headquarters, take a different view. They point out that in urban settings it is difficult enough to collect and verify information about persons of concern to UNHCR. Without registering refugees and obtaining detailed information about their location, personal history and needs, UNHCR is unable to detect the specific risk factors and protection concerns associated with them.

93. According to this perspective, the already challenging task of establishing accurate refugee numbers is compounded if those Iraqis who are in need of protection, assistance or durable solutions are not registered. Those who do have such needs should preferably be recorded and registered by UNHCR.

94. There is, however, a difficulty associated with this approach in the case of Jordan – a difficulty derived from a longstanding Memorandum of Understanding between the country and UNHCR, which stipulates that all recognized refugees in Jordan should be resettled. According to one analyst, “as long as registration is perceived to lead automatically to resettlement... then all those Iraqis who do not want to pursue that aim prefer to refrain from registering. They are afraid to be forced to resettle, to be pushed to resettle in a country that is not of their choice, or to lose other entitlements if they refuse to resettle.”<sup>11</sup> In this respect, the decision to request and receive assistance while remaining unregistered is an understandable one.

### **Registration and exclusion**

95. UNHCR has had some painful experiences in relation to people who are excludable from refugee status on the basis of their previous acts and affiliations. In the mid-1990s, for example, the organization unwittingly found itself providing protection and assistance to *génocidaires* who were implicated in the Rwandan massacres and who had effectively assumed control of large refugee populations who had fled to Tanzania and Zaire. In the context of the Middle East, there was a similar risk that Iraqis who had blood on their hands by virtue of their previous association with the army, security services, Ba’ath Party or a militia group might wrongly be identified as persons of legitimate concern to UNHCR.

96. With regard to this issue, the innovation introduced in the Iraqi refugee operation was to address the matter of exclusion at the front end of the operation, and to do so in a manner that was both efficient and fair. With these objectives in mind, UNHCR introduced a ‘regional exclusion strategy’ intended (a) to identify potential exclusion cases as early as possible, i.e. at the registration stage; (b) to stream them into appropriate processing channels; and (c) to ensure that cases which raised exclusion concerns were processed by appropriately trained staff.

97. Under this arrangement, cases raising strong exclusion concerns have been issued with asylum seeker certificates and scheduled for individual refugee status determination by protection staff. Cases raising lesser concerns have been issued with refugee certificates and interviewed only if there was a need for a protection intervention (e.g. resettlement, release from detention or protection from deportation to Iraq). This approach has been implemented somewhat differently in the three countries so as to take account of the local protection context.

98. To aid registration staff in identifying relevant cases, DIPS and MENA compiled exclusion profiles based on available country of origin information. These profiles have been revised over time, building on new information received as well as the lessons learned from UNHCR’s experience in addressing the Iraqi exclusion issue.

99. While the percentage of individuals requiring exclusion interviews has remained quite low (between two and three per cent of all Iraqis registered) the sheer size of the influx has placed UNHCR’s capacity under serious pressure. In response to this situation, and to ensure that staff members dealing with exclusion are adequately trained, small and specialized ‘exclusion units’ have been established in the UNHCR offices in Amman and Damascus.

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<sup>11</sup> Private correspondence with PDES.

100. Staff security has been a matter of particular concern in relation to exclusion, as UNHCR personnel who deal with this matter are understandably concerned about the risks associated with their work. While concerted efforts have been made to minimize and manage those risks, eliminating them entirely in the Iraqi context will be a demanding if not impossible task.

101. Despite such difficulties, many positive impressions were gained with regard to the registration system and regional exclusion strategy established in the region. One is the sheer scale of the operation, the quality of the staff deployed in it and the sophistication of the systems that have been put into place to address these issues. Another is that the approach adopted by UNHCR has helped to preserve the integrity of the resettlement process, contributed to higher approval rates and thereby contributed to the search for durable solutions.

102. At the same time, some important lessons have been learned from this experience. The first is that the profile and characteristics of the Iraqi refugee population residing in Jordan, Lebanon and Syria are not identical, and that a country-specific approach is required within the broader parameters of a regional exclusion strategy. A second is that exclusion is such a complex issue that the use of registration as an initial filter to identify cases of concern needs to be supplemented by more substantive reviews, so as to ensure that those cases are processed in a fair and effective manner. The third is the need for very close communication and cooperation between registration, protection, resettlement and exclusion staff, given the closely inter-related nature of these functions.

### **Data analysis and management**

103. SOPs for registration are in place throughout the Iraqi refugee operation and UNHCR's ProGres registration system is in effective use by all offices. Active efforts are also being made to capture updated information at the registration or renewal stage.

104. In Jordan, UNHCR has formed an inter-unit Data Analysis Group to examine information derived from internal and external sources, to analyze trends in relation to protection, assistance and solutions, and to gain a better understanding of the refugee population, especially its more vulnerable members.

105. Furthermore, in addition to ProGres, the UNHCR office in Amman has developed its own Beneficiary Information System (BIS) to monitor the assistance and services provided to Iraqis (including those who have not registered with UNHCR) and members of the local population. According to the Branch Office:

The large number of beneficiaries in an urban setting, where refugees and asylum seekers live among residents across all sections of cities and towns, along with the multiple assistance projects implemented through a number of partners, poses a challenge for the monitoring and tracking of assistance. The magnitude of the UNHCR operation in Jordan and the challenge it posed for coordination, as well as the potential for duplication and possible fraud, has necessitated a new mode of recording assistance... The BIS contributes to transparency and

accountability through the creation of a situation where all implementing partners subscribe to the maintenance of proper records and sharing of data.

106. Initiated in September 2007, the system provides information on general assistance trends and is also able to generate reports. Although as the Branch Office acknowledges, “the reports thus generated are only as good as the quality of the data entered by implementing partners.”

107. In practice this has indeed been a problematic issue, due in part to high rates of staff turnover and a lack of resources in partner organizations, but also because of “repeated instances whereby implementing partner focal persons failed to share their export files regularly to the central BIS focal person at UNHCR.” Later in 2009, the BIS will be upgraded and renamed the Refugee Assistance Information System, an online application that is expected to overcome some of the limitations of BIS.

## 5. Community outreach and communications

### **Dispersal and vulnerability**

108. Many of the UNHCR staff members interviewed in the course of this review drew attention to the challenge of making contact with refugees, determining their needs, understanding their intentions and identifying the most vulnerable amongst them in an urban context. In camps, they explained, UNHCR and its partners have a 'captive audience', concentrated in confined spaces which have been designed to facilitate the provision of protection and assistance.

109. By way of contrast, the Iraqi refugees living in Jordan, Lebanon and Syria are scattered amongst a much larger urban population and across a much bigger geographical area. Some are immobile due to ill-health or family commitments, while others live a long distance and an expensive journey away from UNHCR's offices.

110. And those distances are getting longer. As their time in exile becomes more protracted and their financial assets diminish, some Iraqi refugees are moving to out-of-town neighbourhoods in order to find cheaper accommodation, their primary item of expenditure. In these circumstances, there is a danger that a 'survival of the fittest' scenario might arise, whereby the refugees who have most contact with UNHCR are not the most vulnerable, but are the most articulate, entrepreneurial and physically able members of the Iraqi population.

111. While it would be misleading to suggest that the Iraqis are uniquely vulnerable in comparison with other refugee populations, the circumstances which have prompted them to leave their homeland, as well as the situation confronting them in their countries of asylum, have clearly placed many in difficult circumstances.

112. Many of the Iraqi refugees have experienced or witnessed egregious acts of violence and consequently suffer from physical disabilities and trauma. As a result of their flight from Iraq, they have suffered a drastic decline in their socio-economic status, with serious implications for their sense of self-worth and mental health. Some are now being targeted for attack in their countries of asylum, but are reluctant to report this to the police as they fear deportation.

113. A relatively large proportion are elderly or have complex medical problems. Because they are not officially allowed to work, men have been stripped of their role as family provider and felt that their masculinity has been undermined. This has contributed to a situation in which refugee women and girls are at risk of domestic violence, sexual exploitation and early marriage. At the same time, growing numbers of young people are dropping out of school in Syria in order to work in the informal labour market and thereby supplement their family's income. In such circumstances, UNHCR's community outreach and communications activities are increasingly central to the delivery of its mandate for refugee protection and solutions.

## Lessons learned

114. Four important and interlinked lessons can be learned from UNHCR's efforts to operate effectively in the complex operational environment described above.

115. First, the organization cannot wait passively for refugees to approach its offices in urban areas, but must reach out to them in a proactive manner so as to ensure that the needs of refugees are identified, understood and met. And in this respect, the function traditionally described by UNHCR as 'Community Services' has a particularly important role to play. As an evaluation of that function has noted:

Community Services has a mandate that is key to the overall effectiveness of UNHCR by carrying out analysis, monitoring and coordination to ensure that refugees, regardless of age, gender, race, ethnicity, nationality or level of physical disability, are not falling through the cracks of protection and assistance activities undertaken by the Office... Professional community services staff with social science backgrounds and training in social and participatory research techniques are best placed to facilitate situation analysis on behalf of the Office.<sup>12</sup>

116. Regrettably, the Community Services function has not enjoyed particularly high levels of esteem, visibility or funding in the recent history of UNHCR. If, as the High Commissioner has predicted, a growing proportion of the organization's beneficiaries will in future be found in cities and towns, then this function will have to be reinforced and reoriented to address the specific challenges associated with urban areas. In this respect, a useful start has been made by the 2008 publication, 'A Community-Based Approach to UNHCR Operations', which includes a valuable but less than exhaustive list of 'tips on working in urban situations'.

117. Second, some confusion has arisen from the different terminology employed by UNHCR to describe this function. While the field continues to refer to 'Community Services', the entity responsible for this function at Headquarters is titled 'Community Development, Gender Equality and Children's Section'.

118. Opinions differ as to the relative value of these two concepts. As noted by members of the UNHCR team in Beirut, a service is something that one person or group of people provides to another, whereas UNHCR's role should be to motivate, mobilize and empower refugees in their efforts to develop supportive and sustainable structures within their own community. By way of contrast, the UNHCR office in Amman points out that objective of Community Services is to promote the social, economic and cultural rights of refugees, and that community development is only one means of attaining that objectives. Other tools, such as the participatory approach and the service delivery approach, are also available and equally valid.

119. Irrespective of concepts and titles, and notwithstanding the particular challenges of implementing this approach in the Iraqi refugee context,<sup>13</sup> UNHCR's future work in urban areas must be based on a strengthened understanding of and commitment to

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<sup>12</sup> 'The Community Services function in UNHCR: an independent evaluation', CASA Consulting, March 2003.

<sup>13</sup> These include the dispersed and heterogeneous nature of the refugee population, weak social trust, constraints on freedom of association and the lack of a secure legal status.



community development. The current review fully supports a recommendation made by one UNHCR staff member in the Middle East, who writes:

Community development has a potential as a useful, efficient and sustainable tool for helping to realize refugee rights. The tool has been neglected in many UNHCR operations... Currently the organization does not have tools to measure whether we are actually achieving community development, especially in terms of sustainability... For these reasons, it is logical to strengthen UNHCR's training and measurement tools for community development.

120. Strong support for these arguments can be found in efforts made in Syria to mobilize the refugee community through the establishment of specialized 'support groups'. Comprised of appropriately qualified refugee volunteers and covering issues such as 'health', 'mental health', 'survivors of violence' and 'unaccompanied and separated children', these groups provide a means for exiled Iraqis to make effective use of their skills and to advise their compatriots on the services that are available to them.

121. This is not to suggest that UNHCR's aim should be to encourage the development of homogeneous refugee communities that are isolated from other sections of the urban population. Indeed, such an approach might even diminish the protection space available to refugees. In cities and towns, a primary objective must be to promote mutual respect, tolerance and harmonious neighbourly relations.

122. A third lesson to be drawn from UNHCR's recent experience in the Middle East is that the community services/development function cannot function effectively alone, but must be closely integrated with the organization's protection and programme activities. In the words of one staff member, "community services play a major role in the identification of protection problems, and also have an important role to play in formulation of appropriate programmatic responses to those problems." According to another:

If community development is a useful tool for the promotion of social, economic and cultural rights, it also has applications for promoting the rights that usually fall under the protection function in UNHCR. Neighbourhood associations can promote physical security. Youth groups can develop relations with the local police to prevent detention. Refugee paralegals can provide advice on how to resolve numerous basic legal issues.

123. In Jordan, UNHCR has sought to attain this kind of integration through the establishment of 'multifunctional teams', comprised of staff members from different units within the Branch Office, with the stated purpose of "avoiding compartmentalization" and ensuring that "all projects belong to all units." A primary responsibility of these teams, which involve more than 50 staff members in total, is to monitor and assess the impact of implementing partner activities, to ensure that those partners have established beneficiary complaints mechanisms, that they engage refugees in decision-making, and that they work in accordance with the principle of Age, Gender and Diversity Mainstreaming (AGDM).

124. In the words of one staff member, “being a team member forces you to get out of the office, to go beyond the financial monitoring of partners and to help us understand what is really going on in the refugee community.” This approach has thus helped to address two concerns raised by a June 2008 UNHCR inspection mission, which observed that “monitoring visits are conducted by staff in the field on an infrequent basis,” and which called for “increased dialogue between the various functional units such as programme and community services.” Another issue raised by the inspection mission, namely UNHCR’s inability to undertake systematic monitoring of projects implemented by the authorities, remains unresolved.

125. Fourth and finally, the UNHCR programme in Jordan, Lebanon and Syria, has demonstrated that there is considerable scope for the introduction of innovative community outreach and communication methods, a number of which are examined below.

### **Outreach Volunteers**

126. In Damascus, UNHCR has appointed around 75 female Outreach Volunteers (who are trained and paid a small stipend) originating from all segments of the refugee population and residing in all parts of the city and suburbs where refugees are to be found.<sup>14</sup> Their functions include:

- identifying and visiting particularly vulnerable refugees and referring them to UNHCR if necessary;
- providing refugees with counselling and practical forms of assistance;
- facilitating refugee access to services and passing on relevant information with respect to UNHCR’s assistance programme;
- identifying community resources and mobilizing refugees to play an active role in support of their compatriots;
- sharing information so as to gain a better understanding of the refugee population, including their location, movements and living conditions;
- supporting UNHCR’s public information and external relations activities by making presentations to donor states and the media.

127. During a focus group meeting, a representative sample of Outreach Volunteers were asked if this initiative could be improved in any way. As well as requesting additional training in psychosocial issues, which they did not feel well equipped to deal with, they pointed out that the volunteer programme could have usefully been established prior to mid-2007, when the Iraqi influx was at its height and UNHCR was registering up to 3,000 people a day. This lesson should evidently be taken into account in the contingency planning, emergency response and programming procedures employed in other countries where large urban refugee populations exist or are anticipated.

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<sup>14</sup> A similar system has been established in Jordan, working through UNHCR’s implementing partners..

128. Outreach Volunteers do not represent a panacea to the challenge of making meaningful contact with refugees in urban settings. In Syria, their work has not been easy to monitor and there has been significant turnover as a result of resettlement departures. The decision to engage only females (partly for cultural reasons, partly because women are confronted with fewer security risks when moving around, and partly because many of the most vulnerable refugees are female) is arguably not consistent with the principle of AGDM.

129. Despite these considerations, the Outreach Volunteer initiative has proven to be an invaluable means of reaching out to the refugee population and reducing the pressures placed on UNHCR staff in a context where there are a limited number of NGOs. At the same time, it has empowered the volunteers (some of whom were previously women-at-risk themselves) providing them with a sense of purpose, an income and improved self-esteem.

### **Community centres**

130. As well as gaining access to individual refugees and refugee families in their homes, UNHCR has sought to promote the establishment of community centres where Iraqis, other refugees and members of the local population can come together, access services, information and counselling, participate in recreational activities and enjoy each other's company. Four of these centres were visited in the course of this review, in Amman, Beirut and Damascus.

131. In Beirut, the team spent an afternoon at a community centre in the southern suburbs, opened in July 2007 with UNHCR funding and run by the community-based organization Amal. With five full-time staff, around 1,000 registered members, most of them from nearby neighbourhoods, the centre provides literacy, computer, music and other classes to both adults and children from 08.30 to 21.00 each day. The veracity of the centre's motto, "our door is open to everyone", was demonstrated by the fact that a Sierra Leonean refugee woman and two Sudanese refugee men were amongst those studying and socializing at the facility.

132. Such centres are impressive in a number of respects. They offer a physical 'protection space' in which refugees can get a little respite from their daily chores and concerns. They promote community cohesion and restore some of the self-confidence that many Iraqis have lost as a result of their displacement. At the same time, they provide refugees with skills that will be of practical use to them, whether they remain in exile, return to their homeland or are resettled in a third country.

133. And yet a number of related questions can be posed with respect to the community centres. First, do they represent good value for money in terms of community outreach, or do they attract a relatively small number of clients who make regular and repeated use of such facilities? A more detailed analysis of how exactly these centres are used by different groups within the refugee population would help to answer this question.<sup>15</sup>

134. Second, what constraints do refugees experience in terms of accessing such centres? It is known, for example, that some Iraqi men prevent their wives and

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<sup>15</sup> The Danish Refugee Council has undertaken some analysis of this type in Syria, but it is not gender-disaggregated.

daughters from attending the centres, while many refugees are not mobile enough to leave their home or immediate neighbourhood, either as a result of ill-health or because of family commitments. Others are unable to afford the expense of travelling to their nearest centre. For refugees who are struggling to earn a living by working every available hour in the informal labour market, attendance at a community centre also has significant opportunity costs. In these respects, it may be the case that the most vulnerable refugees have the least opportunity of visiting the centres.

135. Third, are these centres sustainable? Renting a property, paying the wages of full-time staff and providing such centres with the necessary equipment and materials entail significant costs - costs that might prove difficult to cover as funding for the Iraqi refugee programme diminishes and spending has to be more tightly focused on essential needs. While this does not constitute a coherent argument against the establishment of such centres, it does underline the importance of managing them in the most efficient manner possible.

136. At the same time, refugee-oriented community centres may have the unintended consequence of limiting the interaction that takes place between the exiled community and their local hosts. In situations where such facilities are to be found, existing community centres might usefully be expanded and adapted to meet the needs of both refugees and other members of the population.

### **Community communications**

137. UNHCR has for many years undertaken what it describes as 'mass information' activities, which are intended to provide refugees and other persons of concern with information on issues such as conditions in their country of origin, the assistance and services available to them, the dangers of irregular movement and their prospects for resettlement. Such activities have proved their value in previous operations, although the team that undertook this review believes that 'community communications' would be a more appropriate concept than 'mass information', given the authoritarian overtones of the latter notion.

138. In Jordan, Lebanon and Syria, the community communications function has been pursued in a very active and innovative manner, a situation facilitated by the profile of the Iraqi population and the countries to which they have fled. The vast majority of the refugees, for example, possess mobile phones, making it possible for UNHCR to communicate by calling them or sending them SMS messages. In Syria, moreover, refugees have access to an interactive website which provides them with information about food distribution. In all of the facilities UNHCR has established in the region, flat-screen TVs are used to show a 'mass information' video that broadcasts information about refugee rights and entitlements and the procedures they must use to access them.

139. In Syria and Jordan, a dedicated UNHCR hotline has been established for refugees who have enquiries with regard to the organization's services, while booklets have been published in Arabic, providing Iraqis with comprehensive details of where UNHCR's offices are and what community centres, clinics and other facilities are available to them. In view of the fact that many Iraqis listen to music programmes on radio and TV, rather than news broadcasts, particular efforts have been made in Syria to associate UNHCR with well-known musicians and other artists,

so as to generate trust and confidence in the organization amongst the refugee population.

140. A final element of UNHCR's community communications strategy has been to establish 'complaints boxes' in prominent locations where refugees can lodge their concerns about their treatment, and at the same time to launch highly visible anti-fraud campaigns, informing refugees that all UNHCR services are free and that they should not offer or give a bribe to any of the organization's employees. Given the potential for such malpractices to occur in a programme characterized by the distribution of cash and large-scale resettlement, such initiatives are to be commended, and should be replicated in other UNHCR operations..

### **Sample surveys**

141. As well as informing refugees about the presence and activities of UNHCR, the organization has also taken active steps to learn more about the expectations, intentions and circumstances of the refugee population.

142. In Beirut, for example, UNHCR's Resettlement Service has engaged a consultant to examine the expectations of Iraqis, especially with respect to resettlement. The survey has revealed, for example, that most Iraqis, including even those who speak English, have reservations about going to the USA, and would prefer to be resettled in countries with more developed social welfare systems, such as Denmark, Germany or Sweden. It has also underlined the importance of matching refugees to resettlement countries where they have relatives and supportive communities.

143. The initial findings of the survey suggest that the cultural orientation classes provided to refugees who have been accepted for resettlement are more effective when they are given by a resettled refugee, even if that person is not an Iraqi. The survey has also revealed that many refugees would prefer to remain in the Middle East with a secure legal status and the ability to move between countries, rather than being resettled in another part of the world.

144. In Damascus, UNHCR commissioned the market research company IPSOS to undertake four sample surveys in 2007 and 2008, involving interviews with some 750 refugees each time, primarily at the Douma Registration Centre. As well as basic demographic data (age, gender, place of origin, current residence, household size, etc.) the surveys collected information on issues such as their reasons for leaving Iraq, their knowledge and expectations of UNHCR, their sources of income, access to basic services and future intentions. In Jordan, UNHCR has also collected and analyzed data on the intention to return to Iraq. The Field Unit interviewed around 1000 people in 2008 and 2009, both in and outside Amman.

145. According to UNHCR staff, these surveys have proved very useful, not only as a basis for programming and planning, but also as a means of keeping the Iraqi refugee situation in the public and media spotlight. They have also underlined the challenge that confronts UNHCR in seeking solutions for the refugees. According to the IPSOS and Amman Field Unit surveys, around 90 per cent of the refugees interviewed last year have no immediate intention of going back to live in Iraq.

## **Decentralization**

146. Responding to the fact that Iraqi refugees are scattered throughout the city and that some are further afield, UNHCR's Amman office has decentralized its operation. As well as devolving programme activities to implementing partners that are spread throughout the city, a Field Unit has been established to conduct regular visits in areas with the highest concentrations of Iraqis, both in Amman itself and in outlying locations.

147. The Field Unit, referred to as the "extended arm" of the Branch Office, identifies refugees with special needs, disseminates information and registration appointment slips and, as mentioned previously, has undertaken a survey of the Iraqis' attitudes concerning voluntary repatriation. As a result of this decentralization strategy, up to 20 centres were established in areas with high concentrations of Iraqis, bringing services and assistance to residential areas, rather than compelling the refugees to travel long distances to access such support.

148. Another example of decentralization is to be found in Syria, where, as a result of several mobile registration exercises, UNHCR learned that large numbers of Iraqis had taken up residence in the northern town of Aleppo, a long and expensive journey from Damascus which was beyond the means and physical capabilities of many refugees. Responding to this situation, a UNHCR office was opened in Aleppo at the end of 2008. That office is now reaching out to rural areas of the Hassake Governorate in north-east Syria, where some of the poorest refugees have chosen to settle in order to access relatively low-cost accommodation.

## **Conclusion**

149. Assessing the effectiveness and impact of UNHCR's community outreach and communications activities is not an easy task, as it is difficult to know if there are large numbers of refugees who are unaware of the organization and who are consequently deprived of the services it can offer. In both Jordan and Syria, it should be noted, the UNHCR offices are confident that few refugees remain unaware of the organization and the services it offers.

150. At the same time, it is clear that there are groups of Iraqis who have no need or desire to make contact with UNHCR: those who are particularly prosperous, those who wish to keep a low profile because of their personal and political history, and those (mainly young men) who would have relatively little to gain from an association with the organization in terms of assistance or resettlement. With respect to the rest of the Iraqi population, there is a broad consensus that UNHCR has been effective in the difficult task of reaching out to and communicating with them.

## 6. Assistance and services

### Policy debates

151. The provision of assistance to refugees in urban areas has given rise to some longstanding policy debates within UNHCR. According to the organization's 1997 urban refugee policy, for example, direct assistance interventions in urban areas tend to be excessively resource-intensive and can lead to long-term dependency amongst the refugees who benefit from them. The policy therefore discourages comprehensive and ongoing 'care and maintenance' programmes. When such assistance is provided, the policy suggests, it should ideally be given on a one-time basis and combined with efforts to promote refugee self-reliance.

152. A related debate within UNHCR concerns the relative benefits of providing urban refugees with financial assistance and other forms of support. Cash payments have been the subject of a particularly lively discussion, focused on questions such as the following:

- at what level should such payments be set, and how should they relate to the minimum wage (if one exists) received by nationals?
- what is the most effective, efficient and equitable manner of distributing cash to refugee households?
- how can the expenditure of cash payments be monitored and their impact assessed, so as to ensure that they are not spent in an inappropriate way?
- do cash payments discourage refugees from finding work and alternative income-generating opportunities?
- once cash payments have been introduced, is it possible to withdraw them without causing hardship to refugees, increasing their level of frustration and thereby creating greater security risks for UNHCR staff?

153. UNHCR's recent experience with Iraqi refugees in urban areas of Jordan, Lebanon and Syria provides an excellent opportunity to reflect upon some of these policy debates. With regard to the issue of one-time assistance interventions, for example, it is extremely difficult to see how such an approach might have been applied to this operation without jeopardizing refugee welfare.

154. The vast majority of Iraqi refugees do not have access to the formal labour market in the three countries concerned, although many are known to find informal or casual labour, especially in Lebanon. And yet they find themselves living in the capital cities of middle-income countries, where they are obliged to rent accommodation and meet the cost of other essential items, such as food, clothing and transport.

155. While there appears to be little empirical evidence on the matter, anecdotal evidence certainly suggests that many of the Iraqis who came with some savings have

seen a serious depletion of those resources since the time of their arrival. In such circumstances, it seems inevitable that a proportion of the population will require assistance on an ongoing rather than a one-time basis. As explained in the following section, it also seems advisable that at least part of such assistance be provided in monetary form.

### **Programme responses**

156. UNHCR's offices in Jordan, Lebanon and Syria have addressed the issue of assistance in different ways. In Amman, food assistance was phased out in 2008, because it was not considered to be a cost-effective or dignified way of supporting Iraqi refugees. UNHCR now provides cash to registered refugee families with specific needs and vulnerabilities. Both registered and unregistered Iraqis receive non-food and household items, sanitary materials, as well as school uniforms and stationary once a year.

157. In Syria, food, material assistance and cash are all part of the package available to Iraqi refugees. In collaboration with WFP and with the support of the Syrian Arab Red Crescent Society (SARC), UNHCR distributes food and non-food items to eligible members (currently 91 per cent) of the registered population. Cash assistance is aimed primarily at female-headed households, so as to prevent school drop-outs, child labour, homelessness, and sexual and gender based violence.

158. In Lebanon, where a higher proportion of the refugees are working, the UNHCR operation is more in line with the 1997 urban refugee policy, providing refugees with food, non-food items and some limited cash assistance on a one-time basis. Through its implementing partners, the Beirut office distributes food coupons to vulnerable families, as well as financial and other assistance, including the payment of rent to those refugees who are deemed to be at greatest risk on the basis of case-by-case assessments.

159. What conclusions can be drawn from this experience? First, while there are some well-known dangers in providing different types and levels of assistance to refugees in nearby countries (secondary movements being the principal one) experience in Jordan, Lebanon and Syria suggests that a 'one size fits all' approach is inadvisable. Assistance packages must be tailored to the specifics of each country and the profile of the refugee population concerned.

160. Second, there is no doubt that cash is popular amongst refugees, who consider it to be a particularly dignified and flexible form of assistance that empowers recipients by giving them the freedom to choose their own expenditure pattern. Providing cash is also preferable to providing food and non-food items which refugees are then obliged to sell for cash at less than market value.

161. Third, refugees expressed mixed opinions concerning the distribution of food. In Syria, for example, some refugees felt that they were stigmatized by the need to collect the rice, pasta, oil, tomato paste and other items provided to them by UNHCR. In the words of one outreach volunteer "a refugee really feels like a refugee on the day she has to collect her food assistance."



162. But other refugees interviewed in Syria, including some with a relatively high socio-economic status, expressed a significant degree of satisfaction with this form of assistance, even if they felt that some improvements could be made with regard to the composition, quality and quantity of the food basket. UNHCR staff in Syria also pointed out that the food distribution system provides an important means of keeping in regular touch with the refugees and thereby complements the organization's community outreach and communications activities.

163. Fourth, UNHCR's recent experience with the Iraqis demonstrates the potential for the introduction of innovative methods of assistance distribution, especially when those refugees are living in urban areas with a relatively sophisticated infrastructure.

164. UNHCR has for many years given regular cash payments to urban refugees who are unable to work or establish their own livelihoods. And in order to collect such payments, the refugees have had to make their way to a UNHCR or implementing partner office and wait in line, often for long periods of time and in hot and uncomfortable conditions, until it was their turn to collect the cash.

165. This traditional distribution system had numerous other disadvantages. It obliged refugees to spend time and money in the quest to collect their assistance. It led to frustration and humiliation on the part of refugees, often manifested in the form of security incidents. It required some complicated and costly logistical arrangements. And it often prompted beneficiaries to sell some of their assistance at below market value, so that they could have access to cash.

166. In Jordan and Syria, UNHCR has avoided these longstanding pitfalls by establishing an agreement with two commercial banks which enables eligible refugees to withdraw their cash from ATM machines at the time and place of their choosing. SOPs have been established with the two banks to prevent fraud and abuse of the system and to deal with problems such as the loss of cards, while UNHCR is able to monitor transactions by means of read-only web access to the databases maintained by the banks.

167. All of the evidence collected in the course of this review suggests that the ATM scheme has proven to be remarkably effective, reliable, efficient (overhead costs are just two per cent of total expenditure on the programme) and, most significantly, popular with the refugees. It is therefore recommended that the SOPs and other relevant documents concerning the functioning of the system be collected, compiled and made available to other UNHCR offices dealing with large urban refugee populations, a task which could be undertaken by DOS.

168. At the same time, a number of other good practice examples can be drawn from the Iraqi refugee assistance programme, all of them designed to make life more convenient and less costly for UNHCR's beneficiaries. For example:

- in Amman, non-food items are provided to refugees by means of 16 implementing partner outlets in different parts of the city;
- in Jordan and Syria, UNHCR provides refugees with updated information about the distribution of assistance by means of mass SMS messages, while in Damascus, the same information is posted on an Arabic-language website;

- a telephone hotline has been established in both Jordan and Syria to answer any queries that refugees may have concerning the assistance programme;
- in Damascus, a fleet of mini-trucks has been established by SARC to transport refugees and their bulk rations from the main distribution centre at Douma to different neighbourhoods in the city.

### **Health services**

169. While UNHCR's 1997 urban refugee policy was controversial in some respects, few would disagree with its provision that "services for those who are not yet self-reliant should be provided through support, where necessary, to national health and education services, not by the creation of parallel structures and special services for refugees."

170. In reality, however, refugees who are living in urban areas often encounter difficulties when trying to make use of national health and education systems that are already underfunded and overstretched. In Jordan, Lebanon and Syria, UNHCR's important contribution has been to relieve some of that pressure by providing financial and infrastructural support to existing services, a contribution that has undoubtedly helped to expand the region's protection space.

171. The Iraqi context is somewhat unusual, in the sense that Iraqis have for many years had access to the healthcare systems of other countries in the region, in some cases free of charge and in others upon payment of a modest fee. Even so, the influx of the past few years has presented some specific challenges for UNHCR.

172. First, the demographic and socio-economic profile of the Iraqi refugee population is such that many suffer from diseases that are not a priority issue for UNHCR in other and less prosperous parts of the world: hypertension, diabetes and cancer, for example. The healthcare expectations of the Iraqis are also relatively high. As a result of these considerations, the services provided to Iraqi refugees have been relatively generous when compared to other urban refugee situations, and include tertiary health care (i.e. serious operations) as well as optical and dental treatment.

173. Second, a significant proportion of Iraqi refugees suffer from psychological and emotional problems owing to the trauma they have experienced prior to and during flight, as well as the difficulties they encounter in their asylum countries. Mental health services are therefore an important component of the assistance programme, although the location of such services (whether they belong to the health or community services sector) remains the subject of some debate.

174. Third, UNHCR has endeavoured to ensure the establishment of mechanisms to prevent and detect instances of SGBV, and to ensure that SGBV survivors receive the necessary legal, social, psychological and clinical support. This has proven to be a particular challenge in a context where matters relating to sexuality are considered to be taboo, and where national capacities to address this issue are often limited. Jordan is something of an exception to this rule, as UNHCR has been able to forge a partnership with the Family Protection Department (a civilian police structure), which has helped to establish a family justice centre where SGBV victims can receive the services they need in a 'one stop shop'.

175. Given the complexity of these issues, UNHCR has appointed dedicated medical coordinators in Jordan and Syria, and has established health SOPs in all three countries of asylum. Health committees have also been established to assess and approve referrals for the more costly and specialized medical interventions. According to many interlocutors, these initiatives have enabled significant progress to be made in the provision of health care to Iraqi refugees, an outcome confirmed by the number of Iraqis who are now travelling to Jordan, Lebanon and Syria with this specific purpose in mind.<sup>16</sup>

176. UNHCR's recent experience in providing health services to Iraqi refugees in urban areas of the Middle East confirms again the need for a flexible approach, tailored to the national and municipal systems that are already in place. In Syria, for example, Iraqi refugees are able to access primary and secondary health care through the clinics of SARC. UNHCR has been supporting 10 of these facilities, seven of which are located in areas of high Iraqi refugee concentration in Damascus. Tertiary health care services are available by means of a referral by UNHCR implementing partners to designated public hospitals in Damascus and other governorates.

177. In Jordan, Iraqi refugees are able to access public primary healthcare for the same minimal fee paid by uninsured Jordanian nationals, while particularly vulnerable cases can get fully subsidized medical care through NGO clinics that are funded by UNHCR and a range of other donors. Mobile clinics have also been established to reach Iraqis who are unable to access a health facility by their own means. UNHCR's cooperation with the Noor Al Hussein Foundation's Institute for Family Health also merits a mention, as it is the only agency providing comprehensive reproductive health services for Iraqi refugees.

178. Lebanon, by way of contrast to Syria (and to a lesser extent Jordan), has a largely privatized medical system. While Iraqis are provided access to public primary health care facilities, the high cost of secondary and tertiary services provided by the private sector, coupled with limited incomes of the refugees and the generally high cost of living in Beirut, have made it difficult for many Iraqis to fully meet their healthcare needs.

179. Irrespective of the implementing arrangements established, recent experience in Jordan, Lebanon and Syria has underlined the difficulty of monitoring the health status of a large and scattered urban refugee population, especially when some of its members are immobile or have not, for one reason or another, made contact with UNHCR and its partners. This difficulty is compounded when services are provided through government and a range of other service-providers. In this respect, it is a positive development that in Syria, UNHCR and SARC plan to establish a comprehensive Health Information System.

180. A final point in relation to health services concerns the need for UNHCR to examine the option of providing such services through health insurance schemes in those cities where this is a normal practice for members of the local population. Like ATM cards, such an approach has relatively low overhead costs and enable refugees to access services in a dignified manner.

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<sup>16</sup> This is not, however, a new trend or one that has been prompted by UNHCR. The difference today is that Iraqis who move to access medical care are now seeking services from UNHCR and its partners as an alternative to accessing traditional public or private sector providers.

## **Education**

181. Due to the large number of Iraqi children who have moved with their families to Jordan, Syria and to a lesser extent Lebanon, UNHCR's education unit has made these countries a priority in its global plan for 2007-2009. As in the health sector, UNHCR has encountered an amenable environment, in the sense that Iraqi access to the educational services of Jordan and Syria pre-dates the establishment of the organization's regional refugee operation. UNHCR has, however, played an important role in supporting the efforts of host states by means of an extensive programme of school rehabilitation and reconstruction, through the provision of school equipment and materials, and by covering the cost of school uniforms.

182. Unlike the health sector, where dedicated health coordinator posts were created by UNHCR, the reinforcement of the education sector has been made possible as a result of six-month deployments organized through standby agreements with the International Rescue Committee Norwegian Refugee Council. There is a broad consensus in the field that such deployments are too short, and it is difficult to understand why dedicated education officer posts could not have been created.

183. As in the health sector, the challenges and opportunities encountered in meeting the educational needs of Iraqi refugees have differed from country to country. By means of UNHCR support to the Ministry of Education, the ability of the Syrian educational system to accept Iraqi pupils and students has significantly increased. Yet enrolment and attendance rates have been limited by the need for young people to earn an income and by the difficulties they have encountered in following the Syrian curriculum after being out of school for some time.

184. In Lebanon, the Ministry of Education issued a circular in late 2008 calling on all private and public schools to facilitate the registration of refugee children. UNHCR and its partners have supported this initiative by providing refugees with education grants, school kits and winter clothing coupons. Over 80 per cent of children between four and 17 years of age are registered in both the primary and lower secondary levels. UNHCR also supports non-formal education, including remedial classes and vocational training through NGO partners. As in Syria, however, drop-out rates are high, the result of economic considerations, as well as differences in the curricula of Iraqi and Lebanese schools and the requirement to learn a language other than Arabic.

185. Looking to the future, there is considerable cause for concern in relation to the education of Iraqi children. Many of the refugee parents, both fathers and mothers, have completed secondary and tertiary education themselves and have high ambitions for their offspring. But the destruction of the Iraqi education system prior to their flight from the country, coupled with the difficulties they now encounter in keeping their children in school, has created a risk that those young people will grow up without an education. In focus group discussions, many refugees referred to the fact that the future of an entire generation had been squandered, and that their children would struggle to cope, whether they were to go back to Iraq, to be resettled elsewhere or to remain in their country of asylum.

## Recurrent questions

186. In the course of this review, three recurrent questions arose with regard to the assistance and services provided to Iraqi refugees: is the programme replicable in other parts of the world; is it sustainable, and to what extent does it treat refugees and other people in an equitable manner?

187. With regard to replicability and sustainability, there is an evident need to underline the special circumstances that UNHCR has encountered in relation to the Iraqi refugees.

188. First, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria are unlike many of the other cities where urban refugees are to be found, in terms of their relative security and sophisticated infrastructure. An ATM cash distribution system would not be viable, for example, in a country that lacks an efficient network of banks or which is characterized by high levels of street crime. Nor would it be easy to provide optical and dental care in countries where the vast majority of nationals do not benefit from such services.

189. Second, the programme established for Iraqi refugees has clearly been conditioned both by the high expectations of those people and by their relative prosperity and level of education. While keeping in contact with beneficiaries by means of SMS messages, the internet and telephone hotlines is likely to become an increasingly common phenomenon, for example, there are few other places with large urban refugee populations in which conditions are quite so conducive to these innovative forms of communication.

190. Third, the approach adopted in relation to Iraqi refugees is a reflection of the high levels of funding made available to UNHCR in the initial phase of the operation and the organization's consequent ability to invest heavily in its own operational infrastructure and that of its partners. The registration and distribution centre in Douma, Damascus, for example, is almost certainly the most technologically advanced facility of its type that UNHCR has ever established. Similarly, some of the projects visited in the course of the review - a dental clinic, a prosthetics workshop and a day-care centre for children with physical and mental disabilities - appeared to be of higher quality than might be found in some inner-city areas in Europe.

191. With donor support now likely to decline, UNHCR will be confronted with some hard questions with regard to the sustainability of the programme and the need to prioritize some activities while reducing or phasing out others. As part of this prioritization process, UNHCR will have to ensure that certain sub-sectors of the refugee programme are funded by other actors.

192. With regard to the question of equity, the Iraqi refugee programme poses a number of difficult (and perhaps irresolvable) questions in relation to the assistance and services with which they have been provided.

193. At the global level, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the Iraqis have been treated in a relatively privileged manner in comparison with many other urban refugee populations - partly because of their own socio-economic status and expressed expectations, partly because of the middle-income nature of the countries and cities where they reside, and partly because of the funding that has hitherto been available for the refugee programme. The dilemmas arising from this situation have

prompted PDES and DOS to jointly commission a study that examines the ethical and operational implications of such differentials with specific reference to the health sector.

194. At the national level, the question arises as to the relative standard of living experienced by Iraqi refugees and poorer members of the host population. An unfinalized draft version of a new UNHCR urban refugee policy stipulates that UNHCR assistance and service-delivery activities should relate to local standards so as to ensure that refugees do not become, or are perceived as, being privileged over other members of the community.

195. This is certainly a pertinent issue in cities such as Aleppo, Amman, Beirut and Damascus, where there are significant numbers of poor people, which have recently experienced some steep price rises, and where the arrival of the refugees has placed new pressures on the housing market and public services. Both in ethical terms and on the pragmatic grounds of maintaining harmonious relationships between the refugees and their local hosts, this review endorses the approach pursued by UNHCR, which enables the most vulnerable Jordanians, Lebanese and Syrians to benefit from the organization's services.

196. While the assistance that UNHCR provides to Iraqi refugees is carefully targeted, staff members have raised questions as to the fairness of the criteria used to identify beneficiaries. A 'woman alone', for example, may qualify for cash assistance, even if she is receiving considerable amounts of money from family members living abroad, while an adult male might not qualify for assistance, despite the fact that he is officially not allowed to work. Similarly, one Iraqi complained that the assistance he receives with respect to his 17 year-old son may be terminated once becomes an adult. "He cannot find a job and he will still have to be fed," he pointed out.

197. Finally, there is an important issue of equity with respect to the differential treatment received by Iraqi refugees in the three countries concerned and the much smaller groups of refugees that originate from other parts of the world, most notably Somalia, Sudan and elsewhere in Africa. These non-Iraqi refugees are disadvantaged in a number of ways. Many do not speak Arabic, are confronted with discrimination and consequently find it harder to find work or establish a livelihood.

198. In Syria, for example, vulnerable Somalis do not receive ATM cards but are obliged to use a traditional cash distribution system. In Jordan, non-Iraqis enjoy the same level of assistance as Iraqis. But as some of them pointed out, the information booklets distributed by UNHCR exclude them from services by being addressed to an Iraqi audience and written in Arabic. And to make these disparities worse, the resettlement countries are generally more ready to admit Iraqi refugees from the three Middle Eastern countries than those coming from Africa.

199. While such differentials in treatment are to some extent the result of a financial technicality (Iraqi refugees come under a relatively well-funded UNHCR Supplementary Budget, while non-Iraqis fall under an under-funded Annual Budget) they are unacceptable and must be terminated.

## 7. External relations and partnerships

### **Raising UNHCR's profile**

200. Until recently, UNHCR has had a low profile in the Middle East, limited knowledge of the region and a rather difficult relationship with a number of its governments. That situation only began to improve in 2006, when the organization played an important role in addressing the displacement crisis triggered by the conflict in southern Lebanon. The subsequent creation of a new Bureau, dedicated to the Middle East and North Africa region, also ensured that this region became (and was perceived by other stakeholders to be) a higher organizational priority.

201. Once the full extent of the Iraqi refugee crisis was known, UNHCR initiated an extremely active external relations strategy, designed to raise international awareness of the situation, to mobilize financial resources and political will and to highlight its own role in responding to the exodus. A newly appointed Coordinator for the operation succeeded in capturing the interest of the international media. The High Commissioner travelled to the region in February 2007 to meet with the most senior levels of government. And two months later in Geneva he convened a high-profile International Conference on Addressing the Humanitarian Needs of Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons inside Iraq and in Neighbouring Countries.

202. Such efforts continue to be appreciated by those countries hosting large numbers of Iraqi refugees. According to a senior government official in Jordan, "UNHCR was instrumental in highlighting the refugee crisis and maintaining attention on it. It also succeeded in raising the awareness and underlining the obligations of those states that were responsible for creating the crisis."

203. As a result of these developments, the relationship between UNHCR and the governments concerned has become steadily more cooperative. "Previously we would simply disagree with each other," said the same Jordanian official. "But now we can agree to disagree," he joked. Expanding on the improved relationship with UNHCR, the official particularly welcomed the pragmatic, non-doctrinal and non-judgmental approach pursued by UNHCR on protection issues.

### **Public information**

204. As the UNHCR operation for Iraqi refugees began to attract more funds and to expand in scale and scope, the organization's field offices began to play a more central role in the area of external relations and public information. This was particularly the case in Syria, where UNHCR established a strong and dynamic unit responsible for both functions, staffed by personnel with relevant skills, local knowledge and linguistic competence.

205. Working in a restrictive political environment where there were very few accredited international journalists, the unit placed particular emphasis on engaging with Syrian society and catering to the tastes of a sophisticated and educated urban audience. To give just a few examples, Arabic-speaking staff were encouraged to

speak to the media, and provided with a 'Question and Answer' paper to guide them in such interviews. Refugee Outreach Volunteers were used to brief the media and donors, thereby giving a human face to the crisis and the work of UNHCR.

206. The Branch Office launched an 'Express Yourself' campaign, supporting those refugees who wanted to tell their own story. And a series of press releases were issued in Arabic and English, carefully drawing attention to both the plight and abilities of the refugees, as well as UNHCR's efforts to help them: 'Young Iraqi and Palestinian musicians perform together in a celebration of refugee children's talents', 'A childhood of rape and exploitation ends mercifully with a new life in Canada', 'Iraqi artists in Syria get a rare chance to exhibit their work', 'UNHCR helps Iraqi students achieve university dream'.

207. It is, of course, difficult to assess the precise impact of such activities on public and political opinion, but there is no doubt that in Jordan and Lebanon, as well as in Syria, the work of UNHCR is known, understood and appreciated. Indeed, the southern suburbs of Beirut are now dotted with signs that bear a close resemblance to the UNHCR logo, but which are in fact the symbol of a local organization. This is somewhat ironic, as UNHCR has not yet developed a logo for the Middle East region that spells out the name of the organization in Arabic script.

208. If there is one issue that has complicated and confused UNHCR's external relations effort, then it is the issue of Iraqi refugee numbers. In the early days of the operation, when UNHCR was eager publicize the crisis, UNHCR (as well as the media and many other members of the refugee and human rights advocacy communities) readily endorsed the estimates provided by the government of Jordan, Lebanon and Syria.<sup>17</sup> But as the UNHCR outreach campaign accelerated, it became increasingly clear the number of refugees registered by the organization was significantly lower.

209. And yet in a number of recent publications and documents consulted in the course of this review, UNHCR has continued to cite the much higher official estimates. To avoid this scenario in future operations in urban areas, where it is inherently difficult to establish precise refugee statistics, it would be wise for UNHCR to approach this matter more cautiously and to refrain from using figures that are not derived from registration data.

### **Partnership challenges**

210. UNHCR's 1997 policy on refugees in urban areas does not make any reference to the notion of partnership. And yet recent experience with the Iraqi refugees in Jordan, Lebanon and Syria demonstrates that partnership and coordination with other agencies and actors are vital in the urban context.

211. Refugee camps are defined and often confined spaces, in which the roles and responsibilities of different stakeholders can be identified from the outset of an

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<sup>17</sup> According to one commentator, these estimates were high partly because they failed to distinguish between stocks and flows of Iraqis, and partly because they made no distinction between refugees and Iraqis who were travelling for other reasons. The overestimates may also have occurred because in the region, individual household members are often counted on entry, whereas only a single family passport is counted on exit. Private correspondence with PDES.



operation. In many camp situations, moreover, the leading and coordinating role of UNHCR is generally acknowledged by other actors, including the authorities. Indeed, UNHCR has been described by one of the authors of this report as a “surrogate state, complete with its own territory (refugee camps), citizens (refugees), public services (education, health care, water, sanitation, etc.) and even ideology (community participation, gender equality).”<sup>18</sup>

212. The situation in urban contexts is evidently very different, by virtue of the fact that:

- refugees are not to be found in a single location but are scattered amongst the host community, and hence have a less direct relationship with UNHCR;
- some refugees may remain beyond the reach of UNHCR or not wish to have contact with the organization;
- UNHCR is under greater and more direct scrutiny by central government authorities in an urban area, especially a capital city, than it is in a camp;
- UNHCR must deal with a wider range of other actors, including local authorities, civil society organizations and the private sector;
- while UNHCR is often a (if not the) dominant actor in a refugee camp, that is very unlikely to be the case in a city or large town.

213. In addition to these general considerations, UNHCR encountered some specific partnership challenges when scaling up its operation for Iraqi refugees in Jordan, Lebanon and Syria. These challenges are examined below.

### **State structures**

214. When Iraqi refugees began to arrive in neighbouring and nearby countries, they were considered to be ‘guests’ by the governments concerned, rather than refugees. In keeping with this principle, the host countries concluded that the Iraqis should, to the extent possible, be allowed to make use of existing public and private facilities, and that dedicated services for the new arrivals (such as those that are invariably found in refugee camps) should not be established.

215. A number of broad observations can be made with respect to this approach. First, there is an evident logic to such arrangements, especially in a situation where so many refugees have taken up residence in urban areas and where the new arrivals share a language and culture with the host population. It would simply not be financially feasible, and probably not socially desirable, to establish separate facilities for large urban refugee populations.

216. Second, and as explained in Chapter 6 of this review, the arrangements put in place in Jordan and Syria have enabled very large numbers of refugees to gain access to schools, health centres, hospitals and other facilities maintained by the state and by parastatal organizations. This has undoubtedly contributed to their immediate

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<sup>18</sup> Amy Slaughter and Jeff Crisp, ‘A surrogate state? The role of UNHCR in protracted refugee situations’, *New Issues in Refugee Research*, No. 168, January 2009.

physical and psychological well-being and also helped them to prepare for their future, wherever that might be. It has also had advantages for the host states and societies. As a government official in Jordan explained, it would not be in the country's interest for Amman to be populated by large numbers of Iraqi children who are out of school and who have not been vaccinated.

217. Third, cities vary considerably in the way that they deliver services to their citizens. In Damascus, for example, state institutions and SARC play a leading role, whereas in Beirut, the private sector is much more active in areas such as education and health. In urban refugee situations, UNHCR's approach must evidently take due account of such variables and look to innovative approaches, such as private health insurance schemes, in cities where public services are unable to meet the organization's and the refugees' needs.

218. A fourth lesson to be learned from UNHCR's recent experience in the Middle East is that providing support to public services can help to win host state and society acceptance for refugee populations. In Damascus, for example, an education ministry official explained that Syrian citizens became more favourably disposed towards the Iraqis once they saw that local schools were being refurbished and reconstructed with international resources mobilized by UNHCR - an interesting example of the way that material support can contribute to the expansion of protection space.

219. Working with official structures provides UNHCR with some important awareness-raising opportunities. In Jordan, for example, UNHCR has provided training to around 2,000 officials in a variety of different ministries, as well as to journalists, NGOs and refugees. This has enabled the organization to raise issues such as detention, legal status and livelihoods, and to build a stronger relationship with the Jordanian authorities.

220. Such arrangements also bring UNHCR into a much more regular and direct relationship with government at all levels than would be the case if the organization were to work with other partners, making it more likely that refugee populations will be taken into account into national and municipal development priorities. As one UNHCR staff member suggested, in the urban context, UNHCR has to move away from its traditional thinking of "bringing in the international NGOs." This is especially the case in cities where local capacity exists and which can be reinforced by means of UNHCR support.

221. This is not to suggest that working through government and parastatal structures is entirely problem or cost-free. For UNHCR, supporting such structures and enabling them to extend their services to refugees can be an expensive approach and an unsustainable one in the longer-term. In this respect, it is essential to ensure that a state's hospitality towards refugees does not become contingent on the receipt of UNHCR funding. Hence the need for the organization to engage with development actors, both bilateral and multilateral, at an early stage of a new operation rather than at the point when humanitarian funding begins to run out.

222. Finally, there are some important accountability issues to be answered in relation to such partnerships. In the Iraqi refugee operation, for example, it has generally proved harder to monitor the delivery of services and to assess their impact on beneficiaries when working through state structures than is the case with NGOs. According to one UNHCR staff member in the region, "we do not really see a

correlation between the amount of support we provide and the difference it makes to the lives of refugees.” Government and parastatal structures may also have their own set of priorities and interests to promote; priorities and interests that are not shared by UNHCR and which may in certain cases undermine the independence and integrity of the organization.

## NGOs

223. While the scope for partnership with national NGOs and civil society organizations would appear to be considerable in middle-income countries, this proved not to be the case in the Iraqi refugee context. Jordan, for example, does have a number of charitable foundations, but at the time of the influx they were preoccupied with national development priorities, and initially did not extend their services to the new arrivals from Iraq. In Syria, the legal framework places restrictions on national NGO engagement in refugee protection and assistance activities.

224. UNHCR was also confronted with a limited choice of international NGO partners in the early phase of the crisis. In Syria, for example, such NGOs have always been very limited in their presence and have encountered constraints in their ability to operate, such as a requirement to sign a Memorandum of Understanding with SARC, which is associated with the government. As the Iraqi refugee operation has unfolded, however, Syria has become more amenable to the presence of international NGOs, 14 of which were accredited with SARC at the time of this review. Three of them have signed agreements with UNHCR.

225. In Jordan, the challenge has been somewhat different. After an initial absence of partners with whom UNHCR could work, the Iraqi refugee crisis, as well as the funding mobilized by the USA and other donor states in relation to that crisis, has attracted a growing number of NGOs, 16 of whom have partnered with UNHCR. This has placed significant demands on the UNHCR Branch Office in terms of monitoring, reporting and quality control. The Multifunctional Team approach, examined in Chapter 5 of this report, is proving to be a valuable means of addressing this situation.

226. As in many well-funded emergency operations, the Iraqi refugee crisis has prompted a degree of competition amongst members of the humanitarian community. In Lebanon, for example, it is apparent that some of the longer-established NGOs are a little disturbed by the arrival of new actors, who, in the words of one interlocutor, “have come because money is available,” “are very good at selling themselves” and “all have their own agenda.”

227. In a similar vein, the review was informed that NGOs in one city “are tripping over themselves to find additional refugees” and that many are especially eager to work with women and children, even though single young males are in some senses amongst the most vulnerable refugees. The review also learned of a situation in which a community centre run by one NGO was offering transport expenses and other incentives to Iraqi refugees, in order to ‘poach’ them from a community centre established by another organization!

## **The UN system**

228. The UN's 2009 Consolidated Appeal for Iraq provided a framework for the UN system and NGOs to work together throughout the region. UN agencies contributed a great deal to Pillar II of the Consolidated Appeals process, which was coordinated by UNHCR and which addresses the protection and assistance needs of Iraqi refugees. It is nevertheless difficult to avoid the conclusion that the UN's response to the Iraqi refugee situation has been dominated by the activities of UNHCR. Other members of the UN system have certainly contributed to the operation, but in a much more modest and less visible manner.

229. This is not entirely surprising. First, UNHCR has a mandate for refugee protection and solutions, and was fulfilling its statutory role by leading and coordinating the international community's efforts in these respects. Second, even in an unconventional refugee situation such as the one found in Amman, Beirut and Damascus, the organization has competencies and capacities that other UN agencies lack.

230. And third, as recent history has demonstrated, UNHCR has a distinctive 'go it alone' culture, derived from its strong operational orientation, its mandated focus on a very specific group of people population group and its readiness to confront governments on protection and human rights issues that development-oriented agencies that work in close tandem with state structures find more awkward to address.

231. While it may be understandable, UNHCR's dominant role in the Iraqi refugee operation has also created some difficulties. Other UN agencies may admire the way that UNHCR was able to gear up so rapidly for the Iraqi refugee operation, but those with a longer and more substantive engagement in the region have in some instances been disturbed by the nature of UNHCR's sudden arrival on the scene. In one of the countries concerned, it was suggested that the organization could have done more to share information, to foster an inter-agency approach and to be more sensitive when forging relationships with ministries that were the established and longstanding partners of other UN agencies.

232. UNHCR should take such comments seriously. As has been seen for many years in more conventional refugee situations, UNHCR has a tendency to assume a leading role when an emergency erupts, and at a time when the situation has a high degree of visibility and when funding is readily available. But as time passes by and the situation becomes a progressively protracted one, UNHCR expects other members of the UN system to step in and to assume responsibility for the longer-term dimensions of the programme. "By then," in the words of one UN partner in the region, "it is too late."

## 8. Durable solutions

### **Few solutions in sight**

233. A Jordanian scholar who was interviewed in the course of this review commented that “the decision to flee from your own country is always easier to make than the decision to return.” This observation is certainly supported by the case of the Iraqi refugees, many of whom left their homes at short notice, threatened by the escalating violence in their homeland and the very real threat that they would be targeted for attack because of their religious identity, their profession or their relative prosperity.

234. At the time of their sudden departure, the refugees hoped that the crisis would not persist very long, and that within a reasonable amount of time they would be able to return to Iraq, reclaim their property and resume their previous life. But as time has passed, those expectations have faded and the refugees are left with few choices with regard to their future.

235. The majority do not want to repatriate now or in the near future. Only some of the refugees can expect to be admitted to a third country by means of resettlement. And those who remain in their countries of asylum have no opportunity to benefit from the solution of local integration, have very limited prospects for self-reliance and are confronted with the prospect of a steady decline in their standard of living. In the words of an elderly refugee man living in the Syrian city of Aleppo, “when we left Iraq, we simply didn’t know that we would end up like this.” This chapter examines the challenges that confront UNHCR and its partners in their efforts to find durable solutions for such refugees.

### **Resettlement**

236. Resettlement has been a dominant and in some senses driving component of UNHCR’s operation for Iraqi refugees in Jordan, Lebanon and Syria. More than 75,000 refugees had been submitted for resettlement by the end of March 2009, some 22,000 in 2007, 33,500 in 2008 and 21,000 in the first five months of 2009. The vast majority of those resettled have been admitted by the USA. The remainder have moved to an additional 16 resettlement countries.

237. As these statistics suggest, the emphasis placed on resettlement is to a significant extent a reflection of the readiness of the USA to make this solution available to those exiled by the sectarian violence that followed the ousting of the Saddam Hussein regime. But the scale and scope of the resettlement programme also derives from UNHCR’s own analysis of the Iraqi refugee situation and its subsequent efforts to galvanize the international community’s response to the crisis. Thus in March 2007, just before the High Commissioner convened a major international conference on displacement within and from Iraq, a UNHCR document observed:

Given the deterioration of the security environment in Iraq, the deteriorating protection environment in countries of first asylum, the large number of Iraqi refugees on the territory of

neighbouring states and the fact that the prospect for other durable solutions appears remote or absent, states are strongly encouraged to consider the resettlement of Iraqi refugees and stateless persons from Iraq.

238. In a number of different respects, this strongly resettlement-oriented approach to the Iraqi refugee situation has been vindicated by the achievements of the programme since the international conference took place. These can be summarized as follows:

- i) The resettlement programme has allowed a large number of refugees to find a durable solution to their plight, and has thus spared those people the prospect of living a protracted life in exile and in limbo.
- ii) As a result of the resettlement criteria formulated for the programme, particularly vulnerable groups of refugees (e.g. survivors of violence and torture, women-at-risk, family reunification cases) have been prioritized in the resettlement process.
- iii) In addition to Iraqi citizens, some Palestinians who fled from Iraq and who became trapped in the Iraq-Syria border area have finally been able to leave the isolated and desolate camps in which they were living, and which will hopefully be closed as a result of the resettlement programme.
- iv) By alleviating the pressure that the refugee influx was placing on the three countries of asylum, and by showing that UNHCR and its partners were serious in their efforts to support those states which had admitted large numbers of Iraqi refugees, the resettlement programme has undoubtedly contributed to the expansion of protection space in the region.
- v) At both the regional and global levels, the Iraqi resettlement programme has helped to reaffirm the fundamental principle of 'international solidarity and burden-sharing', whereby refugees are regarded as the responsibility of the international community as a whole, and not just that of the states to which those people have fled.
- vi) Those Iraqis who have been resettled will now have the opportunity to support their displaced and exiled compatriots, both by sending them remittances and by engaging in advocacy efforts on behalf of Iraqis affected by the current crisis.
- vii) Despite the size, scope and complexity of the Iraqi resettlement programme, the procedures put in place by UNHCR, IOM and the resettlement countries have successfully reduced processing times and appear to have countered the fraud and corruption that have bedeviled resettlement programmes in other parts of the world.
- viii) While resettlement programmes are often sometimes accused of acting as a 'pull factor', encouraging people to leave their homeland unnecessarily or to move from one country of asylum to another, there is little evidence

to suggest that this has been an important characteristic of the Iraqi programme.

239. Despite these many important achievements, the Iraqi resettlement programme has also been characterized by some difficulties and dilemmas.

240. In the course of this review, for example, it became apparent that UNHCR and its staff have been under enormous pressure (both from resettlement countries, especially the USA, and from refugees themselves) to maintain a high pace of resettlement, to meet agreed targets and to devote an exceptional amount of time, energy and resources to this activity.

241. This outcome may have been inevitable in the particular and political circumstances of the Iraqi refugee crisis. And yet some UNHCR staff members have suggested that the organization's heavy investment in the resettlement programme may have been disproportionate to the number of refugees who have benefited from this solution. According to this perspective, an unintended consequence of the heavy emphasis on meeting resettlement targets has been to divert attention and resources from other and equally important functions within the operation, such as community services and the assistance programme.

242. In addition to such broad reservations, a number of more specific issues have arisen in relation to the resettlement programme.

243. First, when UNHCR launched this initiative in early 2007, it did so by stating that "submissions for the resettlement of Iraqi refugees will be determined strictly on the basis of identified needs for resettlement as a protection tool," and that the programme would be based on the principle of "the primacy of vulnerable cases." In practice however, resettlement countries have not always applied such criteria, have expressed a preference for certain groups of refugees (such as Christians and other religious minorities), and have in some cases been reluctant to resettle refugees with serious medical problems, extensive social welfare needs or 'limited integration potential'.

244. Second, the resettlement process has in some respects been a frustrating one for many Iraqis, owing to unrealistic expectations of speedy departure and anxiety about whether they will be admitted to a resettlement country. Refugees express concern over the alleged difficulty of getting updated information with respect to the status of their case, and say that they are not always informed when and why their case has been rejected. Many Iraqis seem to be unaware that states, rather than UNHCR, make the final decision as to who is and is not accepted for resettlement. And in a number of instances, refugees with family members already living abroad have been resettled to other countries where there is no-one to support them.

245. In any situation where resettlement is on offer, managing refugee expectations is a daunting challenge, both prior to and after their departure from the country of asylum. While improved communication between UNHCR and the Iraqi refugees on this matter would be desirable, misunderstandings may arise in situations where people are desperate to be resettled and cannot understand what is delaying or blocking their departure.

246. With respect to UNHCR staff, many resettlement personnel report that they experience a significant degree of fatigue and progressive desensitization as a result of the daily grind of high-volume and high-pressure resettlement processing. In addition, and because their functions are so narrowly focused on the resettlement effort, they feel that they do not have the opportunity to understand how their work fits into the bigger picture of UNHCR's Iraqi refugee operation.

247. Third, having accelerated sharply over the past two years, it now seems likely that the resettlement programme will contract in 2009-10. Despite their difficult circumstances, some refugees prefer not to be resettled but to stay in the region, where they are at least in a familiar social and cultural environment, where they can live in close proximity to their country of origin, and where they do not have to face the enormous challenge of adapting to an entirely new way of life in a foreign country.

248. Such reticence is especially evident in relation to the USA, which offers by far the largest number of resettlement opportunities for Iraqi refugees, but which does not, as many of those refugees now understand, offer the wide range of social benefits and services provided to them in some other states.

249. Resettlement figures are also likely to decline in the future as a result of an inconsistency between the approach taken by UNHCR and the resettlement countries. According to a senior UNHCR staff member, "there is an uneasy relationship between our referral criteria, which centre on vulnerability, and the resettlement countries' eligibility criteria, which are fixed on those of the 1951 Refugee Convention. Resettlement countries are conservative in their response to vulnerability, including women and risk, in spite of Executive Committee Conclusions and guidelines to the contrary." As a result of this inconsistency, as well as the growing number of people who do not want resettlement in the USA, UNHCR is now finding it more difficult to identify cases that will be accepted for resettlement.

### **Voluntary repatriation**

250. From the beginning of the Iraqi exodus, it has been evident that voluntary repatriation will have to play a significant role in the resolution of the refugee situation in Jordan, Lebanon and Syria. As explained elsewhere in this chapter, only a modest proportion of the Iraqi refugee population has access to the solution of resettlement, while the governments of the three asylum countries are insistent that the Iraqis should not stay there on a long-term or indefinite basis. Local integration is therefore not a viable option.

251. Confronted with these difficult circumstances, UNHCR has adopted a three-pronged strategy in relation to voluntary repatriation. First, the organization has called on the international community to preserve the protection space that exists in the region and to desist from any action that might compel or induce the Iraqis to return to their homeland. According to UNHCR, such an approach would not only contradict the *non-refoulement* principle of international refugee law, but would also (especially if large numbers of people were to return under duress) bring a new degree of instability to the society, economy and political structures of Iraq.



252. Second, UNHCR has bolstered its efforts to create conditions that are conducive to the voluntary repatriation and sustainable reintegration of the refugees by expanding its presence and operational activities inside Iraq.<sup>19</sup>

253. Third, UNHCR has taken steps to facilitate the return of those refugees who have decided that they wish to return to Iraq and resume their life there. In addition to pre-departure counselling and advice, such refugees are provided with free transportation and a cash payment of up to \$500 per family. UNHCR also monitors the well-being of returnees by means of regular telephone interviews.

254. Hitherto, the refugees' response to this initiative (as well as a separate voluntary repatriation programme established by the Iraqi government) has been very modest. In Jordan, only 150 Iraqis returned to Iraq with UNHCR assistance in the first half of 2009. In Syria, the UNHCR office reports that:

The number of Iraqi refugees assisted by UNHCR Syria to repatriate under its voluntary repatriation programme continued to remain low in the reporting period, with only 20 families (58 persons) being processed in March 2009. A similarly low level of activity was experienced in the demand for UNHCR's voluntary repatriation pre-counselling sessions. Only 57 persons approached UNHCR, wishing to obtain more information regarding the programme... During the reporting period, the government of Iraq organized one returnee flight to Baghdad. It repatriated a total of 34 Iraqi nationals... Based on information collected during UNHCR interviews, the main reason for refugees deciding to repatriate remains economic hardship in Syria. A positive perception of the current situation or hope of benefiting from the government of Iraq's assistance scheme was mentioned by only a minority of the heads of household.

255. A number of observations can be made with respect to this statement. First, while security in major cities such as Baghdad and Basra has improved to some extent in the past year, suicide bombings and other atrocities continue to take place on a regular basis. As a direct and intentional result of the violence, moreover, a process of 'sectarian cleansing' has taken place, obliging many of Iraq's Sunnis, Shias, Christians and other groups to relocate to areas where they constitute the dominant group. In many cases, the property of people who left the country as refugees, or who became internally displaced, has been occupied or destroyed.

256. Exacerbating the situation, the sectarian conflict of the past three years has effectively destroyed many of the refugees' jobs and livelihoods, while the process of reconstruction is proceeding painfully slowly. "If you fly into Baghdad," says a senior UNHCR official, "you will not see many cranes. Very little rebuilding is taking place." Such conditions evidently act as a major disincentive to repatriation.

257. Second, the reluctance of the refugees to return to Iraq is reinforced by psychological and political considerations. Many have been traumatized by the violence they experienced and witnessed prior to their departure and have lost the

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<sup>19</sup> As stated in the introduction to the report, UNHCR's activities inside Iraq are beyond the scope of this review.

will to make decisions about their own lives as a result of their difficult experiences in exile. Most of the refugees interviewed in the course of this review also expressed a deep sense of alienation from the Iraqi state, which they felt had abandoned them since they left the country.

258. Third, refugees are generally unwilling to participate in the UNHCR repatriation programme because in doing so they are obliged to de-register with the organization, making it more difficult for them to return to their country of asylum later, should they wish to do so, and to benefit from assistance there. This is one of the reasons why a much larger number of refugees have chosen to repatriate independently, thereby keeping their future options open.

259. While it is difficult to calculate the exact number of such independent returnees, According to UNHCR statistics, the figure is in the region of 70,000: 45,000 in 2007 and 25,000 in 2008. In the words of an independent researcher who is studying this movement, "the Iraqis decision to return from Syria and Jordan is driven by the following factors: economic hardship accompanied by the lack of income-generating and education opportunities in the countries of asylum; the real or perceived improved security situation in Iraq, combined with a more positive stance of the Iraqi government towards the externally displaced; and the refugees' decreasing hope of resettlement."<sup>20</sup>

### **To-and-fro movements**

260. Although relatively few refugees are returning to Iraq on a permanent basis, a much larger number are engaged in backwards and forward journeys between their country of asylum and their country of origin.

261. By means of the different community outreach and communications activities undertaken by UNHCR, the organization has been able to collect a growing amount of information about such movements, which are inherently difficult to monitor as the refugees concerned often go out of their way to conceal such visits.

262. To-and-fro movements are undertaken with considerable regularity by refugees in Syria and to a lesser extent in Jordan, but not in Lebanon, which lacks a border with Iraq. According to one survey, 40 per cent of the refugees interviewed in Syria had returned up to three times and ten per cent had gone back more than four times. A minority - 39 per cent - had never been back at all.

263. Why exactly are such movements taking place? To some extent because refugees want to examine the situation in their homeland on a first-hand basis, and because UNHCR considers it premature to organize 'go and see' visits by refugee representatives leaders of the type that are often arranged when conditions are conducive to return in a country of origin. But at the same time, it would appear that many refugees return to Iraq for short periods with specific objectives in mind: to visit elderly parents, find missing relatives, attend funerals and other ceremonies, borrow money, sell property, or to collect rent or pensions, for example.

264. To-and-from movements thus constitute an important component of the Iraqis' survival strategy, both materially and psychologically, and should not necessarily be

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<sup>20</sup> Unpublished report by Vanessa Iaria, Sussex University, provided to UNHCR.

interpreted as a precursor to large-scale and permanent return. Indeed, none of the stakeholders interviewed in the course of this review felt that such a scenario would be likely in the next two to three years, and that in terms of repatriation, a great deal would depend on the evolution of the security situation in Iraq following the drawdown of US combat forces. Indeed, renewed influxes of Iraqi refugees cannot be ruled out if the level of violence escalates at that point.

### **Livelihoods and self reliance**

265. Since the beginning of the mass Iraqi influx into Jordan, Lebanon and Syria, the governments of those countries have made it very clear that the new arrivals would not be allowed to remain there indefinitely, and consequently had no opportunity to benefit from the solution of local integration. Interviews with senior officials in all three countries confirmed that this policy will not be changed. According to one interlocutor in Amman, “we do not need another long-term refugee population in Jordan and there can be no compromise with our position on the integration of the Iraqis. The issue is simply not on the table.”

266. In accordance with this approach towards the Iraqi refugee situation, all three countries have made it virtually impossible for the vast majority of refugees to enter the formal labour market and to become self-reliant. As a result, the refugees have been obliged to find other ways of surviving: living from their savings, moving to cheaper areas or sharing accommodation, collecting money transfers from Iraq and the Iraqi diaspora, receiving assistance from UNHCR, mosques and churches, and in some instances resorting to negative coping mechanisms such as prostitution or entering the labour market with forged documents.

267. In addition, many have found casual labour, often as domestic workers, on construction sites, as caretakers and concierges, in internet cafes and mobile phone shops. According to UNHCR sources, some 60 per cent of refugee families in Jordan have some kind of income, while in Lebanon the same percentage of individual refugees are earning some cash. Increasingly, those in the informal labour market are young people who have been taken out of school in order to earn an income.

268. As a result of these different coping strategies and forms of support, the refugees are managing to eke out an existence. While many live in considerable hardship, there have been no reports of severe malnutrition or unusually high mortality rates amongst the Iraqi population.

269. While it is not unknown for Iraqis to be apprehended and detained for working illegally in Jordan, Lebanon and Syria, the authorities and local populations generally turn a blind eye to this phenomenon. This raises an important question for UNHCR. Should the organization and its partners provide the refugees with vocational training and assist them to establish livelihoods, by means of group micro-credit schemes, for example, despite the formal restrictions placed on their economic activity?

270. In the opinion of this review, such a strategy (which UNHCR has already started to introduce) is justified and indeed necessary, as long as it is undertaken in a discreet manner, focuses on low-risk livelihoods such as home-based businesses, and is accompanied by continued advocacy efforts with the authorities so as to consolidate

and formalize the flexible approach that they currently pursue with regard to the economic activities of refugees.

271. First, now that many refugees have depleted their savings, and now that UNHCR is confronted with the prospect of reduced funding for its assistance programmes, there is a need to maximize the extent to which the refugees can support themselves.

272. Second, while the Iraqis may not suffer from malnutrition and have never been in a life-threatening situation, there is considerable evidence to indicate that they manifest many indications of psychosocial distress: “anxiety, nightmares, family friction and violence, and a reluctance to socialize,” according to one NGO in Amman. By providing the refugees with training and livelihoods support, their self-esteem might be restored to some degree.

273. Third and finally, many of the refugees do not yet know where their future lies. They may be admitted to a resettlement country, they may be able to return to Iraq, or they may have little alternative but to remain for some time in their countries of asylum. Learning new skills, generating an income and becoming at least partially self-reliant would be of enormous value to the refugees, whatever durable solution they eventually find.

274. In this respect, the current review strongly commends the UNHCR Jordan paper ‘Iraqis in Jordan: assessment of livelihoods and strategy for livelihoods promotion’, which should be shared with other UNHCR offices working with urban refugee populations, especially those with limited access to the labour market. Particular note should be taken of the five objectives on which this strategy is based, and which are of direct relevance to other UNHCR programmes in urban areas: “(1) promoting access to legal work and financial services; (2) providing vocational skills to youth, (3) strengthening the social capital of Iraqi refugees; (4) improving employability and entrepreneurship skills; and (5) supporting home-based income-generating activities.”

## 9. An uncertain future

275. UNHCR's operation for Iraqi refugees in Jordan, Lebanon and Syria has many achievements to its credit, especially the innovative manner in which it has responded to the demands of the largest urban refugee situation in the organization's history. As previous chapters of this review have indicated, the operation has been characterized by a range of effective practices which will be of enormous value to the organization and its partners as they prepare to work more extensively in urban settings.

276. But the operation is now confronted with an uncertain future. There is a growing consensus amongst humanitarian agencies in the region that the original estimates of refugee numbers were too high, and that the refugee registrations undertaken by UNHCR provide a more accurate picture of the real figure of those in need of protection and assistance.

277. It also seems likely that refugee numbers will diminish further as a result of resettlement departures, temporary and longer-term returns to Iraq and irregular movements to other countries. Even so (and even if the planned drawdown of US forces is accomplished without an escalation of violence) a very large number of refugees seem likely to remain in the region.

278. Recent sample surveys, as well as the interviews and focus group discussions undertaken in the course of this review, indicate that many of those refugees have no intention of returning to Iraq. Explaining their determination not to repatriate, they cite the atrocities they experienced or witnessed prior to their departure, their concern over the unpredictability of Iraq's future and the likelihood of further conflict, as well as the difficulty of returning to a country where the process of 'sectarian cleansing' has made it impossible for them to live in their own home and neighbourhood.

279. What will become of these refugees? It is possible that some will reluctantly return to Iraq, simply because of the hardship of living in exile. Others may be able to find a temporary niche in the society and economy of their country of asylum, managing to make ends meet but without the legal residency rights they need to feel secure and to plan for the future.

280. There is also a danger that with the Iraqi refugee situation remaining unresolved, with the economic crisis biting and with new emergencies erupting in other parts of the world, donor states will make serious cuts to the funding they make available to the UNHCR operation - funding that has played a major role in the organization's efforts to expand and sustain the protection space available in the region.

281. In the worst case scenario, one might even envisage a situation in which the country of origin, countries of asylum and donor states reach the common conclusion that the best way to resolve this refugee situation is to actively promote large-scale repatriation. In the current circumstances, such an approach would be legally and ethically unsound, and could bring further instability to Iraq.

282. While this review has focused on the role of UNHCR and three refugee-hosting states in relation to the refugee situation, Iraq itself is undoubtedly the most important actor in this scenario. And yet within the region, there is a clear sense that the country must do more to address and resolve the plight of its exiled citizens.

283. Many of the refugees feel abandoned by their own state. Countries of asylum feel that they are being left to bear the brunt of the Iraqi crisis. And some commentators suggest that politicians in Iraq are not doing enough to address issues such as economic recovery and job creation, property restitution and compensation, alternative housing arrangements and access to public distribution systems, all of which could play an important part in creating conditions that are more conducive to voluntary repatriation.

284. In conclusion, this review is fully supportive of the efforts that UNHCR is currently making to expand its presence and activities inside Iraq, but feels obliged to point out that the impact of those efforts will be limited unless they take place in a supportive political and economic environment. As the UN High Commissioner for Refugees has stated:

Inside Iraq, there has been an improvement in the security situation, which has created a window of opportunity for action on the political front. The success and sustainability of this action, however, will in large part depend upon the leadership of the Iraqi government in addressing some pending issues, such as national reconciliation, the status of Kirkuk, distribution of oil revenues and the constitutional review. Without tangible progress on the political front, the country risks falling back into the cycle of sectarian violence.

285. National reconciliation, however, is itself an enormous challenge. On the day that this concluding chapter was drafted, one well-known commentator on Iraq published an article in which he gloomily observed that the country's history of violence makes it "next to impossible to reach genuine political accommodation between Shia and Sunni, Arab and Kurd, Ba'athist and non-Ba'athist, supporters and opponents of the US occupation." He concludes his article with a quote from one of his Iraqi friends: "how do you expect people who are too frightened of each other to live in the same street to reach political agreements?"<sup>21</sup>

286. But perhaps this is too pessimistic. On the streets of Aleppo, Amman, Beirut and Damascus, Iraqis from different segments of society are living together, sharing the same community centres and queuing peacefully alongside each other at UNHCR registration facilities. In Beirut, we visited the offices of the Middle East Council of Churches, a Christian NGO which provides educational and health services to Iraqi refugees. Amongst the dozens of people sitting in the waiting room, the great majority were Shia Muslims.

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<sup>21</sup> Patrick Cockburn, 'Iraq: the final countdown', The Independent, 23 June 2009.