



Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale

Bilagsnr.:	145
Land:	Syrien
Kilde:	U.S. committee
Titel:	"Refoulement/physical protection"
Udgivet:	30. august 2006
Optaget på baggrundsmaterialet:	15. september 2006

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Refoulement/Physical Protection According to the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), Syria deported some Iraqi refugees during the year and refused entry to several others. In October, Syria denied entry to 8 Palestinian families from Iraq, totaling 19 individuals, which included women, children,

and 2 semi-paralyzed men, but did allow them to stay in the El-Hol refugee camp on the border. Border officials restricted entry of Iraqi women between the ages of 15 and 30 without an accompanying male relative on suspicion that they might engage in prostitution. Syria introduced new immigration regulations in 2004 and 2005 requiring any aliens that it expelled to obtain permission from the Minister of the Interior to reenter.

There were about 432,000 Palestinian refugees in Syria under the mandate of the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) and about 80,100 not registered with UNRWA. Syria's 1957 law on the legal status of Palestinians stated that "Palestinians residing in the Syrian Arab Republic territories are considered as Syrians by origin in Syria, in all matters pertaining to the laws and regulations," but it did not include rights to naturalize or to vote. In April 2006, Syria agreed to accept 181 Palestinian refugees from Iraq who had been living in tents on the Iraq-Jordan border for about a month after Jordan refused their entry.

Syria was not party to the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees. Since March 2003, it had respected UNHCR's temporary protection regime for Iraqi asylum seekers and there were roughly 450,000 Iraqis in Syria at year's end, mostly in and around Damascus, 78 percent of whom had arrived after the 2003 war. More than 22,300 Iraqis held UNHCR temporary protection letters as asylum seekers. Nearly 2,600 held UNHCR mandate refugee status. UNHCR conducted individual refugee status determinations necessary for urgent third-country resettlement in cases of extreme vulnerability and granted only 18 during the year.

In 2005, however, the Government ceased to acknowledge UNHCR's protection letters and began to require residency authorization, which it granted all Arab nationals but only for three months upon entry, after which time it required a residence permit from the Department of Immigration and Passports. Many Iraqis simply left the country and reentered to renew their stay, but this was difficult for poorer Iraqis and, as a result, many had to live clandestinely. UNHCR also recognized nearly 5,000 refugees from Somalia, Sudan, Iran,

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Afghanistan, and some North African countries.

Some 200,000 to 250,000 stateless Kurds were in a refugee-like situation in Syria since the Government had denied them citizenship, passports, and birth certificates.

Detention/Access to Courts In November, Syria released 20 Palestinian activists as part of a mass release of 190 political prisoners. According to the U.S. State Department, Syria held numerous Palestinians, including some it had arrested in Lebanon over the last 30 years, many of whom were likely still in detention.



It also detained an unknown number of other refugees and asylum seekers but allowed UNHCR access to some of them. UNHCR was able to determine refugee status for detainees and to negotiate with the Government to prevent their deportation and secure their release.

Freedom of Movement and Residence Syrian authorities permitted Iraqi and Palestinian refugees to move freely throughout Syria and to choose where they wished to live. Most resided in and around Damascus. A little over a quarter of Palestinians, some 115,000, lived in 13 camps.



Documented Palestinian refugees who registered with the General Authority for Palestinian Arab Refugees could obtain Syrian travel documents, which were valid for six years and were renewable at Syrian consular offices abroad. Additionally, Palestinians could travel between Syria and Lebanon using state-issued identity cards, and the Arab League also entitled them to travel documents.

Stateless Kurds could not travel outside of Syria, and those who left could not reenter.

Right to Earn a Livelihood Syria did not permit Iraqi refugees to work legally. They were largely dependent on low-paying jobs in the informal sector without legal protection. Iraqi girls as young as 12 engaged in prostitution. Syria, however, did permit Palestinian refugees to work. The only restriction was that refugees who arrived in Syria after 1956 could not hold civil posts in the Government.



A 1959 law required non-Palestinian refugees and other foreigners to obtain work and residency permits in order to work legally and prohibited their work in the public sector, a large portion of the economy. A 2001 law regulated the residency of foreign domestic workers and reversed laws that prohibited their employment. Labor laws did not protect them as only their contracts governed the terms of their employment.

Syria also restricted non-citizens from owning property other than their homes and did not allow foreigners to own any arable land. In cases where this limitation interfered with Palestinian businesses, Syria allowed citizens to purchase property and transfer control to Palestinian refugees through binding agreements. Citing local resentment of soaring rents, overcrowded schools, and increased crime, a government lawyer predicted that President Bashar al-Assad would "sign an order barring Iraqis from purchasing property."

Stateless Kurds could not work in the public sector nor own property or businesses.

Public Relief and Education

Iraqi refugee children had the right to public education but most schools were already at capacity. As well, some Iraqi families had a hard time finding money to pay for school uniforms and books, an obstacle that nationals shared. Such fees led to high dropout rates and often Iraqi refugee families made their children work long hours to earn money.



UNHCR was able to aid only a few of the most vulnerable Iraqi refugees. It helped single women with housing and female-headed households with income generating activities.

Palestinian refugees generally used UNRWA health services, which made referrals to Syrian hospitals as needed. UNHCR provided a limited number of vulnerable Iraqi refugees with medical services but these were inadequate to meet demand. Starting in January, Syria restricted foreigners' access to the public health system to emergency care and childhood vaccinations.

Syria strictly controlled nongovernmental organizations—especially those assisting stateless Kurds or focusing on human rights violations.

Primary education was mandatory for Palestinian children, who could enter UNRWA elementary schools as well as Syrian elementary schools. Syrian schools and universities also provided them with secondary and higher education. UNRWA ran a vocational college training center for Palestinian refugees in the suburbs of Damascus, offering those who completed secondary school a two-year semi-professional training course and trade courses to those who finished preparatory school. In 1961, the Government had donated the land for the training center and it accepted five Syrian students each year.

NEWS AND REPORTS

- 1 million people became refugees in 2004 (USCRI Headlines)



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