



U.S. Committee for Refugees World Refugee Survey 2001 - Syria

June 2001

At the end of 2000, Syria hosted almost 389,000 refugees and asylum seekers in need of protection. These included 383,199 Palestinian refugees registered with the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), about 3,113 non-Palestinian refugees registered with UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), and 2,642 asylum seekers pending a UNHCR status determination at year's end. Some 23,000 Iraqi nationals not registered with UNHCR also lived in Syria during 1999, many of whom may be refugees. Some 4,970 Syrian nationals sought asylum in European countries during 2000.

Conditions for refugees in Syria remain obscure for several reasons: the lack of free speech, the absence of independent human rights monitoring organizations, a government-controlled press, and the intimidating presence of all-powerful state security forces and an omnipresent intelligence network.

The ascendancy of Bashar Assad to the Syrian presidency following the death of his father, Hafez Assad, in June did not produce noticeable change either in Syria's generally poor human rights record or its treatment of refugees in the country during the rest of the year.

Syria was among the most vocal opponents of a Palestinian-Israeli peace plan presented by U.S. president Bill Clinton in December 2000 that called on Palestinians to relinquish the "right of return" of Palestinian refugees in exchange for Israeli concessions on the final status of Arab east Jerusalem.

Palestinian Refugees

Although Palestinian refugees in Syria are not eligible for citizenship, they are permitted to work and have access to government services.

Of the Palestinian refugees registered with UNRWA, 111,712, about 29 percent, were living in camps. Palestinian refugees in Syria represented 10.3 percent of all UNRWA-registered refugees. Another 64,000 Palestinians living in Syria were not registered with UNRWA, according to the Palestine Liberation Organization's Refugee Affairs Department.

UNRWA's weakened financial state improved little in 2000. Successive budgetary shortfalls have forced UNRWA to undertake austerity measures that continued to strain severely its ability to assist Palestinian refugees in Syria during the year.

Despite its weakened position, UNRWA continued to provide essential services in the fields of health care, education, infrastructure development, and emergency relief in 2000.

During the year, UNRWA operated 23 clinics that provided comprehensive medical care to Palestinian refugees, including mother and child health care and family-planning services. Funding shortages forced UNRWA to limit hospital referrals and the duration of hospital care.

Serious overcrowding in UNRWA schools continued in 2000, with 93.6 percent operating on double shifts, the highest percentage in any of UNRWA's fields of operation.

Although UNRWA replaced a malfunctioning sewage system in Neirab camp near Aleppo, refugee families continued to live in unsafe and decrepit former army barracks in Neirab for lack of UNRWA funds to build them adequate housing.

UNRWA's funding shortage manifested itself in other ways during the year. Although the number of people registered with UNRWA's special hardship program had increased by 6.8 percent to 26,594 by June 2000, UNRWA only had funds to provide emergency cash assistance to the neediest 250 families. Assistance to the remainder was insufficient and often delayed.

Palestinian refugees residing in Syria generally did not report unusual difficulties in traveling to and from Syria as they had in previous years, although Syria continued to restrict the entry of nonresident Palestinians. The Syrian authorities do not permit Palestinians from the Gaza Strip to enter Syria.

Non-Palestinian Refugees

Syria is neither a signatory to the UN Refugee Convention nor the 1967 Protocol. Therefore, non-Palestinian asylum seekers and refugees continued to register with UNHCR for assistance and protection during 2000. While citizens of Arab countries may enter Syria without visas, Iraqi nationals require a security clearance from the Syrian authorities to enter and remain in the country.

At the end of 2000, the Syrian government reportedly was in the process of issuing new restrictions that would limit the stay of Iraqis in Syria to one month. Although it appeared that Syria would not apply this restriction retroactively, the proposed change nevertheless had serious implications for newly arriving Iraqi asylum seekers, for whom it will be impossible to conduct refugee status determination and resettlement interviews within one month.

UNHCR registered 3,113 refugees in Syria in December 2000, mostly from Iraq (1,491 persons). About 300 Iraqis lived in El Hol refugee camp in northeastern Syria. Significant numbers also came from Yemen (743), Somalia (441), Afghanistan (171), and Sudan (91).

Some 4,344 asylum seekers applied for refugee status with UNHCR during the year, more than two-thirds (2,931 persons) coming from Iraq. Significant numbers of Sudanese (287), Somalis (259), and Afghans (94) also filed applications with UNHCR in 2000.

Of the 3,689 asylum seekers whose cases were decided on the merits in 2000, UNHCR granted refugee status to 1,058 applicants, or 29 percent of all claimants. Iraqi and Afghan nationals had the highest approval rates (31 percent each), followed by Sudanese (15 percent), and Somalis (12 percent).

Syria does not allow non-Palestinian refugees the right to employment, although it reportedly tolerates the illegal employment of foreign Arabs. Most UNHCR-recognized refugees received limited financial assistance

from UNHCR, provided through the Syrian Arab Red Crescent Society and the Women's Association.

The Syrian authorities generally cooperated with UNHCR to ensure that refugees received protection and facilitated UNHCR visits to asylum seekers and refugees in detention. Although there were no reported incidents of *refoulement* during the year, Syria reportedly forcibly returned an undetermined number of Iraqi refugees to northern Iraq in 1999, who originally had been deported from Lebanon. In previous years, Syria reportedly forcibly returned hundreds of persons with possible claims to refugee status without sufficiently reviewing the potential danger to the deportees. Illegal border crossing reportedly constitutes a deportable offense in Syria.

Although Syria generally tolerates the presence of non-Palestinian refugees, it does not offer them the option of applying for permanent asylum. Thus, UNHCR pursues resettlement for those it recognizes as refugees in Syria.

Internal Displacement

The failure of Syrian-Israeli peace negotiations in the spring of 2000 shattered hopes that displaced Syrians might soon return to their former homes in the Golan Heights. Except for some Druze villagers who stayed behind, most of the Syrian population of the Golan Heights fled in 1967. Estimates of their original numbers vary. Israel says that about 70,000 left; Syria puts the original number at 153,000, and says that the number has grown to almost 500,000.

After the 1973 Arab-Israeli War, Israel agreed to return a slice of territory along the eastern edge of the Golan Heights, extending to Kuneitra, the one-time capital of Golan Province, in return for the repatriation of Israeli POWs. Before leaving, however, the Israelis leveled the city with bulldozers and dynamite. Although its 53,000 displaced residents had been expected to return, the late President Assad said that the city was uninhabitable, and it remained empty.

The Syrian government rebuilt 10 villages in territory adjacent to the Golan returned to Syria in 1973, where it resettled about 60,000 displaced Golan residents. The remaining displaced Syrians and their progeny, as many as 400,000 people in 2000, lived in government housing projects in the suburbs of Damascus, Dara, and Homs.

Stateless Kurds

Another little-known group outside Syria is 200,000 stateless Kurds in northeastern Syria. Although the Syrian government has registered them, it denies them citizenship despite their strong claims. Consequently, although they carry no passports and cannot travel outside Syria, they are denied the rights and benefits of Syrian citizens. Syria disenfranchised this group in 1962, saying they were "alien infiltrators."

The Syrian government classifies the stateless Kurds either as "foreigners" or as *maktoumeen*, meaning "unregistered." The former are issued red identity documents, which prevent them from owning land, practicing certain professions, receiving food subsidies, being admitted to public hospitals, or legally marrying Syrian citizens. The latter are issued no documents at all. *Maktoumeen* are the children (or grandchildren) of

"foreigners," including foreigners who marry women who are Syrian citizens.

Despite calls from a variety of organizations to find a humane solution to the predicament of Syria's stateless Kurds – including a 1999 appeal from the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination – the Syrian government took no action to improve their situation in 2000.