

Surviving in the city

Jeff Crisp

“Nothing really prepared us for this operation, so we had to adopt an unconventional approach to the way we did business.”

Those are the words of a UNHCR staff member in the Syrian capital of Damascus, referring to the challenge of responding to the massive Iraqi refugee exodus that has taken place since 2006. UNHCR is familiar with the demands of coping with large and sudden movements of refugees but the unique feature of the Iraqi situation is that the vast majority of exiled Iraqis are not housed in camps but have settled in the cities of neighbouring states, especially Amman in Jordan, Beirut in Lebanon as well as Damascus and Aleppo in Syria.

A recent evaluation has highlighted some innovative aspects of how UNHCR attempted to address the specific characteristics of its urban operations in the region.¹

Reception and registration

In the absence of national asylum laws or procedures in Jordan, Lebanon or 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 – a role in which UNHCR was confronted with a wide range of challenges that were met creatively in the different countries.

In Amman and Beirut, separate reception and registration areas were established adjacent to UNHCR's offices, while in Damascus, a dedicated registration centre was established 20 kilometres away in the suburbs. There were innovations at all UNHCR's facilities, including:

- improved appointments systems that avoid long waiting periods and overcrowding
- the permanent presence of Community Services and Protection staff (see below)
- the capacity to distribute emergency assistance on-site, if needed

- fast-track systems for vulnerable refugees
- 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
- clearly identifiable security personnel trained to be both helpful and efficient
- information videos, anti-fraud posters and information leaflets in Arabic
- clean and spacious amenities, including separate areas for men and women, water fountains and lavatories.

One of the more innovative aspects of the Syria operation has been the use of mobile registration, enabling UNHCR 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 proved its worth as a form of outreach and should be replicated where possible in other urban settings.

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 yet are required to make important judgment calls with potentially significant consequences for the refugees they are registering.

Registration is the moment at which a refugee first comes into formal and substantive contact with UNHCR



A UNHCR staff member talks with an Iraqi refugee family in the one-room apartment shared between 13 extended family members, Syria.

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. In the Iraqi refugee context, UNHCR adopted an approach that goes well beyond the traditional collection of basic biodata and which instead encompasses issues such as resettlement needs, vulnerabilities, circumstances requiring urgent protection interventions and referrals for counselling and services.

Community outreach and communications

Many of the UNHCR staff members interviewed in the course of this evaluation drew attention to the challenge, in an urban context, of making contact with refugees, determining their needs, understanding their intentions and identifying the most vulnerable among them. The Iraqi refugees are scattered among a large urban population and across a wide 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. 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 the outskirts where accommodation, their primary item of expenditure, is cheaper. 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 exiled Iraqi population.

In Syria, efforts were made to mobilise the refugee community through the establishment of specialised '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.

In Jordan, UNHCR has sought close integration between its community services function and its protection and programme activities by establishing 'multifunctional teams', made up of staff members from different units within the office. Among the primary responsibilities of these teams are to monitor and assess the impact of implementing partner activities, to ensure that those partners have established beneficiary complaints mechanisms and that they engage refugees in decision-making.

In Damascus, UNHCR has appointed around 75 female Outreach Volunteers (who are trained and paid a small stipend) originating from all sections of the refugee population and residing in all parts of the city and suburbs where refugees are to be found.² The decision to engage only females was 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. Their functions include identifying and visiting particularly vulnerable refugees and referring them to UNHCR if necessary; providing refugees with counselling, information and practical assistance; and mobilising refugees to play an active role in support of their compatriots.

Some of these Volunteers 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, something to 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.

UNHCR has also 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. Such centres have proved popular but 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? And it is known, for example, that some Iraqi men prevent their wives and daughters from attending the centres, while many refugees, for one reason or another, are not mobile enough to leave their home or immediate neighbourhood or are unable to afford the expense of travelling to their nearest centre.

Renting a property, paying the wages of full-time staff and providing such centres with 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. They might also prove to be constraints in other, less well-funded contexts.

Other elements of UNHCR's community communications strategy have included a dedicated UNHCR

hotline for refugees, 'complaints boxes' in prominent locations, and highly visible anti-fraud campaigns, informing refugees that all UNHCR services are free and that they should not attempt to bribe any of the organisation's employees.

Conclusion

There is a very real prospect that the resources available to UNHCR will decline in the near future. Other emergencies are now capturing the world's attention and the money available to humanitarian agencies may diminish as a result of the global economic crisis.

An important question to be asked is whether some of the innovative and exemplary arrangements found by this evaluation 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.

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1. See also article by Sayre Nyce pp42-3.

2. A similar system has been established in Jordan, working through UNHCR's implementing partners.



UNHCR registers vulnerable Iraqi families eligible for the first food distribution for them in Damascus.