

Palestinian Refugees

The Palestinians' claim of a "right of return" to Israel has become one of the most significant obstacles to a final peace agreement. The refugee problem began in 1947 when the Arab countries refused to accept the partition of Palestine into two states - one Jewish, one Palestinian (U.N. Resolution 181). Instead, they initiated a war that resulted in the creation of the state of Israel - and a refugee problem. As many as 700,000 Arabs fled their homes during the 1948 Arab-Israeli war. Many fled voluntarily to avoid the war or at the urging of Arab leaders who promised a quick Arab victory. In some cases Arabs were forced to flee by individuals or groups fighting for Israel.

Funding of Palestinian Relief

While Jewish refugees from Arab countries received no international assistance, Palestinians received millions of dollars through UNRWA. Initially, the United States contributed \$25 million and Israel nearly \$3 million. The total Arab pledges amounted to approximately \$600,000. For the first 20 years, the United States provided more than two-thirds of the funds, while the Arab states continued to contribute a tiny fraction. Israel donated more funds to UNRWA than most Arab states. The Saudis did not match Israel's contribution until 1973; Kuwait and Libya, not until 1980. As recently as 1994, Israel gave more to UNRWA than all Arab countries except Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Morocco.

UNRWA operations are almost wholly funded through voluntary contributions. In 2003, all of the Arab countries *combined* contributed less than \$11 million (3%) and \$7.8 million of that was from Saudi Arabia, meaning the rest of the Arab world contributed less than \$3 million (1%). The 10 largest donors for 2004 who together provided almost 90 per cent of its current cash income, were, in descending order, the European Commission, the United States, the United Kingdom, Sweden, Norway, the Netherlands, Canada, Switzerland, Japan and Italy. The U.S. is the largest single country donor: In fiscal year 2006 the US donated \$84.15 million, with a proposed additional \$51 million to be provided for UNRWA's emergency appeal.

The Arab countries (except Jordan) never accepted the refugees or absorbed them into society. They were kept in crowded camps, where many remain over 50 years later. Conversely, Israel absorbed Jewish refugees who were forced from Arab countries, leaving behind vast property and wealth. They were never compensated, and Israel never renounced its right to submit compensation claims against the Arab countries.

U.N. Resolution 194

The Palestinians claim that U.N. resolution 194 requires Israel to grant the refugees the right of return. The resolution, which established the U.N. Conciliation Commission for Palestine and called for the internationalization and demilitarization of Jerusalem, mentions refugees in only one of its 15 articles. A right of return for the refugees is never mentioned. Rather, it makes the return of refugees conditional on two things: 1) that the refugees are interested in living in peace with their neighbors, and 2) the return takes place "at the earliest practicable date." Experience does not weigh favorably on the first condition, and demographic and geographic conditions indicate that it is not practicable for such a large number of Arab refugees to return to Israel.

Resolution 194 (adopted on December 11, 1948) calls for compensation for those who choose not to return or whose property has been destroyed or damaged. The compensation is to be provided by "the governments or authorities responsible." Israel is not specifically mentioned, and the use of plural wording indicates that, contrary to Palestinian claims, the burden of compensation does not fall solely upon Israel. Israel has agreed to cooperate in international efforts to resettle and compensate Palestinian refugees and would consider individual cases of family reunification.

Implications of Return of Refugees

Israel is not responsible for the creation of the refugee problem, or for perpetuating it. To accept responsibility would have far-reaching implications: 1) It would encourage the arrival of millions of Palestinian refugees in the State of Israel, changing the demographics of the country in such a way as to effectively end the existence of the independent Jewish state; 2) It would be used as a basis for claims against Israel for compensation for loss of property and for 55 years of suffering; 3) It would facilitate claims by Arab “host countries” against Israel for compensation for the cost of “hosting” the refugees.

On November 19, 1948, the U.N. adopted Resolution 212, which also addressed the Palestinian refugee problem. The resolution recommended a plan for funding of relief efforts for the refugees, but made no mention of their return. In July 2000, Israel was prepared to participate in the provision of such compensation, but the late Chairman Arafat flatly refused to compromise. The current Palestinian leadership still claims that Palestinian refugees and their descendants have the right to return to their original homes.

UNRWA Refugee Camps (June, 2003)

Field of Operations	Official Camps	Registered Refugees	Registered Refugees in Camps
Jordan	10	1,718,767	304,430
Lebanon	12	391,679	225,125
Syria	10	409,662	119,766
West Bank	19	654,971	176,514
Gaza Strip	8	907,221	478,854
Agency total	59	4,082,300	1,301,689

Source: <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/myths/mf14.html>

