

# REFUGEES IN THE ARAB-ISRAELI CONFLICT

## **Jewish Refugees**

Historically, Jews and Jewish communities have existed in the Middle East, North Africa and the Gulf region for more than 2,500 years. Following the Moslem conquest of the region, for centuries, while relegated to second-class status, Jews were nonetheless permitted limited religious, educational, professional, and business opportunities. When Arab countries gained independence, followed by the rise in Arab nationalism, state sanctioned measures, coupled often with violence and repression, made remaining in the land of their birth an untenable option for Jews.

In 1948, the status of Jews in Arab countries worsened dramatically as many Arab countries declared war, or backed the war against the newly founded State of Israel. Jews were either uprooted from their countries of longtime residence or became subjugated, political hostages of the Arab-Israeli conflict. In virtually all cases, as Jews left the country, individual and communal properties were confiscated without compensation. From 1948 to 1951, beginning with the establishment of the State of Israel, as many as 900,000 Jews were expelled from their native Arab nations or forced to flee as a result of state-sponsored anti-Zionist violence. Jewish refugees fled to Israel from Iraq, Tunisia, Syria, Egypt, Yemen, Algeria, Libya and Morocco. Jewish refugees from Arab lands were immediately and fully absorbed into the new state of Israel. Today, fewer than 8000 Jews remain in these countries.

## **Palestinian Refugees**

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 over the new Jewish state. In some cases Arabs were forced to flee by individuals or groups fighting for Israel.

The Arab nations, specifically Jordan, Syria and Lebanon, refused to absorb the refugees, instead settling them in refugee camps. Many remain in the crowded camps today, over 60 years later.

An estimated 250,000 Palestinians fled the West Bank and Gaza when Israeli forces arrived during the Six Day War. These people, some of whom had left their homes in Israel in 1948, are considered by the international community to be displaced persons, not refugees.

## **U.N. Resolution 194 and the "Right of Return"**

Palestinians claim that international law allows them a "right of return" to their former homes inside Israel. Israel claims there is no foundation in international law. Palestinians cite U.N. Resolution 194 as guaranteeing a "right of return" to their former homes inside Israel. Resolution 194 mentions only that refugees should be permitted to return at the "earliest practicable date" and prepared to "live at peace with their neighbors." The Palestinians demand an unconditional "right of return" to areas that are part of the State of Israel. The arrival of millions of Palestinians in Israel (whose present Jewish and Arab population is just over 7 million) would, in effect, end Israel's existence as the Jewish state.

## **Compensation for Refugees**

Resolution 194 states that compensation should be paid for the property of those refugees who choose not to return and for loss or damage of property. The resolution does not specifically mention Israel (or any other country) as responsible for paying compensation.

Jewish refugees from Arab nations who were absorbed in Israel have never been compensated for loss of property. Israel has agreed to cooperate in international efforts to resettle and compensate Palestinian refugees and would consider individual cases of family reunification.

The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) is the relief and human development agency, providing education, health care, social services and emergency aid to over four million Palestinian refugees living in Jordan, Lebanon and Syria, as well as in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. It was established following the 1948 Arab-Israeli War by the United Nations General Assembly and is funded primarily by voluntary donations from donor countries.

Initially, the United States contributed \$25 million and Israel nearly \$3 million to UNRWA relief efforts. 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.

UNRWA operations are financed almost entirely by voluntary contributions from governments and the European Union, which account for 94 per cent of all income. The United States is still by far the organization's largest contributor, pledging \$148 million in 2008. In 2007, the top ten donor countries (including the U.S., EU, Japan and Canada) contributed 80% of UNRWA's funding. The budget for 2008 is \$ 523.8 million. As of May 31, 2008, the Agency's largest contributors for 2008 are the United States, the European Commission, Sweden, the United Kingdom, Norway and the Netherlands.

## **Implications of the Refugee Problem**

When the Arabs fled Israel during the 1948 war, the Arab countries never absorbed them into their communities. Instead, they built crowded refugee camps in which many refugees continue to live today. From 1948 until 1967, Jordan controlled the West Bank. Jordan never improved the infrastructure or living conditions of the Palestinians, leaving them in refugee camps. Israel is not responsible for the creation of the refugee problem, nor for perpetuating it.

To accept responsibility would have far-reaching implications. 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.

The plight of Palestinian refugees will be solved only as part of an overall Middle East peace settlement. But there can not be an overall peace settlement without also addressing the wrongs done to Jewish refugees from Arab countries.

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Guided by Jewish values, the JCRC informs, collaborates, advocates and takes action on issues in the public arena that are of central concern to the Jewish community.

#12 Millstone Campus Drive, St. Louis, MO 63146-5776 E-mail [jrcrstl@jrcrstl.org](mailto:jrcrstl@jrcrstl.org) 314-442-3871 [www.jrcrstl.org](http://www.jrcrstl.org)

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