Palestinian Refugees

The Palestinian refugee issue originated in the 1948 Arab-Israeli war, when five Arab armies invaded the State of Israel just hours after it was established. During the ensuing war, as many as 750,000 Palestinian Arabs fled their homes in the newly created state as a result of many factors. Some of the Palestinian Arabs who fled did so to avoid the ongoing war or at the urging of Arab leaders, and expected to return after a quick and certain Arab victory over the new Jewish state. Other Palestinians were forced to flee by individuals or groups fighting for Israel.

Of the Palestinians who left, one-third went to the West Bank (which was under Jordanian control), one-third went to the Gaza Strip (under Egypt’s control), and the remainder to Jordan, Lebanon and Syria.

The Arab nations refused to absorb these Palestinians into their societies and they were instead settled into refugee camps, insisting that citizen and integration would undermine the refugees’ right to return to their homes in Palestine. Only Jordan’s King Abdullah conferred citizenship on the 200,000 Palestinian living in Jordan and the Jordanian-controlled West Bank and East Jerusalem. In 1949, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) was created to oversee the economic integration of the refugees into these Arab countries. UNRWA continues to operate, providing relief, health care, education and vocational training to the refugee populations in Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

During the 1967 Six Day War, another estimated 250,000 Palestinians fled the West Bank and Gaza Strip with the arrival of Israeli forces. Some of these were people
who had left their homes in Israel in 1948. These individuals are considered by the international community to be displaced persons, not refugees.

A Jewish refugee problem was also created with the establishment of the State of Israel. From 1948-1951 as many as 800,000 Jews were expelled from their native Arab and Muslim nations or forced to flee as a result of state-sponsored anti-Zionist violence. They left behind their property and the lives they had built in these lands over hundreds of years. As many as 500,000 of these refugees fled from Iraq, Tunisia, Syria, Egypt, Yemen, Algeria, Libya and Morocco and were absorbed into the new State of Israel. Others fled to Europe and North and South America.

Tallying the number of individuals considered Palestinian refugees today is a matter of intense debate. UNRWA, classifies Palestinian refugees as those who left Israel in 1948; those who left the West Bank and Gaza Strip in 1967; those who were abroad but were subsequently not allowed to return to Israel; and all of their descendants. According to UNWRA, this totals five million Palestinian refugees. UNRWA's statistics include those residing in Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, the West Bank and Gaza Strip. (Note: UNRWA's policy of including the children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren of those who left in 1948 and 1967 into the refugee population for demographic and aid purposes is unique among refugee populations, and is not a done for any other refugee group.)

Israel believes the UNRWA statistics are exaggerated and further distinguishes “refugees” from “displaced persons” and from “expired permit Palestinians” who were abroad at the time the conflicts ensued and were not allowed to return.

Palestinian insistence that refugees must have a “right of return” to their former homes inside Israel, and that this “right” is founded in international law, is rejected by Israel. Israel denies that there is any foundation in international law for a Palestinian “right of return,” and that the non-binding international resolutions on the issue call not for a “return” to Israel, but for a just resolution of
the refugee problem. Since the start of the Oslo process, refugees are considered one of the “final status” issues, along with borders, security, settlements and Jerusalem, that are to be negotiated as part of a final Israeli-Palestinian agreement.

Israel also argues that a “return” is not viable for such a small state, given that the influx of millions of Palestinians into Israel would pose a threat to its national security and upset the country's demographic makeup. In the decades that the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) did not recognize Israel's right to exist and actively sought to bring about Israel's downfall and replace it with a Palestinian state, the “right of return” of Palestinian refugees was a rallying cry. In 1993, the PLO recognized Israel's right to exist and committed to a negotiating process to establish an independent Palestinian state alongside the State of Israel. Given this reality, American Presidents including President Bill Clinton, President George W. Bush and President Barack Obama have publicly stated that Palestinian refugees should rightly be resettled in a future Palestinian state and not inside Israel.

Israel maintains that it is not responsible for the Palestinian refugee problem since it is the result of a war forced on Israel by invading Arab armies. However, Israel has stated that on humanitarian grounds it would participate in an international effort to resolve the situation. Such an effort would be a result of a mutually negotiated peace agreement and likely involve Palestinian refugees settling in newly established state of Palestine, an international compensation fund, and individual cases of family reunification.

Any international effort would also need to consider the situation of the 800,000 Jews who were expelled from their native Arab and Muslim nations or forced to flee as a result of state-sponsored anti-Jewish violence following the founding of the State of Israel.