

# Compare the Different Perspectives on the Causes of the Palestinian Refugee Issue and Discuss

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## Compare the Different Perspectives on the Causes of the Palestinian Refugee Issue and Discuss why it is so Difficult to Resolve

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The Palestinian refugee crisis has been one of the biggest sources of conflict between the Palestinian Arabs and what are now known as the Israelis, since the partition confirmed by the UN General Assembly on 29<sup>th</sup> November 1947. In answering the proposition, it shall first be necessary to establish whether the Zionists sought to peacefully integrate Arabs into their proposed state, as they themselves claim. Then it shall be wise to question if the Palestinians fled their homeland because they were terrified of the Israeli forces, or for other reasons. As Israeli and Arab behaviour in the immediate period after the 1949 Armistice Agreement is assessed, it shall be contemplated why the issue is so difficult to resolve. It shall also be maintained that there are disputes over who are and are not refugees, and that there is much Palestinian anger at how Arabs are treated inside Israel today.

Firstly, there is the issue as to whether the Zionists sought to peacefully integrate Arabs into their new state to be, as has been claimed by the Israelis. Writer Efraim Karsh is convinced that this Israeli argument stands up to the truth. Karsh is certain that David Ben-Gurion, the Zionist leader and Israel's first Prime Minister, wanted to incorporate the Arabs into the new state of Israel. He cites evidence from scholar Shabtai Tevet, that Ben-Gurion's "fundamental article of faith was 'that there is enough room for ourselves and the Arabs in Palestine'" (Karsh 1997, p.47). This in itself appears a notable commitment, but apparently Ben-Gurion's ambitions, as outlined at a Jewish Agency Executive meeting in June 1938, went further, with a vision to "bring the quality of life of the Arab minority to the cultural, social and economic level of the Jewish majority" (Karsh 1997, p. 55). Thus the incentive, according to these aims and the Israeli opinion, should have been for the Arabs to stay in the new state, because the hope of fair treatment was a realistic one, and thereby there shouldn't have been a refugee problem. The Arab perspective is somewhat different, and understandably so. Plan Dalet, which "aimed to consolidate control of Jewish areas and to seize strategic areas allotted to the proposed Arab state" (McDowall 1995, p. 26) portrays the Israelis as an aggressive force from the outset. The alleged view of Menahem Ussishkin, a respected Zionist, supports such an

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idea. For he is said to have claimed “the solution to the problem of the large Arab population in the proposed Jewish state was for their removal by the British army” (Palumbo 1987, pp. 1-2). But what is all the more galling for the Palestinians is that such ideas had been present in Zionist thinking a long time before November 1947, as can be seen from the views of Yosef Weitz, then director of the Jewish National Fund (JNF). Weitz proclaimed in December 1937 that the removal of Arabs from the Jewish state aimed “to diminish the Arab population” (Masalha, 1992, p. 94) and to “evacuate land presently held by the Arabs and thus to release it for the Jewish inhabitants” (ibid). The suspicion is that there is a great deal of Arab annoyance that the British did not do more to confront such a horribly insulting attitude. At this stage of the argument, we are left with an Israeli assurance that they wanted the Arabs to be a part of their new state, alongside a possibly more convincing Palestinian argument that the Israelis had long planned a virtual expulsion of Arabs from their planned state.

The question of Israeli attitude leads appropriately enough on to whether the Arabs fled from their homeland because they were forced by the sheer terror of the Israeli armed forces, or because of other reasons that some Israelis have suggested. Karsh is typically forthright in his assessment of the matter, saying that the conflict between 1947 and 1949 was won “by the more resilient society.” (Karsh 1997, p. 26). This implies that a lack of Arab toughness in the mind was the reason for the refugee problem. Also bound up in this chain of thought is the possibility that the Arabs left out of choice, as though they chose not to be resilient. This idea is not without some support, as “some [Arabs] left despite attempts made by certain Israeli leaders who tried to persuade them to remain” (Segev 1986, pp. 25-26). Indeed, the idea that the refugees were persuaded to stay supports the argument of those who believe Ben-Gurion wanted the Arabs to live a healthy existence in Israel. The Palestinian claim that Arabs left not out of choice, but because the ugly terrorism of the Israeli army left them with no choice, needs to be given consideration. The most extreme example of this was the massacre at Deir Yassin, an Arab village near Jerusalem, where “254 villagers were killed” (McDowall 1995, p. 29). The Arabs assert that such intimidation made it inevitable that many Arabs would leave through fear, and that Israel should bear the clear responsibility for this. Even the Israeli Defence Forces Intelligence Branch made clear that “at least 55 per cent” of the Arab departures were down to their own operations (Masalha 1992, p. 179). However, it would still be wrong to suggest that the Arab leadership formally encouraged departure, thereby ridiculing the Israeli suggestion that the Arabs showed no resilience to stay amid the conflict. It is evident that “the AHC (Arab Higher Committee) vigorously opposed the departure of the Palestinians” (Flapan 1987, p. 85). This seems plausible, and it seems unlikely that the Arab leadership would instruct their own people to leave land which had been theirs for hundreds of years, as that would have been, in effect, an acknowledgement of Israel’s sole right to the area of land. To review, the Israeli account of events is that the Arabs did not show enough mental fortitude, and that they themselves did their utmost to make the Palestinians stay, which seems implausible amid the background of mass destructions such as Deir Yassin. The Palestinians say that such terror forced the Arab

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departure, and Israel must bear the responsibility for the refugee crisis.

The armistice agreement in 1949 meant "Israel controlled 73 per cent of Palestine" (McDowall 1995, p. 27), and it is the behaviour of both Arabs and Israelis in the aftermath of this agreement that needs to be assessed, particularly that which made agreements and peace all the more difficult in the future. Israel did not really help matters by its refusal to repatriate the refugees, and this "may have lost the only opportunity for a possible long-term evolution of peace" (Lucas 1975, p. 361). This did indeed anger the Arabs, as shall be seen shortly. For it is not simply the fact that Israel has failed to repatriate the refugees, it is their utter selfishness in this period which really grates the Arab world. This selfish attitude is exemplified by David Ben-Gurion in his diary, where he proclaimed that "the armistice agreement is sufficient for us. If we chase after peace the Arabs will demand a price: either territory, return of refugees, or both" (Segev 1986, p. 34). It may be asking too much of any government to put aside self-interest to any great degree, but Ben-Gurion certainly failed to grasp the opportunity to make the lives of many refugees a lot better, and if he had taken such an opportunity then the region may well have been removed of much tension that still exists today. Equally, though, the Arabs are far from blameless in this area. They did not help their own cause by expelling their own Jewish communities as an expression of disgust at Israeli actions. Such an example was "Iraq, whose government peremptorily expelled over a hundred and twenty thousand Jews" (Lucas 1975, p. 363). This was the wrong option to take because it was the perfect ammunition for the Israelis to assert that "Palestinian claims for financial compensation must be balanced against the dispossession of Jews in Arab lands" (ibid). That the Palestinians were not themselves responsible for such behaviour did not matter to Israel. If the Arabs truly wanted peace, it was silly to expel Jews, an act that was only likely to antagonise Israel even further. Nor was it particularly wise of the Palestinian refugees to have "infiltrated [to the Israeli side of the border] to steal crops or inflict sabotage" (Lucas 1975, p. 371). This merely encouraged Israel to kill "on a greater scale" (ibid). It is clear that the Arabs felt they could not tolerate Israel's attitude to the refugees, but responding in a hostile manner allowed Israel to demonstrate their ever growing power even more defiantly. Therefore, although the Israeli attitude to the refugees appears morally repugnant, the Arabs have to take their share of the blame for ensuring that the conflict with Israel escalated after 1949, and contributed to the instability that still haunts the region to this day.

Additionally, a further problem that makes the refugee crisis so difficult to resolve, is, simply who exactly qualifies as a refugee. Because, unsurprisingly, the Arab estimate is significantly higher than their Israeli counterparts'. To satisfy their own needs, the "Israelis took into account only those refugees displaced during the fighting" (Flapan 1987, p. 216), while the Arabs "included Palestinians who had become destitute following the destruction of the Arab economy during the war" (ibid). The best estimate to the true number of refugees came from the Clapp Mission, placing "the refugee total at 726,000 as at 30<sup>th</sup> September 1949" (Lucas 1975, p. 461). There is also a suggestion

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that the “real total of refugees may have been higher than 750,000” (Palumbo 1987, p. 203). Whatever, the true number of refugees, if the Israelis and Arabs cannot agree on the number of refugees, it makes it unlikely that the problem will be resolved, as both sides appear to be more concerned with getting bogged down with numbers than finding a viable solution to the problem between them. Put simply, the onus is on Israel in the sense that if Israel does not recognise an individual as a refugee, they are not going to be repatriated. However, it has already been indicated that the Israeli attitude is not likely to lead to repatriation. Another thorny issue for Israel is that of compensation to be given to the refugees, taking into account the unlikelihood of repatriation. The issue is thorny because the costs involved could severely undermine Israel economically. Past evidence suggests that it would be difficult for Israel to give significant amounts of compensation even if they wanted to. They previously suffered as “the influx of Russian immigrants from 1989 to 1992 produced a severe economic crisis for Israel” (McDowall 1995, p. 117). So compensation also seems like an unlikely solution, simply because of its infeasibility for Israel. Israel fully resents the idea that it is their responsibility to solve the refugee problem, most simply because they “rejected any responsibility for the creation of the refugee problem” (Flapan 1987, p. 223). The Palestinians are certain that they are not to blame, and their perspective is that the “Zionists will never admit that the expulsion of hundreds and thousands of innocent Arab civilians was in any sense premeditated” (Palumbo 1987, p. 213). In short, the refugee problem is difficult to resolve because neither the Israelis nor the Palestinians accept that they have caused the problem, for the reason that they cannot agree on who is a refugee, and because repatriation would severely weaken the Israeli economy.

Another significant issue preventing a solution to the refugee problem is the shoddy treatment by the Israelis of the Arabs that *are* still living in Israel and the occupied territories (the West Bank and the Gaza Strip). This has left the Palestinians very bitter, and has not encouraged them to work effectively with the Israelis. An example of how the Arabs are treated came following the Palestinian *intifada* in the late 1980s, the *intifada* being Palestinian riots against the Israeli army in the occupied territories. Israel replied by “closing down the entire education system [in the occupied territories]” (McDowall 1995, p. 136). This cost the children of the *intifada* two vital years of education, and provided a scarring, direct experience of the severity of Israeli decision making. There is also much evidence to suggest that Israel directs far smaller proportions of funds to Arab areas than Jewish areas. For example, the “annual government expenditure on health services in the Territories amounted to a mere \$30 per person compared with \$350 per person in Israel” (McDowall 1995, p. 138). Not only this, but the Israelis have also successfully tried to stifle Palestinian business and agriculture, for fear of competition. Such measures embrace “capping Palestinian access to agricultural water at the 1967 level, [and] setting limits on agricultural production” (McDowall 1995, p. 142). Furthermore, “Palestinian trade remained controlled and in practice discouraged” (*ibid*). Thus there is a clear suggestion that Israel is disrespecting the Palestinian right to provide the basic needs necessary for their people. This

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is a clear indication of Israel failing to treat the Arab community with all due necessary care and seriousness. Indeed, it is a far cry from David Ben-Gurion's aim to fully integrate the Arabs into Israeli society, and to bring their living conditions up to the standards of Israeli Jews. Additionally, Palestinian anger has failed to subside concerning those refugees who live outside of Israel and the occupied territories. This is because they too have a poor quality of life, mainly in neighbouring Arab states such as Jordan, who simply cannot afford to give all of them the necessary living resources. It has been claimed that "the great majority [of refugees living outside Israel and the Occupied Territories]...were living in camps as stateless refugees" (Mansfield 1992, pp. 240-241). It is manifest that families, who were living comfortably in Palestine before the Second World War, should not be subjected to such horrific treatment which has arisen through no fault of their own. To sum up this part, the refugee crisis is difficult to resolve because the Palestinians are angry about the conditions Arabs are forced to live in, both the inhabitants inside, and the refugees outside Israel, that they are not inclined to seek a peaceful solution to the problem.

In conclusion, it is clear that the refugee issue is a complicated one. The Israeli versions of its causes include the argument that the Arabs simply did not want to stay in Israel, despite persuasions, because the Arab society was not resilient enough. The Palestinians admit that they would ideally have liked Arabs to remain in what was still then Palestine, but that this was never likely given the terror inflicted upon its people. The issue has proved so difficult to resolve because of stubbornness on both sides, particularly the Israelis, who, being the more powerful force, are in a more natural position to attempt to solve the problem, should it so desire. That it doesn't so desire, as it has proved by its exploitation of Arabs still living in Israel, is essentially the biggest problem concerning the issue, and the one that looks unlikely to see it truly resolved for the foreseeable future.

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