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FAQs on Refugees

Who are the Palestinian refugees?

Palestinian refugees are the indigenous inhabitants of Palestine, the majority of whom were dispossessed, ran away or were expelled when the state of Israel was created in 1948. This dispossession and expulsion has continued since with the second largest such event in Palestine taking place during the 1967 war, which Israel launched on its Arab neighbors and which resulted in the occupation of the Gaza Strip and the West Bank.

Palestinian refugees generally fall into three main groups: Palestinian refugees displaced in 1948, internally displaced Palestinians who remained within the areas that became the state of Israel, and Palestinian refugees displaced in 1967 from the West Bank and Gaza Strip. For the past 57 years, Israel has continued to deny Palestinian refugees their right to return to their ancestral towns, villages and homes.

How did the Palestinian refugee problem arise?

The Palestinian refugee problem arose from a systematic policy of ethnic cleansing, the results of which are apparent in the Palestinian refugee camps and in the Palestinian shatat (exile). These policies of ethnic cleansing continue to this day.

Zionist policy sought to create an exclusive homeland for Jews in Palestine, a region that already had an indigenous population with a history stretching back thousands of years. The characterization of Palestine as "a land without a people for a people without a land" was a myth created to suggest that Palestine was waiting to be populated. Nothing was further from the truth and this has been evidenced by the atrocities of 1948 and since.

How did Israel expel Palestinians from their land?

Jewish terrorist groups such as Haganah, Irgun and Stern terrorized the Palestinian street, destroyed villages and slaughtered entire Palestinian families. Thirty four massacres were documented by Zionist historian Benny Morris to have occurred within a few months: Al-Abbasiyya, Beit Daras, Bir Al-Saba', Al-Kabri, Haifa, Qisarya. These attacks were part of Plan Dalet and aimed to annihilate the Palestinian population. Approximately 50% of all Palestinian villages were destroyed in 1948 and many cities were cleared from their Palestinian population including Akka, Bir Al-Saba', Bisan, Lod, Al-Majdal, Nazareth, Haifa, Tabaria, Yaffa, and West-Jerusalem among others.

Israeli forces killed an estimated 13,000 Palestinians and forcibly evicted 737,166 Palestinians from their homes and land. Five hundred and thirty one Palestinian villages were entirely depopulated and destroyed.

The tragedy of the refugees continued in 1967. That year, Israel occupied the West Bank and Gaza Strip, and many Palestinians were uprooted for the second time: 15,000 fled from

the West Bank, 38,000 fled from the Gaza Strip and 16,000 fled from the Syrian Golan Heights. The refugees found shelter in surrounding countries including Jordan, Syria and Egypt.

How many Palestinian refugees are there today?

Palestinians are the largest and longest suffering group of refugees in the world. One in three refugees world wide is Palestinian. There are about 6.5 million Palestinian refugees worldwide. More than 3.8 million Palestinian refugees and their descendents displaced in 1948 are registered for humanitarian assistance with the United Nations. Another 1.5 million Palestinian refugees and their descendents, also displaced in 1948, are not registered with the UN. About 263,000 Palestinians and their descendents are internally displaced i.e. inside present-day "Israel". Descendents of refugees are included in the total population because they are still unable to realize their basic rights. About 20,000 Palestinians were internally displaced in the West Bank and Gaza Strip by 2001, some 3,000 of whom were newly displaced during that year. At least 26,000 Palestinians left the West Bank and Gaza Strip for Jordan and did not return between June 2000 and July 2001. Such transfer of the Palestinian population driven by hard econmic and discriminatory conditions continues today.

Where do Palestinian refugees reside today?

The majority of Palestinian refugees live not far from their homes of origin either in their own homeland or in neighboring countries. More than half the refugee population lives in Jordan. Approximately 37.7% live in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, comprising about 50 percent of the population in those areas. About 15% live in almost equal numbers in Syria and Lebanon. About 260,000 internally displaced Palestinians reside in present-day Israel. The remaining refugee population lives throughout the world, including the rest of the Arab world. Of the 3.8 million refugees registered with the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), 33% live in UNRWA's 59 refugee camps throughout the West Bank and Gaza Strip, Jordan, Syria and Lebanon.

What are the basic rights of refugees?

According to international law, refugees have the right to return to their homes of origin, receive real property restitution, and compensation for losses and damages. The UN General Assembly set forth the framework for resolving the Palestinian refugee case in UN Resolution 194 (III) which provides: repatriation for those refugees "wishing to return to their homes and live in peace with their neighbors," or compensation for those choosing not to return. On November 22, 1974, Resolution 3236 clarified the right to return as an "inalienable right". In Res. 302 (IV), the UN General Assembly created UNRWA and assigned the agency the task of caring for Palestinian refugees. UNRWA defined Palestinian refugees as persons who resided in Palestine two years prior to the outbreak of hostilities in 1948 and who lost their homes and livelihoods as a result of that war.

Why are Palestinian refugees excluded from coverage under UNHCR's mandate?

When the UN adopted the Refugee Convention and established the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, it excluded those falling within the UNRWA mandate from coverage under UNHCR's mandate. In effect, this has meant that UNHCR does not concern itself with (or count) Palestinian refugees in Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, or the West Bank and Gaza Strip, although the agency assists Palestinian refugees outside the UNRWA-mandate area. Although unintended, the effect has been that Palestinian refugees have enjoyed fewer protections than other refugees because UNRWA only has a mandate to provide Palestinian

refugees with humanitarian assistance, and, unlike UNHCR, does not have a specific protection mandate.

Is something being done to rectify this exclusion?

Since the current Palestinian uprising began, the UN Commission on Human Rights, the Badil Resource Center for Palestinian Residency and Refugee Rights, and some independent refugee experts have argued that the fact that many Palestinian refugees lack effective protection should trigger the applicability of the UN Refugee Convention to Palestinians in the UNRWA mandate area. These organizations and individuals cite Article 1D of the Refugee Convention, which effectively states that whenever protection or assistance for Palestinian refugees has ceased for any reason before their situation is resolved in accordance with the relevant UN resolutions, they shall "be entitled to the benefits of this Convention." Proponents of this view contend that UNHCR should have begun to exercise its protection mandate for Palestinian refugees long ago when it became clear that the UN Conciliation Commission for Palestine, which was concerned with protection for Palestinians, was unable to carry out its responsibilities.

Why have Palestinian refugees not returned to their homes?

The state of Israel refuses to allow Palestinian refugees to exercise their right to return citing three main arguments; first, that there is no space in Israel for the refugees to return, second, that the return of Palestinian refugees would threaten security and lead to conflict, and finally, that the return of the refugees would jeopardize the Jewish nature of the state. With regards to the first argument recent research shows that 80% of the Jewish population of present-day 'Israel' resides on 15% of the land. The areas where Palestinian villages were demolished lie mainly uninhabited. Hence there is space. As for security concerns, Palestinian refugees broadly accept that exercising their right to return would not be based on the eviction of Jewish citizens but on the principles of equality and human rights. The final argument though is a testament to Israel's false claim that it is the only democracy in the Middle East. Israel is a democracy for Jews only, and this religion-based discrimination or oxymoron should not be confused with real democracy.

Is there a durable solution?

There can be no comprehensive solution without honoring the rights of Palestinian refugees. Three UN human rights treaty committees have found key aspects of Israel's nationality, citizenship, and land legislation which effectively bar Palestinian refugees from exercising their inalienable right to return to be incompatible with the rights codified in relevant human rights conventions. Israel's ongoing aggression against the Palestinian people and continued pursuit of population transfer are incompatible with the quest for peace.

Sources:

Adapted from The Palestinian Dispossession - Frequently Asked Questions
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