

Congress hears testimony on refugees from Arab countries

By Raphael Kohan - Monday July 30 2007

July 19 hearing aimed to bring forgotten narrative back to Middle East discussion

The U.S. Congress listened to testimony on the issue of Jewish refugees from Arab countries for the first time ever last Thursday in a hearing entitled "Jewish Refugees from Arab Countries: Truth, Justice, and Reconciliation."



Regina Waldman testifies before Congress.

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The July 19 hearing featured a short film, "The Forgotten Refugees," which was produced by The David Project Center for Jewish Leadership, and three expert witnesses.

One witness, Former Justice Minister of Canada Irwin Cotler, was unable to attend the hearing in person due to inclement weather, but had his testimony read from a written statement.

"These were massive human rights violations, not just events that occurred coincidentally," Cotler said later in an interview with the Advocate. "The whole question of refugee claims is integral to the peace process now. If any peace process

is to have integrity this issue has to be part of it."

The primary purpose of the hearing, which was hosted by the Congressional Human Rights Caucus in conjunction with B'nai B'rith International and Justice for Jews from Arab Countries, was to inform members of Congress on the upcoming votes for House Resolution 185 and Senate Resolution 85.

If passed, the proposed legislation would force the president to instruct all official representatives of the United States that "explicit reference to Palestinian refugees be matched by a similar explicit reference to Jewish and other refugees, as a matter of law and equity."

While these Jewish refugees have been all but forgotten in contemporary discussions on the Middle East, Regina Waldman, another expert witness, said it should not be so.

"The fact that we were successfully absorbed does not make our plight any less tragic or poignant than [that of] any other refugees," said Waldman, who testified Thursday about her experiences in Libya in the 1960s, when her family was forced to flee the country. "We were absorbed because our Jewish communities refused to let us sit in refugee camps."

Waldman, who came to the U.S. as a 21-year-old, is a co-founder of Jews Indigenous to the Middle East and North Africa (JIMENA). "The idea is that the Middle East left not one but two groups of refugees," said Waldman.

In the years following the establishment of the Jewish state, hundreds of thousands of Jews were forced to flee Arab countries, leaving behind their homes, possessions and cultures. These Jewish civilizations, which existed in the region hundreds of years before Islam came to exist, according to Waldman, have been

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completely destroyed.

But Waldman said that what is important now is recognition and redress, not reparations.

"Redress can take many forms," she said, adding that there are valuable Jewish artifacts still locked behind the borders of these Arab countries.

Based in San Francisco, JIMENA is looking to expand to other U.S. cities. Seth Brysk and Mindy Goldberg, both former staffers at the Jewish Community Relations Council of Greater Boston's Israel Action Center, saw the value in Waldman's message and tried to establish a Boston chapter of JIMENA.

"JIMENA is a bridge between the mainstream Jewish institutions, which are all Ashkenazi, and the Sephardic community, which doesn't tend to identify with the Ashkenazi structure," Goldberg wrote in an e-mail to the Advocate. "JIMENA is a voice for the Sephardic community."

Though the future of JIMENA in Boston is unclear, Waldman said bringing the message to D.C. was an important step for her organization.

"This balances the Middle East situation and gives a more fair and just perspective," she said. "This is a story our own Congress has to hear."

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