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## The problem with Israel's Jewish 'refugee' initiative

The Israeli government's demand that Palestinians recognise exiled Arab Jews as 'refugees' is political point-scoring



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While the US has given up pressing for a freeze on illegal settlement building, one Israeli minister has been cranking up the volume on an issue he apparently considers more pressing. The deputy foreign minister, [Danny Ayalon](#), recently launched a new initiative to demand that Palestinians "recognise Jews who exiled from Arab lands as refugees".

Ayalon's initiative is in alliance with [Justice for Jews from Arab Countries](#) (JJAC), whose mission is to put this issue on the international agenda.

The idea itself has been in circulation pretty much since the 1970s when the Palestinian refugee issue was beginning to gain traction within the international community. Since then, it has resurfaced pretty much whenever there are peace talks – hence its return during this latest, wilted round of exchanges between Israeli and Palestinian negotiators.

As Ayalon puts it, the initiative is explicitly a response to the Palestinian demand for a "[right of return to the land of Israel](#)". The reasoning is: if Palestinians think of themselves as refugees, forced to leave their homes in the tectonic shifts that created Israel in 1948, so, too, were the Jews exiting Arab lands in the same seismology.

There are all manner of problems with this formulation. First, many Middle Eastern Jews dislike being called refugees. Some reject this label because they left Arab lands out of a pioneering desire to relocate to what would become Israel; some say they were uprooted from Arab lands, either by agitating Zionist emissaries, or by the shockwaves that Zionism sent through the Middle East.

Another thorn in the side of this argument is that Israel was created explicitly as a homeland for Jews, while for Palestinians, the homeland is the place from which they were exiled. That means there is no point in lauding Israel for "absorbing" the "Jewish refugees" from Arab lands, while chiding Arab countries for not doing the same with Palestinians – which seems to be the Jewish refugee claim's secondary reasoning.

There are undoubtedly compensation claims to be made by [Jews whose properties and possessions were impounded](#) when they left some Arab countries – Egypt, Syria and Iraq spring to mind – but it isn't clear why those seeking recompense would automatically wish Israel to represent them in this matter. In fact, many Jews both inside and beyond Israel have specifically declined the offer.

If Ayalon, or JJAC, or any of the other groups, were genuinely concerned for the history and legacy of Middle Eastern Jews, there might be better ways to express it. For instance, they might think about setting up heritage centres to commemorate Jewish life in Arab lands, or promote and celebrate their cultural, political and linguistic output, or address the ethnically-driven social imbalances that still exist in Israel between Jews of European and Arab origin.

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But the fact that the sole and stated point of such initiatives is to corral the subject into the frame of Palestinian refugee claims means that, to Israel, the experience of Jews from Arab lands exists only to be hijacked and hocked for cheap, political point-scoring. After all, if there were no Palestinian refugees, would the Israeli government still be raising the issue?

There are significant points to make about the Jewish experience in Arab lands, caught in the crossfire of both Zionism and Arab nationalism: you could, for instance, look at why some Arab governments at the time did not handle the issue smartly, why they sacrificed Jewish communities for short-term political expediency, or did not sufficiently resist the rapid conflation of "Jewish" with "Zionist".

You could also flip it around, and explore how much resistance existed in those countries, among Jews and Muslims alike, to the idea of Jews leaving Arab countries, or review how this departure was experienced as a loss, for both sides.

Or – and this is deeply unfashionable – you could study the long, vibrant experience of Jewish life in the Arab world and ask what went right, as a way of seeking templates for how to make things right again.

There's no space for any of that in the "Jewish refugee" frame as endorsed by the Israeli government. And that's yet another reason why it is so wrong-headed, anachronistic and possibly the worst sort of advocacy for Middle Eastern Jews.

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