



The other Mideast refugees

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The world knows of the pain and dislocation experienced by roughly 700,000 Palestinian Arabs when Israel was established; it knows little about the trauma borne by some 850,000 Jews from the Arab world who were uprooted from their homes.

The precise numbers and exact impetus for the departures, in these linked cases, remain in dispute. The motivations of the displaced in promoting their respective narratives are easily suspect because both Jewish and Arab refugee conundrums are tied to claims of "inalienable rights," for restitution and reparations, and (in the case of the Arabs) demands for repatriation.

In any journey toward genuine acceptance and reconciliation that the quest for peace demands, the two narratives will need to be mutually validated in some fashion.

THE PLIGHT of Jews who left the Arab countries has drawn relatively little attention, notwithstanding the efforts of individuals such as Heskel M. Haddad, a New York-based ophthalmologist of Iraqi origin. Recently, however, this cause received a boost from a non-binding US Congressional resolution adopted in April which urged the administration to raise the Jewish refugee issue whenever the Palestinian one arises. And this week a group called Justice for Jews from Arab Countries has been holding a conference in London to ensure that the narrative of Jewish refugees is told alongside that of the Palestinian Arabs.

It would be a tragedy if this campaign were dismissed as an attempt at one-upmanship in an arena so long dominated by supporters of the Palestinian Arabs; suffering does not negate suffering.

One approach for fair-minded individuals is to consider the Jewish refugees as human beings rather than as pawns in a vitriolic political dispute.

This is why the recent publication of Lucette Lagnado's *The Man in the White Sharkskin Suit* is so welcome. In telling the affecting saga of her family's forced emigration from Cairo to New York, and by sharing memories of her proud father Leon's decline from boulevardier, poker player and businessman - who rubbed shoulders with King Farouk - to a refugee unable to raise the few thousand dollars necessary to open a corner candy store, Lagnado puts a human face on the *other* Middle East refugee tragedy.

Lagnado focuses on her own family's experiences, but let's not forget the episodic blood libels and riots that peppered the history of Egyptian Jewry, beginning in the early 1800s. As the Zionists moved ahead in creating a Jewish state in Mandatory Palestine, and as the Palestinian Arab leadership adamantly rejected a two-state solution, Arabs elsewhere began to turn against the Jews in their midst.

There were riots in Alexandria and Cairo in 1938-39, and again in November 1945, when 10 Jews were killed and hundreds wounded. Synagogues were ransacked. Egyptian Jewry carried on as best it could even when 2,000 Jews were arrested and their property confiscated on May 15, 1948 - the day Israel declared independence. In June 1948, the community was obligated to "donate" to Palestinian Arab refugee relief. In September, 20 Jews were killed and 61 injured as Cairo's Jewish Quarter was bombed. Looting followed, and more Jewish property was confiscated.

After the 1956 Sinai Campaign, 4,000 Jews were expelled; allowed to take only a single suitcase each and forced to renounce any financial claims against Egypt. In 1957 all Jews not in "continuous residence" since 1900 were deprived of citizenship. By 1960, many synagogues, orphanages and homes for the aged had been closed down.

The Lagnados held out until 1963, eventually arriving in New York with \$212, the maximum they had been allowed to take out of Egypt. By 1967, Jews still employed in government were dismissed; hundreds were arrested, some were tortured. That is how a community whose population numbered 80,000 in 1920 dwindled to today's perhaps 200 souls, mostly elderly widows.

Yet Egypt's treatment of its Jews was in no way the most egregious in the Arab world.

ROUGHLY 580,000 Jews from across the Arab world ultimately found refuge in Israel. Another 260,000 Jews were absorbed elsewhere.

For the Palestinian Arabs, by contrast, the disaster of dislocation was compounded by the decision of the 21 Arab states never to absorb them, and to force the UN to create UNRWA, whose surreal mission - with the acquiescence of the international community - is to perpetuate their homelessness in perpetuity.

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