

## New York parley to discuss plight of Jewish refugees

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Delegates from around the world who convened in New York on Sunday for a two-day conference on the rights of Jewish refugees from Arab countries are concerned that despite promises from Israeli government officials, their cause will not be made a priority at the upcoming Annapolis peace summit.

The mission of Justice for Jews from Arab Countries (JJAC), which has brought together 40 delegates from 10 countries, is to ensure that any official mention of Palestinian refugees should be accompanied by a similar mention of the nearly one million Jews from Arab countries who were forced to flee in 1948. JJAC is expected to criticize Israeli inaction over the refugee issue, sources told *The Jerusalem Post*.

Israeli prime ministers dating back to Menachem Begin have ensured that this issue would be on the international political agenda. In 1993, former prime minister Yitzhak Rabin said in an interview with the Jerusalem Arabic daily Al-Quds that "when there is a committee that deals with the problem of refugees, we will claim that there are two problems - the problem of the Palestinian refugees and the problem of the Jewish refugees from the Arab countries."

The cabinet reiterated its commitment in 2002 and 2003, in decisions calling for efforts to gather information on Jewish property in Arab countries.

But several statements in the last few months by Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni have JJAC concerned they might not be as committed to the cause as the group had hoped.

In September, Livni told the Knesset that a Palestinian state was "the integral national solution to the [Palestinian] refugee problem," and she made similar statements in her address to the United Nations General Assembly last month.

Addressing the Knesset in October, Olmert said he understood "the hardship of the Palestinians and feel a deep empathy to the distress that many of them experienced as a result of our conflict."

Both leaders neglected to mention the plight of Jewish refugees.

These comments are of particular concern to JJAC in light of the upcoming peace summit, scheduled to take place at the end of the month.

"It's clear that in any Mideast discussion, Palestinian refugees will be on the table, but our position is [that] there needs to be a recognition that there were two refugee populations," said JJAC Executive Director Stanley Urman.

The fact that Jewish refugees were absorbed by Israel does not mean their history should be ignored, said Urman, who recently returned from meeting with several government officials in Israel to press the case. Urman said he had been assured that "at the appropriate time, an appropriate statement would be made."

But until now, Arab countries have largely denied the plight of their Jewish populations.

The Arab world practices "four No's," said Urman: They claim there was never a significant Jewish population in Arab states, that there was no discrimination, that they left freely without leaving any property behind, and that they have no right to compensation.

While searching through UN archives for information to strengthen their case, Urman came across an article in the New York Times, dated May 16, 1948, warning that Jews were in danger in all Muslim countries. The article cited a law drafted by the Arab League that recommended a coordinated strategy of repressive measures against Jews.

The Draft Law provided that "all Jews - with the exception of citizens of non-Arab countries - were to be considered members of the Jewish minority state of Palestine"; that their bank accounts would be frozen and used to finance resistance to "Zionist ambitions in Palestine." Jews believed to be active Zionists would be interred as political prisoners and their assets confiscated.

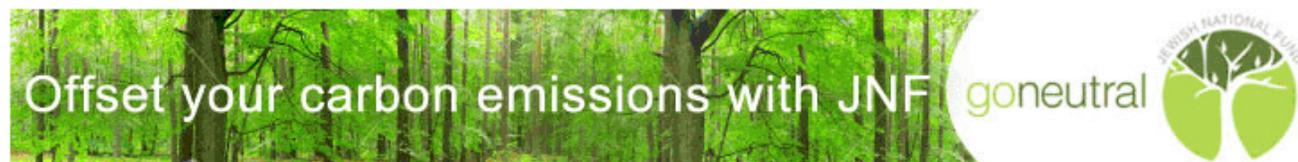
"This has been known, but we've never had proof. This document is the smoking gun," said Urman. "There is ample evidence that points to collusion."

On two occasions, in 1957 and 1967, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees determined that Jews fleeing from Arab countries were refugees who fell within the mandate of the UNHCR. However, though there have been 126 UN resolutions pertaining to Palestinian refugees, none make mention of Jewish refugees.

JJAC is targeting the Quartet to "make sure all members have this on their radar screen," said Urman.

"The time has come to return Jewish refugees from Arab countries to the Middle East narrative from which they have been expunged these past 60 years," said Canadian MP and former justice minister Irwin Cotler in a statement.

Cotler, a long-time international human rights lawyer and law professor, will participate in the Monday press conference at the offices of the American Jewish Committee, where JJAC will release a report that includes the newly-found document of the Arab League Draft Law.



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