

What About Jewish Refugees?

Advocacy group, meeting here, worried at lack of Olmert government support for parity.

by Stewart Ain / Nov. 1, 2007

As 40 delegates from 10 countries gather here Sunday for a two-day conference focusing on Jews displaced from their Arab homelands, there is growing concern that this issue will not be a priority for the Olmert government when the topic of Palestinian refugees is raised at the Israeli-Palestinian summit in Annapolis, Md.

Officials of Justice for Jews from Arab Countries (JJAC), which will hold steering committee meetings here, insist that any discussion of the refugee problem must include Jewish refugees as well, since hundreds of thousands were forced to flee or were expelled, with untold losses in property. Ironically, the current Israeli government has been less than supportive of the effort, and the upcoming meeting here may provide a showdown of sorts since officials of the government will attend.

Of particular concern were recent comments of Israeli Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni, who in September told the Knesset that a Palestinian state is “the integral national solution to the [Palestinian] refugee problem.” She mentioned it again last month at the United Nations, but on neither occasion did she mention that there were Jewish refugees whose rights must also be addressed.

Just weeks ago, Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert spoke of the “hardship” Palestinians have endured because of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict but made no mention of the Jews who experienced similar travail, the organization pointed out. Silvan Shalom, a prominent Sephardic political leader from the opposition Likud Party who served as Israeli foreign minister from 2003 to 2006, said he believes the Olmert government is “not committed” to the issue.

Shalom, who as foreign minister frequently spoke of Jews displaced from Arab lands, told The Jewish Week: “I think they are not doing it the same way I did; I think they are less committed.”

He said that if it is decided that some compensation is due to Palestinians who became refugees because of Israel’s War of Independence in 1948, the compensation should also be for Jews displaced from their Arab homelands. “There should not be a situation where the Jews of Arab countries are forgotten,” Shalom said. He added that compensation for Jews “should be based on equal rights and reciprocity” with the Palestinians.

Observers suggest that Livni and other members of the government are either tone deaf to the cause, primarily advocated by Sephardim, who make up the majority of Jews in Israel today, or worry that any focus on refugees will only increase attention on the Palestinian cause.

The fact that Israel absorbed so many refugees, at great expense and hardship, rather than leave them languishing, should not be used against Israel, say officials of JJAC. To strengthen their case for the displaced Jews, Stan Urman, the group's executive director, said that while perusing United Nations archives to examine press coverage of this issue, he came across a front page article in the New York Times, dated May 16, 1948. The headline of the article was "Jews in Grave Danger in All Moslem Lands." The article cited a law drafted by the Arab League that said the 900,000 Jews living in Arab countries would be considered "members of the Jewish minority state of Palestine." It said 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 and their assets confiscated. And it also detailed how Jews were being persecuted in different Arab countries.

"The Arab world today practices four Nos," Urman said. "It says there was never any large Jewish population in Arab states, that they were not ill treated, that they left of their own free will without leaving any property behind, and that they have no right to compensation." The Arab League document, he said, demonstrates that those denials are "blatant falsehoods."

"We have the evidence that the political community of the Arab League in 1947 colluded among all seven Arab states to persecute their Jewish populations and to use them as weapons against the State of Israel," Urman said. "I have a litany of legislation adopted by Arab countries that mirror the draft law — stripping Jews of their citizenship and taking away their right to vote and own property."

For an Israeli-Palestinian peace to be "durable and enduring, it must resolve issues of relevance to all parties," Urman added. "To move forward to reconciliation we need truth and justice, just as South Africa set up commissions at which the whites had to admit the way they persecuted the black majority. It must be recognized that the Jews were also victims of the Arab-Israeli conflict and that the first injustice was the mass violation of human rights of Jews in Arab countries. We can't allow a second injustice."

Urman said the issue of Palestinian refugees will be on the table at Annapolis "and we want to make sure that the plight and flight of Jews from Arab countries is also on the table."

In addition, Urman said Washington lawmakers are examining two resolutions that say any explicit reference to Palestinian refugees must be matched by a reference to Jewish and Christian and other refugees.