

The Other Refugees

By Philip Klein

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Regina Bublil Waldman remembers math class, Libyan style.

As a six-year old Jew living in the Arab nation in 1954, Waldman witnessed the lesson at a local madrasa. "The teacher turned to the board and asked the students, 'If you had five Jews, and you killed three of them, how many Jews do you have left to kill?' That was a very frightening and very traumatic experience for me. I came home crying, and I asked my mother, 'Does that mean I will be killed?'"

Her childhood experience was just a harbinger of what she would encounter in 1967, when in response to the Six Day War, Muslim mobs began to torch Jewish homes and businesses. Waldman's family was only able to escape Libya alive because of the benevolence of friends. A Muslim man prevented her house from being burned, and her British boss rescued her family from a bus driver who had locked them in a bus, poured gasoline below, and held a box of matches.

Waldman, now a humanitarian activist, recalled her experiences on Thursday in testimony before a Congressional Human Rights Caucus hearing about the plight of the Jewish refugees from Arab countries who were forced from their homes in the decades following the establishment of the state of Israel. Proposed legislation, with versions in the House and Senate, would recognize this displaced population that has been forgotten by history.

"When the issue of refugees is raised in the context of the Middle East, people invariably refer to the Palestinian refugees, but not Jewish refugees from Arab countries," said Henry Green, a professor at the University of Miami, who also testified at the hearing.

The numbers are staggering. In 1948, there were 856,000 Jews living in Arab nations, according to data provided by [Justice for Jews from Arab Countries](#), which helped organize the hearing. These Jewish communities dated as far back as over 2,500 years, or a millennium before the existence of Islam. By 1968, the total had dropped to 76,000, and as of 2005, there were just 5,110 Jews living in Aden, Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Syria, Tunisia and Yemen combined. This displacement was larger than the 726,000 Palestinians who became refugees because of the Arab-Israeli War of 1948. And yet, of the 681 United Nations resolutions passed since 1947 regarding the conflict in the Middle East, 101 dealt with Palestinian refugees, and not a single resolution specifically addressed the plight of Jewish refugees in the region.

Ever since it came into being, Arabs have used the Palestinian refugee problem as part of a campaign to undermine Israel's legitimacy. This even though, as it declared its independence, Israel [proclaimed](#):

Even at this hour of bloodshed, we call upon the Arabs of Palestine to restore peace in this country. We call upon the Arab citizens to return to their homes. We assure them full civil rights on the basis of full representation in all governmental organs of the State. We are extending the hand of friendship to the neighboring Arab states in order to initiate mutual cooperation. We are ready to contribute our share to the revival of the Middle East.

Arab governments were not so gracious to their Jewish populations. Even before the existence of Israel, anti-Semitic laws were common in Arab states. In Yemen, for instance, Jews were not permitted to ride horses, because they were not supposed to be higher than Muslims, and Jewish orphans under the age of 12 were forcibly converted to Islam. During World War II, Haj Muhammed Amin al-Husseini, the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem and the leader of Palestinian Arabs, was Adolf Hitler's guest in Berlin, and wanted to apply the Nazis' "final solution" to Jews in Palestine and Arab countries. In a radio address to Arabs, al-Husseini declared: "Arabs, rise as one man and fight for your sacred rights. Kill the Jews wherever you find them."

Even if they wanted to leave, Jews were denied their right to migration, and after World War II, the British prevented Jews from emigrating to Palestine. Once the British mandate ended, Israel declared statehood, and war broke out between Israel and the Arab states, the situation became even worse for Jews. Anti-Semitic programs and riots claimed lives throughout the Middle East, Jews had their citizenships revoked, and their land and assets confiscated. The situation continued to deteriorate in the 1950s, as a wave of Arab nationalism spread through the region, and was exacerbated further by the Six Day War in 1967.

The current drive to bring attention to the plight of Jewish refugees is not intended to dismiss any suffering experienced by Palestinians, said Stanley Urman, executive director of Justice for Jews From Arab Countries, but to make sure that displaced Jewish populations are as much a part of the international political agenda as other refugee groups.

In the near term, the focus is on passing two resolutions, one in the House ([H.R. 185](#)) and one in the Senate ([S. 85](#)). The proposed House legislation resolves that "for any comprehensive Middle East peace agreement to be credible and enduring, the agreement must address and resolve all outstanding issues relating to the legitimate rights of all refugees in the Middle East, including Jews, Christians, and other populations displaced from countries in the region."

It also calls on the President to instruct any U.S. representative to the U.N. or other international forums to use American influence to ensure that any resolution that

mentions Palestinian refugees "must also include a similarly explicit reference to the resolution of the issue of Jewish, Christian, and other refugees from Arab countries..." as well as make clear that the resolution of all outstanding refugee issues are integral to any comprehensive peace plan.

So far, the two pieces of legislation have found support in both parties. The House resolution is sponsored by the staunch liberal Rep. Jerrold Nadler (D-NY), but includes among its 16 co-sponsors the conservative stalwart Rep. Mike Pence (R-IN). The Senate version is sponsored by Sen. Frank Lautenberg (D-NJ) and includes among its five co-sponsors Sen. Joe Lieberman (I-CT), and Sen. Trent Lott (R-MS). Reps. Alcee Hastings (D-FL) and Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (R-FL) spoke at Thursday's hearing.

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