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The forgotten refugees

Jewish refugees from Arab states just as as Palestinian refugees

Uzi Arad

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As Israel and the Palestinians negotiate the princ status agreement, while looking into mechanisms resolve the Palestinian refugee problem, it is imp their attention to the refugees who have been igr Jews who left Arab countries just before and just

While the Palestinian refugee problem has been preferential treatment compared to any other refu appears that the question of Jewish refugees ha forgotten. The issue has been dealt with mainly t as the Justice for Jews of Arab Countries (JJAC leaders such as Irwin Cotler.

According to JJAC figures, about 850,000 Jews left Arab countries in 1948 – slightly more than the estimated number of Palestinians who left the Land of Israel. It is noteworthy that Jewish communities existed in Arab countries for hundreds of years, including some that preceded the Muslim occupation, following which the Jews along with the Christians were considered “second class citizens.”

In the 20th Century, the civil rights of Jewish communities were curbed. The Jews were subjected to confiscation of property, discrimination, pogroms, abuse on the part of authorities, and at times even executions. As a result, more than a million Jews left Arab countries since Israel's establishment. According to estimates, only about 5,000 Jews remain in Arab countries today.

The Palestinian refugee problem has enjoyed great international attention: Out of 681 UN resolutions pertaining to the Middle Eastern conflict, about 101 pertain to Palestinian refugees, and immense international funds were

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invested in supporting them. At the same time, even though the question of Jews who left Arab countries was granted legal and political status (on two opportunities, the UN High Commission for Refugees confirmed that

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Jews who left Arab states following 1948 are refugees who deserve UN assistance) the issue was not promoted in practice.

Principle of reciprocity

Jewish refugees received indirect formal expression in agreements and treaties where the issue of refugees is expressed using language that implies parallelism, without explicitly noting whether a refugee is Palestinian or Jewish. This is how the issue was worded in Resolution 242, in the peace treaties with Egypt and Jordan, in the Oslo Accords, and in the understandings of the Madrid Conference.

Until today, Israeli government elements have not given operative weight to the issue. Indeed, in the framework of the Netanyahu government's preparations for final-status talks, the principles of parallelism and reciprocity were drafted in a manner that would condition progress on the Palestinian refugee issue on parallel progress with respect to Jewish refugees.

President Clinton accepted this outline and it appeared that the Barak government was willing to adopt it, yet according to testaments by JJAC members and others, the last two governments neglected the issue and refrained from placing it on the operative agenda.

Now, in order to close the gap, it is essential to act on two fronts: Firstly, on the legal-principled level – entrench the issue as a permanent element in any framework and agreement, in a similar manner to the way this is done with Palestinian refugees. Secondly, on the practical level – apply the principal of reciprocity, according to which there will be no progress on the issue of Palestinian refugees without progress on the issue of Jewish refugees.

Only such condition would grant the issue the leverage needed to place it on the agenda and to stimulate it. This explains the significance of legislation adopted in April by the US Congress – which obligates the Administration – according to which any explicit reference to Palestinian refugees must be accompanied by a similar explicit reference to the Jewish refugees.

It would be appropriate for the Israeli Knesset not to trail behind the US Congress and pose a similar demand. However, the

issue obliges the Israeli government even more so, and it must not leave it up to organizations and Jewish leaders in the Diaspora.



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