

No issue is more emblematic of the 20th century Palestinian experience than the plight of the approximately seven million Palestinian refugees. An estimated 70 percent of all Palestinians worldwide are refugees, while one out of three refugees worldwide is Palestinian. Approximately half of all Palestinian refugees are stateless. For decades, Israel has denied Palestinian refugees the right to return, violating UNGA Resolution 194, while providing for unfettered Jewish immigration to Israel.

Palestinian refugees lack the most basic human rights, suffer from inadequate international protection and assistance, and bear the brunt of the ongoing conflict with Israel. A just resolution of the refugee issue – one that recognizes the right of return and provides a range of meaningful choices to refugees – is essential to a successful negotiated solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

A Brief History of the Refugee Issue

From 1947 to 1949, more than 726,000 Palestinians were expelled from or forced to leave their homes and became refugees prior to, and immediately following, Israel's statehood declaration. Many fled from direct military assaults, while others fled from fear of imminent assaults by Jewish militias. Some 150,000 Palestinians remained in the areas of Palestine that became the State of Israel, including 46,000 Palestinians who were internally displaced during the war. Israel has refused to allow these internally displaced Palestinians to return to their homes and villages.

During Israel's 1967 military occupation of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, roughly 300,000 Palestinians were forced to leave their homes there to other parts of the occupied Palestinian territories (oPt) as well as across regional borders. Among this new wave of fleeing Palestinians, approximately 120,000 had previously been displaced in 1948. Since 1967, we have continued to face displacement from and within the oPt as a result of Israeli policies that include home demolition, evictions, land confiscation, residency revocation, construction of settlements and the Separation Wall, and the massive supporting Israeli military presence. Neither the 1948 refugees nor the 1967 refugees and internally displaced persons have been allowed by Israel to return to their homes within what are now Israel and the oPt.

Those Palestinians who were expelled or fled the violence in and around 1948 were effectively denationalized by Israel's parliament in 1952. Their properties were seized and ultimately transferred to the State of Israel for the nearly exclusive benefit of the Jewish people. During and following the 1948 war, more than 400 of Palestinian villages were depopulated and destroyed. Israel built new Jewish-only communities over some of these destroyed village areas. As former Israel Defense Minister Moshe Dayan stated in 1969,

“[J]ewish villages were built in the place of Arab villages. You do not even know the names of these Arab villages, and I do not blame you because geography books no longer exist, not only do the books not exist, the Arab villages are not there either. Nahlal arose in the place of Mahlul; Kibbutz Gvat in the place of Jibta; Kibbutz Sarid in the place of Huneifis; and Kefar Yehushu'a in the place of Tal al-Shuman. There is not one single place built in this country that did not have a former Arab population.”

However, by some estimates, 90 percent of the sites of our villages destroyed by Israel during and after its 1948 conquest remain vacant. By contrast, the vast majority of our refugees' homes located in urban centers were left standing in 1948 but were occupied by Jewish immigrant Israelis.