

Refugees and a “Right of Return”

Anti-Zionist activists who seek an end to the Jewish state claim that 1) Zionist/Israeli policy was, and is, to expel Palestinian Arabs from the country and 2) Arabs who left Israel in 1948 and all their descendants have the moral and legal right to return. Both claims are false. 1) While Zionists sought to live alongside Palestinian Arabs, their leaders launched a war against the nascent state of Israel during which many Arabs fled and became refugees and 2) The UN resolution cited by anti-Israel activists neither grants all refugees nor their descendants the “right of return” to Israel.

No Zionist Policy to Expel Palestinians

- Israel’s first Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion repeatedly made clear:

“We do not wish and do not need to expel Arabs and take their places. All our aspiration is built on the assumption – proven throughout all our activity ... that there is enough room in the country for ourselves and the Arabs.”

- Most Palestinian Arab refugees were not expelled by Israelis, but fled the war launched by their leaders, often despite British and Jewish requests that they stay. The only major expulsion of Palestinians was from the twin towns of Lydda and Ramle following a violent uprising by residents that took place after a ceasefire was declared, forcing the Israeli army to reconquer the towns.

No Palestinian “Right of Return” Exists

- Supporters of a Palestinian Arab right of return cite paragraph 11 of the 1948 UN General Assembly Resolution 194, which states that “refugees wishing to return to their homes and live at peace with their neighbors should be permitted to do so at the earliest practicable date ...”
- But the central core of the resolution was to call for the creation of a conciliation commission and for the establishment of contact between the parties and the commission to negotiate a peaceful settlement. Arab leaders rejected Resolution 194 for the very reason that it implied recognition of Israel. The only clause they did acknowledge was clause 11 because of its language regarding refugees who wished to “live at peace with their neighbors.” The resolution, thus, neither conferred an automatic “right” of return to all refugees nor granted rights to descendants of refugees.
- Moreover, the Arab states consistently violated 194’s main provision calling for the “establishment of contact between the parties themselves and the Commission at the earliest possible date” to negotiate a final settlement. Under the legal principle of estoppel, if a party materially violates an agreement, that party has no right to demand some other part of the agreement be honored. Arab states rejected the resolution, declining to meet with Israel, much less to reach a peaceful settlement with it. Therefore, Israel was under no obligation to follow the resolution.

**For more information, see CAMERA’s
“The Palestinian Claim to a ‘Right of Return.’”**

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UNRWA

- The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) was created in 1949 by the United Nations General Assembly (Resolution 302 (IV)) to give assistance to Palestinian refugees from the 1947-1949 Arab-Israeli war in Gaza, the West Bank, Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon.
- UNRWA considers “refugees” to include both actual refugees and all their descendants, even those born and raised in, or citizens of, another country or territory. This is an understanding of “refugee” that the UN has not applied to other populations.
- UNRWA employees have been shown to have terrorist ties, with some participating in the massacres carried out in Israel on October 7, 2023.

Jewish Refugees from Arab Lands

- Over 800,000 Jews became refugees during and following Israel’s War of Independence, exceeding the number of Palestinian Arab refugees in the aftermath of Israel’s War of Independence. Many Jewish refugees were driven from their homes in Arab countries as a result of anti-Jewish hostility. Of these, the majority (~600,000) sought refuge in Israel.
 - In Iraq, Jews were targets of a brutal and extended massacre in 1941 known as the Farhoud, and, after passage of the 1947 UN partition resolution, were subject to new depredation, persecution and oppression by Iraqi authorities, resulting in the effective expulsion of almost the entire Iraqi Jewish community.
 - In Syria, Jews were targets of a devastating pogrom in Aleppo in 1947 followed by intensive persecution --freezing of bank accounts, seizure of and prohibition from purchasing property, boycott of businesses, and physical attacks on Jews resulted in the flight of Syrian Jews to Israel.
 - In Egypt, during the years following the re-establishment of the modern Jewish state and again, after the 1956 Suez War, Jews were subject to riots, murders, mass arrests, confiscation of businesses and property and expulsions, resulting in the flight of the majority of Egyptian Jews.
 - In Yemen, Morocco, and Libya, anti-Jewish rioting prompted tens of thousands of Jews to move to Israel.