

Jews From Muslim Lands: The Forgotten Refugees of 1948

June 20 was World Refugee Day, dedicated to nearly 60 million people worldwide who have been forcibly displaced by conflict or persecution. One group of refugees rarely acknowledged is the Jews who were indigenous to Muslim lands but compelled to flee around the time when the state of Israel was established.

A Google search for “1948 refugees” produces about 6 million results. All but a few (at least through page six) are about the Palestinian Arab refugees, as if they were the only refugees in 1948.

However, it is estimated that from the beginning of the 1948 Arab–Israeli War through the early 1970s, up to 1 million Jews fled or were expelled from their ancestral homes in Muslim countries. Nearly 260,000 of those refugees reached Israel between 1948 and 1951 and comprised 56 percent of all immigrants to the fledgling state. By 1972, their numbers had reached 600,000.

In 1948, Middle East and North African countries had considerable Jewish populations: Morocco (250,000), Algeria (140,000), Iraq (140,000), Iran (120,000), Egypt (75,000), Tunisia (50,000), Yemen (50,000), Libya (35,000), and Syria (20,000). Today, the indigenous Jews of those countries are virtually extinct (although Morocco and Iran each still have under 10,000 Jews). In most cases, the Jewish population had lived there for millennia.

Few know this history because the Jewish refugees of 1948 were granted citizenship by the countries to which they fled, including Israel. By contrast, many Muslim countries refused to integrate the Palestinian refugees, preferring to leave them as second-class citizens in order to maintain a domestic

demographic balance and/or a political problem for Israel.

Media bias also explains why so few people know about the 1948 Jewish refugees from Muslim lands. A search for “1948 refugees” on the BBC news site generates 41 articles (going back to 1999); 40 discuss the Palestinian Arab refugees of 1948. Only three of those 40 (dated 9/22/11, 9/2/10, and 4/15/04) even mention the Jewish refugees from Muslim lands, and two do so only in a single, superficial sentence that presents the issue as a claim rather than a historical fact.

A search for “1948 refugees Jews from Arab lands” on the *New York Times* site produces 497 results (replacing *Arab* with *Muslim* halves the results), while “1948 Palestinian refugees” yields 1,050 results. Consider a comparison using Sri Lanka, another war-torn, multiethnic country that gained its independence from Britain in 1948. The nearly-26-year ethnic conflict there began in 1983 and claimed 80,000 to 100,000 lives, many multiples of the total casualties from the nearly 100-year Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Sri Lanka’s conflict also produced hundreds of thousands of refugees, including at least 200,000 Tamil refugees in Western Europe alone. Yet a search for “Tamil refugees” generates only 531 articles—less than 5 percent of the 11,300 results for “Palestinian Arab refugees.”

Institutionalized favoritism at the U.N. also has enabled the Palestinians to monopolize the refugee issue, which undoubtedly reinforces the media’s bias. All non-Palestinian refugees around the world (nearly 55 million) are cared for by the U.N. High Commission for Refugees, which works under the guidelines of the Convention on Refugees of 1951. But Palestinian refugees (whose original population was under 1 million) have a U.N. agency dedicated exclusively to them (UNRWA).

UNRWA’s unique definition of *refugee* includes anyone “whose normal place of residence was Palestine between June 1946 and

May 1948, who lost both their homes and means of livelihood as a result of the 1948 Arab-Israeli conflict.” So, in addition to families who lived in the area for generations, UNRWA’s definition includes any migrants who arrived as recently as 1946 but were then displaced.

And because the definition includes “descendants of fathers fulfilling the definition,” UNRWA’s refugee population has grown from 750,000 in 1950 to 5.3 million today (making resolution of the Palestinian refugee issue even harder). Despite these problems, the United States continues to support UNRWA (with over \$4.1 billion dollars since 1950).

The rest of the world’s refugees are assisted by the High Commission, which is mandated to help refugees rapidly rebuild their lives, usually outside the countries they fled. Jewish refugees from Muslim lands did just that: They rebuilt their lives in Israel and elsewhere.

But the fact that they quietly adapted and Israel granted them full citizenship doesn’t lessen the wrongs committed by their countries of origin. These Jewish refugees from Muslim lands suffered legal and often violent persecution that resulted in immeasurable emotional and physical loss. They lost billions in property and endured huge socioeconomic disadvantages when forced to rebuild their lives from scratch. Israel was unfairly burdened with the colossal social and economic cost of suddenly absorbing so many refugees. So any suggestion that Jewish refugees from Muslim lands don’t deserve compensation is resoundingly wrong.

On the recent World Refugee Day, the Israeli Knesset member Shimon Ohayon, whose family fled Morocco in 1956, called on the Arab League to “accept their great responsibility for driving out almost a million Jews from lands [in] which they had lived for millennia.” He explained, “In 1947, the Political Committee of the Arab League drafted a law that called for the freezing of bank accounts of Jews, their

internment and [the confiscation of their assets].

“Various other discriminatory measures were taken by Arab nations and subsequent meetings reportedly called for the expulsion of Jews from member states of the Arab League.”

Ohayon challenged the League to accept responsibility for “the ethnic cleansing of the Jewish population from most of the Middle East and North Africa ... [and] to provide redress to the Jewish refugees.”

A just and comprehensive Mideast peace is possible only when Muslim states recognize their role in two historic wrongs: 1) displacing 1 million indigenous people only because they were Jews and 2) perpetuating the plight of Palestinian refugees by denying them citizenship.

The first wrong requires financial compensation to the families of Jewish refugees from Muslim lands, which reparation can be administered by the states that absorbed them. The second wrong should be remedied by granting full citizenship to Palestinian refugees (and their descendants) who have resettled in Muslim lands. Both wrongs have festered for too many decades.

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