

Avi Beker ~ The Forgotten Narrative: Jewish Refugees From Arab Countries



Jewish Political Studies Review - Historically, there was an exchange of populations in the Middle East and the number of displaced Jews exceeds the number of Palestinian Arab refugees. Most of the Jews were expelled as a result of an open policy of anti-Semitic incitement and even ethnic cleansing. However, unlike the Arab refugees, the Jews who fled are a forgotten case because of a combination of international cynicism and domestic Israeli suppression of the subject. The Palestinians are the only group of refugees out of the more than one hundred million who were displaced after World War II who have a special UN agency that, according to its mandate, cannot but perpetuate their tragedy. An open debate about the exodus of the Jews is critical for countering the Palestinian demand for the “right of return” and will require a more objective scrutiny of the myths about the origins of the Arab- Israeli conflict.

Introduction

Why was the story of the Jewish refugees from Arab countries suppressed? How did it become a forgotten exodus?

Semha Alwaya, an attorney from San Francisco and former Jewish refugee from Iraq, wrote in March 2005 in the *San Francisco Chronicle* that the world is ignoring her story simply because of the “inconvenience for those who seek to blame Israel for all the problems in the Middle East.”¹ As she notes, since 1949 the United Nations has passed more than a hundred resolutions on Palestinian refugees and not a single one on Jewish refugees from Arab countries. The UN makes a clear divide between the “right of return” of millions of refugees even into Israel proper (the pre-1967 borders) and the rights of these Jewish refugees.

Although they exceed the numbers of the Palestinian refugees, the Jews who fled are a forgotten case. Whereas the former are at the very heart of the peace process with a huge UN bureaucratic machinery dedicated to keeping them in the camps, the nine hundred thousand Jews who were forced out of Arab countries

have not been refugees for many years. Most of them, about 650,000, went to Israel because it was the only country that would admit them. Most of them resided in tents that after several years were replaced by wooden cabins, and stayed in what were actually refugee camps for up to twelve years. They never received any aid or even attention from the UN Relief And Works Agency (UNRWA), the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, or any other international agency. Although their plight was raised almost every year at the UN by Israeli representatives, there was never any other reference to their case at the world body.

Only at the end of October 2003 was a bipartisan resolution (H. Con. Res. 311) submitted to the U.S. Congress that recognized the “Dual Middle East Refugee Problem.” It speaks of the forgotten exodus of nine hundred thousand Jews from Arab countries who “were forced to flee and in some cases brutally expelled amid coordinated violence and anti-Semitic incitement that amounted to ethnic cleansing.” Referring to the “population exchange” that took place in the Middle East, the resolution deplors the “cynical perpetuation of the Arab refugee crisis” and criticizes the “immense machinery of UNRWA” that only “increases violence through terror.” The resolution called on UNRWA to set up a program for resettling the Palestinian refugees.

Typically, the issue of the Jewish refugees was not on the agenda of the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations for a final settlement at Camp David in July 2000. The subject emerged only after the parties failed to reach an agreement on the issue of the Palestinian refugees. Only then did the Israelis raise the question of justice for the Jews from Arab countries.

In addition to the international constraints, there have been domestic political reasons for successive Israeli governments’ suppression of the subject. Many Israelis regarded the immigration and later integration of the Middle Eastern Jews into Israeli society as an important element in the Zionist ethos of the ingathering of exiles, and there was a reluctance to describe it in terms of a forced expulsion or, at best, an involuntary emigration. The Zionist leadership of the newborn state chose the romanticized code-name Magic Carpet to describe the immigration from Yemen, and the biblical title Operation Ezra and Nehemiah – they were Jewish leaders who returned to Jerusalem from Babylon to build the Second Temple – for the exodus of the Iraqi Jews.

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