



Palestine: give refugees the right to return to their homeland!

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During and after the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948, almost 800,000 Palestinians were ethnically cleansed. They were turned from citizens into refugees. These refugees and their descendants are the largest and most persistent refugee group in the world with over 3.7 million registered by the United Nations and about 2 million others not registered.

The property of the refugees was stolen from them, mostly becoming state land in the possession of kibbutzim and moshavim (collective farms), land which under Israeli law may only be used by Israel's Jewish citizens. Additionally, Israel's famous Law of Return removed any citizenship or residence rights from non-Jews expelled from its territory during the 1947-1949 war, while simultaneously granting any Jewish person in the world the right to claim automatic citizenship upon arrival in the country.

The majority of Palestine's Arab population were self-sufficient peasants or tenant farmers: consequently their expulsion from their homes and the confiscation of their property left them dependent upon charity, international aid or menial work in order to survive. More than 50 years after the Nakba (catastrophe), many still live in the dehumanising refugee camps.

Why has the refugee problem persisted? United Nations Resolution 194, passed in December 1948, made Israel's UN membership conditional on the implementation of the right of the refugees to return, stating: "...the refugees wishing to return to their homes and live at peace with their neighbours should be permitted to do so at the earliest practicable date... compensation should be paid for the property of those choosing not to return."

Israel held off from reaching an agreement on the return of the refugees, insisting that it had to take place in the context of a general peace settlement in which the Arab states recognised the state of Israel. This insistence was made for two reasons: to prevent making permanent the borders that Israel acquired in 1948 (which many Israelis regarded as being unsatisfactory); and to turn the results of ethnic cleansing into a fact that would have to be accepted by the Arab states, thus "solving" the refugee problem at their expense and that of the refugees themselves. This remains the situation today.

Where did the refugees end up? Between one-half and two-thirds of Palestine's Arab population was displaced in 1948. Of the small number (less than 100,000) who remained under Israeli rule, most were granted Israeli citizenship although expulsions continued well into the early 1950s under the guise of removing "infiltrators".

Various discriminatory land laws and the Law of Return created the legal category of "present absentee"; that is, Arabs who fled from their original homes to areas (usually only a short distance away) that subsequently became part of Israel. These laws confiscated their property, despite their possession of Israeli citizenship and their presence in the country. They and their descendants are a factor in the debate around the "right of return".

The largest number of refugees, about half the total, were expelled to those parts of their country which the Zionists did not occupy in 1948: the West Bank and the Gaza Strip (one of the poorest and most densely populated pieces of land in the world), under Jordanian and Egyptian rule respectively. They subsequently found themselves under Israeli occupation in 1967.

During the occupation, and until Israel's recent 'closure' of the Palestinian areas, which has effectively sealed them off from the outside world, the Israeli economy drew heavily on the captive labour force in the occupied territories. Many Palestinians would make a long daily journey from their refugee camp to work in the same lands from which they had been expelled - having to run a gauntlet of checkpoints and restrictive 'security' and immigration measures in the process. For them, the 'right of return' is not a demand to return to a country from which they have been separated for more than 50 years - it is a demand for full civil, national, political and economic rights in the country in which they still live.

A smaller number of refugees found themselves in Syria and the Jordanian East Bank, where they enjoy rights of permanent residence (and, in Jordan's case, citizenship). Additionally, economic migration between the west and east banks of the River Jordan gradually increased the number of Palestinians in Jordan proper to the point where they now constitute the majority of the population.

Outside of historic Palestine, the largest Palestinian refugee population is in Lebanon, where it now numbers over half a million. In order not to disrupt the demographic balance and Lebanon's French-imposed confessional political system, (based upon a fictitious Christian majority), the mainly Muslim Palestinians were barred from working in over 70 listed professions, denied rights of permanent residence, and subjected to a complex regime of legal discrimination intended to encourage their migration out of the country.

Subsequent migrations and expulsions have also taken place. From the 1950s onwards, Palestinians have emigrated to other Arab states (particularly in the oil-rich Gulf and Peninsula), to North America, Europe and Australia in search of economic opportunities denied to them in their host countries. Palestinians were expelled from the West Bank following Israel's occupation in 1967; from Jordan in 1970 during King Hussein's suppression of the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO); from Lebanon after Israel's invasion in 1982; from Kuwait following its 'liberation' by US imperialism in 1991; and from Libya by their supposed friend and protector, Colonel Gaddafi. Like European Jewry in the first half of the twentieth century, they are the perennial victims of pogroms and massacres, and have little security in any of their places of exile.

Astonishingly as it may seem Israel has attempted to evade responsibility for the Palestinian refugee problem. One of the most prevalent myths is that the 1948 refugees 'were not expelled', but left at the request of their own leaders in order to facilitate a plan to drive the Jews into the sea.

This transparent lie flies in the face of all of the recorded historic facts. There 35 documented massacres, including the most notorious 'Deir Yassin' where 250 unarmed civilians were murdered in cold blood. To deny this is historical revisionism.

A more common objection is that the absorption and reintegration of the refugees should be the responsibility of the Arab states. After all, Israel absorbed an equivalent number of Jews from the Arab countries in the immediate aftermath of 1948, many of them forced out of their countries of origin in a similarly shocking fashion. Why can't the Arab states take responsibility for their fellow Arabs, as Israel has for its fellow Jews? Socialists should reject this principle of 'population exchange' out of hand, trampling as it does on the national rights of all peoples without exception. One crime does not excuse another.

Another argument is that 'return' is economically and logistically impossible. This, however, is a red herring. A study of the demography of Israel shows that 78 per cent of Israelis live in 14 per cent of pre-1967 Israel and that the remaining 86 per cent of the land in Israel, on which 22 per cent of Israelis live, is mostly land that belongs to the refugees. Of this 22 per cent of Israel's population, 91 per cent (20 per cent of the total) live in city centres which are mostly Palestinian, and the remaining 9 per cent (2 per cent of the total) live in kibbutzim and moshavim - the vast majority existing on refugee land.

Of the 530 locations 'depopulated' in 1948, the majority are still unoccupied or lie in areas with very low population density. Contrast this to the overcrowded and inhumane conditions in the camps. Consequently, a large portion of the

refugees could, almost literally, return to their towns and villages of origin without displacing a single Jew. As Salman Abu Sitta, president of the Palestine Land Society and former member of the Palestine National Council states: "the return of 5 million refugees and the end of the historic conflict is weighed against the livelihood of 8,600 kibbutzim, an economically bankrupt movement now largely abandoned by the Israelis themselves".

Moreover, Israel's history as a state built on immigration demonstrates that there is no question of its economic ability to absorb newcomers if the political will is there. The total number of refugees from Gaza and Lebanon equals the number of Russian immigrants who came to live in Israel during the the 1990s.

The real objection to the return of the refugees, which all other objections are intended to obscure, is that it would undermine Israel's character as a Jewish state. It is certainly indisputable that the mass return of the refugees to their former lands would undermine the current Jewish majority within Israel's pre-1967 borders. An argument is even made that the returning refugees would inevitably "take revenge" upon the current Jewish residents, or would otherwise oppress the Jewish minority or attempt to "drive them into the sea".

This argument is a self-fulfilling prophecy that evades the question of national oppression, the responsibility of the oppressor nation (Israel) for its consequences, and the possibility of its eradication. The longer that a people is nationally oppressed, the more likely it is that their just national grievances will find expression in national hatreds.

Besides which, if Israel's character as a Jewish state can be maintained only by denying the rights of another nationality, then this is not a national character that socialists should defend.

Socialists should support the right of return for Palestinians. The passage of time does not remove this right: it merely underlines its seriousness. But more importantly, the refugees' right of return is a national right that is a key component of the exercise of the entire Palestinian people's right to self-determination. The Palestinian people are oppressed as a nation not merely because they suffer Israeli occupation - their national oppression, and their national struggle against it, pre-dates 1967 by twenty years.

They are oppressed as a nation because they are denied their right to self-determination within their historic homeland by a state founded on exclusivist principles. This refers not just to the apartheid-style exclusion of those under occupation or inside Israel itself, but to the physical exclusion of the Palestinian diaspora.

Proposed "solutions" to the refugee problem which reject the right of return and refer only to financial compensation, economic integration and resettlement recognise one aspect of their individual rights, but ignore their national rights. They may alleviate the economic situation of the refugees, but will not solve the problem of their national oppression. Nor will they eliminate their own self-identification as members of the Palestinian nation, as the existence of economically integrated Palestinian communities in Jordan and Syria demonstrates.

Take the example of Gaza. Its refugee residents have no intention of leaving Gaza en masse to anywhere outside of historic Palestine - ruling out resettlement. A solution which offered them financial compensation as a substitute for their return (in the context of a two-state solution) would amount to little more than an insulting drip-feed of international aid to a neo-colonial slum still vastly dependent upon the Israeli economy. It would not eliminate their just national grievances, and would therefore not solve the national conflict.

A "solution" based upon a combination of compensation and resettlement, however, would necessarily have to resettle the refugees in lands further away from their historic homeland than where they now live, if it was to have any purpose whatsoever.

It can be quite safely assumed that the refugees would oppose this tooth and nail, and would resist its implementation. "Resettlement", therefore, would amount to little more than a state-sponsored pogrom supported by the guarantees of the "international community", that is, world imperialism.

Not all of the refugees would choose to return to their lands in the event of a settlement that recognised their unfettered right to return. That, however, is their choice. The principle at stake is not merely the individual rights of a large number of displaced persons, but the national rights of an oppressed nation to determine its own national future.

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