

Refugees are one of the major points of contention in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The term is usually used to refer to Arab refugees from Mandatory Palestine who lost their homes during the 1947-48 war. The same war also caused the ethnic cleansing of hundreds of thousands of Jews from Arab countries; most of these refugees were absorbed and settled in Israel. But six decades later, millions of descendants of the Arab refugees still lack permanent housing and full political rights in the Palestinian Authority and Arab countries.

The Origins of the Problem: War and Displacement

- A UN resolution in November 1947 partitioned British-ruled Palestine into a Jewish state and an Arab state. The Jews accepted the Partition Plan as affirmation of their 3,000-year tie to the land and fulfillment of their national dream. The Arabs of Palestine and neighboring states rejected the plan and launched a war to eradicate the Jewish state.
- In May 1948, the British forces left and the Jews established the State of Israel. In its founding Declaration of Independence, Israel extended its hand in peace to its neighbors and invited its non-Jewish residents to become full and equal citizens of the new state.
- During the war, about 750,000 Arabs were displaced within and from Palestine. Some were forcibly evacuated by Jewish military forces; others fled the fighting, expecting to return to their homes when the fighting ended.
- A similar number of Jews were also expelled from Arab states, stripped of their citizenship, and their property confiscated. These Jewish refugees from Morocco, Iraq, Yemen, Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Algeria, Syria, and Lebanon were welcomed in Israel, resettled and absorbed.

Descendants of Refugees Today: Unsettled and unwelcome

- The Arab refugees from Palestine settled primarily in Jordan, Egypt, Lebanon, and Syria. Most of these countries did not allow them citizenship and continue to discriminate against the refugees and their descendants in housing, employment, and political participation.
- The UN created a special body, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), to deal with Palestinian refugees. The UN defines Palestinian refugees differently than all other refugees in the world, and explicitly rejects any attempt to resettle or absorb them in their host countries.
- Today, there are over 4 million Palestinian Arab refugees and their descendants, most living in Israeli-occupied (and Palestinian Authority-controlled) territories and in Arab countries. They are generally treated as second-class citizens, or non-citizens with limited rights, in Arab states.

Hope for Tomorrow: Just resolution of the refugee problem

- Resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict must address the problem of stateless refugees. Under most scenarios, they would be settled in their host countries or return to a newly-established Palestinian state, and may receive financial compensation. The demand for a “right of return” for Palestinian refugees to Israel undermines the basic premise of a two-state solution.

For further information, source documents, and additional resources, please visit www.broaderview.org/refugees.