

Palestinian Refugees

The story of the Palestinian refugees dates back a number of decades to the late 1940's and the establishment of the State of Israel. Despite the resettlement of millions of refugees around the world through the help of international organizations and welcoming countries, the Palestinian refugees remain in their state of squalor across the Middle East and, amazingly, their numbers only continue to grow.

The Palestinian refugee problem certainly seems like one of the more intractable issues within the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. However, despite propaganda and all sorts of allegations and accusations, Israel is not the reason why there now number nearly 5 million Palestinian refugees.

History

During the 1947-48 Israeli [War of Independence](#), initiated by the surrounding Arab countries, thousands of Palestinians did in fact leave their homes and flee the area. But this was done for a variety of reasons and not merely because Israel would want to kick them out. Thousands of wealthy Arabs left in anticipation of a war, thousands more responded to Arab leaders' calls to get out of the way of the advancing armies, a handful were expelled, but most simply fled to avoid being caught in the cross fire of a battle.

The beginning of the Arab exodus can be traced to the weeks immediately following the announcement of the UN partition resolution. The first to leave were roughly 30,000 wealthy Arabs who anticipated the upcoming war and fled to neighboring Arab countries to await its end. Less affluent Arabs from the mixed cities of Palestine moved to all-Arab towns to stay with relatives or friends.

All of those who left fully anticipated being able to return to their homes after an early Arab victory, as Palestinian nationalist Aref el-Aref explained:

The Arabs thought they would win in less than the twinkling of an eye and that it would take no more than a day or two from the time the Arab armies crossed the border until all the colonies were conquered and the enemy would throw down his arms and cast himself on their mercy.

Meanwhile, Jewish leaders urged the Arabs to remain in Palestine and become citizens of Israel. The Assembly of Palestine Jewry issued this appeal on October 2, 1947:

We will do everything in our power to maintain peace, and establish a cooperation gainful to both [Jews and Arabs]. It is now, here and now, from Jerusalem itself, that a call must go out to the Arab nations to join forces with Jewry and the destined Jewish State and work shoulder to shoulder for our common good, for the peace and progress of sovereign equals.

On November 30, the day after the [UN partition vote](#), the Jewish Agency announced: "The main theme behind the spontaneous celebrations we are witnessing today is our community's desire to seek peace and its determination to achieve fruitful cooperation with the Arabs...."

Israel's [Proclamation of Independence](#), issued May 14, 1948, also invited the Palestinians to remain in their homes and become equal citizens in the new state:

In the midst of wanton aggression, we yet call upon the Arab inhabitants of the State of Israel to preserve the ways of peace and play their part in the development of the State, on the basis of full and equal citizenship and due representation in all its bodies and institutions....We extend our hand in peace and neighborliness to all the neighboring states and their peoples, and invite them to cooperate with the independent Jewish nation for the common good of all.

Caught in the Middle

Throughout the period that preceded the [May 15 invasion](#) of the Arab regular armies, large-scale military engagements, incessant sniping, robberies and bombings took place. In view of the thousands of casualties that resulted from the pre-invasion violence, it is not surprising that many Arabs would have fled out of fear for their lives.

The second phase of the Arab flight began after the Jewish forces started to register military victories against Arab irregulars. Among the victories were the battles for [Tiberias](#) and [Haifa](#), which were accompanied by the evacuation of the Arab inhabitants.

On January 30, 1948, the Jaffa newspaper, *Ash Sha'ab*, reported: "The first of our fifth column consists of those who abandon their houses and businesses and go to live elsewhere....At the first signs of trouble they take to their heels to escape sharing the burden of struggle."

Another Jaffa paper, *As Sarih* (March 30, 1948) excoriated Arab villagers near Tel Aviv for "bringing down disgrace on us all by 'abandoning the villages.'"

John Bagot Glubb, the commander of Jordan's Arab Legion, said: "Villages were frequently abandoned even before they were threatened by the progress of war" (*London Daily Mail*, August 12, 1948).

Jewish forces seized [Tiberias](#) on April 19, 1948, and the entire Arab population of 6,000 was evacuated under British military supervision. The Jewish Community Council issued a statement afterward: "We did not dispossess them; they themselves chose this course....Let no citizen touch their property."

In early April, an estimated 25,000 Arabs left the [Haifa](#) area following an offensive by the irregular forces led by Fawzi alQawukji, and rumors that Arab air forces would soon bomb the Jewish areas around Mt. Carmel. On April 23, the [Haganah](#) captured Haifa. A British police report from Haifa, dated April 26, explained that "every effort is being made by the Jews to persuade the Arab populace to stay and carry on with their normal lives, to get their shops and businesses open and to be assured that their lives and interests will be safe." In fact, [David Ben-Gurion](#) had sent [Golda Meir](#) to Haifa to try to persuade the Arabs to stay, but she was unable to convince them because of their fear of being judged traitors to the Arab cause. By the end of the battle, more than 50,000 Palestinians had left.

Tens of thousands of Arab men, women and children fled toward the eastern outskirts of the city in cars, trucks, carts, and afoot in a desperate attempt to reach Arab territory until the Jews captured Rushmiya Bridge

toward Samaria and Northern Palestine and cut them off. Thousands rushed every available craft, even rowboats, along the waterfront, to escape by sea toward [Acre](#) (*New York Times*, April 23, 1948).

In Tiberias and Haifa, the Haganah issued orders that none of the Arabs' possessions should be touched, and warned that anyone who violated the orders would be severely punished. Despite these efforts, all but about 5,000 or 6,000 Arabs evacuated Haifa, many leaving with the assistance of British military transports.

[Syria's UN](#) delegate, Faris el-Khoury, interrupted the UN debate on Palestine to describe the seizure of Haifa as a “massacre” and said this action was “further evidence that the 'Zionist program' is to annihilate Arabs within the Jewish state if partition is effected.”

The following day, however, the British representative at the UN, Sir Alexander Cadogan, told the delegates that the fighting in Haifa had been provoked by the continuous attacks by Arabs against Jews a few days before and that reports of massacres and deportations were erroneous. The same day (April 23, 1948), Jamal Husseini, the chairman of the Palestine Higher Committee, told the UN Security Council that instead of accepting the Haganah's truce offer, the Arabs “preferred to abandon their homes, their belongings, and everything they possessed in the world and leave the town.”

As fear and chaos spread throughout Palestine, the early trickle of refugees became a flood, numbering more than 200,000 by the time the provisional government declared the independence of the State of Israel.

Once the invasion began in May 1948, most Arabs remaining in Palestine left for neighboring countries. Surprisingly, rather than acting as a strategically valuable “fifthcolumn” in the war, the Palestinians chose to flee to the safety of the other Arab states, still confident of being able to return. A leading Palestinian nationalist of the time, Musa Alami, revealed the attitude of the fleeing Arabs:

The Arabs of Palestine left their homes, were scattered, and lost everything. But there remained one solid hope: The Arab armies were on the eve of their entry into Palestine to save the country and return things to their normal course, punish the aggressor, and throw oppressive Zionism with its dreams and dangers into the sea. On May 14, 1948, crowds of Arabs stood by the roads leading to the frontiers of Palestine, enthusiastically welcoming the advancing armies. Days and weeks passed, sufficient to accomplish the sacred mission, but the Arab armies did not save the country. They did nothing but let slip from their hands Acre, Sarafand, Lydda, Ramleh, Nazareth, most of the south and the rest of the north. Then hope fled (*Middle East Journal*, October 1949).

As the fighting spread into areas that had previously remained quiet, the Arabs began to see the possibility of defeat. As the possibility turned into reality, the flight of the Arabs increased—more than 300,000 departed after May 15 — leaving approximately 160,000 Arabs in the State of Israel.

The Arabs' fear was naturally exacerbated by the atrocity stories following the attack on [Deir Yassin](#). The native population lacked leaders who could calm them; their spokesmen, such as the Arab Higher Committee, were operating from the safety of neighboring states and did more to arouse their fears than to pacify them. Local military leaders were of little or no comfort. In one instance the commander of Arab troops in [Safed](#) went to Damascus. The following day, his troops withdrew from the town. When the residents realized they were defenseless, they fled in panic. “As Palestinian military power was swiftly and dramatically crushed and the [Haganah](#) demonstrated almost unchallenged superiority in successive battles,” Benny Morris noted, “Arab morale cracked, giving way to general, blind, panic or a ‘psychosis of flight,’ as one IDF intelligence report

put it” ([The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem Revisited](#), MA: Cambridge University Press, 2004, p. 591).

Although most of the Arabs had left by November 1948, there were still those who chose to leave even after hostilities ceased. An interesting case was the evacuation of 3,000 Arabs from Faluja, a village between [Tel Aviv](#) and [Beersheba](#):

Observers feel that with proper counsel after the Israeli-Egyptian armistice, the Arab population might have advantageously remained. They state that the Israeli Government had given guarantees of security of person and property. However, no effort was made by Egypt, Transjordan or even the United Nations Palestine Conciliation Commission to advise the Faluja Arabs one way or the other (*New York Times*, March 4, 1949).

Arab Leaders Provoke Exodus

A plethora of evidence exists demonstrating that Palestinians were encouraged to leave their homes to make way for the invading Arab armies. The U.S. Consul General in Haifa, Aubrey Lippincott, wrote on April 22, 1948, for example, that “local muftidominated Arab leaders” were urging “all Arabs to leave the city, and large numbers did so.”

The *Economist*, a frequent critic of the [Zionists](#), reported on October 2, 1948: “Of the 62,000 Arabs who formerly lived in Haifa not more than 5,000 or 6,000 remained. Various factors influenced their decision to seek safety in flight. There is but little doubt that the most potent of the factors were the announcements made over the air by the Higher Arab Executive, urging the Arabs to quit....It was clearly intimated that those Arabs who remained in [Haifa](#) and accepted Jewish protection would be regarded as renegades.”

Time's report of the battle for Haifa (May 3, 1948) was similar: “The mass evacuation, prompted partly by fear, partly by orders of Arab leaders, left the Arab quarter of Haifa a ghost city....By withdrawing Arab workers their leaders hoped to paralyze Haifa.”

Benny Morris, the historian who documented instances where Palestinians were expelled, also found that Arab leaders encouraged their brethren to leave. Starting in December 1947, he said, “Arab officers ordered the complete evacuation of specific villages in certain areas, lest their inhabitants ‘treacherously’ acquiesce in Israeli rule or hamper Arab military deployments.” He concluded, “There can be no exaggerating the importance of these arly Arab-initiated evacuations in the demoralization, and eventual exodus, of the remaining rural and urban populations” ([The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem Revisited](#), MA: Cambridge University Press, 2004, p. 590).

The Arab National Committee in Jerusalem, following the March 8, 1948, instructions of the Arab Higher Committee, ordered women, children and the elderly in various parts of Jerusalem to leave their homes: “Any opposition to this order...is an obstacle to the holy war...and will hamper the operations of the fighters in these districts” (Morris, *Middle Eastern Studies*, January 1986). Morris also documented that the Arab Higher Committee ordered the evacuation of “several dozenvillages, as well as the removal of dependents from dozens more” in April-July 1948. “The invading Arab armies also occasionally ordered whole villages to depart, so as not to be in their way” ([The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem Revisited](#), MA: Cambridge University Press, 2004, p. 592).

Morris also said that in early May units of the Arab Legion reportedly ordered the evacuation of all women and children from the town of Beisan. The Arab Liberation Army was also reported to have ordered the evacuation of another village south of Haifa. The departure of the women and children, Morris says, “tended to sap the morale of the menfolk who were left behind to guard the homes and fields, contributing ultimately to the final evacuation of villages. Such two-tier evacuation—women and children first, the men following weeks later—occurred in Qumiya in the Jezreel Valley, among the Awarna bedouin in Haifa Bay and in various other places.”

Who gave such orders? Leaders like Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri Said, who declared: “We will smash the country with our guns and obliterate every place the Jews seek shelter in. The Arabs should conduct their wives and children to safe areas until the fighting has died down.”

The Secretary of the Arab League Office in London, Edward Atiyah, wrote in his book, *The Arabs*: “This wholesale exodus was due partly to the belief of the Arabs, encouraged by the boastings of an unrealistic Arabic press and the irresponsible utterances of some of the Arab leaders that it could be only a matter of weeks before the Jews were defeated by the armies of the Arab States and the Palestinian Arabs enabled to re-enter and retake possession of their country.”

In his memoirs, Haled al Azm, the Syrian Prime Minister in 1948-49, also admitted the Arab role in persuading the refugees to leave:

Since 1948 we have been demanding the return of the refugees to their homes. But we ourselves are the ones who encouraged them to leave. Only a few months separated our call to them to leave and our appeal to the United Nations to resolve on their return.

“The refugees were confident their absence would not last long, and that they would return within a week or two,” Monsignor George Hakim, a Greek Orthodox Catholic Bishop of Galilee told the Beirut newspaper, *Sada alJanub* (August 16, 1948). “Their leaders had promised them that the Arab Armies would crush the 'Zionist gangs' very quickly and that there was no need for panic or fear of a long exile.”

On April 3, 1949, the Near East Broadcasting Station (Cyprus) said: “It must not be forgotten that the Arab Higher Committee encouraged the refugees' flight from their homes in Jaffa, Haifa and Jerusalem.”

“The Arab States encouraged the Palestine Arabs to leave their homes temporarily in order to be out of the way of the Arab invasion armies,” according to the Jordanian newspaper *Filastin* (February 19, 1949).

One refugee quoted in the Jordan newspaper, *Ad Difaa* (September 6, 1954), said: “The Arab government told us: Get out so that we can get in. So we got out, but they did not get in.”

“The Secretary-General of the [Arab League](#), Azzam Pasha, assured the Arab peoples that the occupation of Palestine and Tel Aviv would be as simple as a military promenade,” said Habib Issa in the New York Lebanese paper, *Al Hoda* (June 8, 1951). “He pointed out that they were already on the frontiers and that all the millions the Jews had spent on land and economic development would be easy booty, for it would be a simple matter to throw Jews into the Mediterranean....Brotherly advice was given to the Arabs of Palestine to leave their land, homes and property and to stay temporarily in neighboring fraternal states, lest the guns of the invading Arab armies mow them down.”



Even Jordan's King Abdullah, writing in his memoirs, blamed Palestinian leaders for the refugee problem:

The tragedy of the Palestinians was that most of their leaders had paralyzed them with false and unsubstantiated promises that they were not alone; that 80 million Arabs and 400 million Muslims would instantly and miraculously come to their rescue.

Expulsions of Arabs

The [Haganah](#) did employ psychological warfare to encourage the Arabs to abandon a few villages. [Yigal Allon](#), the commander of the [Palmach](#) (the “shock force of the Haganah”), said he had Jews talk to the Arabs in neighboring villages and tell them a large Jewish force was in Galilee with the intention of burning all the Arab villages in the Lake Huleh region. The Arabs were told to leave while they still had time and, according to Allon, they did exactly that.

In the most dramatic example, in the Ramle-Lod area, Israeli troops seeking to protect their flanks and relieve the pressure on besieged Jerusalem, forced a portion of the Arab population to go to an area a few miles away that was occupied by the Arab Legion. “The two towns had served as bases for Arab irregular units, which had frequently attacked Jewish convoys and nearby settlements, effectively barring the main road to Jerusalem to Jewish traffic.”

As was clear from the descriptions of what took place in the cities with the largest Arab populations, these cases were clearly the exceptions, accounting for only a small fraction of the Palestinian refugees. The expulsions were not designed to force out the entire Arab population; the areas where they took place were strategically vital and meant to prevent the threat of any rearguard action against the Israeli forces, and to insure clear lines of communication. Morris notes that “in general, [Haganah](#) and [IDF](#) commanders were not forced to confront the moral dilemma posed by expulsion; most Arabs fled before and during the battle, before the Israeli troops reached their homes and before the Israeli commanders were forced to confront the dilemma” ([The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem Revisited](#), MA: Cambridge University Press, 2004, p. 592).

How Many Refugees?

Many Arabs claim that 800,000 to 1,000,000 Palestinians became [refugees](#) in 1947-49. The last census was taken in 1945. It found only 756,000 permanent Arab residents in Israel. On November 30, 1947, the date the [UN voted for partition](#), the total was 809,100. A 1949 Government of Israel census counted 160,000 Arabs living in the country after the war. This meant no more than 650,000 Palestinian Arabs could have become [refugees](#). A report by the UN Mediator on Palestine arrived at an even lower figure — 472,000.

A second refugee population was created in [1967](#). After ignoring warnings to stay out of the war, [King Hussein](#) launched an attack on [Jerusalem](#), Israel's capital. The UN estimated that during the fighting 175,000 Palestinians had fled for a second time and approximately 350,000 left for the first time. About 200,000 moved to Jordan, 115,000 to Syria and approximately 35,000 left Sinai for Egypt. Most of the Arabs who left had come from the West Bank.

When the Security Council empowered U Thant to send a representative to inquire into the welfare of civilians in the wake of the 1967 war, he instructed the mission to investigate the treatment of Jewish

minorities in Arab countries, as well as Arabs in Israeli-occupied territory. Syria, Iraq and Egypt refused to permit the UN representative to carry out his investigation.

UN Resolution 194

Through November 2003, 101 of the 681 UN resolutions on the Middle East conflict referred directly to [Palestinian refugees](#). Not one mentioned the Jewish refugees from Arab countries ([Jerusalem Post](#), December 4, 2003).

The United Nations first took up the refugee issue and adopted [Resolution 194](#) on December 11, 1948. This called upon the Arab states and Israel to resolve all outstanding issues through negotiations either directly, or with the help of the Palestine Conciliation Commission established by this resolution. Furthermore, Point 11 resolves:

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, and that compensation should be paid for property of those choosing not to return and for loss of or damage to property which under principles of international law or in equity should be made good by Governments or authorities responsible. Instructs the Conciliation Commission to facilitate the repatriation, *resettlement* and economic and social rehabilitation of refugees and payment of compensation... (emphasis added).

The emphasized words demonstrate that the UN recognized that Israel could not be expected to repatriate a hostile population that might endanger its security. The solution to the problem, like all previous refugee problems, would require at least some Palestinians to be resettled in Arab lands.

The resolution met most of Israel's concerns regarding the refugees, whom they regarded as a potential fifth column if allowed to return unconditionally. The Israelis considered the settlement of the refugee issue a negotiable part of an overall peace settlement. As President [Chaim Weizmann](#) explained: "We are anxious to help such resettlement provided that real peace is established and the Arab states do their part of the job. The solution of the Arab problem can be achieved only through an all-around Middle East development scheme, toward which the United Nations, the Arab states and Israel will make their respective contributions."

At the time the Israelis did not expect the refugees to be a major issue; they thought the Arab states would resettle the majority and some compromise on the remainder could be worked out in the context of an overall settlement. The Arabs were no more willing to compromise in 1949, however, than they had been in 1947. In fact, they unanimously rejected the UN resolution.

The [General Assembly](#) subsequently voted, on [November 19, 1948](#), to establish the United Nations Relief For Palestinian Refugees (UNRPR) to dispense aid to the refugees. The UNRPR was replaced by the [United Nations Relief and Works Agency \(UNRWA\)](#) on December 8, 1949, and given a budget of \$50 million.

UNRWA was designed to continue the relief program initiated by the UNRPR, substitute public works for direct relief and promote economic development. The proponents of the plan envisioned that direct relief would be almost completely replaced by public works, with the remaining assistance provided by the Arab governments.



UNRWA had little chance of success, however, because it sought to solve a political problem using an economic approach. By the mid-1950s, it was evident neither the refugees nor the Arab states were prepared to cooperate on the large-scale development projects originally foreseen by the Agency as a means of alleviating the Palestinians' situation. The Arab governments and the refugees themselves were unwilling to contribute to any plan that could be interpreted as fostering resettlement. They preferred to cling to their interpretation of Resolution 194, which they believed would eventually result in repatriation.

While Jewish refugees from Arab countries received no international assistance, Palestinians received millions of dollars through UNRWA. Initially, the United States contributed \$25 million and Israel nearly \$3 million. The total Arab pledges amounted to approximately \$600,000. For the first 20 years, the United States provided more than two-thirds of the funds, while the Arab states continued to contribute a tiny fraction. Israel donated more funds to UNRWA than most Arab states. The Saudis did not match Israel's contribution until 1973; Kuwait and Libya, not until 1980. As recently as 1994, Israel gave more to UNRWA than all Arab countries except Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Morocco. In 2003, the United States contributed more than \$134 million of UNRWA's \$326 million budget (41%). All of the Arab countries *combined* contributed less than \$11 million (3%) and \$7.8 million of that was from Saudi Arabia, meaning the rest of the Arab world contributed less than \$3 million (1%).

Israel's Attitude Toward Refugees

When plans for setting up a state were made in early 1948, Jewish leaders in Palestine expected the population to include a significant Arab population. From the Israeli perspective, the refugees had been given an opportunity to stay in their homes and be a part of the new state. Approximately 160,000 Arabs had chosen to do so. To repatriate those who had fled would be, in the words of Foreign Minister [Moshe Sharett](#), “suicidal folly.”

Israel could not simply agree to allow all Palestinians to return, but consistently sought a solution to the refugee problem. Israel's position was expressed by [David Ben-Gurion](#) (August 1, 1948):

When the Arab states are ready to conclude a peace treaty with Israel this question will come up for constructive solution as part of the general settlement, and with due regard to our counterclaims in respect of the destruction of Jewish life and property, the long-term interest of the Jewish and Arab populations, the stability of the State of Israel and the durability of the basis of peace between it and its neighbors, the actual position and fate of the Jewish communities in the Arab countries, the responsibilities of the Arab governments for their war of aggression and their liability for reparation, will all be relevant in the question whether, to what extent, and under what conditions, the former Arab residents of the territory of Israel should be allowed to return.

The Israeli government was not indifferent to the plight of the refugees; an ordinance was passed creating a Custodian of Abandoned Property “to prevent unlawful occupation of empty houses and business premises, to administer ownerless property, and also to secure tilling of deserted fields, and save the crops....”

The implied danger of repatriation did not prevent Israel from allowing some refugees to return and offering to take back a substantial number as a condition for signing a peace treaty. In 1949, Israel offered to allow families that had been separated during the war to return; agreed to release refugee accounts frozen in Israeli

banks (eventually released in 1953); offered to pay compensation for abandoned lands and, finally, agreed to repatriate 100,000 refugees.

The Arabs rejected all the Israeli compromises. They were unwilling to take any action that might be construed as recognition of Israel. They made repatriation a precondition for negotiations, something Israel rejected. The result was the confinement of the refugees in camps.

Despite the position taken by the Arab states, Israel did release the Arab refugees' blocked bank accounts, which totaled more than \$10 million. In addition, through 1975, the Israeli government paid to more than 11,000 claimants more than 23 million Israeli pounds in cash and granted more than 20,000 acres as alternative holdings. Payments were made by land value between 1948 and 1953, plus 6 percent for every year following the claim submission.

After the [Six-Day War](#), Israel allowed some West Bank Arabs to return. In 1967, more than 9,000 families were reunited and, by 1971, Israel had readmitted 40,000 refugees. By contrast, in July 1968, Jordan prohibited persons intending to remain in the East Bank from emigrating from the West Bank and Gaza.

Arab Attitudes Toward the Refugees

The UN discussions on refugees had begun in the summer of 1948, before Israel had completed its military victory; consequently, the Arabs still believed they could win the war and allow the refugees to return triumphant. The Arab position was expressed by Emile Ghoury, the Secretary of the Arab Higher Committee:

It is inconceivable that the refugees should be sent back to their homes while they are occupied by the Jews, as the latter would hold them as hostages and maltreat them. The very proposal is an evasion of responsibility by those responsible. It will serve as a first step towards Arab recognition of the State of Israel and partition.

The Arabs demanded that the United Nations assert the “right” of the Palestinians to return to their homes, and were unwilling to accept anything less until after their defeat had become obvious. The Arabs then reinterpreted Resolution 194 as granting the refugees the absolute right of repatriation and have demanded that Israel accept this interpretation ever since.

One reason for maintaining this position was the conviction that the refugees could ultimately bring about Israel's destruction, a sentiment expressed by Egyptian Foreign Minister Muhammad Salah al-Din:

It is well-known and understood that the Arabs, in demanding the return of the refugees to Palestine, mean their return as masters of the Homeland and not as slaves. With a greater clarity, they mean the liquidation of the State of Israel (*Al-Misri*, October 11, 1949).

After the 1948 war, [Egypt](#) controlled the [Gaza Strip](#) and its more than 200,000 inhabitants, but refused to allow the Palestinians into Egypt or permit them to move elsewhere.

Although demographic figures indicated ample room for settlement existed in [Syria](#), Damascus refused to consider accepting any refugees, except those who might refuse repatriation. Syria also declined to resettle 85,000 refugees in 1952-54, though it had been offered international funds to pay for the project. [Iraq](#) was also expected to accept a large number of refugees, but proved unwilling. Lebanon insisted it had no room for the



Palestinians. In 1950, the UN tried to resettle 150,000 refugees from Gaza in [Libya](#), but was rebuffed by Egypt.

[Jordan](#) was the only Arab country to welcome the Palestinians and grant them citizenship (to this day Jordan is the only Arab country where Palestinians *as a group* can become citizens). King Abdullah considered the Palestinian Arabs and Jordanians one people. By 1950, he annexed the West Bank and forbade the use of the term Palestine in official documents.

In 1952, the UNRWA set up a fund of \$200 million to provide homes and jobs for the refugees, but it went untouched.

The plight of the refugees remained unchanged after the [Suez War](#). In fact, even the rhetoric stayed the same. In 1957, the Refugee Conference at Homs, Syria, passed a resolution stating:

Any discussion aimed at a solution of the Palestine problem which will not be based on ensuring the refugees' right to annihilate Israel will be regarded as a desecration of the Arab people and an act of treason (*Beirut al Massa*, July 15, 1957).

The treatment of the refugees in the decade following their displacement was best summed up by a former UNRWA official, Sir Alexander Galloway, in April 1952: "The Arab States do not want to solve the refugee problem. They want to keep it as an open sore, as an affront to the United Nations and as a weapon against Israel. Arab leaders don't give a damn whether the refugees live or die."

Little has changed in succeeding years. Arab governments have frequently offered jobs, housing, land and other benefits to Arabs and non-Arabs, *excluding* Palestinians. For example, [Saudi Arabia](#) chose not to use unemployed Palestinian refugees to alleviate its labor shortage in the late 1970's and early 1980's. Instead, thousands of South Koreans and other Asians were recruited to fill jobs.

The situation grew even worse in the wake of the [Gulf War](#). [Kuwait](#), which employed large numbers of Palestinians but denied them citizenship, expelled more than 300,000 of them. "If people pose a security threat, as a sovereign country we have the right to exclude anyone we don't want," said Kuwaiti Ambassador to the United States, Saud Nasir Al-Sabah (*Jerusalem Report*, June 27, 1991).

UNRWA & the Refugees Today

By the end of 2010, the number of Palestinian refugees on [UNRWA rolls](#) had risen to nearly 5 million, several times the number that left Palestine in 1948. In just the past three years, the number grew by 8 percent. Today, 42 percent of the refugees live in the territories; if you add those living in Jordan, 80 percent of the Palestinians currently live in "Palestine." Though the popular image is of refugees in squalid camps, less than one-third of the Palestinians are in the 59 [UNRWA-run camps](#).

The following chart details the dispersement of Palestinian refugees as of December 2010:

Field of Operations	Official Camps	Registered Refugees	Registered Refugees in Camps
Jordan	10	1,999,466	350,899
Lebanon	12	455,373	227,718
Syria	9	495,970	149,822
West Bank	19	848,494	206,123
Gaza Strip	8	1,167,361	518,147
Agency total	58	4,966,664	1,452,709

During the years that Israel controlled the Gaza Strip, a consistent effort was made to get the Palestinians into permanent housing. The Palestinians opposed the idea because the frustrated and bitter inhabitants of the camps provided the various terrorist factions with their manpower. Moreover, the Arab states routinely pushed for the adoption of UN resolutions demanding that Israel desist from the removal of Palestinian refugees from camps in Gaza and the West Bank. They preferred to keep the Palestinians as symbols of Israeli “oppression.”

Now the camps are in the hands of the [Palestinian Authority \(PA\)](#), but little is being done to improve the lot of the Palestinians living in them. Netty Gross of the [Jerusalem Report](#) (July 6, 1998) visited Gaza and asked an official why the camps there hadn't been dismantled. She was told the Palestinian Authority had made a “political decision” not to do anything for the nearly half a million Palestinians living in the camps until the final-status talks with Israel took place. In fact, between June 2000 and June 2003, the number of Palestinians living in camps in the PA has increased by nearly 50,000 (8 percent) and the overall number of refugees has grown by 11 percent.

For decades the refugees have held the UN responsible for ameliorating their condition. Though many Palestinians are unhappy with the treatment they have received from their Arab brothers, most refugees focus their discontentment on “the Zionists,” whom they blame for their predicament rather than the vanquished Arab armies.