

Lenten Refugee Moment, Week 5: Palestine

April 2, 2017

We've been looking at some of the world's largest refugee populations under the care of the UN refugee agency, formally called the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. However, *the* largest and longest-standing population of refugees¹ is overseen by a different UN organization, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA). UNRWA was established in 1949 specifically to carry out relief and works programs for Palestinians who fled or were expelled from their homes during the 1948 Arab-Israeli conflict that led to the establishment of the state of Israel.² Israel has continued to displace Palestinians and also to deny refugees the right to return, with the result being the "Palestinian refugee problem" is now in its 69th year. Of the estimated 12.1 million Palestinians worldwide, 7 to 8 million of them are refugees.^{3,4}

This number includes refugees from the 1948 conflict and their descendants; refugees from the Six Day War of 1967 and their descendants; and so-called "present absentees,"^{5,6} a bizarre Israeli term referring to Palestinians who were forced to flee their homes between 1948 and 1967 and not allowed to return but who remain present in either Israel or the occupied Palestinian territories. Finally, an unknown number of Palestinians have been forced out since 1967 through ongoing house demolitions and land confiscations to make room for Jewish-only settlements and a 400-mile-long separation wall on large tracts of Palestinian land, both illegal under international law.^{7,8,9}

The right of refugees and their descendants to return is enshrined in several articles of international law and UN resolutions. Israel's admission as a UN member state in 1949 was conditioned on its compliance with UN resolution 194, which states 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 the property of those choosing not to return and for loss of or damage to property." Israel still has not complied.¹⁰

To understand why this is so, we need to go back in history a bit to understand the original vision for the modern nation-state of Israel—as distinct from the Israel of the Bible. The vision for the modern nation-state grew out of a nationalist political movement called Zionism led by some Jews in Europe in the late 1800s. The goal was to create an exclusive Jewish state where Jews would be free from European oppression and anti-Semitism. Several locations were proposed, including ones in South America and Africa, but the movement eventually set its sights on Palestine. A small Jewish community had lived peacefully there as part of the Palestinian population for hundreds of years, as had Christians, but as more and more European Jews immigrated with the intent to colonize the land for themselves, tensions started rising. The UN intervened in 1947 with a partition plan allocating 55 percent of the land for a Jewish state, which neither side liked. Violence broke out almost immediately, and by 1949 Zionist forces had expanded their control to 78 percent of

Palestine, three-quarters of a million Palestinians had been made refugees, and over 500 Palestinian towns and villages were wiped off the map.¹¹

In 1967, Israel occupied the remaining 22 percent of the land and began colonizing it shortly thereafter.¹² The Israeli occupation is the longest military occupation in modern history, with Palestinians denied the most basic of civil rights and subjected to dehumanizing restrictions on virtually every aspect of daily life.¹³

Zionism from the beginning was a colonial project, designed to replace the indigenous population and to prevent them from returning:

Joseph Weitz, head of the Jewish Agency's Colonization Department in 1940, said in "A Solution to the Refugee Problem": "Between ourselves it must be clear that there is no room for both peoples together in this country. There is no other way than to transfer the Arabs from here to neighboring countries—all of them. Not one village, not one tribe should be left."¹⁴

David Ben Gurion, first prime minister of Israel, warned in 1948: "We must do everything to insure [sic] they [the Palestinians] never do return."¹⁵

In his book *We Belong to the Land*, retired Melkite Catholic Archbishop Elias Chacour described the scene in which his family and other longtime residents of their village, Biram, in the upper Galilee watched as Israeli bomber planes destroyed their town and they were made refugees in their own land.¹⁶ "The ... villagers ... gathered on a nearby hill, weeping as they watched explosives being put in place around their houses. Then Israeli Air Force planes roared over them and began bombing the village. In horror my family saw the houses explode and the trees catch fire. The screaming villagers ran to the edge of Biram and saw that bulldozers were already working to complete the destruction. Soldiers met the people and said, 'If you want to return now, you can go. The bulldozers will bury you under the rubble of the houses.'"¹⁷

Israel's position on Palestinian refugees has not changed since 1948. The government continues to say they cannot go back because their return would be a threat to the maintenance of a continued Jewish demographic majority in Israel, and that refugees should go to one of 22 Arab countries around the world.^{18,19}

Diplomatic efforts have largely focused on creating a possible Palestinian state in the West Bank, one of the territories occupied in 1967, but about half of the West Bank is already inaccessible to Palestinians, as Israel has built more than 120 illegal colonies there and encouraged over 650,000 Jewish settlers to move into them, mostly from the US and Russia.²⁰⁻²⁴ Moreover, for many Palestinians, focusing just on the 22 percent of Palestinian land occupied in 1967 ignores the issue that for them lies at the heart of the conflict—the 1948 expulsion of half the Palestinian population from 78 percent of their land.²⁵ Many families to this day still have the

keys to the homes they were forced to leave then, in the hopes that one day they will be able to return to them.²⁶

The majority of Palestinian refugees continue to reside in either the occupied Palestinian territory or surrounding countries, with rights varying from country to country. In Jordan nearly 95 percent of all Palestinian refugees have been given citizenship and are able to participate in Jordanian political and economic life. On the other hand, most Palestinian refugees in Lebanon have almost no political rights and are denied access to government run public services such as education, healthcare, and social security and from obtaining employment in many professions.²⁷

Refugees living in the occupied Palestinian territory are subject to the same limitations on their rights as are all Palestinians.²⁸ A South African government study found those limitations to be consistent with life under apartheid, defined by “discrimination based on ethnicity, segregation into ever-shrinking, non-contiguous, besieged territorial enclaves; and system of domination reinforced through assassinations; administrative detention; torture; cruel, inhumane, or degrading treatment; and arbitrary arrest and imprisonment.”²⁹

By and large, Israel has responded to such reports with accusations of anti-Semitism,^{30,31,32} and keeps its own people in the dark about its history. The original Arab names of towns have been replaced with Hebrew ones.³³ School textbooks omit any reference to what happened to the Palestinians in 1948, and the two populations are kept apart as much as possible.³⁴

According to Israeli historian Ilan Pappé, the real reason Israel refuses to recognize Palestinian refugee right of return is that Israel would need to acknowledge responsibility for creating the refugee problem in the first place, and that would raise “troubling questions about the moral legitimacy of the Zionist project as a whole ... For Israelis to acknowledge Palestinians as victims ... would mean undermining their own status of victimhood” and force them “to recognize they have become the mirror image of their own worst nightmare.”³⁵

After interviewing several Palestinian refugees in Jordan recently, journalist Paula Schmidt wrote these words:

“There’s something almost cruel about asking a Palestinian refugee whether he would accept living peacefully with Israel were he ever allowed to return. It feels like a sadistic exercise: treat a man like a lesser human, deny him a country, a house, a profession, keep him confined for years and once he is released expect him to stand up, dust the humiliation off his clothes and shake hands with his captor. The Palestinian refugees I spoke to are not willing to shake hands with their captors—at least not if another Palestinian is watching. Pride is the last thing they still own, the tenacity typical of those who have nothing to lose on one hand, and no hope of gaining anything on the other. But what I learned once the conversations became private is that many of those refugees would just like to live in peace with

dignity, and for that they are willing to give a pardon that has never been asked of them. In fact, ... [a]fter talking about the horrors committed by Israel and the need for justice and sometimes revenge, almost everyone, with one single clear exception, agreed that if Israel stopped “occupying our land, killing and humiliating our people, stealing our water, and respected our rights, we could live in peace. Perhaps even together.”³⁶

As we have been doing throughout this series, let’s close out this time by singing the first two verses of “Now It Is Evening,” #2187 in *The Faith We Sing*.

*Notes: The UMC affirms Palestinian refugee right of return and has called on Israel to end the occupation and settlement-building and to ease other infringements on Palestinian human rights. It also supports boycott of products made in the illegal settlements.*³⁷

¹ Al-Awda: The Palestine Right to Return Coalition, “FAQs about Palestinian Refugees,” <http://al-awda.org/learn-more/faqs-about-palestinian-refugees/>

² UNRWA, “Who We Are,” <https://www.unrwa.org/who-we-are?tid=85>.

³ AFP and Times of Israel staff, “Palestinians Say They Number 12.1 Million Worldwide,” *Times of Israel*, May 12, 2015, <http://www.timesofisrael.com/palestinians-say-they-number-12-1-million-worldwide/>

⁴ American Friends Service Committee, “Palestinian Refugees and the Right of Return,” <https://www.afsc.org/resource/palestinian-refugees-and-right-return>

⁵ Areej Sabbagh-Khoury, “The Internally Displaced Palestinians in Israel,” Mada al-Carmel, <http://mada-research.org/en/2013/02/25/the-internally-displaced-palestinians-in-israel-areej-sabbagh-khoury/>

⁶ Hatim Kanaaneh, *Chief Complaint: A Country Doctor’s Tales of Life in the Galilee*, Just World Books, Charlottesville, Virginia, 2015, page 14.

⁷ Areej Sabbagh-Khoury, “The Internally Displaced Palestinians in Israel,” Mada al-Carmel, <http://mada-research.org/en/2013/02/25/the-internally-displaced-palestinians-in-israel-areej-sabbagh-khoury/>

⁸ Al-Awda: The Palestine Right to Return Coalition, “FAQs about Palestinian Refugees,” <http://al-awda.org/learn-more/faqs-about-palestinian-refugees/>

⁹ Emily Harris, “A Decade in the Making, West Bank Barrier is Nearly Complete,” NPR, May 22, 2013,

<http://www.npr.org/sections/parallels/2013/05/22/186017646/a-decade-in-the-making-west-bank-barrier-is-nearly-complete>

¹⁰ American Friends Service Committee, "Palestinian Refugees and the Right of Return," <https://www.afsc.org/resource/palestinian-refugees-and-right-return>

¹¹ If Americans Knew, "A Synopsis of the Israel-Palestine Conflict," <http://ifamericaknew.org/history/>

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Noam Sheeizaf/+972, "Longest Military Occupation in the World Is Entering Its 46th Year amidst Deafening Silence," Jews for Justice for Palestinians, May 6, 2012, <http://jffjp.com/?p=31360>

¹⁴ Al-Awda: The Palestine Right to Return Coalition, "Famous Quotes," <http://al-awda.org/learn-more/famous-quotes/>

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Pilgrims of Ibilin, "Abuna Elias Chacour," <http://www.pilgrimsofibilin.org/about-us/abuna-elias-chacour/>

¹⁷ Elias Chacour, *We Belong to the Land*, University of Notre Dame Press, Indiana, 2001, pages 79–80

¹⁸ American Friends Service Committee, "Palestinian Refugees and the Right of Return," <https://www.afsc.org/resource/palestinian-refugees-and-right-return>

¹⁹ Martin Asser, "Obstacles to Arab-Israeli Peace: Palestinian Refugees," BBC News, September 2, 2010, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-11104284>

²⁰ United Methodists for Kairos Response, "Why Boycott the Settlements," page 2, https://www.kairosresponse.org/why_boycott_broch_may2015.html

²¹ Institute for Middle East Understanding, "Israel & International Law: Settlements," March 24, 2015, <https://imeu.org/article/israel-international-law-settlements>

²² Jack Moore, "Study: 15% of West Bank Settlers Are American," *Newsweek*, August 28, 2015, <https://europe.newsweek.com/study-15-west-bank-settlers-are-american-nationals-332168>

²³ Bernard Sabella, "Russian Jewish Immigration and the Future of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict," *Middle East Report*, Middle East Research and Information Project, May/June 1993, <http://www.merip.org/mer/mer182/russian-jewish-immigration-future-israeli-palestinian-conflict>

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²⁵ Sari Hanafi, "Why a 'Right of Return' Is Necessary," *Lebanon Daily Star*, October 7, 2004, http://ifamericaknew.org/cur_sit/ror.html

²⁶ Aziza Nofal, "Palestinians Work to Keep Nakba Memory Alive," *Al Monitor*, May 9, 2015, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/05/palestine-israel-occupation-nakba-right-of-return.html>

²⁷ American Friends Service Committee, "Palestinian Refugees and the Right of Return," <https://www.afsc.org/resource/palestinian-refugees-and-right-return>

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Middle East Project of the Human Sciences Research Council of South Africa, "Is Israel an Apartheid State?" 2009, https://www.kairosresponse.org/south_africa_report_icahd_1.html

³⁰ Ali Abunimah, "Palestinians Hail UN Report Declaring Israel an Apartheid State" *Electronic Intifada*, March 16, 2017, <https://electronicintifada.net/blogs/ali-abunimah/palestinians-hail-un-report-declaring-israel-apartheid-state>

³¹ Seraj Assi, "Is Israel an Apartheid State?" *Foreign Policy Journal*, April 7, 2017, <https://www.foreignpolicyjournal.com/2017/04/07/is-israel-an-apartheid-state/>

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³⁴ Personal testimonies of Israeli Jews, including members of Bay Area Women in Black and Maya Wind, who was sentenced to Israeli military prison for refusing compulsory military service

³⁵ Ilan Pappé, *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine*, Oneworld Publications Limited, London, 2006, pages 245–246

³⁶ Paula Schmitt, "Sentenced to Life at Birth: What Do Palestinian Refugees Want?" *+972*, February 8, 2014, <https://972mag.com/sentenced-to-life-at-birth-what-do-palestinian-refugees-want/86902/>

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