

The Status of the Palestinian Refugees

Jul 14, 2000



Brief Analysis

Among the issues being discussed at Camp David between Israeli prime minister Ehud Barak, Palestinian Authority chairman Yasir Arafat, and President Clinton is one matter that directly affects several other states in the region not represented at the talks, namely, the situation of the Palestinian refugees, especially those in Lebanon, Syria, and Jordan.

The Palestinian refugee issue writ large is not only unwieldy but overwhelming in its scope. Each host country requires unique policy initiatives on citizenship, residency, and compensation. A "one-size-fits-all" solution would end up destabilizing one or more of the host countries and not addressing the most pressing needs of one or more parts of the refugee population. As a result, final agreement on the refugee problem should not only separate the symbolic rhetoric from practical arrangements, it should also address each country of asylum (Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, and the Palestinian Authority) separately.

There are no reliable data on refugee numbers, and no census has been taken of refugees in countries like Lebanon and Jordan in decades. The United Nations Relief Works Agency (UNRWA) acknowledges that its figures are unverified and, especially in the case of Lebanon, inflated. Of the 3.5 million UNRWA-registered refugees, 1.4 million already live in Palestinian-controlled territory (655,000 in the West Bank and 772,000 in Gaza). Another 1.5 million are in Jordan and have Jordanian citizenship; 350,000 are in Syria and are stateless; and 373,000 are in Lebanon, although the actual number of stateless Palestinians in Lebanon may be half that. Most refugees live outside of the refugee camps.

Elements of a Refugee Agreement The United States has several important policy interests that pertain to a successful solution for the refugees. First, a solution should reinforce the sustainability and viability of peace treaties between Israel and the Palestinians, and between Israel and other Arab states. Second, there should be accommodation for the refugees that will mitigate the potential for destabilization within the Arab host countries and Israel. Third, arrangements should be made for raising the humanitarian living standards of the refugees, especially where they are in dire need.

Proposals for resolving the Palestinian refugee issue have traditionally focused on three themes: return, resettlement, and compensation.

- Return is an issue that has both symbolic and practical elements; it will have to be settled bilaterally between Israel and the Palestinians. The Palestinian legal claim to a right of return is based on their reading of UN General Assembly Resolution 194, which says, "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." Ironically, the resolution makes no reference to a "right of return." Israel has refused to entertain any notion of its obligation to accede to a Palestinian right of return within its borders and argues that UN Resolution 194 makes no provisions for any collective refugee rights. For Israel, three primary issues preclude a Palestinian exercise of a right of return-even if one could be agreed upon-Israel's demographic balance and its priority of assuring the survival of the Jewish character of the state;

Israel's security needs; and the possibility that any gesture regarding a right of return would leave the door permanently open to future claims. Many compromises could be envisaged, on both the symbolic and practical levels, including an Israeli willingness to expand its longstanding program allowing some Palestinians to move to Israel for family reunification purposes. Israel has accepted tens of thousands of Palestinians on that basis since 1948 (70,000 before the 1967 Arab-Israeli war), and recently the Israelis approved the return of 4,000 Palestinians annually. Other reports suggest Prime Minister Barak may be willing to entertain the idea of a symbolic gesture, admitting some number of Palestinians to Israel. Most analysts agree though, that any right of return will be implemented primarily to a future Palestinian state, despite reservations on Chairman Arafat's part regarding both the absorptive capacity of his territory and the political consequences of immigrating potentially radical refugees on a large scale.

- Resettlement, meaning both integration in the host countries where the refugees have lived for fifty years and true "resettlement" in a third country such as the United States, also has a strong symbolic component as well as a compelling pragmatic one. Officially, the Palestinian leadership has rejected the proposal that refugees be permanently integrated in their respective Arab host countries, viewing this as a relinquishment of the moral claim to return and an abrogation of a fundamental nationalist goal.

How and whether to integrate the refugees in Jordan and Lebanon is a matter of grave importance for the stability of those states-and an issue on which what works in one case would seriously threaten social order in the other. For example, Jordan's problem is a longstanding one of competing identities. It is crucial for the Jordanians of Palestinian origin to decide if they are Palestinians or Jordanians and then for the country to turn to the task of fully integrating them into political life, ending the discrimination they now face. Conversely for Lebanon, the issue is how to promote the emigration of most of the stateless refugees so as not to perturb the country's socio-political and confessional balance, while removing all restrictions on those who remain. Although dual citizenship may be one way for refugees to maintain a symbolic link to Palestine while actually residing elsewhere, such an arrangement is counter to the guidelines of the Arab League (enforced spottily in the Arab world), and might have dangerous consequences in Jordan where it could be used to create the impression that Palestinian?origin Jordanians are not true Jordanians.

It is also reasonable to expect that countries now absorbing many immigrants will accept Palestinian refugees. A Camp David accord could include a U.S. commitment to organize an international effort to absorb refugees.

- Compensation might take place collectively and to individual refugees, as well as to states or representative bodies. In the past, there has been widespread doubt over the possibility of rewarding individual compensation, due to the length of time that has passed, the absence of property deeds and other documents proving ownership, and the enormous logistical difficulty in verifying so many claims. However, UN General Assembly Resolution 194 contains a mechanism for processing such individual-level claims in a workable manner, and the Compensation Commission it established made much progress in identifying which individual Palestinians owned property and how much money they were owed; this included a total assessment of about \$5 billion in property loss (in 1999 dollars).

Collective compensation, long the preferred option for the West and for Israel, is subject to the problems of determining who should provide it, how it should be administered, and who should benefit from it.

Who provides it? President Clinton has already offered the possibility of American aid to an international compensation fund for the refugees. Israel is certain to participate, as are other Western nations in addition to possibly several Arab states. Agreement on how to share the burden of providing the aid among the wealthy countries will require broad consultations; announcing a target goal at Camp David would seriously complicate this task.

•Administration. The administration of the aid should be accomplished on a country-by-country basis, so that the aid can be used to reinforce structural economic reform programs and so that more aid can be directed to those countries that are most helpful in resolving the refugee problem and advancing the peace process (specifically, if Syria refuses to cooperate with a refugee settlement, Damascus should get no aid).

•Who Benefits? The beneficiaries of the aid should be not only the refugee populations but also the indigenous inhabitants of the host countries who have shared the burden of hosting the refugees; in particular, it would be politically destabilizing were richer Palestinian-origin Jordanian communities to benefit from aid while poor East Bank Jordanian communities do not. This is also the case in the Palestinian Authority, where refugees may compete with other Palestinians for government resources.

It is worth noting, however, that the idea of compensation as payment to host countries for their expenditure of resources is controversial among international refugee institutions. There is opposition to the provision of compensation as payment to states, as it might undermine the structure of the international asylum system. This will be a factor in garnering support for a compensation structure, especially in an environment in which there is competition for international aid resources as well as more dramatic crises, like the AIDS epidemic in Africa to which to direct such funds.

Defusing Radicalism The bulk of those whom any compromise will affect are not under Arafat's jurisdiction, and many refugees don't consider the negotiations valid in the first place. This is compounded by the fact that the most radical and marginalized refugees—who are most alienated from their host country and the PA-PLO leadership—are simultaneously in the most urgent need of assistance and under the authority of countries (Lebanon, Syria) which have an interest in fostering unrest in order to disrupt a peace process in which they currently do not play an active role.

If the Camp David II summit fails to produce a comprehensive agreement, interim arrangements should be made for the Palestinian refugees currently in dire straits. It would be prudent to address some of the socioeconomic and even political concerns of refugees living in Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, and the PA. Such a strategy, which might mitigate the growth of radicalism in the refugee camps, might thus alleviate some of the concerns that the refugees constitute an undesirable element for immigration either to the nascent Palestinian state or to Western nations. It would also foster an atmosphere less fraught with militaristic and nationalist jingoism, and more inclined toward receptivity to the peace process and reconciliation between Israel and the Palestinians.

Nicole Brackman is a Soref research fellow at The Washington Institute.

Policy #270

RECOMMENDED

BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Bennett's Bahrain Visit Further Invigorates Israel-Gulf Diplomacy](#)

Feb 14, 2022

◆
Simon Henderson

(/policy-analysis/bennetts-bahrain-visit-further-invigorates-israel-gulf-diplomacy)

BRIEF ANALYSIS

Libya's Renewed Legitimacy Crisis

Feb 14, 2022



Ben Fishman

[\(/policy-analysis/libyas-renewed-legitimacy-crisis\)](#)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

The UAE Formally Ceases to be a Tax-Free Haven

Feb 14, 2022



Sana Quadri,
Hamdullah Baycar

[\(/policy-analysis/uae-formally-ceases-be-tax-free-haven\)](#)

TOPICS

[Peace Process \(/policy-analysis/peace-process\)](#)

[U.S. Policy \(/policy-analysis/us-policy\)](#)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

[Palestinians \(/policy-analysis/palestinians\)](#)