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"Origins of Palestinian Arab Refugees Landlessness"

By Kenneth W. Stein

With the renewal of Israeli-Palestinian final status talks this month, discussion about resolving the Palestinian refugee question is again at hand. It is a highly emotional issue for Palestinians and Israelis alike. The bottom line consists of two parts: first, Palestinians want the unimpeded right to return to Palestinian-governed land -- as many as three million have been suggested to return. Israelis want to limit Palestinian return to perhaps ten percent of that number, both before and after a Palestinian state is created. At all costs, Israel seeks to prevent any Palestinian return to Israel proper which would threaten Israel's Jewish demographic majority.

Kicking off the Palestinian claim, Arafat, at a recent Arab League meeting, noted that the Palestinians' right "to return to their homeland is our conviction and one which we will never compromise." Ze'ev Schiff, the savvy and highly talented Israeli military analyst wrote in Haaretz (9/24/99), that when final status talks resume, the Palestinian side [will demand] that Israel accept moral responsibility for the creation of the Palestinian refugee problem during the War of Independence in 1948. Schiff cautioned that if Israel accepts responsibility for the creation of the refugee problem because of a war that was forced upon Israel, that after Israel makes territorial withdrawals, it will be put at risk "of losing its Jewish majority in its own country and all the dangers that implies."

But did the Palestinian refugee problem begin around Israel's Independence War? No, it started much earlier. Over the last decade, some Israeli historians of the Arab-Israeli conflict have claimed in scholarly writings that there was collusion between the Zionists and the Jordanians to prevent the establishment of a Palestinian state in 1948 and the intention to drive out Palestinians.

Whether their assertion has merit or not, collusion did take place between Jewish land buyers and resident Palestinian (not absentee) Arab sellers, all during the Zionist's drive to create a territorial base in Eretz Yisrael. That collusion initiated the displacement of Palestinian peasants from lands they habitually cultivated; Palestinian refugees were created by Israel's struggle for independence, but their landlessness started decades before the 1947 United Nations partition vote to divide

Palestine into an Arab and Jewish state.

If anyone has any doubts, go look in the Zionist Archives, read the Palestine Arab press in the 1930s, or check the Palestine Land Department files.

Himi Husayni, a British district officer in the Arab district of Jenin in Palestine, wrote the following to a fellow official in the British administration on August 16, 1930:

"It is believed that everyone of the (name of an Arab notable family member) is going to sell to the Jewish National Fund or any other person whom they will find, but owing to the fact that they [the Arab sellers] are afraid to lose their moral prestige amongst the inhabitants because of such sales, they are borrowing money from the JNF and making secret arrangements in which they agree to sell their mortgaged share by public auction, simply to show the public that they were unable to refund the money borrowed and that they were obliged to accept the sale which was affected through the court. And in the meantime, this process relieves them from the rights of the cultivators which will be claimed should the lands be sold in the ordinary way."

Palestinian Arab newspapers in the 1930s acknowledged the horror of Arab lands sales to Jews and displacement of Arab peasants Al-Jami'a al-'Arabiyyah said in September 1934, "By selling, they [the Arabs] sell the blood and remains of their fathers." The staunchly Palestinian Arab nationalist paper, al-Difa' in November 1934, asked, "Is it human that the covetous should store store capital or evict the peasant from his land and make him homeless or even sometimes a criminal? The frightened Arab who fears for his future today melts from fear when he imagines his offspring as homeless and as criminals who cannot look at the lands of their fathers."

Palestinian Arab peasants were initially made landless and homeless by Arab land sales to Zionists. One of the motivations for the 1939 British White Paper was to halt Jewish land sales, and as British Colonial Office official John Shuckburgh said in 1940, "The Arab [needed] to be protected against himself." The displacement of Palestinian peasants from their lands can be traced back to the 19th century when all over the Levantine area large-landed estates were created and one-time peasant owners fell upon hard economic times and gave up ownership rights to urban notables and landlords.

Palestinians were displaced by the struggle to control Palestine, first among themselves, then between Palestinians and the Zionists, and then between the Israelis and surrounding Arab countries. Forget the debate

about why they left: some left of their own accord, some were driven out as noted in the Hebrew edition of Yitzhak Rabin's memoirs.

My students ask: who is morally responsible for the creation of the Palestinian refugee problem? Was it the British for allowing and controlling the Jewish national home's development? Was it the Zionists for using covert methods in buying land and in immigrating Jews to Palestine, and then asserting their new found power to defeat the Arab armies in 1948-49? Was it the Palestinian landowner who helped the Zionists establish a foothold in Palestine, and the void in Palestinian Arab political leadership and inter-Arab rivalries that helped Israel establish itself? Was the Palestinian Arab himself responsible because he decided it was more important to save his family in time of war than retain property or remain as a tenant on land he or his family once owned outright? The answer is all of the above.

The second part of the contemporary bottom line is: Palestinian refugees must be resettled. Palestinian refugee camps must go; they foster economic squalor and remain breeding grounds for anti-Israeli feeling; economic development must accompany Palestinian refugee resettlement.

Compensation should also be considered for Jews who were forced to leave Arab lands in the same time period. History did not begin in 1948.

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