

## Abba Eban: The Refugee Problem

Excerpts from a speech (November 17, 1958) by the Israeli representative to the United Nations.

### How Was the Refugee Problem Caused?

#### Aggression by Arab States Created Refugee Problem

The Arab refugee problem was caused by a war of aggression, launched by the Arab States against Israel in 1947 and 1948. Let there be no mistake. If there had been no war against Israel, with its consequent harvest of bloodshed, misery, panic and flight, there would be no problem of Arab refugees today. Once you determine the responsibility for that war, you have determined the responsibility for the refugee problem. Nothing in the history of our generation is clearer or less controversial than the initiative of Arab governments for the conflict out of which the refugee tragedy emerged. The historic origins of that conflict are clearly defined by the confessions of Arab governments themselves: "This will be a war of extermination", declared the Secretary-General of the Arab League speaking for the governments of six Arab States; "It will be a momentous massacre to be spoken of like the Mongolian massacre and the Crusades".

#### Palestine Arabs Urged to Flee by Arab Leaders

The assault began on the last day of November 1947. From then until the expiration of the British Mandate in May 1948 the Arab States, in concert with Palestine Arab leaders, plunged the land into turmoil and chaos. On the day of Israel's Declaration of Independence, on May 14, 1948, the armed forces of Egypt, Jordan, Syria, Lebanon and Iraq, supported by contingents from Saudi Arabia and the Yemen, crossed their

frontiers and marched against Israel. The perils which then confronted our community; the danger which darkened every life and home; the successful repulse of the assault and the emergence of Israel into the life of the world community are all chapters of past history, gone but not forgotten. But the traces of that conflict still remain deeply inscribed upon our region's life. Caught up in the havoc and tension of war; demoralized by the flight of their leaders; urged on by irresponsible promises that they would return to inherit the spoils of Israel's destruction - hundreds of thousands of Arabs sought the shelter of Arab lands. A survey by an international body in 1957 described these violent events in the following terms:

"As early as the first months of 1948 the Arab League issued orders exhorting the people to seek a temporary refuge in neighboring countries, later to return to their abodes in the wake of the victorious Arab armies and obtain their share of abandoned Jewish property" (Research Group for European Migration Problems Bulletin, Vol. V-No. 1, 1957, p. 10).

Contemporary statements by Arab leaders fully confirm this version. On 16 August 1948 Msgr. George Hakim, the Greek Catholic Archbishop of Galilee, recalled:

"The refugees had been confident that their absence from Palestine would not last long; that they would return within a few days - within a week or two; their leaders had promised them that the Arab armies would crush the 'Zionist gangs' very quickly and that there would be no need for panic or fear of a long exile".

A month later on September 15, 1948, Mr. Emile Ghoury who had been the Secretary of the Arab Higher Committee at the time of the Arab invasion of Israel declared:

"I do not want to impugn anyone but only to help the refugees. The fact that there are these refugees is the direct consequence of the action of the Arab States in opposing partition and the Jewish State. The Arab States agreed upon this policy unanimously and they must share in the solution of the problem".

## Misery Is Result of Unlawful Resort To Force By Arabs

No less compelling than these avowals by Arab leaders are the judgments of United Nations organs. In April 1948, when the flight of the refugees was in full swing, the United Nations Palestine Commission inscribed its verdict on the tablets of history:

"Arab opposition to the plan of the Assembly of 29 November 1947 has taken the form of organized efforts by strong Arab elements, both inside and outside Palestine, to prevent its implementation and to thwart its objectives by threats and acts of violence, including repeated armed incursions into Palestine territory. The Commission has had to report to the Security Council that powerful Arab interests, both inside and outside Palestine, are defying the resolution of the General Assembly and are engaged in a deliberate effort to alter by force the settlement envisaged therein".

This is a description of the events between November 1947 and May 1948 when the Arab exodus began. Months later, when the tide of battle rolled away, its consequences of bereavement, devastation and panic were left behind. At the General Assembly meetings in 1948 the United Nations Acting Mediator recorded a grave international judgment:

"The Arab States had forcibly opposed the existence of the Jewish State in Palestine in direct opposition to the wishes of two-thirds of the members of the Assembly. Nevertheless their armed intervention proved useless. The (Mediator's) report was based solely on the fact that the Arab States had no right to resort to force and that the United Nations should exert its authority to prevent such a use of force".

The significance of the Arab assault upon Israel by five neighboring States had been reflected in a letter addressed by the Secretary General of the United Nations to representatives of the permanent members of the Security Council on 16 May 1948: -

"The Egyptian Government", wrote the Secretary-General, "has declared in a cablegram to the President of the Security Council on 15 May that Egyptian armed forces have entered Palestine and it has engaged in 'armed intervention' in that country. On 16 May I received a cablegram from the Arab League making similar statements on behalf of the Arab States. I consider it my duty to emphasize to you that this is the first time since the adoption of the Charter that Member States have openly declared that they have engaged in armed intervention outside their own territory".

### Arab Governments Must Accept Responsibility

These are only a few of the documents which set out the responsibility of the Arab Governments for the warfare of which the refugees are the main surviving victims. Even after a full decade it is difficult to sit here with equanimity and listen to Arab representatives disengaging themselves from any responsibility for the travail and anguish which they caused. I recall this history not for the purpose of recrimination, but because of its direct bearing on the Committee's discussion. Should not the representatives of Arab States, as the authors of this tragedy, come here in a mood of humility and repentance rather than in shrill and negative indignation? Since these governments have, by acts of policy, created this tragic problem, does it not follow that the world community has an unimpeachable right to claim their full assistance in its solution? How can governments create a vast humanitarian problem by their action - then wash their hands of all responsibility for its alleviation? The claim of the world community on the cooperation of Arab governments is all the more compelling when we reflect that these States, in their vast lands, command all the resources and conditions which would enable them to liberate the refugees from their plight, in full dignity and freedom.

With this history in mind the Committee should not find it difficult to reject the assertion that the guilt for the refugee problem lies with the United Nations itself. The refugee problem was not created by the General Assembly's recommendation for the

establishment of Israel. It was created by the attempts of Arab governments to destroy that recommendation by force. The crisis arose not as Arab spokesmen have said because the United Nations adopted a resolution eleven years ago; it arose because Arab governments attacked that resolution by force. If the United Nations proposal had been peacefully accepted, there would be no refugee problem today hanging as a cloud upon the tense horizons of the Middle East.

The next question is - why has the problem endured?

### Why Does the Refugee Problem Endure?

#### Refugee Problem Cannot Be Solved By Repatriation

In his statement to the Committee on November 10, 1958, the representative of the United States said:

"In our view it is not good enough consciously to perpetuate for over a decade the dependent status of nearly a million refugees".

Other speakers in this debate have echoed a similar sense of frustration.

Apart from the question of its origin, the perpetuation of this refugee problem is an unnatural event, running against the whole course of experience and precedent. Since the end of the Second World War, problems affecting forty million refugees have confronted Governments in various parts of the world. In no case, except that of the Arab refugees, amounting to less than two percent of the whole, has the international community shown constant responsibility and provided lavish aid. In every other case a solution has been found by the integration of refugees into their host countries. Nine million Koreans; 900,000 refugees from the conflict in Viet Nam; 8<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> million Hindus and Sikhs leaving

Pakistan for India; 6<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> million Moslems fleeing India to Pakistan; 700,000 Chinese refugees in Hong Kong; 13 million Germans from the Sudetenland, Poland and other East European States reaching West and East Germany; thousands of Turkish refugees from Bulgaria; 440,000 Finns separated from their homeland by a change of frontier; 450,000 refugees from Arab lands arrived destitute in Israel; and an equal number converging on Israel from the remnants of the Jewish holocaust in Europe - these form the tragic procession of the world's refugee population in the past two decades. In every case but that of the Arab refugees now in Arab lands the countries in which the refugees sought shelter have facilitated their integration. In this case alone has integration been obstructed.

The paradox is the more astonishing when we reflect that the kinship of language, religion, social background and national sentiment existing between the Arab refugees and their Arab host countries has been at least as intimate as those existing between any other host countries and any other refugee groups. It is impossible to escape the conclusion that the integration of Arab refugees into the life of the Arab world is an objectively feasible process which has been resisted for political reasons.

In a learned study on refugee problems published by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace in November 1957 under the title "Century of the Homeless Man" Dr. Elfan Rees, Advisor on Refugees to the World Council of Churches, sums up the international experience in the following terms:

"No large scale refugee problem has ever been solved by repatriation, and there are certainly no grounds for believing that this particular problem can be so solved. Nothing can bring it about except wars which in our time would leave nothing to go back to. War has never solved a refugee problem and it is not in the books that a modern war would".

## Arab Leaders Block Solution For Political Reasons

Those words should be compared with Mr. Shukairy's peroration, in which he seems to look forward to a settlement of the refugee problem by a war launched for the extinction of Israel's independence. Such a war, whose result would not be that envisaged by Mr. Shukairy, would be more likely to create new refugee problems than to solve the existing ones.

Dr. Rees' Report continues:

"This then is not a case of a refugee rejecting a particular solution but of the international community having to reject it as dangerous and impossible. It is time this was done with more frankness and force than has been used hitherto. Until it is - real danger remains, and these refugee problems will be unnecessarily perpetuated by the rejection of other and viable solutions".

The Carnegie Endowment publication concludes:

"The facts we must face force us to the conclusion that for most of the world refugees the only solution is integration where they are".

Another important study on refugee problems carried out last year has been published by the Research Group for European Migration. This study reaches the following grave conclusion:

"The official attitude of the (Arab) host countries is well known. It is one of seeking to prevent any sort of adaptation and integration because the refugees are seen as a political means of pressure to get Israel wiped off the map or to get the greatest possible number of concessions".

It is painfully evident that this refugee problem has been artificially maintained for political motives against all the economic, social and cultural forces which, had they been allowed free play, would have brought about a solution.

Recent years have witnessed a great expansion of economic potentialities in the Middle East. The revenues of the oil bearing countries have opened up great opportunities of work and development, into which the refugees by virtue of their linguistic and national background could fit without any sense of dislocation. The expansion in the areas of Arab sovereignty has also created opportunities of employment which did not exist in the days of colonial tutelage. There cannot be any doubt that if free movement had been granted to the refugees there would have been a spontaneous absorption of thousands of them into these expanded Arab economies. It is precisely this that Arab Governments have obstructed. In his report to the Eighth session of the General Assembly the Director of UNRWA describes Arab policies on free movement in a highly significant passage:

"The full benefit of the spread of this large capital investment (in Arab countries) will be felt only if restrictions on the movement of refugees are withdrawn. This is a measure which was proposed in the original three-year plan but little has been done so far to give effect to it. Such freedom of movement would enable refugees to take full advantage of the opportunities for work arising in countries such as Iraq, Saudi Arabia and the Persian Gulf Sheikhdoms where economic development has already taken place".

There has, of course, been some movement of refugees into the new labor opportunities of the region. The force of economic attraction has sometimes prevailed. But these potentialities can only be fully realized if political resistance to integration is overcome. There are broad opportunities in the Arab world for refugees to build new lives; but the governments concerned have so far sought to debar refugees from using them. In the survey published by the Carnegie Endowment the obstructive record of Arab governments is set out in graphic words:



"The history of UNRWA has been a clinical study in frustration. No Agency has been better led or more devoutly served but the organized intransigence of the refugees and the calculated indifference of the Arab States concerned have brought all its plans to nought. By chicanery it is feeding the dead, by political pressure it is feeding non-refugees, its relief supplies have been subjected in some instances to import duty, its personnel policies are grossly interfered with and its 'constructive measures', necessarily requiring the concurrence of governments, have been pigeon-holed. The net result is that relief is being provided in 1957 to refugees who could have been rehabilitated in 1951 with 'home and jobs', without prejudice to their just claims".

In a survey on "Social Forces in the Middle East 1956", Dr. Channing B. Richardson of Hamilton University writes:

"Towards UNRWA the attitudes of the Arab Governments vary between suspicion and obstruction. It cannot be denied that the outside observer gains the impression that the Arab governments have no great desire to solve the refugee problem".

In June, 1957 the Chairman of the Near Eastern Sub-Committee of the United States Senate Foreign Relations Committee reported at the end of an illuminating survey:

"The fact is that the Arab States have for ten years used the Palestine refugees as political hostages in their struggle with Israel. While Arab delegates in the United Nations have condemned the plight of their brothers in the refugee camps nothing has been done to assist them in a practical way lest political leverage against Israel be lost".

#### 450,000 Jewish Refugees From Arab Lands Absorbed By Israel

The failure or refusal of Arab governments to achieve a permanent economic integration of refugees in their huge lands appears all the more remarkable when we contrast it with the achievements of other countries when confronted by the challenge and opportunity of absorbing their kinsmen into their midst. Israel with her small territory, her meager

water resources and her hardpressed finances, has found homes, work and citizenship in the past ten years for nearly a million newcomers arriving in destitution no less acute than those of Arab refugees. These refugees from Arab lands left their homes, property and jobs behind. Their standards of physique and nutrition were in many cases pathetically low. They have had to undergo processes of adaptation to a social, linguistic and national ethos far removed from any that they had known before. Thus, integration in this case has been far more arduous than it would be for Arab refugees in Arab lands, where no such differences exist between the society and culture of the host country and those with which the refugees are already familiar. If Israel in these conditions could assimilate nearly one million refugees - 450,000 of them from Arab lands - how much more easily could the vast Arab world find a home for a similar number of Arab refugees if only the same impulse of kinship asserted itself.

This is concisely described in the report published by the Carnegie Endowment:

"There is another aspect of the Middle East refugee problem that is also frequently ignored. It is necessary to remember that concurrently with the perpetuation of the Arab refugee problem more than 400,000 Jews have been forced to leave their homes in Iraq, the Yemen, and North Africa. They have not been counted as refugees because they were readily and immediately received as new immigrants into Israel. Nevertheless they were forced to leave their traditional homes against their will and to abandon, in the process, all that they possessed. The latest addition to their number are the 20,000 Jews for whom life has become impossible in Egypt. Fifteen thousand of them have sought asylum in Israel while the remainder are in Europe seeking other solutions to their problem".

Nor is this an isolated example of what can be achieved by Governments in circumstances much less favorable than those which the Arab States command. Less than two weeks ago the representative of Finland, in the Third Committee of this Assembly, gave the following moving account of what a small country can achieve in refugee integration:

"In 1944 the 3,300,000 people who lived within the present boundaries of Finland had to receive in a couple of weeks' time around 440,000 displaced persons, all Finnish citizens who had left their homesteads after the new frontier line had cut off some 13 percent of our territory from the rest of Finland.... As in 1944 practically no emigration of the displaced persons was possible and none of them could be sent back to their earlier home region, complete integration was the only solution. It was an extremely heavy economic burden taking into consideration that there was no international aid, that the reparation of war destruction and the payment of war indemnities all came simultaneously and that the displaced persons came practically empty handed".

I will not ask the Committee to consider the other numerous precedents. Enough has been said to prove the crucial point that there is no objective difficulty in solving such problems provided the will for a solution exists.

Indeed, compared with other problems, the Arab refugee problem is one of the easiest to solve.

#### Refugees Closely Akin to Arabs in Host Countries

The Research Group for European Migration points out in its report (pps. 25-26) that

"The Palestine refugees have the closest possible affinities of national sentiment, language, religion and social organization with the Arab host countries and the standard of living of the majority of the refugee population is little different from those of the inhabitants of the countries that have given them refuge or will do so in the future".

The same point is made in the report of a Special Study Commission to the Near East and Africa despatched by the Committee on Foreign Affairs of the United States House of Representatives, the source of a great proportion of U.N. relief funds:

"Unlike refugees in other parts of the world the Palestine refugees are no different in language and social organization from the other Arabs. Resettlement therefore would be in familiar environment. If the local governments are unwilling to tackle the problem except on their own terms there is little incentive for outside governments to continue financial support. Original humanitarian impulse which led to the creation and perpetuation of UNRWA is gradually being perverted into a political weapon". (May 19, 1958).

### Regional Economic Development Blocked by Arab Governments

Most of the recent literature describes Arab resistance to integration by two methods - political opposition to integration; and careful scrutiny of UNRWA's activities to ensure that they do not develop into permanent solutions. The policy of obstruction however also has a third heading. I refer to the rejection of economic development proposals which seemed to hold the promise of a refugee solution. The thinking behind these plans was simple but imaginative. The international community was willing to create special opportunities of livelihood by irrigating new areas of land, establishing new farms or, in some cases, new village communities with industrial as well as agricultural activity. Refugees were to be placed into these newly created labor opportunities. The result would be a reduction of the number of refugees receiving relief and progress towards lightening the international burden.

None of these schemes has won Arab acceptance. Many of them have been rejected precisely because their implementation would help solve the refugee problem. A typical and spectacular instance is to be found in the long negotiations conducted between 1953 and 1956 on a project for the coordinated use of the Jordan and Yarmuk Rivers. Israel was prepared, despite certain disavowal - indeed is still prepared - to cooperate in this plan. Ambassador Eric Johnston has summed up his experience in the following words:

"Between 1953 and 1956, at the request of President Eisenhower, I undertook to negotiate with these States a comprehensive Jordan Valley development plan that would have provided for the irrigation of some 225,000 acres. ... After two years of discussion, technical experts of Israel, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria

agreed upon every important detail of a unified Jordan plan. But in October 1956 it was rejected for political reasons at a meeting of the Arab League. ... Three years have passed and no agreement has yet been reached on developing the Jordan. Every year a billion cubic meters of precious water still roll down the ancient stream, wasted, to the Dead Sea".

### Arab Governments Prefer Refugee Status Quo

In the light of these experiences it cannot be doubted that Arab Governments have been determined that the refugees shall remain refugees; and that the aim of wrecking any alternative to "repatriation" has been pursued by these governments with an ingenuity worthy of a better cause. With an international agency working for integration; with millions of dollars expended every year to move refugees away from a life of dependence, the Arab governments have brought us to a point where there are more refugees on United Nations rolls than ever before.

### How to Solve the Arab Refugee Problem

#### Resettlement Among Host Countries the Only Solution

Any discussion of this problem revolves around the two themes of resettlement, and what is called "repatriation". There is a growing skepticism about the feasibility of repatriation. These hundreds of thousands of Arab refugees are now in Arab lands on the soil of their kinsmen. They have been nourished for ten years on one single theme - hatred of Israel; refusal to recognize Israel's sovereignty; resentment against Israel's existence; the dream of securing Israel's extinction. All these implacable sentiments found expression in the address by the representative of Saudi Arabia.

## Repatriation a Threat to Security

Repatriation would mean that hundreds of thousands of people would be introduced into a State whose existence they oppose, whose flag they despise and whose destruction they are resolved to seek. The refugees are all Arabs; and the countries in which they find themselves are Arab countries. Yet the advocates of repatriation contend that these Arab refugees should be settled in a non-Arab country, in the only social and cultural environment which is alien to their background and tradition. The Arab refugees are to be uprooted from the soil of nations to which they are akin and loyal - and placed in a State to which they are alien and hostile. Israel, whose sovereignty and safety are already assailed by the States surrounding her, is invited to add to its perils by the influx from hostile territories of masses of people steeped in the hatred of her existence. All this is to happen in a region where the Arab nations possess unlimited opportunities for resettling their kinsmen, and in which Israel has already contributed to a solution of the refugee problems of Asia and Africa by receiving 450,000 refugees from Arab lands among its immigrants.

Surely the Committee will not find it difficult to understand why this solution finds such little favor. In discussing the rights and duties of individuals let us not forget the rights and duties of States. Israel is a small sovereign State whose primary pre-occupation is that of its safety. It cannot in conscience entertain a solution which would involve its own disruption, and bring misery and disillusionment to refugees who have surely suffered enough from false hopes and vain illusions. While every State is entitled to respect for its security needs, Israel is surely unique in the acuteness of the threats which surround her. No other State on the face of the globe is surrounded, as we are, by hostile neighbors who openly avow its destruction. To suggest that in addition to facing external perils from the north, south and east, we should import a massive quantity of hatred and rancor into our midst is to demand something beyond prudence or reason.

## Arab Countries True 'Patria' for Arab Refugees

There are three other considerations which must be placed on the scale against repatriation. First the word itself is not accurately used in this context. Transplanting an Arab refugee from an Arab land to a non-Arab land is not really "repatriation". "Patria" is not a mere geographical concept. Resettlement of a refugee in Israel would be not repatriation, but alienation from Arab society; a true repatriation of an Arab refugee would be a process which brought him into union with people who share his conditions of language and heritage, his impulses of national loyalty and cultural identity.

Second, the validity of the "repatriation" concept is further undermined when we examine the structure of the refugee population. More than 50% of the Arab refugees are under 15 years of age. This means that at the time of Israel's establishment many of those, if born at all at that time, were under 5 years of age. We thus reach the striking fact that a majority of the refugee population can have no conscious memory of Israel at all.

Thirdly those who speak of repatriation to Israel might not always be aware of the measure of existing integration of refugees into countries of their present residence. In the Kingdom of Jordan, refugees have full citizenship and participate fully in the Government of the country. They are entitled to vote and be elected to the Jordanian parliament. Indeed many of them hold high rank in the government of the kingdom. Thousands of refugees are enrolled in the Jordanian army and its National Guard. It is, to say the least, eccentric to suggest that people who are citizens of another land and are actually or potentially enrolled in the armed forces of a country at war with Israel are simultaneously endowed with an optional right of Israel citizenship.

In the Syrian region of Egypt refugees have not been granted citizenship; but by virtue of a law of July 1956, their status is, to a large degree, assimilated to that of

citizens. This is especially so in respect of the right to work and to establish commercial enterprises. According to the law of July 1956, refugees are subject to compulsory military service in the Syrian army. Here again, to adduce an unconditional right "repatriation" would signify that those who are citizens of a state foreign and hostile to Israel have a simultaneous right to be regarded as Israel citizens! Is there any state represented here which would acknowledge a right of entry to those who having left its shores have become the citizens of a foreign and hostile state, and have taken military service under Governments which proclaim a state of war against it?

This is merely a striking example of the sharp paradox which we enter if we try to reconcile the slogan of "repatriation" with the actual context, the hard facts of Arab Israel relations.

I do not believe it necessary to speak at any length on the point that resettlement in Arab countries is free from all the disadvantages which adhere to "repatriation". Every condition which has ever contributed to a solution of refugee problems by integration is present in this case. With its expanse of territory, its great rivers, its resources of mineral wealth, its accessibility to international aid, the Arab world is easily capable of absorbing an additional population, not only without danger to itself, but with actual reinforcement of its security and welfare....