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THE RIGHT OF RETURN AND THE FUTURE OF PALESTINIAN LIBERATION

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

The ongoing injustice against Palestinian refugees, and their right of return to their historic homeland, lies at the heart of the modern story of the Palestinian people and their struggle against Zionism. The issue of Palestinian refugees is often said to be intractable, but this supposedly impossible issue is about the right of a people to return to their homes after almost a century of forced displacement and dispossession. Here are four key things you need to know:

01

The right of return for Palestinian refugees to their historic homeland lies at the heart of the modern story of the Palestinian people and their struggle against Zionism

02

The right of return refers to the principle that Palestinian refugees have a right to return to the land and property that they themselves or their forebears were forced to leave as a result of the establishment of the state of Israel

03

The birth of the Palestinian refugee question was because of the active campaign of forced displacement to ensure the establishment of a Jewish state in historic Palestine

04

The number of Palestinian refugees and their descendants today stands at around 6 million, still dispersed across historic Palestine, the surrounding region, and elsewhere in the world

WHAT IS THE “RIGHT OF RETURN”?

Right of return

حق العودة ḥaqq al-awda

noun.

The principle affirming that Palestinian refugees and their descendants, who were displaced or expelled from their homes during the establishment of the state of Israel, have a right to return to their land and property.

The right of return, or what Palestinians know as “Haq al-Awda” in Arabic, refers to the position and principle that Palestinian refugees, both first-generation refugees and their descendants, have a right to return to the land and property that they themselves or their forebears were forced to leave across historic Palestine as a result of the establishment of the state of Israel. This position is firmly grounded in international law.

The issue of return captures a wide range of possibilities and propositions, all of which are designed to address the fundamental question of how those who were forced to leave their homes between 1947 and 1949 can return and receive justice. The right of return is at the core of the Palestinian struggle and a matter that demonstrates, more than any other, the disruption and violence that was foundational to Israel's establishment. It therefore has singular political, social, cultural and symbolic resonance for the Palestinians, as well as moral force.

THE BIRTH OF PALESTINIAN REFUGEES - THE NAKBA

The inception of the Palestinian refugee question strikes at the very foundation of the establishment of the Israeli state and the culmination of the Zionist project. It reveals the very logic of this project and the mass dislocation it required.

After the end of WWII, in 1947, the newly-created United Nations General Assembly passed a resolution calling for the partitioning of Palestine into a Jewish state and an Arab state. Partition was the UN's attempt at an international compromise intended to resolve the future of Palestine, however it was not considered a just path forward by the Palestinians nor the Arab states in the region. To the contrary, it was seen as the legitimization of colonialism. Significant tensions had developed during the British mandate period as the indigenous Palestinian population protested Britain's support for Zionist Jewish settlement in their land, which they perceived as paving the path for an exclusively Jewish state that would result in their dispossession.

The Zionist leadership accepted the partition plan, which fulfilled their dream of creating a Jewish homeland in Palestine, seeing it as the first step in the further conquest of historic Palestine. But the indigenous Palestinians refused the notion of partition, believing in their right to self-determination in the entirety of their

land. The refusal of the international community to grant Palestinians this right, coupled with expansive Jewish settlement throughout Palestine in the preceding years, ultimately sparked what is known as the "1948 War" the most transformative moment in Palestinian history.

Phase one: November 1947 - May 1948:

Fighting began almost immediately after the partition resolution was passed. Initially, this took the form of violence between Jewish settlers and Palestinians under British rule. Around 300,000 Palestinians were made refugees as armed Zionist militias carried out a campaign of ethnic cleansing, with mass expulsions and massacres.

Phase two: From May 1948:

As British forces withdrew from Palestine, the Zionist leadership formally declared the establishment of the State of Israel. This declaration of independence prompted seven Arab armies to declare war on the newly-formed Israel, although in most cases the declaration was merely rhetorical and did not entail any significant military action against Israel.

From May 1948:

Another 450,000 Palestinians were dispossessed and fled their homes.

In total, at least 750,000 Palestinians fled or were expelled from their homes over the course of the 1948 war, marking the birth of the Palestinian refugee crisis.

Somewhere between 400 and 600 Palestinian towns, cities and villages were destroyed and depopulated.

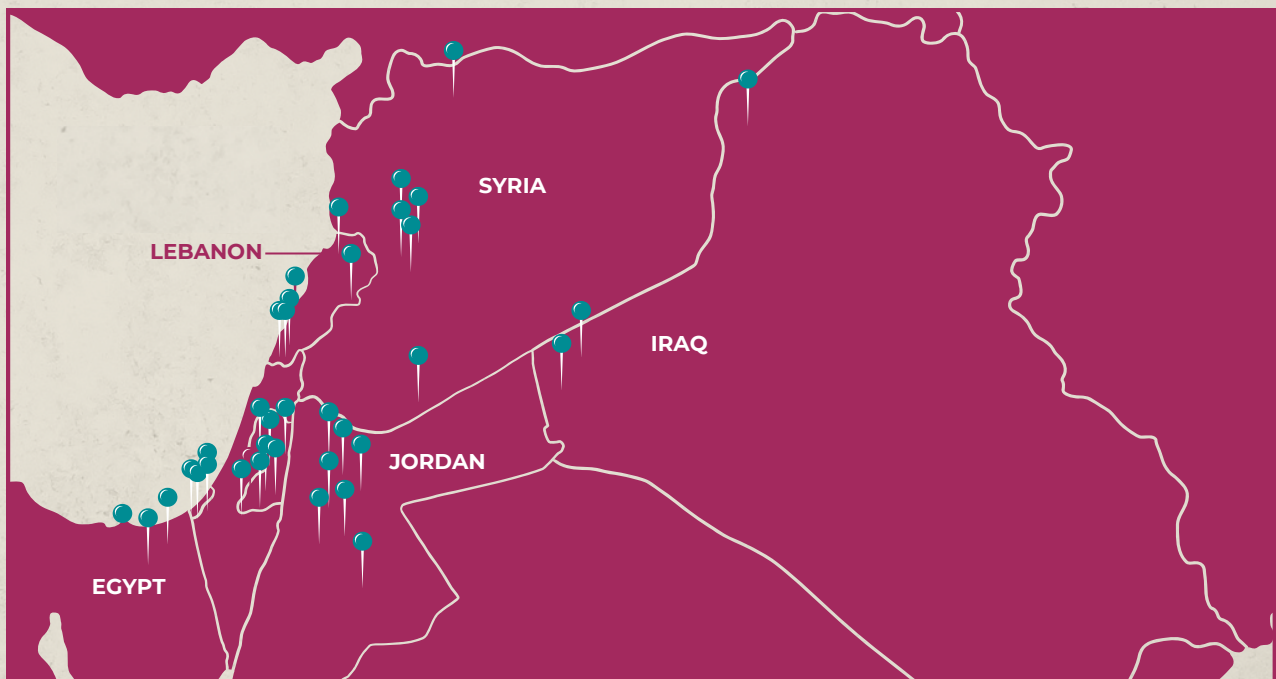
Perhaps the largest single expulsion of the war involved 50,000 Palestinians being forcibly displaced from Lydd and Ramleh. Palestinians refer to this historical moment as the Nakba, or the "Catastrophe".

For Palestinians, and within a well-founded historiography, what happened between 1947 and 1949 was crucially not an accident or an incidental outcome of war, but part of an active and forceful campaign to ensure the establishment of a Jewish state in historic Palestine. The settler colonial project that had begun in earnest at the turn of the twentieth century required the removal of the indigenous Palestinian inhabitants of the land if a Jewish majority was to be secured.

THE REFUGEES AFTER THE WAR

What happened to the Palestinian refugees after the war, and where they went, is important to understanding where they are located today and the kinds of conditions they face.

The expulsions meant that there was a mass, multi-directional movement of Palestinians. They not only fled to other parts of historic Palestine, such as the Gaza Strip, Bethlehem, Nablus and Jaffa; they also fled to surrounding countries, such as Jordan, Egypt, Lebanon, Syria, and even Iraq.



The Palestinian people, in other words, were now overwhelmingly fragmented and separated from each other, most of them now living in dozens of refugee camps spread across multiple locations and countries. This colonial dislocation meant the geographical breakup of the Palestinians as a national group.

In order to quickly respond to the needs of these refugees in their various locations, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East, also known as UNRWA, was established in December 1949. UNRWA was established as a relief and development body tasked with taking care of the needs of the Palestinian refugee community, including the provision of healthcare and education services, until a just solution for the refugees could be reached. Many UNRWA camps were set up almost immediately after 1948, and there are around 60 official UNRWA camps today, with varying conditions and levels of development.

PALESTINIAN REFUGEES TODAY

The fragmentation and national dislocation of 1948 continues to this day. The number of Palestinian refugees and their descendants today stands at around 6 million, still dispersed across historic Palestine, the surrounding region, and elsewhere in the world.

Having continued to have their right of return denied, Palestinian refugees live in a state of uncertainty, insecurity and vulnerability in their various locations, their ongoing displacement a necessary prerequisite for the maintenance and expansion of the Israeli state and its Jewish supremacist society.

Palestinian refugees face a range of serious challenges even at the level of subsistence, depending on where they are. And essential services such as schools, clinics and social support are also under threat as UNRWA has struggled financially for a few years, particularly since the first Trump administration.

January 2018

Trump cuts \$65 million of a planned \$125 million UNRWA package

June 2018

UNRWA is forced to reduce its Syria emergency cash assistance due to severe funding shortfalls.

August 2018

The Trump administration announces it will end all US funding to UNRWA

April 2021

The Biden administration restores US contributions to UNRWA

January 2022

UNRWA cautions that chronic budget shortfalls threaten its ability to maintain vital services

January 2024

The Biden administration pauses US funding to UNRWA (reinstated in April 2024)

December 2025

The Swedish government declares it will cease all UNRWA funding in 2025

May 2025

UNRWA fears US funding cuts unless it joins the new US led Gaza aid distribution plan

A considerable number of Palestinian refugees continue to live in poor, over populated and under resourced camps in neighbouring states, namely Lebanon, Jordan and Syria. In their host countries, they are often denied civil rights, with limited access to basic services, education or employment opportunities, apart from those provided by UNRWA.

<u>LEBANON</u>	<u>JORDAN</u>
470,000 Palestinian refugees	2M+ Palestinian refugees
Only a small proportion of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon have been granted citizenship	370,000 still living in refugee camps
The vast majority remain stateless and stranded in refugee camps	Despite being granted citizenship, refugees living in camps face extreme difficulties, with 67% classified as poor
Even third generation refugee descendants remain socially and economically disenfranchised	Palestinian refugees who fled from Syria to Jordan after the 2011 Syrian revolution are extremely vulnerable and almost entirely reliance on UNRWA
Their widespread discrimination and marginalisation contribute to: high levels of unemployment, low wages, and poor working conditions	Refugee children in public schools often face discrimination and bullying
Poverty is exacerbated by restrictions placed on their access to state education and social services	Only 9% of refugees hold valid work permits (down from 21% in 2021) sharply restricting access to formal employment, deepening their economic vulnerability.

The Palestinian refugee issue persists, and the right of return for them is denied, because the state of Israel insists on maintaining its Jewish supremacist form. The notion that the return of Palestinians to their historic homeland jeopardises the “integrity” of the state of Israel is the clearest indication of the colonial displacement that lay at the heart of Israel’s establishment, and the colonial war that continues to be waged against the Palestinians as a people.

MOBILISING AROUND THE RIGHT OF RETURN

Despite the systematic obstacles placed in their way, and the displacement that continues for almost a century, Palestinians remain committed to their right of return and to asserting this right.

One of the most powerful demonstrations of this was the Great March of Return, a campaign launched in the Gaza Strip in 2018 to protest conditions in the Gaza Strip as well as to call for the implementation of the right of Palestinian refugees to return to their ancestral homes. From March 2018 to December 2019, every Friday thousands of Palestinians in Gaza would march in support of the right of return, in the face of live fire by Israeli forces.

Globally, Palestinians have been organising themselves and their supporters to mobilise as well. BADIL Resource Center for Palestinian Residency and Refugee Rights is one of these organisations, committed to defending and promoting the rights of Palestinian refugees and internally displaced persons. Al-Awda, or The Palestine Right to Return Coalition, is a global network bringing together grassroots activists and campaigners to advocate for the right of return. There is also the Palestinian Return Centre, based in London, which plays an educational as well as organising role. And then there is the meticulous and tireless work of scholars such as Salman Abu Sitta, providing detailed proposals for the actual implementation of return.

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*We will not leave. We will not repeat the Nakba.
We will not abandon Gaza as we abandoned
Hirbiya. This time, we stay, no matter the cost.*

Saeed Salem, North Gaza resident

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ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

To explore this topic further, we encourage you to check out our other resources.



Nakba Glossary Term

Explore how the Nakba led to the mass displacement of Palestinians in 1948 through expulsions and village destruction. Learn about its origins, its ongoing impact today, and how it shapes Palestinian life and resistance.



Ethnic Cleansing: An Ongoing Nakba

Explore how ethnic cleansing uses violence and intimidation to forcibly remove people from their land. Learn about how it continues to shape the reality for Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank.



'Home is Where Our Hearts Are : Realising the Right of Return'

This virtual talk explores the interconnection between the Palestinian and Chagossian struggle for justice and Britain's colonial collusion in the dispossession of both communities.