



The Israeli Initiative
The Right Road to Peace

The Palestinian Refugees Issue: A New Israeli Approach

Our Vision in a Nutshell

The Palestinian refugee problem was created sixty years ago, during the Israeli War of Independence. As opposed to other refugee problems of that era, the Palestinian refugee problem remains unresolved to this day. In fact, it has grown to monstrous proportions as Arab countries have perpetuated the refugee situation as a tool to de-legitimize the State of Israel.

This can be changed - and must be changed. Our reading of the issues must be altered, so the Palestinian refugee problem is seen as a historic, humanitarian problem - not a political one. This shift in thought must be accompanied by a practical change: transferring the mandate for the Palestinian refugees from UNRWA to the UNHCR, as will be explained below.

The uniqueness of the Palestinian refugee problem

The 1948 Israeli War of Independence turned hundreds of thousands of people throughout the Middle East into refugees. Since then, tens of other refugee problems have been created, whereby millions have become refugees in Europe, Africa, and Asia. All these refugees have been aided by the UN in their host countries or through their own personal initiative, and have become regular citizens. Over the same period, not a single Palestinian refugee has been removed from the tally

of refugees. On the contrary, the number of refugees has only increased from year to year, introducing fresh generations into the circle of poverty, despair, and hate.

UNRWA and the perpetuation of refugee status

The treatment of refugees in the world is divided between two UN agencies: UNHCR, whose mandate is to deal with all the refugees in the world, and UNRWA, a special agency designated to assist Palestinian refugees from 1948.

The difference between these two agencies is very simple: the first, "regular" agency, strives towards the rehabilitation of the refugees it is handling, and to facilitate their integration as citizens in the countries in which they are staying or those that are prepared to accept them. In contrast, UNRWA is forbidden to rehabilitate the refugees in its care. Its role is confined to "maintenance" of the refugees from 1948, thus preserving their status. The result is that millions of Palestinians still live in refugee camps - a shame for humanity and also a threat for peace: these camps constitute a breeding ground - and a refuge - for terrorism and hatred.

The integral reason for the special mandate of UNRWA is that the Arab world has regarded the preservation of the status of the Palestinians as refugees as a means of attacking the legitimacy of the State of Israel. Fearing that mention of the problem would raise once again the question of "the right of return," Israel has also preferred to ignore the problem rather than attempt to solve it.

A humanitarian solution to the refugee problem

The solution of the refugee problem must include the dismantling of UNRWA and the implementation of a generous compensation program for all Palestinian refugees, who will be given the option of making a new life for themselves and being accepted as citizens in a range of countries that welcome immigration.

Billions of dollars are expended every year on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This includes US dollars poured into the regional arms race; immense sums of European money transferred to the accounts of the

Palestinian Authority; and the big money that goes every year to UNRWA. This money can be put to better use when it will be invested in full and generous rehabilitation of the refugees, funded by the US, Europe, and Israel, together with the Arab oil-producing countries.

It is important to emphasize that this is what the majority of Palestinian refugees desire, as evidenced by recent reliable surveys. While Palestinian political leaders insist that the Palestinian people want statehood, the facts show a different picture. A humanitarian solution, a chance for new life and citizenship in another country, is the real dream of many Palestinian refugees' families. Unfortunately, although rehabilitation is the most reasonable and feasible solution for the Palestinian problem, there is no one to help reach this goal.

As part of the process of refugee rehabilitation and compensation, the refugee camps should be gradually dismantled and their latent threat and the shame of their existence eliminated. It is not difficult, for example, to imagine how a generous rehabilitation program applied in Gaza would be the noblest gift to Palestinian society and to the world at large by allowing one million Gazan refugees wallowing in misery to escape their plight.