

AFTERMATH OF WARS: ARAB AND JEWISH REFUGEES

Israel 101: Pages 8-11

Rationale and Goals

- To emphasize that Arab refugees were a result of the war that Arab nations launched against Israel hours after it was established. Israel's declaration of statehood did not create one refugee, and Israel offered citizenship to all those within its partition boundaries. One hundred sixty thousand Arabs living in what was then Palestine accepted the offer and became Israeli citizens.
- To emphasize that an almost equal (if not greater) number of Jewish refugees were also created by the 1948 War. Arab nations forced their Jewish residents out of their homes and their countries, even though many had lived in these Arab nations for millennia, long before even the Arab-Muslim conquest.
- To contrast how Arab and Jewish refugees were treated by their host nations. Israel absorbed its refugees. Arab states refused to absorb theirs for political reasons, and the refugees became permanent wards of UNRWA and fodder for Palestinian violence.
- To contrast the different fate of Palestinian refugees from the fate of refugees in other conflicts in the 20th century.

Discussion Questions

- In many ways, the U.S., a land of immigrants, is also a land of refugees. Why did your families originally come to the U.S.—for new opportunities or because they could not remain in their original countries? How many people do you know who are refugees? What do you think are the main differences between refugees and immigrants who chose to come to the U.S.?
- Compare and contrast what Arab and Jewish refugees faced after the 1948 War of Independence. How far did each group have to travel, how different was the culture and language they came to, and what were living conditions like for each group?
- Over 850,000 Jews lived in Arab lands in 1947. Many had lived in these countries for millennia. After Israel's victory in the 1948 War, rising persecution and anti-Jewish laws forced almost half a million of them to flee. Subsequent Israeli victories and rising persecution led to the flight of other Jews. Today, only 5,600 of the 850,000 remain in Arab countries. How would you explain this phenomenon, and what new insights does it give you about the "refugee problem?" Why do you think the Jewish refugees are not better known, and how do you think information about them might affect the debate about Palestinian refugees?
- How is UNRWA unique, and how is its treatment of refugees different from the way the UN treats all other refugees under UNHCR (UN High Commission on Refugees)? What has been the effect of this different treatment? How do you think the Palestinian refugee problem should be solved? WHY do you think that the Arab countries do not absorb the Palestinians or improve their living conditions? Has this helped or hurt the Palestinians?

- What have Israel, the U.S., Arab countries, the UN and others done to assist Palestinian refugees? How has this assistance helped or hurt the Palestinian refugees?
- The mid-20th century was called the “century of the homeless man” because tens of millions of people became refugees in the aftermaths of World Wars I and II, the division of India and Pakistan (14 million refugees), the war between North and South Korea, and other conflicts. What happened to these refugees, and how did their experience differ from what happened to Jewish and Arab refugees?
- “What ifs” often don’t work well when applied to history because one cannot predict what unexpected events would have occurred, but it has been argued that if Arab states had accepted the UN Partition Plan in 1947 to create an Arab state alongside a Jewish state, there would have been no war and no refugees, and today an Arab Palestine, like Israel, would be celebrating its 60th anniversary. How valid do you think this argument is?
- What do you think would be the best solution for the refugee problem? How legitimate is the Palestinian refugee demand for a right of return? How many other refugees from other conflicts have demanded or exercised such a right?



Activities

Activity 1

Comparing Refugees: A Dramatic Simulation

Preparation:

Estimated Time: One class period • **Materials:** Paper and pencils.

Lesson Plan: The first part of the activity has been designed as a catalyst that will motivate the students to read and discuss the text (pp. 14-15).

Background:

Refugees are an unfortunate but common result of war. During and after World War II, millions of people were displaced from their homes. After the war, some returned to their homes, but many were resettled elsewhere.

What happened to the Jewish and Arab refugees that resulted from Israel's War of Independence?

This activity will explore this question.

Activity:

Introduction: Ask the students to openly talk about what they know about refugees. What is a refugee? What causes people to become refugees? What options are open to refugees? What is the responsibility of other nations for the fate of refugees? In modern history and today, what are some examples of nations taking responsibility for refugees?

Dramatic Simulation: Divide the students into two groups. The students will take on the identities of high school students living during the years 1945-1950. One group will represent Jews who lived in Arab countries. The other group will represent Arabs who lived in Palestine before 1948. Within each of these two groups, have the students work in pairs.

Two Sets of Questions: Have the students imagine that they are living in their respective countries during a time of strife. Ask them to discuss and write answers to the following questions: "Should I leave my home or stay here? If I have to leave my home during the war, what options should I consider about where to go and what to take with me?" Have them be as specific as possible. Give students about 20 minutes to discuss and write their answers in pairs.

Now have the students imagine that they've had to leave their homes during the conflict and have not been allowed to return home. Ask them to discuss the following questions: "What options do I have now? Where should I go?"

Now have the students discuss their answers in class. For the first set of questions, the students might imagine that they could eventually return to their homes after the end of the conflict. For the second set of questions, the students might imagine other places in the world where they might want to settle.

What Actually Happened? Now have the students find out what actually happened by asking them to read the text (pp. 14-15). Discuss the text with the students. What was the fate of the Jewish refugees after they were forced to leave their homes in Arab countries? What was the fate of the Palestinians who fled or were forced to leave their homes during Israel's War of Independence? What caused these different fates? If you have access to the Internet, look up this article, published in CAMERA (Committee for Accuracy in Middle East Reporting in America): "Why Palestinians Still Live in Refugee Camps" (www.camera.org/index.asp?x_context=7&x_issue=52&x_article=960).

Show students the short speech that Gina Waldman, a Jewish refugee from Libya, delivered to the UN Human Rights Council on March 19, 2008, at www.un.org/webcast/unhrc/archive.asp?go=080319. (Scroll down to NGOs, B'nai B'rith statement.)

Wrap-Up: The options available to these two sets of refugees were theoretically identical. In reality, the results couldn't have been more different:

- All the Jews who were forced to leave their homes in Arab countries were absorbed by other countries. Most were absorbed by the young Israeli state, where they began to create new lives for themselves, with new possibilities. Their offspring did not consider themselves to be refugees. In fact, the plight of the Jewish refugees from Arab countries, during and soon after Israel's War of Independence, has nearly been forgotten.
- On the other hand, Arabs who left or were forced to leave their homes in 1948 were never absorbed by the surrounding Arab states. Instead, they lived in refugee camps under very restrictive living conditions. Since then, most of the refugees have continued to live in these camps. Their children and children's children still consider themselves to be refugees.

Activities

Activity 2

Jewish Refugees from Middle Eastern Countries

Preparation:

Estimated Time: 2 full class periods • **Materials:** The film *The Forgotten Refugees*, Internet access for Web sites www.jimena.org and www.justiceforjews.com.

Lesson Plan: This activity is designed to make students aware that Jews are indigenous to the Middle East and to have them conduct their own research on the experience of Jews in Middle Eastern countries and on the fate of the Jewish refugees.

Session 1: Show the film *The Forgotten Refugees* and the 10-minute internet film *The Amazing True Story of How One Woman Helped Save Jews of Syria*, archived at www.justiceforjews.com/educational.html. Have students discuss:

- What they learned.
- How they feel about what they learned.
- How what they learned influences their views about Israel.

Session 2: Have students (in small groups or individually) research Jews from Arab countries either by interviewing a refugee and writing a report based on the interview or selecting a Middle Eastern country and researching the fate of Jews in that country.

During class, have students report and compare their findings, discussing:

- How the country reports confirm or contradict the individual interviews.
- What generalizations can be drawn about the Jewish experience in Middle Eastern countries.
- Why the Jewish refugees have been “forgotten” and what impact this “forgetting” has had on discussions about the Arab-Israeli conflict.
- What options were available for those who wanted to help Jews trapped in Middle Eastern countries like Syria.

Activities

Activity 3

Comparing UNWRA with UNHCR

Preparation:

Estimated Time: 1-2 class periods • **Materials:** Internet connection for research. If computers aren't available, background materials on UNWRA and UNHCR should be provided.

Lesson Plan: This activity is based on the last several paragraphs on page 15. Students should be encouraged to research this issue using other sources as well, such as the UNWRA and UNHCR Web sites.

Background: The General Assembly of the UN (United Nations) set up UNRWA (United Nations Relief and Works Agency) in 1949 to provide humanitarian relief to the Arabs who fled from Israel during Israel's War of Independence. It was viewed by the UN as a temporary agency. In fact, the UNHCR (UN High Commission for Refugees) was founded a year later. At first, its mandate was to provide humanitarian relief to the millions of refugees from World War II. Later, this mandate was expanded to include all refugees in the world. However, this mandate did not apply to UNRWA. Thus, today there are two UN agencies that deal with refugees: UNHCR, which deals with all of the world's refugees, except for the Palestinian refugees, and UNRWA, which deals only with the Palestinian refugees.

Introduction: Provide the above background information to students.

Activity:

Ask the students to research the following question: "Does UNRWA have a unique and important role to play, or should it be absorbed by UNHCR?" Students can use the Internet sites listed below or materials that you print for them from these and other sites.

For example, here is information from one site (amizdatblogfree.blogspot.com/2005/11/report-to-unca-transform-operation-of.html):

"A document found on the UNHCR website, 'The State of the World's Refugees, Part 1, The Early Years' puts the matter baldly: '[Arab States...] feared that the non-political character of the work envisioned for the nascent UNHCR was not compatible with the highly politicized nature of the Palestinian question.' Over the years, UNRWA has developed into a massive bureaucratic agency that provides for Palestinian Arab refugees at a level that exceeds what is given to any other refugees in the world. The Palestinian Arab refugees are the only ones to have guaranteed health care, welfare assistance and primary education. In fact, 50% more per refugee is spent on the Palestinian Arabs than on any other refugees. One of the reasons this is so is because UNRWA has come to function in a quasi-governmental fashion for a growing population that has remained, according to UNRWA's rules and definitions, stateless now for 57 years. Whereas UNHCR seeks to help the refugees under their jurisdiction find solutions so that they might get on with their lives with permanency, UNWRA operates under the premise that the Palestinian Arab refugees are still refugees, even if they have acquired a new citizenship, as many have in Jordan while still anticipating a return to their homes and villages in Israel, from which they or their grandparents fled. The question remains: Why do western nations who finance UNRWA (including the 31% contribution from the US) not demand that UNRWA operate according to the principles of UNHCR – to resettle refugees instead of implementing a policy that perpetuates their suffering, while fostering their delusions about the 'right of return'?"

Presentation and Discussion: Students should present their findings and give their opinions regarding the guiding question.

Wrap-Up: The United Nations should play an important and constructive role in helping to solve the plight of refugees around the world. The above guiding question regarding the proper relationship between UNRWA and UNHCR needs to be highlighted when the topic of the Palestinian refugees is raised.

Activities

Activity 4

Justice for Jews from Arab Lands

The Web site, Justice for Jews from Arab Countries (www.justiceforjews.com), includes current activities this group is doing to bring world attention to the “forgotten refugees.” The site also includes suggestions for teacher lesson plans (www.justiceforjews.com/educational.html). You may choose to devote a class or two to having students explore this site and doing some of the suggested activities.

Resources

Internet

History of Palestinian Refugees–

www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/History/refugees.html

Map of Arab refugees from Israel (1948)–

www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/History/refugeemap.html

Jewish Refugees from Arab Countries–

www.jimena.org and www.justiceforjews.com

Arabs who fled Haifa just before Israeli independence: an analysis of historical documents. Efraim Karsh, *Commentary Magazine*, archived at: www.hagshama.org.il/en/resources/view.asp?id=251

Introduction to UNWRA–

www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/UN/unrwa.html and UNRWA Web site at www.un.org/unrwa/english.html

Refugees from World War II–

UNWRA Web site: www.unwra.org/unrwa

UNHCR Web site: www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/home

Debate about UNRWA by UNRWA official and Arlene Kushner, a critic of UNRWA: www.azure.org.il/magazine/magazine.asp?id=301

Films

Jewish Refugees from Arab Countries

The Forgotten Refugees