

■ With regard to the **1948 refugees** Israel rejects **UN Res. 194** as a basis for talks on the grounds that the responsibility for the refugee tragedy lies with the Arab governments, who started the war and who asked the Palestinians to leave to make way for the liberation of Palestine from the Zionists, and that the **right of return** would be a direct demographic and security threat to Israel's statehood. The Palestinians, conversely, insist on the implementation of UN Res. 194, and demand the absolute and unconditional 'right of return' to the area of Mandatory Palestine for all Palestinian refugees of 1948, saying the refugee tragedy was a direct result of expulsion and fear based on military attacks and massacres of Jewish forces upon Palestinians.

■ While Israel only counts those refugees who fled during the **War of 1967**, numbering them between 200,000 and 300,000, Palestinians and Arab countries include those who became refugees in 1947-49 and 1967 and put their original number at around one million. However, the numbers are estimated and disputed, especially by the Israelis, and the matter is further complicated by the question of 'who is a refugee'. In Lebanon, for example, UNRWA counts over 370,000 registered refugees, while the PLO cites figures as low as around 150,000 (mainly in an effort not to interfere with the country's religious and ethnic divisions), while other observers average them around 200,000.

■ On the issue of **repatriation**, Israel rejects the notion of refugees returning to their original homes and is only willing to admit a small number of refugees (Camp David 2000: 5-10,000 over a 5-10-year period) under "family reunification" schemes. Contrarily, Palestinians demand the unconditional return of all persons regardless of what caused their displacement. It must be said, however, that there are Palestinian voices suggesting that one must distinguish between the essential principle and the problematic practicality of exercising that right, as a mass return to homes and lands in pre-1948 Palestine is idealistic and the ability of the PA to absorb huge numbers of people limited.



Israel further argues that besides everything else there is no space for refugee repatriation due to overcrowded conditions. Palestinians counter that this argument has no basis, since Israel has had no problems absorbing about a million new immigrants over the past decade. One of the injustices perceived is that Russian immigrants can claim to be Jewish and live on Palestinian land, while its rightful owners - Palestinian refugees - are denied the right to return.

■ Israel further insists that the issue of **compensation** will only be dealt with in reciprocity, i.e., including consideration of the cases of Jews who were "expelled" from Arab countries after the creation of the state of Israel. Palestinians hold against this that Jews left those countries not as the result of expulsion or war but strongly persuaded (if not coerced) to do so by Israel and that Jewish property in the Arab world is not their responsibility but would require negotiations with Arab states.

Israel is also only willing to contribute an unspecified lump sum into a yet to be established international fund to compensate refugees and oversee compensation and resettlement issues. Palestinians, in turn, insist on direct reparation or compensation to individual refugees based on refugee's rights to restitution and compensation. The total losses in destroyed or confiscated Palestinian property is estimated at US\$250 billion at today's worth, and double this sum if non-material losses are included (BADIL Center, Bethlehem). Such calculation still does not include the billions to be claimed by host countries like Jordan.

■ What Israel advocates instead is **resettlement** in host countries, improving the quality of camp life, and restricted readmissions based on humanitarian considerations. Palestinians reject all attempts leading to re-settlement unless based on the refugees' choice.

■ Backing the Israeli position and breaking with decades of **US Middle East policy**, Pres. Bush, in April 2004, coupled his endorsement of Israeli PM Sharon's unilateral Gaza pullout plan, with support for Israel to retain parts of the occupied West Bank and a negation of any right of return of Palestinian refugees to what is now Israel, stating in a letter handed to Sharon that "an agreed, just, fair, and realistic framework for a solution to the Palestinian refugee issue as part of any final status agreement will need to be found through the establishment of a Palestinian state, and the settling of Palestinian refugees there, rather than in Israel.



Cartoon by Omayya Joha, <http://omayya.com//>

Caption: Writing on the scroll: "Title deeds;" writing on the ground: "American Proposals."

