

## THE FEASIBILITY OF RETURN

Recent research by **Salman Abu Sitta** (*Palestinian Right of Return - Sacred, Legal and Possible*. London: Palestinian Return Center, 1999) divided Israel into three demographic areas - A, B and C - and demonstrated that the majority of Israeli Jews (68%) is concentrated in **Area A** - 8% of Israel - which is largely the same area in size and location as the land which the Jews had purchased or acquired in 1948. Area A is mainly urban centers, many of which have grown out of originally Palestinian towns. In **Area B** - 6% of Israel with a largely mixed population - another 10% of Israeli Jews live. In other words, 78% of Israeli Jews live in 14% of Israel, while **Area C** - 86% of Israel - is home to the remaining 20% of Israeli Jews, and comprises by and large the area (by size and location) of Palestinian refugee homelands.



Abu Sitta's study shows then that the argument that Israel is already too populated and has no 'spare' space is but a myth, stating, for example, that of the Jews living in Area C, less than 200,000 reside in rural areas, while some 5 million refugees are crammed into hopelessly overcrowded refugee camps, often only a few kilometers away beyond the Green Line. Area C is thus the perfect area for any future absorption of returning Palestinian refugees. The scenarios Abu Sitta is drawing on include the following:

If all registered refugees in Lebanon were allowed to return to their homes in Galilee, which is still largely Arab, it would only be felt in Area B, while there would be almost no impact on Area A (Jewish concentration) and Area C (least populated). The same is true for the refugees in Gaza: if they were allowed to return to their homes mostly in the - rather empty - south, the Jewish majority in Area A would drop by only 6%. According to Abu Sitta, the number of rural Jews in the south who may be affected by the return of Gaza refugees does not exceed 78,000 or the size of a single refugee camp.



Another approach was formulated by **Nasser Abu Farha** from the Alternative Palestinian Agenda (for more details see [www.ap-agenda.org](http://www.ap-agenda.org)), whose proposal allows for the return of significant numbers of refugees. The overall idea is based on a variation of UN Partition Plan of 1947, which envisaged the establishment of two states in historical Palestine, one Palestinian (encompassing land in the Galilee and northern Negev along with the West Bank and Gaza) and one Jewish. With regard to the refugee issue the plan firstly calculates a figure of around 2 million refugees who will want to return. This includes the combined populations of all the refugee camps in the region (1.3 million according to UNRWA) plus a certain percentage (roughly 25%) of refugees living outside camps, based on the assumption that not all of them will want to return having achieved greater stability and prosperity than the former in their respective host countries.

Returnees would be absorbed in two ways. Firstly, 1.3 million refugees would be accommodated in rural areas, partly by rebuilding some 62 villages that were destroyed by Zionist militias in 1948 and which fall under the sovereignty of the new Palestinian state, and partly by constructing new cities and towns in the proposed Palestinian state, which would encompass sparsely populated areas of what is now Israel. The remaining 700,000 refugees would return to cities such as Haifa, Jaffa and Tiberias, where many of the neighborhoods that Palestinians were forced from in 1948 remain abandoned, as well as to a new city of 200,000 residents that is to be constructed in the Jordan Valley. The plan allows for the return of refugees to areas in what will be Israel providing it will not create civil unrest.

In addition, compensation will be paid to the refugees in line with the provisions of UNGA Res. 194, which states that the "parties responsible" for the expulsion of the Palestinians are liable. According to Abu Farha the three parties who should pay compensation are Israel, Britain and the UN as they committed or aided ethnic cleansing (in the case of the former two) or failed to prevent it (in the case of the UN).

Dutch geographer **Jan de Jong** made a study on practical and realistic steps that could be taken to solve the refugee question according to the principle of equitably respecting the rights of both peoples and upholding the Palestinian right of return. In acknowledgement of two separate nationalities de Jong has formulated a 'Palestinian-Israeli Adapted Partition Plan' guided by the 1947 UN Partition Plan and based on a division of the land into areas where both populations, including **up to two million** returning refugees, could enjoy their national rights to the maximal extent in what was and is, or has become their home.

