

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 value, 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.
- At the beginning of **Jan. 2001**, the Palestinian negotiating team rejected the so-called **US bridging proposal**, which was a last attempt by the outgoing Clinton administration to secure a peace deal. On the refugee issue, the US proposed recognizing the right of return while stressing that there is no such specific right with regard to today's Israel, but rather to the Palestinian state, including areas proposed for a 'land swap', or rehabilitation in Arab states, or resettlement in third countries. The Palestinians refused, saying the proposal "fails to provide any assurance that refugee's rights to restitution and compensation will be fulfilled" and neither secures "the establishment of a viable Palestinian state nor the right of Palestinian refugees to return to their homes."

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 22% 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.



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.