



## Jewish refugees briefly mentioned at Annapolis

By PAUL LUNGEN

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Advocates for Jewish refugees from Arab countries are “pleased and gratified” that Israeli Foreign Affairs Minister Tzipi Livni raised their issue during a speech to delegates attending last week’s summit in Annapolis.

“I think it was an appropriate reference. I think it was the first time such a reference was made in such a major speech by the foreign minister,” said Stan Urman, executive-director of Justice for Jews from Arab Countries (JJAC), an umbrella organization that speaks for an estimated 850,000 Jews who fled Arab countries following the establishment of Israel in 1948.

In an address to delegates that included senior Arab leaders, Livni reflected on the UN partition resolution of 1947 that created Israel as a Jewish state and was meant to create a Palestinian entity alongside it.

“I am proud of where Israel is today,” she stated. “I am sorry that the Arab world rejected the principle of partition in the past, and I hope and pray that today there is an understanding that instead of fighting, the right thing to do is to build a shared future in two separate states: one – the State of Israel, which was established as a Jewish state, a national home for the Jewish people; and the other – Palestine, which will be established to give a full and complete solution to Palestinians wherever they may be, those who are in Gaza and the West Bank and those in refugee camps in other Arab countries with temporary status, waiting for a sense of belonging to a national state, the same feeling of wholeness that the establishment of the State of Israel gave to Jewish refugees who were forced to leave Arab countries and Europe and became partners in building Israel.”

In the months leading up to Annapolis, and even before, JJAC argued that the experience of Jewish refugees had to be incorporated into any narrative that described the Arab-Israeli conflict.

The public perception – even that of negotiators – focused exclusively on Palestinian refugees when an even larger number of Jews were made homeless as a result of the Arab-Israeli conflict, JJAC contended.

In the weeks leading up to Annapolis, JJAC revealed a 1947 Arab League policy of colluding to disenfranchise Jewish citizens in Arab countries, seize their property and force them to flee.

MP Irwin Cotler, Canada's former justice minister, told The CJA that "we need to rectify the historic injustice in which Jewish refugees have been expunged from the peace and justice narrative of the last 60 years."

As a victim refugee group, Jews from Arab lands should be given the same consideration as Palestinian refugees. In addition, Arab states and the Arab League must acknowledge their roles in creating Jewish refugees, he said.

Cotler noted that at Annapolis, Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert referred to the suffering of Palestinian refugees but there was no reciprocal acknowledgement from any Arab delegate of their states' role in creating Jewish refugees.

The Annapolis summit convened 60 years after the UN voted to create a Jewish and a Palestinian state, he continued. What has been forgotten in the widely accepted Palestinian narrative – which focuses on their displacement and suffering – is that all Arab countries and the Palestinian leadership rejected the UN partition plan and fought a war to prevent it.

Palestinian and Jewish refugees were created because the Arab countries rejected partition, Cotler stated. He said Canada "has the refugee gavel" in multilateral refugee talks and should include the plight of Jewish refugees whenever Palestinian refugees are discussed.

Canadian Jewish Congress co-president Sylvain Abitbol said he was pleased at Livni's reference to Jewish refugees. "It is a forgotten story in the sense you have about a million Jews [made homeless]. The moment they left their countries and entered Israel they were no longer refugees, while the Palestinians have been kept as refugees as an example against Israel." Abitbol, who is a member of JJAC's executive, said Jewish refugees lost property with an estimated value of \$20 billion, and their claims have to be addressed when those of Palestinian refugees are discussed.

Urman acknowledged that while Livni's reference to Jewish refugees was brief, it was appropriate for the occasion, as Annapolis dealt with process and procedure, not with negotiations over substantive issues. He said he has been told the issue was also raised in private conversations.

JJAC plans to keep the issue alive as negotiations unfold, he continued. JJAC will meet in Israel early in the new year and, in co-operation with organizations representing "Mizrachi" (eastern) Jews, "we will try to put this on the radar screen forcefully in Israel."

JJAC hopes to meet with Olmert, Livni and senior Israeli parliamentarians.