

# The Guardian

## Recognising the Jewish 'Nakba'



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This week, before an audience of peers and MPs, an 80-year-old Jewish refugee named Sarah told the story of her traumatic departure in 1956 in the wake of the Suez crisis. Her husband lost his job. Taken ill, she had remained behind in Egypt with her new baby, while he left to look for work in Europe. She departed with nothing – along with 25,000 other Jews expelled by Nasser and forced to sign a document pledging that they would never return. In a final act of spite, the customs officers ransacked her suitcase and even her baby's carrycot.

Sarah was speaking at a House of Lords briefing as part of the [Justice for Jews from Arab Countries](#) congress. JJAC, an international coalition of 77 organisations, is holding its inaugural congress in London, and aims to highlight the neglected rights of (according to indisputable UN figures) 856,000 Jewish refugees like Sarah.

The exodus began 60 years ago when Arab states, hell-bent on crushing the new state of Israel militarily, also turned on their peaceful Jewish communities. Street violence killed over 150 Jews. Within 10 years, more than half the Jews had fled or been expelled, following [discriminatory legislation](#), extortion, arrests, internment and executions. Those who remained became subjugated, political hostages of the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Today 99.5% - all but 4,500 - have gone. As the historian Nathan Weinstock [has observed](#), not even the Jews of 1939 Germany had been so thoroughly "ethnically cleansed".

The displacement of Jews from Arab countries was not just a backlash to the creation of Israel and the Arabs' humiliating defeat. The "push" factors were already in place. Arab League states drafted a law in November 1947 [branding](#) their Jews as enemy aliens. But non-Muslim minorities, historically despised [as dhimmis](#) with few rights, were already being oppressed by Nazi-inspired pan-Arabism and Islamism. These factors sparked the conflict with Zionism, and drive it to this day.

The [Jewish "Nakba"](#) - Arabic for "catastrophe" – not only emptied cities like Baghdad (a third Jewish); it tore apart the cultural, social and economic fabric in Arab lands. Jews lost homes, synagogues, hospitals, schools, shrines and deeded land [five times the size of Israel](#). Their ancient heritage - predating Islam by 1,000 years – was destroyed.

The Jewish state, which struggled to take in 600,000, many of them stateless, is both a response to Arab antisemitism, and the legitimate political expression of an indigenous Middle Eastern people. Half Israel's Jewish population is descended from refugees from Arab and Muslim lands.

Arab governments have never admitted committing mass violations of Jewish human and civil rights, much less apologised or offered restitution. Over 120 UN resolutions deal with the 711,000 Palestinian refugees; not one refers to the greater number of Jewish refugees. Although peace initiatives have been worded to refer generically to the "refugee problem", Jewish and Arab, Israel has been reluctant to politicise the Jewish refugee issue, having successfully integrated them as full citizens: [Arab denial](#) has thus conspired with Israeli silence to airbrush Jewish refugees out of the picture, leading to obfuscation, distortion and decontextualisation.

This April, JJAC scored a major success, however, when the US House of Representatives adopted [its first resolution \(pdf\)](#) on Jewish refugees; future resolutions mentioning Palestinian refugees must refer explicitly to Jewish refugees from Arab countries.

The resolution is about recognition, not restitution, although Jewish losses [have been quantified](#) at twice Palestinian losses. Such resolutions could lead to a peace settlement by recognising that there were victims on both sides. Thus justice for Jews is not just a moral imperative, but the key to reconciliation.

Moreover, a major hurdle to peace could be removed if the Palestinian "right of return" were counterbalanced by the Jewish right *not* to return to Arab tyrannies, recognising a de facto population exchange of roughly equal numbers.

The Jewish refugees, who spent up to 12 years in Israeli *ma'abarot* (transit camps), could also serve as a model for the resettlement (in host Arab countries or an eventual Palestinian state) of Arab refugees languishing in camps.

Meanwhile, awareness of the "Jewish Nakba" is growing: a Libyan Jew who fled in fear of her life has addressed the UN Human Rights Council. Jewish refugees were mentioned at Westminster and discussed on BBC radio. In the US, Canada and at the European parliament, the campaign for justice is steaming ahead.

At Tuesday's briefing, Sarah will be testifying to the fact that two sets of refugees emerged from the Arab-Israeli conflict. The UK will be urged to look at what role it could usefully play in seeking to resolve issues affecting all Middle East refugees. Fifty-

two years ago, Sarah rejoined her husband in England; they rebuilt their lives and put Egypt behind them. This does not mean that she should be denied justice.