

The Jerusalem Report

The Other Mideast Refugees

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(July 21, 2008) The plight of hundreds of thousands of Jews who were displaced from their homes in Arab lands in the wake of 1948 was the focus of a recent congress in London

When the British public thinks of Middle East refugees, it is the Palestinians that come to mind. But when the issue was raised last month in the House of Lords and covered extensively on the BBC and in the Guardian, it was with a different twist.

The focus was not on the plight of the Palestinians - some 726,000 of whom became refugees in the wake of the creation of Israel, according to United Nations estimates - but on an even greater number of Jews who were displaced from their homes in Arab lands in the months and years following May, 1948.

The flutter of attention devoted to this lesser-known consequence of the conflict was sparked by a conference held in London last month by the *Justice for Jews from Arab Countries (JJAC)*. The American-based organization brought 50 delegates from Israel, Europe, North and South America to highlight its claim that some 856,000 Jews were displaced from 10 Arab countries in the wake of 1948.

"Whenever there is a discussion on refugees in the Middle East, it must address the Palestinian plight and - if peace is to be durable and compelling - also the issue of Jewish refugees," JJAC executive director Stanley Urman told *The Jerusalem Report*. His organization scored a victory in April when the U.S. Congress passed a resolution urging that whenever international forums discuss refugee matters, every reference to Palestinian refugees be matched by a similarly explicit reference to the uprooting of Jewish communities from Arab countries.

The London congress was aimed at giving the organization and its agenda greater exposure in Europe. Indeed days after the congress wound up, *JJAC* representatives spoke at the first ever European Parliament hearing on the issue. British Labour Party parliamentarian Louise Ellman pledged that *"the issue will now be raised (in Parliament) and ministers made aware of it."* Ellman told *The Report* that the absence of the issue from the political agenda shows the "imbalance of the debate on Israel."

While the conference seems to have achieved its goal of catapulting the issue into the limelight, not all the attention was positive. In fact the topic highlighted deep cracks within the Jewish community and brought to the fore conflicting versions of history.

"The pain and plight of some 850,000 Jews uprooted and displaced from Arab countries - not only a forgotten, but a forced exodus - has been expunged and eclipsed from both the Middle East peace and justice narratives these past 60 years," Irwin Cotler, Canadian parliamentarian, international human rights lawyer and JJAC board member, declared at a House of Lords briefing. *"This is a story that has not been heard. It is a story that has not yet even been told. It is a truth that must now be acknowledged."*

The conference included presentations of historical research including that of eminent scholar Martin Gilbert, as well as emotional testimonies like that of 80-year-old Londoner Sarah Fedida, who was expelled from Egypt during the 1956 Suez crisis. She told delegates and politicians how her husband arrived at his office to find himself unable to enter and *"everything confiscated,"* and how shortly afterwards they were forced to leave without money or possessions. Edwin Shuker, an Iraqi-born Londoner who co-chairs JJAC also spoke of his family's forced departure from its home.

British-Jewry's leadership, mostly Ashkenazi and traditionally less attuned to issues facing the Sephardic communities, responded enthusiastically. The main representative organization, the *Board of Deputies*, gave its backing to the congress and promised to place the matters raised firmly on the communal agenda. The fact that *"the narrative of the Arabs who left Israel is a partial one has been overlooked for far too long,"* said Board of Deputies Chief Executive Jon Benjamin.

Arye Mekel, spokesman for Israel's Foreign Ministry, told *The Report* that Jewish refugees from Arab countries will be an important factor in peace negotiations. *"We believe that just as the Jewish refugees settled in the Jewish state, the Palestinian refugees, if they want it, should be settled in a future Palestinian state."* In view of peace negotiations with the Palestinians, it is *"an opportune time to raise the issue of Jewish refugees,"* and *"if private organizations want to draw attention to this issue, it is very well with us,"* said Mekel.

Even some left-wing Jewish groups, often critical of the Jewish establishment's positions on the Middle East, were in agreement. Paul Usiskin, *British Friends of Peace Now* co-chair, welcomed the congress telling *The Report* that the issue *"deserves to be addressed as a just cause."*

But Avi Shlaim, a former Israeli and now an Oxford University professor of international relations and a well known anti-Zionist, sees things differently. Born in Baghdad in 1945, he says his family felt compelled to leave Iraq for Israel in 1950. Amid *"an atmosphere of panic, Jews felt threatened, there were attacks, and in that atmosphere my family decided to leave,"* he says. Calling the claims put forward at the JJAC conference *"disingenuous"* he says his family left Iraq because of *"hostility at a popular level to the new State of Israel"* and not due to any official discrimination or expulsion. This makes him *"not a refugee"* - as the JJAC would classify him - but rather *"a victim of the Arab-Israeli conflict"* as he puts it.

Shlaim maintains that the only Jews who were forced to leave Arab countries by government officials were those who left Libya in 1948 and Egypt during and after the Suez crisis. Jews from other Arab countries are in the same boat as his family - they are not refugees at all, contends Shlaim.

Countering this argument, Cotler maintains that, "*Had the U.N. Partition Resolution been accepted by the Arab states 60 years ago, there would have been no Arab-Israeli war, no refugees, Jewish or Arab, and none of the pain and suffering of these last 60 years.*" In his view, the blame for the entire refugee problem lies in the enmity of Arab countries to the Jewish state.

But Shlaim sees it differently. One of the so-called New Historians, the loosely-defined group of scholars who have challenged what they regard as myths associated with Israel's founding, he blames the Zionist establishment for much of the ensuing conflict. Claims about Jewish refugees, he says, are a distraction from the fact that Israel, in its treatment of the Palestinians, is responsible for "*the most protracted refugee problem in the world.*" The departures of the two peoples from their homes "*are not at all parallel,*" he says.