

## **ISRAEL ADDS MIDEAST JEWISH REFUGEES TO NEGOTIATIONS**

BY RACHELLE KLIGER

(Feb. 2, 2010) *Israel's parliament discusses bill that will tie compensation for Jewish refugees from Arab countries to any future peace negotiations.*

Israeli lawmakers are seeking a law that will make compensation for Jewish refugees expelled from Arab countries after 1948 an integral part of any future peace negotiations.

Lawmakers put together a bill demanding compensation for current Jewish Israeli citizens, who were expelled from Arab countries after Israel was established in 1948, leaving behind significant valuable property.

Originally submitted almost a year ago in the Knesset, Israel's parliament, the bill passed its first hearing two weeks ago. Now various interest groups are pushing the bill with the Knesset's 120 members before it is subjected to a second and third hearing next week.

The bill was sponsored by Member of Knesset (MK) Nissim Ze'ev from the Shas party and follows a resolution passed in the United States House of Representatives in 2008, calling for refugee recognition to be extended to Jews and Christians similar to that extended to Palestinians in the course of Middle East peace talks.

"I think the term compensation is too limited a term," former Canadian Justice Minister Irwin Cotler told The Media Line.

Cotler, a vocal advocate of the campaign, was one of several international representatives at the Knesset conference discussing the bill, organized by MK Nissim Ze'ev on Monday.

"We're not just speaking about financial compensation or indemnification," Cotler said. "We're talking about justice for Jews from Arab countries. This speaks to the question of, among other things, rectifying the justice and peace narrative of the last 62 years where the question of Jews from Arab countries has not been part of the narrative."

"There have been more than 160 U.N. resolutions on the matter of refugees," he continued. "All 160 dealt with Palestinian refugees only. I'm not saying they shouldn't address Palestinian refugees, but I'm saying there's no justice and no truth if it does not also address the plight of Jews seeking justice from Arab countries."

According to the international advocacy group, Justice for Jews from Arab Countries (JJAC), some 850,000 Jews were displaced from Arab countries after the State of Israel was established. These include Jews from Syria, Trans-Jordan, Egypt, Lebanon, Yemen, Iran, Iraq, Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco.

Speaker of the Knesset Rubi Rivlin (Likud Party) said the issue was an important counterweight to Palestinian claims for a right of return to homes from which they were expelled or had to leave in 1948, and which are now part of Israel.

"The Arab peace initiative, based on the Saudi initiative, has a clause that calls for a just solution to the Palestinian refugee issue," Rivlin said at the conference. "Israel is opposed to the right of return... we have to make an appeal today, to say that there is no room for bringing up the

Palestinian right of return without the Jewish refugee issue being resolved. This has to be heard in the political discourse in Israel and in the international community.”

Rep. Eliot Engel (D – NY), who supported the congressional resolution and attended Monday’s conference, said there was hypocrisy in the way the international community dealt with the Palestinian refugee community.

“The Arabs today, as they have done for 50 years, use the Palestinian refugee population as political pawns,” Engel said. “They want them to live in misery. They want them to suffer and then to blame the Jews. The fact of the matter is that the blame lies right at the foot of the Arab states, be it Saudi Arabia or Jordan or Egypt or any of those countries that have lots of petro-dollars and they don’t even spend a shekel to help their refugees.”

Monday’s conference was marked by heated arguments from members of the audience, which included Jews who were expelled from Arab countries in the years following the establishment of the state.

Gila Naftali, an Egyptian born Jew who was expelled with her family in 1956 when she was eight years old, said there has been a systematic marginalization of eastern Jews. She was almost banished from the auditorium by security when she lashed out at MK Danny Ayalon that “You don’t know what it’s like to be kicked out of your country within 24 hours.”

Ayalon, a proponent of the bill whose father left his belongings behind in Algeria to come to the fledgling country in 1948, shook Naftali’s hand on his way out, in a gesture of reconciliation. The government came under criticism from Jews expelled from Arab states, who feel these initiatives are too little and too late. Others have questioned how the compensation, if acquired, will be allocated.

“I don’t just want compensation,” Naftali later told The Media Line. “Everybody will get the compensation. I want money for this building that was in our family for four generations,” she said, brandishing a sepia photograph of her former Cairo home.

Stanley Urman, executive director of JJAC said he was aware of these sentiments. “I feel for their plight and their pain,” he told The Media Line. “We, the Jewish people and the State of Israel, must take responsibility for not being successful enough in bringing this to the world’s attention.”

The fact that the U.S. has already passed a resolution to this effect could serve to impact any future negotiations.

“They have sway,” Urman said, in reference to the U.S. brokers. “Whether they bring this up in a forceful manner is yet to be seen. The U.S. is a member of the Quartet and all seminal Middle East issues are going through the Quartet, so the U.S. certainly would be our voice at that table.”

The Israeli bill stipulates that “The state of Israel will not sign, directly or by proxy, any agreement or treaty with a country or authority dealing with a political settlement in the Middle East without ensuring the rights of Jewish refugees from Arab countries according to the U.N.’s refugee treaty.”

“In any discussion where the Palestinian refugee issue is brought up in the framework of peace negotiations in the Middle East,” it continues, “the Israeli government will bring up the issue of compensation for loss of property and giving equal status to Arab refugees who left their property after the state was established and to Jewish refugees from Arab countries.”

Ze’ev stressed that Iran was also included in the bill, even though it was not defined as an Arab country.

Levana Zamir, chairman of the international organization of Egyptian Jews said she welcomed the initiative.

“Finally, after 62 years, the Knesset is accepting a law that recognizes our rights,” she told The Media Line. “I’m just sad that my father didn’t have the privilege of seeing this. He fought for this and after he passed away I took the matter into my hands. As Jews from Egypt we should be very happy because there’s a peace agreement with Egypt, so once there’s a law, we should start demanding money.”

Zvi Gabai, who represents Jews from Iraq, said it was a shame this was not done sooner. “In the meantime,” he said, “the Palestinians and spin doctors have exploited the Palestinian refugee matter and presented it as though the Palestinian refugees were the only issue and that there were no Jewish refugees, without presenting two sides of the coin – that there were not only the Palestinians who suffered but also Jews from Arab countries who suffered and lost property, without bringing this matter to a decision, there will be no justice.”

The Palestinian Return Centre, a London-based organization defending the rights of Palestinian refugees with the aim of resettling them in their original homes, said it was not farfetched to believe that Jews would get compensation, but stressed that it was wrong to draw parallels between the two refugee populations.

“The Jews who were kicked out of Arab countries have found a place to live,” a spokesperson for the organization told The Media. “They have found luxury, work, good housing and a government. But the Palestinians have found nothing. They are not allowed to work in 70 professions in Lebanon. They’re not allowed to travel. They don’t have passports or basic freedoms and they’re being bombed in Gaza’s camps.”

“There is no parallel in the suffering,” the spokesperson continued. “The Palestinian suffered double what the Jews in the Arab countries suffered.... The [Arabs] have enough money and enough political will to solve the problem with Israel, but the problem is with Israel. If Israel is willing to conduct peace on the basis of giving rights to the Palestinians, I guess the Arabs would compensate the Jews, if that happened.”

*By Rachelle Kliger on Thursday, February 18, 2010*