

## US: Jewish refugees must be addressed

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As peace talks between Israelis and Palestinians gather steam, the US House of Representatives passed a resolution on Tuesday urging that the issue of Jewish refugees be part of any agreement.

While the Palestinian claim of a "right of return" for its refugees has long been an issue - and stumbling block - in final-status talks, the resolution seeks to have the suffering of Jewish refugees taken into account as well.

Backers described it as the first congressional measure to recognize these refugees, and argued that it shouldn't hinder the peace process, but rather ground it more firmly in the historical reality experienced by two peoples long at odds.

"This is not an impediment," said Malcolm Hoenlein, executive vice chairman of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations.

He argued that raising the profile of Jewish refugees would create a stronger and more credible foundation for talks.

But the Arab American Institute suggested the resolution was unhelpful and "distracts attention" from other refugee issues, according to an action alert sent to its members last week.

The non-binding House resolution recounts the history of the issue and calls on the US to make sure that any international resolutions relating to the "required resolution of the Palestinian refugee issue" also contain "similarly explicit reference to the resolution of the issue of Jewish, Christian and other refugees from Arab countries."

It also demands that the US make clear its position that "as an integral part of any comprehensive Arab-Israeli peace... all refugees displaced from Arab countries, including Jews, Christians and other minority groups," be recognized.

Around the time of the creation of the State of Israel, hundreds of thousands of Jews in Arab countries lost their homes and savings - and in some instances, their lives - as they were forced to flee.

A similar number of Palestinians fled from present-day Israel as hostilities between Jewish and Arab armies broke out.

"The world needs to understand that it's not just Arabs and Palestinians, but it's also Jewish people who were dispossessed of their homes and possessions, who were victims of terrorist acts and murder," said Rep. Joseph Crowley (D-New York) on a conference call Monday with resolution cosponsors Jerrold Nadler (D-New York) and Mike Ferguson (R-New Jersey). A companion resolution in the Senate has yet to be voted on.

Regina Bubil-Waldman, a Jewish refugee who fled Libya as a child, welcomed the resolution with a quaver in her voice.

"It touches my heart, and I cannot tell you how emotional this is," she said. "Only with historical truth can we

build a better future - and today, that's what we're doing."

*JTA contributed to this story.*

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