



Olmert: Not yet on Jewish refugees

Ben Harris

Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert is cautioning advocates of Jewish refugees from Arab countries that any discussion of the issue is premature.

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NEW YORK (JTA) -- Organizers of a major conference on behalf of Jewish refugees from Arab countries were told by Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert that any discussion of the issue was premature.

In a recent letter to leaders of Justice for Jews from Arab Countries, which organized the conference here Monday, Olmert said it was premature to raise the refugee question now. But he gave assurances that when the issue is eventually put on the table, Israel would "reaffirm its commitment to resolving the rights of Jewish refugees from Arab countries as well."

Olmert's letter, dated Oct. 8 and obtained by JTA over the weekend, came as Justice for Jews from Arab Countries, an advocacy coalition of 72 groups, was preparing to unveil documentation showing how Arab states conspired to persecute their Jewish citizens. In the aftermath of Israel's creation, hundreds of thousands of Jews fled Arab lands where they had lived for centuries, a total roughly equivalent to the number of Palestinian refugees that fled or were driven from Israel.

Estimates of the number of Jewish refugees range generally from 700,000 to one million, a majority of whom were absorbed by Israel.

Leaders of the coalition insist that their efforts to publicize the rights of Jewish refugees, and the culpability of Arab governments in exacerbating their plight, have nothing to do with winning reparations. Instead, they say, they are seeking justice and establishing an accurate historical record. With a major peace conference planned for Annapolis in the coming months, they say, raising the profile of Jewish refugees could provide the Israeli government a powerful bargaining chip to offset claims by Palestinian refugees.

"This is not about money. This is not anti-Palestinian refugees," said Stanley Urman, the executive director of Justice for Jews from Arab Countries.

"We have one simple objective and that is, in the context of peace, the issues for both sides must be addressed. And our objective is to ensure that any explicit reference to Palestinian refugees is matched by an explicit reference to Jewish refugees, as a matter of law and equity."

Previously, Israeli leaders appeared committed to that objective. In March 2002, and again in December 2003, the Israeli Cabinet decided to pursue the restoration of property owned by Jews who fled Arab countries and authorized cooperation with other ministries and organizations toward that end. But in more recent statements, Olmert and Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni have acknowledged the suffering of Palestinian refugees without mentioning the plight of Jewish refugees.

Olmert's letter, while pushing off the issue, was intended to reassure the coalition of Israel's continuing commitment to the rights of Jewish refugees.

Urman told JTA that delegates to the New York conference were "gratified" by Olmert's assurances. According to

Urman, delegates planned to issue a declaration on the conclusion of the conference outlining the organization's plan of action.

On Monday, the coalition released documents discovered in United Nations archives showing that following the General Assembly's partition resolution in November 1947, the Arab League drafted a law allowing for various measures to be taken against their Jewish citizens. Among the measures were the freezing of Jewish bank accounts, imprisonment, exile and forced conscription into the military.

In a 1948 memorandum to the U.N. Economic and Social Council, the World Jewish Congress drew attention to the draft law and warned that the situation of Jews in Arab countries had become "critical." Consideration of the matter was subsequently killed by a pro-Arab parliamentary maneuver.

"We seem to have found a body of evidence relating to both events and materials that suggest that the displacement of 1 million Jews in 10 Arab countries did not happen by happenstance," Urman told JTA. "The documents we have uncovered reveal that there was an orchestrated effort by the Arab League to have all its member states react in a coordinated fashion to persecute their Jewish populations and use them as political weapons in their struggle against the State of Israel."

Although this history has long been known, Urman said the new documents are the "smoking gun" that conclusively demonstrate collusion among Arab leaders in driving out their Jewish citizens.
