



Brenda Gazzar

Regina Waldman, chair of the San Francisco-based JIMENA: Jews Indigenous to the Middle East and North Africa, speaks to Israeli Justice Minister Meir Shitreet at the Jewish Refugees from Arab Countries International Rights and Redress Campaign summit in Jerusalem on Monday, Oct. 23.

Jewish refugees and descendants launch campaign to tell their story

By Brenda Gazzar

JERUSALEM, Oct. 23 (JTA) — As Regina Waldman's family fled Libya in July 1967, their bus driver pulled over, locked the Jewish family in the bus and tried unsuccessfully to blow them up on their way to the airport.

With tensions running high from the Six-Day War, the family left behind their home and most of the property of Waldman's father, who worked as a developer.

"We left under very traumatic circumstances," said Waldman, who was 19 at the time and today is co-founder and chairwoman of the San Francisco-based JIMENA: Jews Indigenous to the Middle East and North Africa.

Waldman is among more than 30 representatives from 10 countries who convened Monday in Jerusalem to launch the International Rights and Redress Campaign. The campaign — led by Justice for Jews from Arab Countries and the World Organization of Jews from Arab Countries — aims to educate the public about the heritage and rights of Jewish refugees from Arab countries, register their stories and document their personal and communal losses.

Nearly 900,000 Jews fled Arab lands in the last century, with roughly two-thirds immigrating to the modern State of Israel.

"Our priority remains to register every Jewish family that fled an Arab country and to document their story and their claims, without which no credible representation on their behalf could ever be made," said Stanley Urman, executive director of the New York-based Justice for Jews from Arab Countries, at the summit held at the Dan Panorama Hotel. "It's to document Jewish history,

to record the personal narratives of families and their displacement, to make sure that the 2,500 year history and legacy of Mizrahi Jewry in Arab countries will not be lost to the faces of history.”

Contrary to recent media reports, officials said the campaign is not asking for reparations on behalf of the Jewish refugees and is not about money. Rather, the aim is political: The information collected will be used to assert the rights of Jews displaced from Arab countries and balance Palestinian refugee claims.

“The idea is to put on the table on a parallel level those claims of the Jewish refugees from Arab countries... with the claims that have been promoted all over the world” by the Palestinians, “who are always coming and demanding again and again their rights,” said Israel’s acting justice minister, Meir Sheerit, who is originally from Morocco and gave the keynote address at Monday’s gathering.

While Israel absorbed several hundred thousand refugees within a few years of its founding in 1948, Arab countries failed to use their wealth to absorb Palestinian refugees “and are using them as a weapon against Israel,” Sheerit said.

The Israeli Cabinet adopted decisions in March 2002 and December 2003 calling for an international registration campaign for these Jewish refugees. After the groundwork was laid, some 40 Diaspora communities and more than 50 Jewish organizations around the world will participate in the campaign, organizers say.

Sheerit announced that the campaign would receive additional financing from Israel, where the issue is handled by a special unit of the Justice Ministry called the Department for the Rights of Jews from Arab Countries. The unit has registered 13,000 Israeli families’ stories and their claims so far.

“It will be enough money to make a direct and serious campaign,” Sheerit said.

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