

Palestinians weren't the only refugees

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Last week the U.S. House of Representatives passed a resolution urging that any Middle East peace solution treat Jewish refugees from Arab countries and Palestinian refugees equitably. The resolution said that it would be "inappropriate and unjust" to recognize rights for Palestinian refugees without recognizing equal rights for Jewish refugees from Arab countries.

This resolution speaks to the Middle East, but it also speaks to Canada. Canada is the chair for the refugee working group in the multilateral "Madrid" Middle East peace process, which began in 1991 with a meeting hosted by Spain. At a later meeting in 1992 in Moscow, at which 36 different states participated, the Refugee Working Group was created and Canada appointed the gavel-holder. At both meetings, speaker after speaker rejected double standards and endorsed the principle of recognition for both Palestinian and Jewish refugees.

At the Moscow gathering, then-U.S. Secretary of State James Baker made no distinction between Jewish and Palestinian refugees, stating: "The refugee group will consider practical ways of improving the lot of people throughout the region who have been displaced from their homes."

The Refugee Working Group defined refugees without distinction between Jew and Palestinian. Refugees were "those displaced as a result of the conflict between Israel and her Arab neighbours."

Yet Canada, in its chairing of this working group, has ignored completely Jewish refugees from Arab countries. The Canadian government website about the working group begins by referring to "The continuing plight of the Palestinian refugees displaced by the Arab-Israeli conflict." That is the sole focus of the website and Canada's efforts.

Jewish communities that had lived in Arab countries since one thousand years before the advent of Islam were harassed, hounded, expropriated and expelled from these lands because of the existence of Israel. Anti-Zionists in each and every country throughout the Middle East justified the victimization of their local Jewish populations by portraying them as enemy aliens. Anti-Zionists attempted to intimidate Israel by terrorizing their own local Jewish populations. At one and the same time, these anti-Zionists blamed Israel for Palestinian refugees and created a Jewish displaced population out of a tit-for-tat sense of revenge.

In the end, there were more Jews displaced than Palestinians. The original Palestinian refugee population is estimated by the United Nations to have been 726,000. The Jews

who have been displaced from Arab countries since the advent of the State of Israel are estimated at over 850,000. A further 57,000 have been displaced from Iran.

Canada has been hesitant to have the working group it chairs address the issue of Jewish refugees from Arab countries for fear that it would complicate the peace process, adding one more issue that needs to be resolved. Yet the very isolation and manufactured uniqueness of the Palestinian refugee population creates a sense of grievance, a foundation upon which other alleged grievances are built. By design, it is an avoidance tactic that masks what continues to be the failure of Palestinians to acknowledge the reality of Israel's existence.

Canadian officials assert that the plight of the Jewish refugee population has been resolved through resettlement abroad and integration into Israel. This reasoning ignores what is at the core of the plight of Palestinian refugees -- a vehemently anti-Zionist agenda that is code for the destruction of the Jewish State of Israel. Anti-Zionists created a Palestinian displaced population by launching a war against the nascent State of Israel to bring about its annihilation, and then maintained these Palestinians as refugees by refusing their local integration into Arab countries to which they had fled. The anti-Zionism which has generated and maintained the Palestinian refugee problem needs to be confronted directly through an acknowledgement of the reality of two displaced populations.

As well, redress for refugees is not just resettlement, integration, or money. It is also memory; it is also truth. The right to recognition of the wrongs which have been done to the Jews of Arab lands remains even after there has been resettlement, integration and compensation.

By adopting a blinkered approach that looks only at Palestinian refugees in isolation from displaced Jews, the Canadian government is neglecting to look at the peace process in its wider context. If one accepts that peace in the Middle East means peace with Israel's Arab neighbours and Iran as much as with the Palestinians, then it is impossible to overlook the issue of displaced Jews.

It is time for Canada to recognize that there can be no peace without justice. Justice in the Middle East includes justice for Jews from Arab countries and Iran. Unless Jews displaced from these places are treated equitably in the Middle East peace process, there will be no just peace.

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