

House Equates Jewish, Palestinian Refugees

“The suffering of Jews who fled Arab countries must be recognized in a comprehensive peace agreement, says New York Rep. Jerrold Nadler.”

by James D. Besser / Washington

(April 2, 2008) With Israeli-Palestinian negotiations once again accelerating and the issue of Palestinian refugees back as a potential deal breaker, the House of Representatives has weighed in with a resolution acknowledging the 850,000 Jews displaced from Arab countries — and urging the administration to raise the issue every time the issue of Palestinian refugees is brought up.

The resolution, introduced by Rep. Jerrold Nadler (D-Manhattan), Rep. Iliana Ros-Lehtinen (R-Fla.) and Rep. Joseph Crowley (D-Queens) and supported by Jewish groups across the political spectrum, passed the House by a voice vote on Tuesday.

“Today the House has helped shed light on the plight of Jewish refugees in the Middle East,” Nadler said in a statement. “Their suffering is real and demands recognition; America must reaffirm that it embraces a just and comprehensive approach to the issue of Middle East refugees.”

Backers argue that the measure is an attempt to redress a critical imbalance when the issue of Middle East refugees is raised. “Discussions of Middle Eastern refugees inevitably focus exclusively — and shortsightedly — on the plight of those of Palestinian descent,” said Ros-Lehtinen. But Jewish refugees “lost their resources, their homes and their heritage sites, fleeing in the face of persecution, pogroms, revolutions and brutal dictatorships.”

Backers brushed off criticism that the measure is more political than humanitarian — intended to counter Palestinian claims to a “right of return” to what is now Israel, a persistent obstacle in past Israeli-Palestinian talks.

“This should not be an impediment [to negotiations]; this will make the talks more realistic,” said Malcolm Hoenlein, executive vice chair of the *Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations*, a key backer of the legislation.

Supporters also dismissed claims that the Israeli government, worried about fragile negotiations now under way, has been cool to the idea of making the issue of Jewish refugees a major factor in U.S. policy.

Prime Minister Ehud Olmert “has not communicated” any concerns about the legislation to lawmakers, Nadler said. “But this resolution is about U.S. government policy, not Israeli policy. It seems to us that it makes eminent sense from the standpoint of equality and justice and for the advancement of the peace process.”

The nonbinding resolution cites the fact that “Jews and other ethnic groups have lived mostly as minorities in the Middle East, North Africa, and the Persian Gulf region for more than 2,500 years, more than 1,000 years before the advent of Islam.”

The resolution’s connection to ongoing peace negotiations is explicit. It goes on to urge the president to “ensure that any resolutions relating to the issue of Middle East refugees, and which include a reference to the required resolution of the Palestinian refugee issue, must also include a similarly explicit reference to the resolution of the issue of Jewish, Christian and other refugees from Arab countries.”

Stanley Urman, executive director of the group *Justice for Jews from Arab Countries*, said the legislation restores “truth to the Middle East narrative, by recommending equitable treatment of all Middle East refugees. Only in this fashion can there be movement from truth to justice, from justice to reconciliation, and from reconciliation to peace — between and among all peoples and states in the region.”

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