



The Other Refugees

A newly discovered document explains the Jewish exile from Muslim lands

by Jillian Bandes / November 13, 2007

A new discovery in the archives at the United Nations has drastically altered the historical narrative of the exile of Jews from Arab countries.

Conventional wisdom had long held that the exile was the result of isolated incidents of anti-Semitism. But the newly discovered document reveals that it was, in fact, the result of concerted efforts by Arab countries, amounting to what is essentially a standard multinational policy of discrimination.

The document was released by the human rights group Justice for Jews from Arab Countries (JFJ) at a conference this past weekend, and includes the following:

“...every Jew whose activities reveal that he is an active Zionist will be considered as a political prisoner and will be interned in places specifically designated for that purpose... his financial resources...will be frozen.”

No one at the Arab League was available to speak on record about the document despite repeated call to the organization over a four-day period. But an unnamed source there claimed that any document explaining such repression is “pretty questionable,” given that there is no record of it in Arab League files.

The source said that, due to the lack of computers, there had not been any record-keeping that long ago.

University of Miami professor Henry Green, an attendee at the JFJ conference, said “the historical record regarding the United Nations partition vote and the ongoing issue of refugees includes archival information that is accessible to anyone,” and that he would invite the Arab League “to join me and review the records so we can bring the historical documents to bear.”

JFJ President Stan Urman said that the law outlines “a step by step chronology pointing to collusion by the Arab League” to work against Israel during the time of its inception. Urman and over 50 scholars from 10 countries met at the conference, which Green said

“acknowledged and addressed the plight and pain of Jews from Arab and Islamic Lands that have been displaced because of state-sanctioned policies of repression.”

The document comes at the center of a controversial historical and international debate. Almost sixty years ago, between 850,000 and 1 million Jews were exiled from Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Iraq and elsewhere in the region, while around 726,000 Palestinian refugees were displaced at roughly the same time. Jewish advocates point to 126 U.N. resolutions that have been passed on behalf of Palestinian refugees, and note that zero have been passed on behalf of their Jewish counterparts.

JFJ spokeswoman Shira Dicker believes this to be the result of Israel's inaction on the issue, resulting from discrimination against Israel's Sephardic Jews--who made up the vast majority of those exiled from Arab countries--and an unwillingness to revisit the past.

“There were guilts, there were mess-ups. Some lands commanded more cachet than others,” said Dicker. She expressed the common view that Ashkenazi Jews coming from European locations received preferential treatment to the Sephardim coming from Arab lands. As a result, the issue of exile was low on Israel's agenda. Furthermore, the refugee victims felt as if their stories were less tragic than those of the Holocaust survivors, who were taking up residence in Israel during the same period. And as time went on, Jewish refugees from Arab lands found it difficult to bring attention to their cause as victims because of their success in re-rooting themselves.

Conference attendees interested in seeing that change were infuriated when an Israeli official offered that the government would “address the issue when the time is right.”

A State Department official was similarly noncommittal, saying that there are no plans to address the issue of Jewish refugees at the upcoming Middle East peace talks in Annapolis, Maryland between U.S., Israeli, and Palestinian representatives among others. Looking for allies, the victims are turning to Congress. Spearheaded by Reps. Tom Lantos and Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, H. Res. 185 and S. Res. 85, address the issue of Jewish refugees by mandating that any Middle East peace agreement would address the plight of “all refugees in the Middle East”--not just Jews, but Christians and Muslims as well. The proposed legislation would also require that Jewish and other refugees be mentioned when resolutions are made about Palestinian refugees--a point likely to stir anger among Palestinian advocacy groups. However, debate won't begin on the resolution before the Annapolis talks.

Gina Wills, a public affairs specialist in the Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration at the Department of State, said that the United States has never addressed the issue of Jewish refugees or commanded attention to their restitution. In fact, it has refused to recognize the claims of Jews fleeing Iraq, despite recognizing the claims of Arab refugees against Israel.

The issue “has been expunged on the pages of history,” said JFJ's Shira Dicker. “This is it, 60 years after the fact.”