

1

## ANOTHER VIEWPOINT

(AVP)

3845 BUFFALO RD, AUBURN, CA 95603, April 1996 (n.s.)3

## THE PALESTINIAN REFUGEES: WILL PEACE BRING A SOLUTION?

Elias H. Tuma

The Palestinians and Israeli have finally decided to make peace. The Israelis have almost withdrawn their forces from the Occupied Territories. The Palestinians have their pseudo government or Palestinian National Authority (PNA) in the shadow of the Israeli authorities. Some Israelis and Palestinians in both sides of Palestine are unhappy but the majority are satisfied and hopeful that the ultimate solutions will be permanent and mutually favorable. One major segment, the majority of the Palestinians, however, seems to be left out so far: These are the Palestinian refugees. The Israeli-Palestinian agreements have deferred negotiations on the refugees until later. In the meantime a multilateral committee and several other non-governmental agencies and institutions are searching for solutions to the refugee problem.

The refugees are primarily of two origins: those displaced as a result of the 1947/8 war and those who were displaced, some for the second time, as a result of the 1967 war. They are disbursed inside and outside camps in Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, the West Bank and Gaza (WBG). Small groups also live in Egypt, Iraq, Libya, and outside the Middle East region. Those in the WBG probably feel fortunate because they are already within the boundaries of the Palestinian territory. Their grievances center largely around socio-economic conditions. Those outside the WBG are not as fortunate. Very little has been said about their future or political status. Israel has little incentive to deal with these refugees: they are outside its boundaries; they have little leverage to influence its policies; and they are no longer a threat to its security. Palestinian and Arab leaders are also dragging their feet. The Palestinian leaders presumably have more urgent concerns, while other Arab leaders have apparently decided that it is for the Palestinians to deal with that matter. The Palestinian refugees thus have become victims of war and lack of attention from their leaders.

The Palestinian refugees, as recorded by the United Nations Rehabilitation and Welfare Agency (UNRWA), are about 3.2 million people. About 1.3 million are in Jordan, .346 million are in Lebanon, .337 million are in Syria, and the rest are in the WBG. Thus, almost 2 million Palestinians are recorded as refugees living outside the jurisdiction of the PNA. About half a million live in refugee camps. While the quality of life of those outside the camps is similar to or in some cases better than the quality of life of the average citizen of the host country, living conditions in camps, are much worse, especially in the camps of Lebanon. However, all the refugees, in and out of camps, are deprived of certain political rights compared to citizens and permanent

residents. Even those living in Jordan, who have been awarded citizenship, are still discriminated against in various ways, such as the duration of a passport or treatment by the government when there is an economic or social crisis.

Until recently the Palestinian refugees had hopes of repatriation, fair compensation, or resettlement in independent Palestine. Now all three options seem to have evaporated. Few Arab or Israeli leaders are willing any more to entertain the idea of repatriation of the refugees to homes and lands they left behind within the state of Israel. Ethnicity, nationalism, limited economic capacity, and the goals of Zionism are invoked to preclude the return of Palestinians to Israel. Suggestions of symbolic numbers of returnees are being floated around within the framework of reuniting families, good will, or as a mechanism to seal the fate of repatriation for ever. The loss of hope to return to home and land in Israel has been compounded by fears that compensation also may be nothing but an empty promise. Various groups working on the refugee issue have been hinting that claims for compensation are not legally warranted, and are unfeasible to process, verify, or implement. Hence, these groups propose that certain funds be established to rehabilitate living conditions in the camps, help the PNA to develop the economy of Palestine, or help individual refugee families to resettle and integrate in the rest of society within or outside the host country.

Probably most painful is the loss of hope that these refugees would be able to settle within the Palestinian territory and help to build the new Palestinian national home. Not only is Israel taking a strong stand against an open door policy for these refugees to resettle in Palestine, but the Palestinian leadership itself has pronounced that no more than 750,000, or less than a third of the refugees outside the territories, will have a chance to come home. Most probably the returnees will be close to the PNA, wealthy individuals coming in with large investment capital, or people whose families are split and a reunification seems justified.

The Palestinian refugees deserve better treatment by Palestinian and Arab leaders, by Israel, and by the international community at large. Israel should pay more attention to the legal claims of these refugees. The United Nations has played the midwife role in the birth of the state of Israel. That same agency has resolved that the refugees should be able to return to their homes or receive compensation for their losses. No demographic, political, economic or social argument should absolve Israel of its responsibilities toward the refugees. The United Nations and the Great powers, the United States, Britain, and France, which were responsible for the creation of Israel, should see to that. Even more serious is the responsibility of the Palestinian and Arab leaders. If every Jew has the right of return and is entitled to Israeli citizenship once on Israeli territory or under Israeli authority, should not the Palestinian refugees be welcome in the new Palestinian entity? Should they not have an opportunity to participate in the building of that economy and society? And do they not deserve to have an opportunity to rebuild their economic and socio-political future among their own people and in a country they can call theirs?

It is unlikely that a majority of the refugees living outside the camps would opt to return to Israel or to the WBG, given their achievements in the host countries. Even those living in camps may choose to stay in their present countries of residence. The Arab countries, both host and non-host, have a moral responsibility toward these refugees to help them cope with the crises that have been crystallized by the peace process. It is also to their own benefit to do so since the refugees embody valuable human capital. And because of their apparent rejection by Israel and by Palestine, they are most likely to become loyal citizens of the country they settle in permanently. By welcoming and helping the refugees resettle, these countries would no doubt benefit the refugees, but they would also be accumulating highly valued human capital in their economies. Permanent residence or full citizenship are mechanisms of social, economic, and political integration among people. The United States has set the example for people of different cultures, languages, religions, and cultural backgrounds to live together and has succeeded. Israel has followed that example, even though it has restricted its openness only to Jews, but Jews have come from different cultures, backgrounds, with different languages, and it has succeeded. The Arab countries can do the same with more ease: the Palestinians share their culture, language, and in most cases religion. Most Arab countries are also well endowed with resources. All these are good reasons to believe that the Arab countries can absorb and integrate all those who wish to come and settle, and that they will also succeed.

AVP is a non-partisan non-profit monthly published and edited by Elias H. Tuma (professor emeritus of economics, University of California, Davis, CA). Lori Aoun is Associate Editor. The views expressed above are those of the author and do not implicate the University in any way. On internet:  
<http://polar.ucdavis.edu/Econ/Tuma/tuma.html>