

HOW MANY PALESTINIAN ARAB REFUGEES WERE THERE?

by Efraim Karsh Israel Affairs April 2011

The number of Palestinian Arabs fleeing their homes during the 1948 war has constituted one of the most intractable bones of contentions of the Arab-Israeli conflict, not least since the Palestinians have insisted on the "right of return" of these individuals and their descendants to territory that has long been part of the state of Israel.

More than a half-century later, these exaggerated initial numbers have swollen still further: as of June 2000, according to UNRWA, the total had climbed close to three and three-quarters million, though it readily admits that the statistics are largely inflated. For its part the PLO set a still higher figure of 5 million refugees, while Israel has unofficially estimated the current number of refugees and their families at closer to 2 million.

Using a wealth of declassified Arab, Israeli, and British documents, this article seeks to provide as comprehensive and accurate an estimate as possible of the actual number of refugees in the wake of the 1948 war.

At the end of the war, the Israeli government set the number of Palestinian refugees at 550,000-600,000; the British Foreign Office leaned toward the higher end of this estimate. But within a year, as large masses of people sought to benefit from the unprecedented influx of international funds to the area, some 962,000 alleged refugees had been registered with the newly-established UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA).

The extraordinary coverage of the 1948 war notwithstanding, the birth of the Palestinian refugee problem during the five-and-a-half months of fighting, from the partition resolution of November 29, 1947, to the proclamation of the state of Israel on May 14, 1948, passed virtually unnoticed by the international community. Nor for that matter did the Arab states, burdened as they were with a relentless flow of refugees, or even the Palestinian leadership itself, have a clear idea of the dispersal's full magnitude, as demonstrated by the mid-June 1948 estimate of the prominent Palestinian leader, Emile Ghouri, of the number of refugees at 200,000: less than two thirds the actual figure. A few weeks later, after thousands more Arabs had become refugees, a Baghdad radio commentator was still speaking of 300,000 evacuees "who are forced to flee from the Jews as the French were forced to flee from the Nazis." Taking their cue from these claims, W. De St. Aubin, delegate of the League of Red Cross Societies to the Middle East, estimated the number of Arab refugees (in late July) at about 300,000, while Sir Raphael Cilento, director of the UN Disaster Relief Project (DRP) in Palestine, set the number at 300,000-350,000 (in early August).^[1]

Paradoxically it was the Israelis who initially came with the highest, and most accurate, estimates. In early June Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion was told by Yossef Weitz of the Jewish National Fund (JNF) that "some 123,000 Arabs left 155 villages in the Jewish state's territory; another 22,000 left 35 villages outside the Jewish state: a total of 145,000 evacuees and 190 villages. Seventy-seven thousand Arabs left five cities in the Jewish state's territory (Haifa, Beisan, Tiberias, Safad, Samakh). Another 73,000 left two cities [designed to remain] outside the state (Jaffa and Acre). Forty thousand Arabs left Jerusalem: a total of 190,000 from eight cities. All in all, 335,000 Arabs fled (including 200,000 from the UN ascribed Jewish territory)."^[2]

A comprehensive report by the Hagana's intelligence service, comprising a detailed village-by-village breakdown of the exodus, set the number of Palestinian Arab evacuees in the six-month period between December 1, 1947 and June 1, 1948, at 391,000: 239,000 from the UN-ascribed Jewish state, 122,000 from the territory of the prospective Arab state, and 30,000 from Jerusalem. Another exhaustive Israeli study set the number of refugees (in late October) at 460,000, almost evenly divided between the rural and urban sectors.^[3]

This estimate was substantially higher than the 360,000 figure in the report of the UN mediator, Count Folke Bernadotte, submitted to the General Assembly on September 16, or Cilento's revised estimate of 400,300 a couple of weeks later, and was virtually identical to the supplementary report submitted on October 18 by Bernadotte's successor, Ralph Bunche, which set the number of refugees at 472,000 and anticipated the figure to reach a maximum of slightly over 500,000 in the near future.^[4]

By now, however, the Arabs had dramatically upped the ante. In a memorandum dispatched to the heads of the Arab states and Arab League Secretary-General Abdel Rahman Azzam in mid-August, the Palestine Office in Amman, an organization operating under the auspices of the Transjordan government, estimated the total number of refugees at 700,000, of whom 500,000 were in Palestine and the rest in the neighboring Arab states. The memo struck a responsive chord, for in October the Arab League set the number of refugees at 631,967, and by the end of the month official Arab estimates ranged between 740,000 and 780,000. When the newly-established United Nations Relief for Palestine refugees (UNRPR) began operating in December 1948, it found 962,643 refugees on its relief rolls.[5]

In conversations with British diplomats (in early October) Cilento described the figures supplied by the Arab authorities as unreliable, claiming that they increased from week to week in all areas irrespective of known movements of refugees from place to place. A large number of refugees had, for example, moved from the Nablus area to the Hauran in Syria while others from Jericho, Jerusalem and Transjordan had moved to Gaza. Similarly, at least 2,000 refugees had recently moved from the Egyptian port town of Kantara, on the Suez Canal, to Gaza. Yet the number of refugees in the areas from which these movements had taken place was in all cases reported as increasing instead of decreasing. Similar exaggerations were made in Syria where, according to Bunche's October report, the authorities claimed the existence of 30,000 refugees whereas the actual figure was no more than half that size.

Cilento expected as many as 400,000 Arabs to apply for UN relief in the coming winter on top of the 360,000-390,000 registered refugees, though these were not genuine refugees in the sense that they were living in their own homes and had not been "displaced." This, however, didn't prevent him, when the prediction was vindicated before the end of the year, from raising the number of refugees to 750,000. St. Aubin, who in September 1948 became the DRP's director of field operations, went a step further by placing the figure (in July 1949) at "approximately one million."

Admitting to having "some difficulty in separating out the real refugees from the rest, and in explaining the reasons for doing so to the Arab authorities," Cilento attributed this chaotic situation to a number of reasons:

Refugees were registered on arrival and fed but their names were not struck off the list if they moved or died;

Refugees moving from one area to another would check in and be fed at several points en route and at each would be added to the list of refugees in the area, in this way numbers increased on paper in areas vacated as well as at final destination;

Local destitute persons were included in numbers although they were not properly refugees;

Fraud and misrepresentation by officials and others to utilize supplies etc.;

There were people who left their homes owing to disturbed conditions but returned to them shortly afterward, yet were briefly registered as refugees and the records remained.[6]

Sir John Troutbeck, head of the British Middle East office in Cairo, got a first-hand impression of this pervasive inflation of refugee numbers during a fact-finding mission to Gaza in June 1949. "The Quakers have nearly 250,000 refugees on their books," he reported to London.

They admit however that the figures are unreliable, as it is impossible to stop all fraud in the making of returns. Deaths for example are never registered nor are the names struck off the books of those who leave the district clandestinely. Some names too are probably registered more than once for the extra rations. But the Quakers assured me that they have made serious attempts to carry out a census and believe they have more information in that respect than the Red Cross organizations which are working in other areas. Their figures include Bedouin whom they feed and care for just like other refugees. They seemed a little doubtful whether this was a right decision, but once it had been taken it could not be reversed, and in any case the Bedouin, though less destitute than most of the refugees proper, are thought to have lost a great part of their possessions. They and the other refugees live in separate camps and in a state of mutual antipathy.[7]

This was hardly a novel phenomenon. Population figures of Palestinian Arab society, especially of rural Muslim communities, were notoriously unreliable, based as they were on exaggerated information provided by village headmen in order to obtain greater government support. As explained in the preface to the mandatory government's Village Statistics 1945, for

all the "very detailed work" invested in this comprehensive compendium of rural Palestine, its estimates "cannot... be considered as other than rough estimates which in some instances may ultimately be found to differ even considerably, from the actual figures." [8]

The supplementary volume to the government's Survey of Palestine (1946), compiled in June 1947 for the information of the UN Special Committee on Palestine (UNSCOP), elaborated on the problematic nature of official demographic statistics:

For the years 1943-46 an investigation recently carried out by the Department of Statistics revealed that many cases of death, especially in rural areas, have not been reported. These omissions (which are mainly due to the attempt to obtain food rations of deceased persons) seriously impair the reliability of the death rates (particularly infant mortality rates) and that of the rate of natural increase. On the other hand, they are not of such magnitude as to effect seriously the estimates of total population. [9]

This may well have been the case. But then, if accepting the Supplement's estimate of 1.3 million Palestinian Arabs at the end of 1946 (the actual figure was most probably 5%-6% lower) the number of refugees could by no stretch of the imagination approximate the million mark for the simple reason that some 550,000-600,00 Arabs who lived in the mandatory districts of Samaria, Jerusalem, and Gaza (which subsequently became the West Bank and the Gaza Strip after their respective occupation by Transjordan and Egypt) remained in situ, while another 160,000 Arabs remained in, or returned to, Israel. This, in turn, puts the number of refugees at 540,000-590,000. Likewise, according to an extrapolation of the Village Statistics 1945, the non-Jewish population of the area that was to become Israeli territory at the end the war amounted, in April 1948, to some 696,000-726,800. Deducting Israel's 160,000-strong postwar Arab population from this figure would leave 536,000-566,800 refugees beyond Israel's frontiers. [10]

As can be seen below, my own calculations, based on British, Jewish, and to a lesser extent Arab, population figures of all identified rural and urban localities abandoned during the war, amounts to 583,000-609,000 refugees.

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