WHEN YOU ARE A REFUGEE

The Nakba

As many as 900,000 Palestinians became refugees when the State of Israel was established. Jewish paramilitary forces depopulated or destroyed more than 500 Palestinian towns and villages during the War of 1948. This expulsion and destruction is called the Nakba, or “the catastrophe,” by Palestinians.

The United Nations General Assembly passed Resolution 194 which called for the return and compensation of refugees from the War of 1948. Israel affirmed the resolution but refuses to enforce it.

The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) began providing relief, education, primary health care, social services and emergency response to refugees.

During the Six Day War, 300,000 Palestinians fled from the West Bank and Gaza to Jordan, Syria, Egypt and elsewhere. Many of them were 1948 refugees, uprooted for the second time.

PROPERTY LOSS WITHOUT COMPENSATION

Palestinian refugees lost almost everything they owned. Their “land, buildings, businesses, plantations, and bank accounts were expropriated [by Israel] without compensation.”

LIFE IN REFUGEE CAMPS

Two-thirds of the Palestinians living in the Gaza Strip are refugees. Nearly half of them live in one of Gaza’s eight refugee camps.

POVERTY

Refugee camps are typically dense and overcrowded, with high levels of unemployment and poverty. In many camps, water and electricity are frequently cut off for long periods of time.

NO ASSISTANCE

Palestinians who were displaced in 1948 within what is now Israel are not allowed to return to their original land, even though they were granted Israeli citizenship and may live mere miles from their old homes. They are considered “internally displaced persons” and do not receive help from UNRWA.

STATELESSNESS

Palestinians who fled to other Middle Eastern countries were permanently cut off from their homes in historic Palestine. Today, they frequently have uncertain legal status and few protections. Many are considered stateless and live in poverty.

A CRY FOR HOME offers stories, videos and fact sheets from MCC on Palestine and Israel. Everyone needs a home – where families are safe and secure, where their basic needs are met, where they can come and go freely, and where they can imagine a future. But that is not the reality for Palestinians – or even for some Israelis. To view other fact sheets and learn more, visit: mcc.org/cry-for-home.
The Right of Return

What is it?

- This Right of Return is upheld in the United Nations General Assembly’s Resolution 194. Palestinians claim the right to return to the country from which they were expelled.
- Jews from around the world are granted Israeli citizenship almost immediately upon their arrival to the country, but Palestinian refugees living around the world are not allowed to return to their land, nor are they given the option of Israeli citizenship.

How could it be implemented?

1. Israel could offer and Palestinians could accept compensation for the loss of homes and land.
2. Israel could allow and Palestinians could accept the possibility of traveling to and visiting family sites.
3. Israel and Palestine could become a binational, democratic state with equal rights for all peoples, whether Jewish or Palestinian.

Symbols of home

The key

Most of the families living in Aida Refugee Camp, located near Bethlehem in the West Bank, are Palestinian refugees from the War of 1948. When they fled their villages, they locked their doors thinking they would come back to their homes after the fighting. After almost 70 years, they still hold the original keys to their homes, hoping that one day they will return. This large key rests over the entrance of the camp as a symbol of the hope of return.

The cactus

The cactus was traditionally used by Palestinians to mark the boundaries of their properties. Today, the cactus is often all that is left to mark the place of a village destroyed during the Nakba. The cactus has become a symbol for the Palestinian Right of Return.

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REFERENCES

2. Zochrot. Estimates vary from 400 to over 600 villages and towns. Zochrot uses the higher number, but includes very small localities.
3. UN General Assembly Resolution 194.
5. UNRWA, “Where we work.”
6. As a result of the Syria War, Palestinian refugees within Syria are especially vulnerable. Many have been displaced within Syria and over 100,000 have fled the country. UNRWA, “Where we work.”