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The Forgotten Refugees

An exchange of populations.

By David G. Littman



Last Thursday, a new terrorist group calling itself, "The Government of Universal Palestine, the Army of Palestine" claimed responsibility for a murderous jihadist terror attack against Kenyans and Israelis in Kilambala, Kenya. The attacks were timed to mark the eve of the anniversary of the November 29, 1947 decision by the United Nations to partition Palestine and allow the creation of the Jewish state.

The next day, in New York and Geneva, the United Nations hosted its annual "International Day of Solidarity with the Palestinian People" — without a hitch.

Amid this ongoing savagery and carnage worldwide, some basic truths need to be reaffirmed about the Middle East tragedy. Aside from the thorny Jerusalem issue, the major stumbling block has always been the question of the return of — or compensation for — Arab refugees from Palestine in 1948 and 1967. But Israel's steadfast refusal by the Arab Palestinian leadership and Arab countries since the 1920s also led to another great refugee tragedy.

In 1945 there were about 140,000 Jews in Iraq; 60,000 in Yemen and Aden; 35,000 in Syria; 5,000 in Lebanon; 90,000 in Egypt; 60,000 in Libya; 150,000 in Algeria; 120,000 in Tunisia; and 300,000 in Morocco, including Tangiers. That comes to a total of about 960,000 — and more than 200,000 in Iran and Turkey.

Jordan covered 78 percent of Palestine as designated by the League of Nations in 1922. Turning a blind eye to article 15 of the League of Nations Mandate, Great Britain decided in 1922 that no Jews would be authorized either to reside or buy land in what was now the Emirate of Transjordan. This decision was ratified by the kingdom of Jordan in its law No. 6, sect. 3, of April 3, 1954 (reactivated in law no. 7, sect. 2, of April 1, 1963), which states that any person may become a citizen of Jordan if he is not a Jew. Even when Jordan made peace with Israel in 1994, this *Judenrein* legislation remained.

In these ancient Jewish communities, which date from Biblical times, less than 40,000 Jews remain today — and in the Arab world there are fewer than 5,000, one-half of one percent of their number at the end of World War II.

During the 20th century, thousands of Jewish men, women, and children, young and old, were brutally massacred in the Maghreb, Iraq, Syria, Egypt, Libya, and Aden — even under French and British colonial rule — and also in Palestine after the British conquest and during the Mandate (1918-48).

As to why and how these countries became *Judenrein* ("cleansed" of Jews), the heading of an article from the *New York Times* of May 16, 1948 — a day after Israel declared its independence — says it all: "Jews in Grave Danger in all Moslem Lands. Nine Hundred Thousand in Africa and Asia Face Wrath of Their Foes".

On January 18, 1948, the president of the World Jewish Congress, Dr. Stephen Wise, appealed to U.S. Secretary of State George Marshall: "Between 800'000 and a million Jews in the Middle East and North Africa, exclusive of Palestine, are in 'the greatest danger of destruction' at the hands of Moslems being incited to holy war over the Partition of Palestine ... Acts of violence already perpetrated, together with those contemplated, being clearly aimed at the total destruction of the Jews, constitute genocide, which under the resolutions of the General Assembly is a crime against humanity."

Already in Iraq (1936 and 1941), Syria (1944-45), Egypt and Libya (1945), and Aden (1947) — all before the state of Israel's founding — murderous attacks had killed and wounded thousands. Here is a description from the official report in 1945 by Tripoli's Jewish community president, Zachino Habib, describing what happened to Libyan Jews in Tripoli, Zanzur, Zawiya, Casabat, Zitlin, Nov. 4-7, 1945: "The Arabs attacked Jews in obedience to mysterious orders. Their outburst of bestial violence has no plausible motive. For fifty hours they hunted men down, attacked houses and shops, killed men, women, old and young, horribly tortured and dismembered Jews isolated in the interior... In order to carry out the slaughter, the attackers used various weapons: knives, daggers, sticks, clubs, iron bars, revolvers, and even hand grenades." (1)

A recent example of such murderous acts was seen on April 11, 2002 when the jihadist bombing of the ancient al-Ghariba synagogue of Djerba in Tunisia killed 17 and badly wounding many others, most of them elderly German tourists. A spokesman for al Qaeda claimed they had been behind the bombing. Now Tunisia's remaining Jewish community will seek security in Israel and elsewhere — like 99 percent of their coreligionists before them.

Pogroms and persecutions, and grave fears for their future, regularly preceded the mass expulsions and exoduses of the Jews, whose ancestors had inhabited these regions from time immemorial, a millennium and more before the successive waves of Arab conquest and occupation from the 7th century. Beginning in 1948, more than 650,000 of these Oriental Jewish refugees were integrated into Israel — even as the country was being threatened with annihilation by neighboring Arab League states, which, for over 40 years, refused the U.N.'s 1947 Palestine Partition Plan. Approximately 300,000 more Jews found refuge, and a new homeland, in Europe and the Americas.

Roughly half of Israel's 5 million Jews — from a population of 6.2 million, of whom roughly 20 percent are Arab, Druze, and Bedouin Israelis — is now composed of those refugees and their descendants, who received no humanitarian aid from the United Nations, and who indeed did not ask for it. It was Jews worldwide, just emerging from the Shoah, who worked together with Israel to achieve this integration.

Yet it was this defiance of international legality by the Arab League in 1947-1948 — maintained decade after decade in unsuccessful attempts at politicide — that led to the ongoing Arab-Palestinian catastrophe. A parallel commitment on behalf of the less numerous Arab refugees of Palestine (in 1948 they numbered about 550,000, although a figure of 750,000 is often claimed) for their integration into some of the 21 Arab states (covering 10 percent of the world's land surface) was considered too great a symbolic and monetary sacrifice, even despite their immense oil resources.

George Orwell's remark about everyone being equal — but some being more equal than others — could well be applied to refugees since the 1940s: Apparently some refugees *are*

considered more equal than others. But the forgotten million — Jewish refugees from Arab lands — were not helped by the U.N. , nor were they kept for over half a century in refugee camps, breeding hopelessness, frustration, and — under U.N. auspices — a culture of hate and death, in which jihadist bombers thrive today.

The transfer of populations on a large scale, as a consequence of war or for political reasons, has always been a characteristic of human history, particularly in the Islamic Orient. Deportations, expropriations and expulsions of dhimmis — Jews, Christians, and other indigenous peoples — recurred throughout the long history of dhimmitude, including in Palestine. One should question today the real motivation of a selective, historically flawed memory which systematically spotlights the Arab-Palestinian refugees — suffering from the Arab League's own policy — but conveniently forgets the Jewish refugees from Arab lands.

U.N. Security Council Resolution 242 of November 22, 1967 — also adamantly refused then by the Khartoum Arab League Summit Conference with the formula: "No peace with Israel, no recognition of Israel, no negotiation with Israel, no concessions on the questions of Palestinian national rights" — refers to "a just solution to the refugee problem". This term applied implicitly also to Jewish refugees from Arab countries — who had been obliged to seek security outside their native lands — and not only to the Arab-Palestinian refugees who are not specifically referred to in the resolution.

The dire hardships endured by the great majority of the Jewish refugees from Arab countries have never been considered by the United Nations, nor has the loss of their inestimable properties and heritage dating back over 3, 000 years. The time has surely come for this great injustice to be addressed seriously, within the context of a just and equitable global solution to the ongoing Middle East tragedy, once the Palestinian leadership ends its jihad-war of attrition and takes the democratic path to peace.

On April 24, 2002, at the U.N. Commission on Human Rights in Geneva, we referred to this matter as a representative of the World Union for Progressive Judaism. Speaking in a "right of reply," the delegate of Iraq (Saad Hussain) stated, unashamedly, that he was "responding to the lies that we heard in the statement of the gentleman called David Littman, known for his animosity toward the Arabs, Muslims, and Islam. The Arab history, the Arab and Islamic history for fourteen centuries, has not witnessed any harm to the Jews — quite the contrary. The Jews have lived, and continue to live in peace, and their sacred places and their property have been protected until today (...) They live in Arab countries today in perfect safety, despite the events — the horrible events taking place in Palestine." (2)

Not surprisingly, the truth is very different. Jews have always been forbidden to reside in Saudi Arabia and Jordan; there are now no Jews in Libya; under 100 in Egypt and Syria; and only 17 remain in Iraq! We shall again briefly raise the question of the forgotten million Jewish refugees from Arab countries at the next session of the U.N. Commission on Human Rights — when the chairperson will be the lady ambassador from Libya! At the last six-week session (March-April 2002) , more than 50 percent of the commission's time was taken up by Palestinian issues — to the dismay of very many observers.

(1) Renzo di Felici, *Jews in an Arab Land: Libya, 1835-1970* (University of Texas, 1985, pp. 193-94., n. 19, p. 365)

(2) U.N. English interpretation, as recorded verbatim from the statement delivered in Arabic.

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