

Still refugees after sixty years

Unlike most refugees around the world, Palestinians are still refugees because they are not allowed to return to the places where they came from, Israel says it doesn't want the refugees to come back to their village sites and towns because it would change the "Jewish character" of the state. This means that the majority of the population of Israel must permanently be Jewish. Most of the land must also be held permanently for the Jewish people. Israel became a Jewish state due to the mass displacement of Palestinians.

After the war in 1948 and 1976, Israel barred the refugees from coming back. After the first war, Israel's government decided to bulldoze the villages where the refugees came from and gave these places new Hebrew names, sometimes reminiscent of biblical places. Many of these sites today are national parks or protected nature areas. The remains of the Palestinian villages, however, are still visible beneath the undergrowth. Refugees from the West Bank and Gaza Strip cannot return because of Israel's military occupation.

When new states are established, citizens of the old state are also considered citizens of the new one under international law, even if they were displaced at the time that the new state came into being. Israel, however, adopted new laws like the 1952 Nationality Law under the name of denationalization. It is strictly prohibited under international law.

Refugees elsewhere also have the right to repossess their properties. Israel, however, adopted a web of land laws like the 1950 Absentees Property Law which transferred these properties to the state to be held permanently for the Jewish people. Israel advocates for the return of property taken from Jews in various parts of the Arab world and in Europe but it says that this principle does not apply to Palestinians.

Raising the demand for maintaining a Jewish state with a permanent Jewish majority and control of the majority of the land in order to block the option of refugee return, however, is an approach which lacks legitimacy under international law. The question that has to be asked, is whether or not Israel has the right to remain an exclusive Jewish state rather than a state of all its citizens, at the expense of millions of Palestinians who used to live in there?

Finally I can say as a Palestinian refugee, "we are able to live alongside Jews, in the same way as they used to live alongside them during the 1920s and before. Their destiny, and to live with Jews in a democratic state through this equitable return to their villages, far from the racist concepts and the racist discrimination which people reject and which we all reject".