



The Historical Roots of President Trump's Gaza Relocation Plan

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: President Donald Trump's controversial initiative to relocate the Palestinian population from the Gaza Strip, primarily to Egypt and Jordan, is causing a stir in the Arab world. While the strong public resistance to the idea expressed by Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi and Jordanian King Abdullah seems to negate the possibility that the president's initiative can be implemented, President Trump insists that his plan is achievable and that Egypt and Jordan will eventually cooperate. His resettlement idea, viewed in today's political environment as anathema, has a series of historical precedents.

President Donald Trump has overturned the Middle East chessboard by proposing that the population of Gaza be resettled elsewhere to allow for the total razing and reconstruction of the Gaza Strip and the full eradication of its terrorist infrastructure. He views Egypt and Jordan as logical hosts to the resettled Gaza population. By mentioning the critical contributions the US makes to Egypt and Jordan, not to say their full reliance on the US, Trump is sending a strong hint to President Sisi and King Abdullah that their reservations about his proposal will come with a price. This could have serious consequences for the two Arab states, both of which face major domestic challenges including economic instability and political unrest.

Those fears notwithstanding, Egypt and Jordan have called on the Arab League to demonstrate a determined and united front against the relocation initiative. The

Joint Arab statement of February 1, 2025, read, “We affirm our rejection of [any attempts] to compromise Palestinians’ unalienable rights, whether through settlement activities, or evictions or annexation of land or through vacating the land from its owners...in any form or under any circumstances or justifications.”

Several European countries have wondered about the ethics of forcibly relocating a population. Relocation, even if framed as voluntary, often involves coercion when individuals have no real alternatives. This raises questions about the morality of displacing millions of people who have already suffered decades of conflict, displacement, and loss.

Will this thwart the American president's ambitious plan? Not necessarily. Trump will likely exert additional pressure on the Jordanian king and Egyptian president, alongside generous economic incentives.

It should be noted that the current relocation initiative is not a new idea. It has long historical roots that stretch all the way back to the conclusion of Israel's War of Independence (1948-1949) and the emergence of the problem of Palestinian refugees. Plans were proposed that were mainly directed toward resettling the refugees through formal absorption into host countries.

Most of these initiatives were thwarted by the Arab League countries as part of a strategy intended to eventually annihilate Israel by inflating the cause of the refugees’ “right of return” to the territory of the State of Israel.

The lessons learned from past failures can serve as reference points for considering President Trump's plan to relocate the residents of the Gaza Strip. The following historical overview sheds light on the circumstances that played a critical role in the past and can help us judge the prospects for Trump’s relocation and resettlement initiative.

Background

The documented evidence shows that the Arab countries, since the very beginning of the Palestinian refugees’ tragedy, have never been interested in any kind of solution to the refugee problem but solely in their return to their homes within Israel. Using this rationale, all the Arab states, with the exception of Jordan,

refused to grant citizenship to any Palestinian refugees residing within their borders. Most Arab leaders reasoned that resettling the Palestinians was tantamount to renouncing Arab claims to Palestine. Out of an overt hostility toward Israel, they deliberately refused to resettle Palestinian refugees in an effort to maintain their refugee status and keep the Palestinian issue alive in the world's consciousness.

Resettlement versus the “right of return”

Official Arab discourse on the matter centered around the implementation of the “right of return” and the preservation of UNRWA as a symbol of both the refugees’ plight and the international community’s responsibility for implementing UN General Assembly Resolution 194.

At the birth of the Palestinian refugee crisis, the Arab states faced a political challenge. While they encouraged their peoples to demand the refugees’ repatriation in Israel, the Arab governments lacked the power to force Israel to accept them. Arab host states found themselves insisting that the Palestinian refugees “go home” even though they did not have the ability to make this happen.

In striking testimony, British MP Richard Cross Brian said, on visiting a refugee camp in Jordan in March 1951, that “...the Arab League needs the refugee problem in order to keep the struggle against Israel. The resettlement of the refugees would have denied its most important tool in this respect”.

Systematic Arab rejection of the refugees’ resettlement

Ever since the early stages of the Palestinian refugee problem, numerous resettlement projects have been proposed, international funds provided, and studies undertaken, all of which focused on the benefits to the refugees of their absorption into Arab host countries. The main idea was that the Palestinians’ rehabilitation could help the host countries develop their own economic potential under proposed aid programs as well as remove the main obstacle to a settlement in the Middle East.

However, the resettlement initiatives, all of which were intended to better the lives

and ease the suffering of the Palestinian people, became the official symbol of “betrayal” of the refugee cause. The term “return” remains to this day – an empty slogan devoid of any clear reference to the modalities of its implementation, either in terms of procedure or in terms of the political regime that might prevail in a recovered Palestine.

The principle of maintaining the refugees as stateless persons in order to retain their Palestinian nationality and thus preserve their “right of return” was the key premise of the Arab League’s Palestinian refugee policies.

Walter Eytan, the first director general of the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs, wrote in his book *The First Ten Years*¹:

...The Arab states were quick to see that they had in the refugees a priceless political asset. They were determined to do everything to preserve it – which meant doing nothing for the refugees...The Arab states as a whole will have no interest in the solution of the problem until the refugees become a political liability for them, as they have been for Israel, or at least cease to be an asset.

The logic behind the principle of resettlement

The first UN secretary general, Trigve Lie, expressed a realistic vision on the topic by stating, "The Arab States would have a change of opinion, and they would recognize the inevitability of reintegration of refugees elsewhere than in Israel." A Report of the Special Study Mission of the US Congress stated in 1954 that the objective should be for refugees to become citizens of the Arab states – but also noted that “any Arab political leader suggesting an alternative to repatriation in what was formerly Palestine would have been ousted from office and, perhaps, have run the risk of assassination”.

The approach of Israeli President Yitzhak Ben-Zvi

A creative idea of how to solve the refugee problem was proposed in December 1960 by the late former Israeli President Yitzhak Ben-Zvi. He suggested that the Arab refugees be regarded as a fair exchange of population for the Jews expelled from Muslim countries who subsequently settled in Israel.

Ben-Zvi said, "The Arabs must accept the fact that Arab refugees should be resettled in their respective countries just as Jews were resettled in Israel...The UN must understand that this was the only way of solving the problem, even if it required financial support." The Arab side rejected President Ben-Zvi's proposal on the claim that it violated UN resolutions.

Resettlement initiatives that were stopped by the Arabs

Several initiatives were explored based on the idea of resettlement. They included the following:

- a. The Syrian case: After its 1948 defeat, the Syrian government was in desperate need of agricultural workers. A joint US-UK initiative to offer a deal for the resettlement of Palestinian refugees in Syria was raised, first with then Syrian Prime Minister Husni Za'im (mid-1949) and then with Adib Shishakly (who overthrew Za'im). The basic framework was settlement in return for money. The plan was to resettle 500,000 refugees in Syria at a cost of \$200,000,000. However, shortly after the Egyptian revolution of July 1952, Shishakly shut down the project, claiming that he was being accused of suppressing freedom, binding Syria to the imperialist organizers of Western pacts and to the oil companies, and of "selling" the refugees. In February 1954, Shishakly was driven from the country by a military coup.
- b. The American plans: A plan was put forward by US Secretary of State John Foster Dulles in August 1955 that suggested the resettlement of the refugees in Arab states. This was to be incentivized through the development of water management projects with the US as a major contributor; payment of compensation for lost property; return of a limited number of refugees to Israel; and a solution to the border problem between Israel and the Arab states. Another US plan, initiated by President Eisenhower after the Israeli military campaign in Sinai (October-November 1956), offered an economic solution to the refugee problem through regional economic development. The last official US plan in this regard was that of Joseph Johnson in October 1962, who suggested that refugees be given a choice of return or

compensation from UN and US funds while maintaining Israel's right to refuse returnees on security grounds.

- c. The Iraqi case: On several occasions, the feasibility of resettling the refugees in Iraq was raised both theoretically and practically. One of the ideas was a possible quid pro quo in which Iraq would absorb a major share of Palestinian refugees in exchange for the 100,000 Jewish residents of Iraq, who would be authorized to emigrate to Israel without hindrance. Though a preliminary scheme for this kind of population exchange was raised by the Iraqi side, the idea was never implemented. This is unfortunate, as resettlement of the refugees in Iraq could have benefited the refugees while helping to solve one of Iraq's own development problems.
- d. The Canadian case: In mid-1955, at the request of UNRWA, the Canadian government expressed a readiness to admit displaced Palestinian refugees. Canadian officials believed that alleviating the refugee problem in the Middle East would help to further regional stability. The resettlement scheme was still politically sensitive, however. Arab governments protested what they labeled a Zionist plot to remove Palestinians from their ancestral land, and Palestinian activists threatened to conduct violent attacks in Canadian cities if Ottawa kept offering Palestinian refugees safe haven in Canada.
- e. The South American option: It was recently revealed that the US proposed giving Palestinian refugees land in South America as a solution to the refugee problem. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, who served during the administration of George W. Bush, suggested that displaced Palestinians be settled in Argentina and Chile. Rice made the proposal during a June 2008 meeting with US, Israeli and Palestinian negotiators in Berlin. The initiative was bluntly rejected by the Palestinian side.

The special resettlement initiative of UN Secretary General Dag Hammarskjöld

Of all the resettlement proposals, the initiative of UN Secretary General Dag Hammarskjöld was the most comprehensive. On June 15, 1959, he made the assertion that there were feasible means of absorbing the refugees into the economy of the Arab region. He asserted further that the refugees would be

beneficial to their host countries by adding vital manpower to assist in their development. Hammarskjold detailed the estimated cost of the refugee absorption, which he said could be financed by oil revenues and outside aid.

The Arab states strongly rejected the plan on the grounds that it overlooked the Palestinians' national rights. They also strongly objected to its blueprint for regional economic development, which would result in economic cooperation with Israel and eventually political cooperation. This was deemed unacceptable as it would benefit Israel by ending the boycott.

The most radical remark on behalf of the Arab States was delivered by Saudi Arabian representative to the UN Ahmad Shukeiri, who warned that unless Israel was forced to accept the complete repatriation of the refugees, 80,000,000 Arabs "from Casablanca to the Persian Gulf" were ready and eager to go to war against the Jewish State.

The Jordanian option as an "alternative homeland"

The case of Jordan, which bears the highest burden of refugees, illustrates why other Arab states are reluctant to accept Palestinian refugees. In terms of demographics, the over 2 million refugees who reside in Jordan - 40% of all registered refugees - represent more than 70% of the total Jordanian population. The idea of flooding Jordan with large numbers of additional Palestinian refugees directly threatens the future of the Hashemite Kingdom. It can therefore be easily understood why Jordan's King Abdullah expressed his firm position that he will never accept turning Jordan into the Palestinians' "alternative homeland".

No matter what the official Jordanian position may be, the notion of Jordan as an "alternative homeland" is still alive. It is being pushed by Dr. Mudar Zahran, the Secretary General of the Jordanian Opposition Coalition, who aims to bring about the collapse of the Kingdom of Jordan.

Conclusion

In all the proposals for resettling Palestinian refugees, they were identified not as a liability but as an asset. They were described as a reservoir of manpower which, combined with the economic potentialities of the area, could contribute toward

raising the standard of living across the whole region. But on the political level, the refugees were perceived as a threat to stability and peace, and as people who could easily be exploited by Communist and other radical movements.

Since neither Israel nor the US had the power to compel resettlement, the Palestinians and the Arab states succeeded in resisting it. In the wake of the failure of any resettlement strategy to take hold, UNRWA - a tool of UN - was suspected of indirectly helping to subsidize Palestinian terror groups and even of abetting Palestinian atrocities against Israelis on October 7.

The Arab States' resistance to resettlement was well reasoned. Notwithstanding the 1949 armistice, the Arab governments did not accept Israel's legitimacy. To agree to resettlement as a resolution to the refugee problem would have been tantamount to acknowledging the permanence of Israel.

Israeli historian Prof. Benny Morris, commenting on the 1948-49 negotiations concerning repatriation and resettlement, bluntly argued that the Arab states regarded the refugees as a potential fifth column. Some Arab governments feared that the absorption of Palestinian refugees could undermine their own political stability.

Finally, voices among the refugees themselves have described their feelings on the matter: "The Arab States do not want to solve the refugee problem. They want to keep it as an open sore, as an affront to the United Nations and as a weapon against Israel. Arab leaders don't give a damn whether the refugees live or die."

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¹ Walter Eytan, *The First Ten Years* (Simon & Schuster, 1958) p. 131.