

# From UNRWA To Israel: The 1952 Transfer of Responsibilities for Refugees in Israel

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The transfer of responsibilities from UNRWA (United Nations Relief and Work Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East) to Israel in July 1952 was a significant step in the resettlement of the refugees in the sovereign territory of Israel. It doubles in importance considering that Israel was the only Middle Eastern country to take over from the UN agency. However, the significance of this step should also be compared with at least two more factors: the ratio between the refugees found in Israel and the total Arab post-1948 refugee population, and the ratio between the Israeli refugee population and its total Arab body. Comparing these two sets of figures might facilitate an understanding of the reasons for the disappearance of the problem in Israel, yet have no effect whatsoever on the refugee issue in its entirety.

In the following pages an attempt made to analyze the reasons behind UNRWA's suggestion to Israel to take over, and the processes that led Israel to reluctantly accept this proposal. Of course, this move represented an opportunity to resettle the Arab refugees left behind in what became the State of Israel. However, there are other reasons for the total disappearance of the term "refugee" from Israeli terminology. First, the fact that this country never formally recognized in its legislation the distinctiveness of this particular population. Further, treating all Arabs in the same way, subjecting them all to military government, helped galvanize one politically motivated population of refugees and non-refugees. But those issues are beyond the scope of this article.

## How Significant Was the Size of the Refugee Population in Israel?

The total number of Arab refugees emanating from the 1948 armed conflict in Palestine is important for understanding the magnitude of the issue, yet it has never been easy to calculate. It is also important to determine the proportion of Arab refugees to other Arab citizens and the total Jewish population of Israel, in considering the political, financial, and military efforts invested by the Israeli government. Further, any Israeli contribution aimed at solving the internal refugee issue should be assessed against the proportion of the total number of refugees and those living in Israel.

Most figures given are only estimates which put the number of refugees at the end of the war between 600,000 and 760,000.<sup>1</sup> In contrast, the number of Arab citizens in the newly created State of Israel was carefully calculated based on the results of the first Israeli census (held on 8 November 1948). One of the reasons for this census was to determine the extent of the security risk posed by the Arab population of Israel, the refugees included. Thus, bearing in mind the method and the purpose, it is logical to assume that some effort was indeed invested in those calculations. Moreover, the question of facts and figures should not only be studied on its own, but the number of refugees in Israel should always be mentioned in terms relative to the total number of Arabs in Israel. That number stood at around 102,000 in the fall of 1948.<sup>2</sup> A few months later, in January 1949, the number of refugees in Israel, based on figures used by the UN, stood at 40,000.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, Israeli sources used the figure of 30,000:<sup>4</sup> 11,000–12,000 (among them 4,000

peasants) in the north, plus the Bedouins of the Negev, most of them refugees, who numbered about 16,000–18,000 people (3,500 families) in 25 tribes (3 clans).<sup>5</sup> Most of these figures are based on the official census and the estimate of Yosef Weitz, an Israeli official responsible for land and settlement issues.

After the conclusion of the April 1949 armistice agreement between Israel and the Hashemite Kingdom of Transjordan, the number of Arabs in the area under Israeli sovereignty increased dramatically. In April 1949, about 20,000 refugees were found in twenty villages in northern Israel, and 7,000 more lived in the port town of Acre.<sup>6</sup> Adding the number of refugees in the south, the refugee population at that time stood at more than 40,000. This figure was later used by the Israeli government in a letter to the chief UNRWA representative in the Middle East, in which Israel agreed to assume the organization's duties on its territory. The letter stated that, originally, the number of refugees in Israel had been about 48,000, but at the time of the letter (mid-1952) it stood at 20,000. It is clear from a variety of sources that the number used by the Israeli government for internal calculations, as well as diplomatic approaches, did indeed stand at 48,000.<sup>7</sup>

Thus, the number of Arabs living in Israel as of 31 December 1950 stood at 170,000;<sup>8</sup> about one-third of them were refugees. Of these, the number of people taken care of by UNRWA in northern Israel was about 25,000: 21,001 Arab refugees, 2,995 Jewish refugees, and 891 Arabs from the demilitarized zone along the Israeli-Syrian border. This picture did not change much two years later in regard to the number of refugees on UNRWA's list. At this time, UNRWA and Israel were en-

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gaged in negotiations for the transfer of responsibility for the refugees in Israel. The only major difference was that the total number of refugees was identical to the number of those helped by UNRWA, meaning that all other displaced people were already taken care of within the Israeli system. This might indicate that by late 1950 the problem of about 28,000 refugees was already resolved.<sup>9</sup> UNRWA figures cited by British diplomats<sup>10</sup> speak of 12,000 Arab refugees already resettled in Israel, and thus removed from the 1949 number of UNRWA-supported recipients. This number was further reduced in the following months by another 3,000 refugees. Thus, the Israeli ministerial committee discussing resettlement was able to reclassify the refugees: 7,000 would not need any help; 5,000 would need jobs in Israel; and about 5,000 were hard-core welfare cases. The date of this meeting, only two months after the transfer from UNRWA, strongly suggests that the Israeli government believed the UN figures to be exaggerated and thus, through recounting and not through resettlement, in eight weeks, the numbers were further reduced.<sup>11</sup> The 1952 figures were 17,000 and 16,500 Arabs<sup>12</sup> for May and November, respectively. Of these, about 40 percent were considered to be "hard-core" cases, meaning they could not support themselves. Stated differently, that was the actual number of refugees cared for by UNRWA, and the number which Israel took upon itself to deal with upon the transfer of responsibilities from the Agency to the government of Israel.<sup>13</sup>

Reducing the relative representation of the refugees within the Israeli Arab population from about 28 percent to about 10 percent in four years almost eliminated the problem within the Israeli borders. A few years later, the term "refugee" disappeared from the Israeli discourse. This change was largely due to the Israeli takeover from UNRWA in 1952. However, relative to the whole body of refugees in the Arab countries, the reduction was rather insignificant: from about 3 percent to about 2 percent. On this level, Israel

did not serve as a role model for her neighbours.

### UNRWA Interest and Expectations

United Nations' organized involvement in the refugee issue began in August 1948 with the establishment of the Disaster Relief Project. In November 1948, the United Nations General Assembly established the United Nations Relief for Palestine Refugees. This body was replaced by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency based on the General Assembly resolution. This agency began its activities in May 1950, entrusted with projects for the permanent resettlement of refugees in Arab countries and in Israel.

Even before the establishment of UNRWA, the foreign powers involved in the refugee issue adopted a distinct policy regarding Israel. It became evident over time that Israel was treated differently from the Arab countries. The Western powers, led by the United States and Great Britain adopted,<sup>14</sup> as early as 1949, a three-layer approach in dealing with the Israeli dimension of the refugee issue:

- Israeli opposition to the principle of repatriation is the foundation of any future Israeli and international policy;<sup>15</sup> this, obviously, does not rule out public lip service in the form of repatriation demands from Israel.
- Israel is eager to resolve the problem of those refugees within its borders to eliminate a potential security threat, and aiming to manifest that the issue is more humanitarian than political.
- Israel is suspicious of unfriendly United Nations organizations and their agencies.

UNRWA policies based on these premises indicated Israel as an obvious candidate to take over from UNRWA, and made Israel a testing ground for ways of tackling the issue. Moreover, the Western powers insisted on initiating a resettlement process in Israel, in order to appease the Arab countries whose support for the West was essential with the raging Cold War. Transferring responsibility

to Israel had to be interpreted by Arab governments as making Israel admit its formal guilt in creating the problem. Perhaps the issue of guilt associated with taking care of the refugees was the main reason for the Arab governments' consistent refusal to take over from UNRWA in their sovereign territories, in spite of the economic benefits which might have accompanied such an agreement. Even though Syria was seen by UNRWA as the most likely candidate in addition to Israel, the takeover never materialized.<sup>16</sup> On the other hand, the policy of making Israel responsible for the refugees only within its borders, and not for the refugees all over the Middle East, is evident from contemporary diplomatic correspondence, which strongly suggests that resettlement schemes in Arab countries were usually offered to refugees found only in other Arab countries.<sup>17</sup>

An additional element of policy was identified and acted upon in the early 1950s: considering that UNRWA did not possess the resources to build infrastructure for the refugees in Israel, or elsewhere, and the quick pace of development in Israel in order to accommodate hundreds of thousands of Jewish newcomers, the relinquishing of powers to the local government might lead, in the view of the Agency, to the integration of the refugees into the emerging infrastructure.<sup>18</sup>

The outcome of these policies could be only a re-examination of the role of UNRWA in Israel. Indeed, in 1950 the Western powers began to consider the possibility that UNRWA would not be the exclusive means of dealing with the refugees in Israel.<sup>19</sup> This concept, at first only theoretical, became the policy of UNRWA when, in 1950, it faced dire financial straits. An internal UNRWA memorandum of December 1950 advocates<sup>20</sup> transferring responsibilities to local governments as a cost-saving measure, since these authorities would be less exposed to refugee pressure and excessive demands from UNRWA officials, would have better means of verifying the precise number of refugees, and thus would commit

less funds to this population than the UNRWA, while maintaining the same level of treatment. Under these circumstances, Israel was not a natural place for savings, since UNRWA allocated only 3 percent<sup>21</sup> of its distribution budget to refugees in Israel. However, considering the political implications, Israel could serve as a starting point accepted by all parties.

The diminishing role of UNRWA in Israel and the organization's acute financial crisis may help explain its approach to Israel. In December 1950, UNRWA first asked<sup>22</sup> Israel to take over the Agency's activities in the country. The offer was the result of the United Nations General Assembly resolution in November that direct relief cannot be terminated as provided for in a prior resolution, and authorized the Agency to furnish such relief, for which \$20 million would be required for the period 1 July 1951 to 30 June 1952. This came on top of an existing UNRWA deficit of over U.S.\$2.6 million (about 10 percent of its overall budget).<sup>23</sup> This resolution spelled a looming financial crisis for the Agency, and a need to turn over responsibilities to local governments wherever possible. However, since UNRWA had a UN mandate only in the economic and humane fields, no change in the position of this body could in any way be interpreted by the Arab countries as a total UN withdrawal from its commitments to a political solution to the refugee issue.<sup>24</sup> Thus, Israel was offered several financial incentives, including a grant of \$2 per capita per month (welfare cases only, so that the approximate value of this part of the offer was about \$170,000 annually), and a lump sum of \$1-1.5 million for the total refugee population, provided Israel took over on 1 April 1951. One month after the deadline, and due to the fact that Israel did not respond, UNRWA withdrew its proposals. However, the United States approached Israel in December 1951.<sup>25</sup> Shortly thereafter, Israel indicated it would take over from the UN and absorb more than 20,000 refugees living in Israel.<sup>26</sup> Negotiations between the Organization and Israel

were resumed in early 1952, and the two parties agreed on 18 May 1952 that UNRWA was to terminate its activities on 1 September 1952, and that Israel would not be given any financial aid for the project. That date was later to be changed to 1 July upon the request of the Agency (however, UNRWA was to continue delivery of supplies until 1 September 1952).

### Israeli Reaction and Apprehension

The transfer of responsibilities was not smooth on the part of Israel. Most of the refugees found on Israeli soil had been granted Israeli citizenship in late 1948 and early 1949. Consequently, any change in the way refugees were treated by non-Israeli agencies was, from the very beginning, unwelcomed and perceived as a foreign intervention in Israeli domestic affairs.<sup>27</sup> Because of suspicions regarding any initiative along these lines, especially coming from UN circles, and the productive cooperation between the Israeli government and UNRWA,<sup>28</sup> it was unnecessary in Israeli eyes to change the current *modus operandi* into something that might become more costly, both in financial and diplomatic terms. The Israeli-UNRWA cooperation even enabled the two parties to reach<sup>29</sup> a *de facto* agreement denying refugees infiltrating Israel from Lebanon UNRWA's assistance in Israel. On a different level, in 1951 Israel began distributing supplies to its refugees, overlapping UNRWA activities,<sup>30</sup> and presumably paving the way for a unilateral takeover.

Israeli displeasure with the proposed changes was evident in April 1952 when Walter Eytan, Director General of the Foreign Office, used very reserved language in stating<sup>31</sup> that he "thought that Israel had agreed in principle" to the move; similar language was used in discussions with British diplomats. This, coming in the wake of negotiations for the Israeli takeover of United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) activities already at the end of March 1951,<sup>32</sup> was indeed taken as a setback for UNRWA. Further negotia-

tions<sup>33</sup> with Israeli diplomats revealed the budgetary burden on Israel resulting from a possible transfer of responsibility. According to an Israeli diplomat in charge of the negotiations, about 8,000 of the 20,000 refugees taken care of by UNRWA would continue to constitute "hard-core" welfare cases. Consequently, Israel would have to put together a detailed timetable and additional sources of financing.

Concurrently, the United States Secretary of State was concerned<sup>34</sup> with the slow pace of resettlement in Jordan, but did not believe that the individual Arab countries (Jordan included) would accept greater responsibility for the refugees. Consequently, he and the Administration were determined to see at least Israel contribute its share to the resettlement process. Responding to U.S. pressure,<sup>35</sup> and based on UNRWA estimate that the annual expense for its activities in Israel would be some US\$5 million, Israel suggested gradual withdrawal of UNRWA. However, Israeli insistence on receiving about one-half of the estimated costs for "hard-core" cases from UNRWA was interpreted by the U.S. as another ploy to delay the transfer of responsibility. As a result, Americans decided to pressure Israel by using their leverage stemming from the fact that Israel was a large recipient of U.S. bilateral aid for refugee expenses through UN channels. This American resolution was immediately conveyed to the governments in Beirut and Amman with the hope that Israel would now agree to transfer of responsibility as of 1 July.

On 18 May 1952, largely as a result of American and UNRWA pressure, Israel notified<sup>36</sup> the Director General of UNRWA, Ambassador Blandford, that it agreed that UNRWA would be relieved of further responsibility for the refugees in Israel. That Israeli agreement was reiterated at a meeting between Blandford, the Prime Minister of Israel, the Director General of the Foreign Ministry, and Mr. Michael Comay, in charge of negotiations with UNRWA at the Israeli Foreign Minis-

try. The organization's goal at that point was to end all of its activities in Israel as of 1 July 1952, and withdraw all of its staff.

Israeli opposition to the proposed change in responsibility was the result of several considerations. Leading among them was deep-rooted suspicion of any foreign involvement in the Israeli decision-making processes relating to Arab-Israeli relations, including the refugee issue. Israel initiated a gradual change in UNRWA-Israeli operations even before the formal decision; that is, Israel found it necessary to resist a beneficial move only because it was not the result of its own independent decision making. This tactic was only marginally affected by the financial factor which, if compared with other contemporary Israeli financial undertakings, was insignificant.

#### Postmortem: Did the Transfer of Responsibility Contribute to a Solution?

UNRWA officially ended its activities in Israel on 1 July 1952,<sup>37</sup> but continued providing supplies to refugees in Israel until 1 September, and partially operated even during October of that year. The number of refugees taken care of was 17,000 (7,000 would not need any assistance, 5,000 would need welfare payments, and 5,000 would need jobs).

The process of changing responsibilities for refugees within Israeli borders involved two sets of conflicting interests. Israel, always suspicious of foreign intervention in its domestic affairs, tried to slow down the process. UNRWA, on the other hand, hard-pressed to relieve its financial crisis and eager to show some progress in resettlement, tried its best to speed it up. Looking back to the negotiations with UNRWA, Israel had every reason to be satisfied. After the transfer of responsibilities, a senior Foreign Office official summarized<sup>38</sup> the Israeli assessment of the change: Israel did not benefit from the activities of the organization and neither did the refugees. Aid from a foreign power contributed to the alienation of that national minority from the state. This

support helped in maintaining some opposition to the government and its efforts; it also contributed to these refugees being a source of cheap labour (since they already had some income of their own). Furthermore, UNRWA did not try to advance any solution to the problem. Without the aid of the Agency, Israel was faced with the task of solving the problem. One historical precedent widely used<sup>39</sup> by Israel at that time was that the success of the resettlement of Greek refugees in the 1920s was in part the result of the fact that the feeding of the refugees by international organizations was discontinued in the early stages and replaced by constructive resettlement measures. This precedent, impertinent as it might be looked at four generations later, did guide the Israeli authorities. Indeed, a sharp decline in the number of refugees in Israel was reported in late 1952. At about the same time, only a few months after the transfer of responsibilities, a senior Israeli official asserted that there was no longer a problem of refugees in Israel.<sup>40</sup>

#### Notes

1. Benny Morris. *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987. pp. 297-98; cf. ISA/FM2444/19/Israel Foreign Ministry/News From the Countries of the Middle East/Report #3/25 February 194[9]/The Palestinian Refugees Problem—This document states (and this became the basis for Israeli policy) that there were no reliable figures, but that the total number of refugees did not exceed 600,000.
2. ISA/FM2444/19/Israel Foreign Ministry/News From the Countries of the Middle East/Report #3/25 February 194[9]/The Palestinian Refugees Problem; ISA/FM2444/19/Israel Foreign Ministry/2 June 1949/From: Dr. H. Meyuzam, Central Bureau of Statistics, To: A. Goren, The Foreign Ministry.
3. ISA/FM2444/19/Israel Foreign Ministry/News From the Countries of the Middle East/Report #4/20 April 1949/The Palestinian Refugees Problem.
4. ISA/FM2444/19/Israel Foreign Ministry/27 May 1949/From: Yosef Weitz, To: the Foreign Minister; ISA/FM2445/2A/Israel Foreign Ministry/18 December 1952/Written comments by the Advisor on Arab Affairs to the Prime Minister.
5. ISA/FM2444/19/Israel Foreign Ministry/1 September 1949/Minutes of the Refugee Affairs Committee.
6. NA/RG84/Haifa/Box 1/Folder 350/570.1/350.21/From: the U.S. Consul, Jerusalem, To: the U.S. Consul, Haifa.

7. PRO/FO371/91411/EE1828/1, UNRWA Haifa Monthly report for November 1950; PRO/FO371/91411/EE1826/6, UNRWA monthly report for December 1950 reports slight difference in numbers: total of 24,919; cf. PRO/FO371/91411/EE1828/14, UNRWA Haifa monthly report for January 1951 speaking of 24,911; same range of numbers is repeated all through 1951; ISA/FM2445/1/Israel Foreign Ministry/26 March 1952/From: the Foreign Ministry, Jerusalem, To: Israeli Embassy, Washington; NA/RG84/Tel Aviv(1950-52)/Box 18/Folder 571(PRWA)/5 June 1952/From: The Ambassador, To: Washington, transmitting a copy of the letter addressed to the UNRWA, by Michael Comay, of the Israeli Foreign Ministry; ISA/FM2406/17A/Israel Foreign Ministry/3 September 1952/From: the International Organizations Section of the Foreign Ministry, Jerusalem, To: the acting Director General, Foreign Office, Jerusalem.
8. NA/RG84/Tel Aviv(1950-52)/Box 6/Folder 350/27 June 1951/From: The First Secretary, To: Washington; NA/RG84/Tel Aviv(1950-52)/Box 8/Folder 350/19 July 1951/From: The Ambassador, To: Washington.
9. PRO/FO371/91410/EE1826/45, 19 December 1951, From: UK Delegation to the UN General Assembly, Paris, To: the Foreign Office, London, reporting views expressed by the Israeli Foreign Minister in a discussion with the UK Ambassador; ISA/FM2445/1/Israel Foreign Ministry/18 March 1952/From: Israeli Embassy, Washington, To: the Foreign Ministry, Jerusalem.
10. PRO/FO371/98505/EE1824/33, 20 June 1952, From: UK Delegation to Beirut, To: the Foreign Office, London.
11. ISA/FM2445/1/Israel Foreign Ministry/8 September 1952/minutes of the ministerial Refugee Affairs Committee.
12. ISA/FM2406/17A/Israel Foreign Ministry/3 September 1952/From: the International Organizations Section of the Foreign Ministry, Jerusalem, To: the acting Director General, the Foreign Office, Jerusalem.
13. PRO/FO371/91410/EE1826/44, 14 December 1951, summary of discussion between the Israeli Ambassador, London, and the British Secretary of State; NA/RG84/Tel Aviv(1950-52)/Box 14/Folder 571(PRWA)/18 April 1952/From: Keeler, Tel Aviv, To: Washington; NA/RG84/Tel Aviv(1950-52)/Box 14/Folder 571(PRWA)/28 May 1952/From: The Ambassador, To: Washington.
14. Early indication for a similar approach to Israel can be found in PRO/FO371/75417/E263, 5 January 1949, in which a UNCCP official and a British diplomat exchange views on the Arab refugees.
15. *op. cit.*, Partial U.S. withdrawal from the repatriation principle, see: ISA/FM2444/19/Israel Foreign Ministry/29 May 1949/From: the U.S. President, To: the Prime Minister, Israel; PRO/FO371/82595/E1461/16/G, 12 September 1950, Top Secret, From: the British Embassy, Washington, To: the Foreign Office, London; PRO/FO371/91410/EE1826/1, 28 December 1950, From: the British Embassy, Baghdad, To: the Foreign Office, London; PRO/FO371/91410/EE1826/14, 26 January 1951, UNRWA

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