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Solving the Palestinian Refugee Crisis

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Instructor’s Notes

For this essay, the rhetorical situation called for Emily to convert research originally gathered for an informative essay into a persuasive, argument essay. To accomplish this, she first had to “listen in to the dialogue” concerning the plight of the Palestinian refugees, learn about their current situation, and then find an argument within the dialogue that she could speak to. Notice that she had to be careful not just to present information about the refugees’ suffering. While describing the issue does provide pathos for her essay, she went beyond that description to an argument for a specific solution.

Writers’ Biography

Emily Guilliams is a second year International Studies major. She loves writing, but she believes commas are an unsolvable enigma. In her spare time, she dreams of traveling the world and roots for Cleveland sports teams to be decent.

Solving the Palestinian Refugee Crisis

For over sixty years, political leaders, and academics have discussed it. Countless books have addressed it. The United Nations (UN) has issued resolutions about it, but the debate about the plight of Palestinians refugees continues. This situation contains many highly debatable issues. These include questions of who is responsible for the refugees and what solutions are viable economically, politically, and legally. While the length and magnitude of this debate make it seem impossible to resolve satisfactorily for all parties, many world leaders still try. The reality of millions of Palestinian refugees living in limbo along with the desire for lasting peace should inspire commitment to a possible solution. After a consideration of rights, historical events, and the current situation, the most realistic plan for solving the Palestinian refugee problem is for Arab governments
to grant Palestinian refugees, who reside inside their territory, citizenship and integrate them as soon as possible.

The Palestinian refugees’ suffering, caused by the loss of identity and prolonged human rights violations, should lead world leaders to demand action. For over sixty years, the Palestinian’s fates have been a bargaining chip leaving many to an undesirable fate. Many of these Palestinians, who fled Israel in 1948, “left behind their belongings and expected to return to their homes within days or weeks” (Marx). When this did not happen, a “demoralizing process of pauperization” (Nachmias) occurred. A reversal of this process has not happened for many Palestinian refugees. Some have been doomed to a life “in squalid camps for decades” (Nachmias). This is not an acceptable human rights situation. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948 stated, “Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family” (Leckie 3); however, many Palestinians have discovered how easily neglected and manipulated the rights of those without a state are. Some Arab countries have promoted the idea that “improving Palestinian conditions and giving them basic rights would facilitate their full integration in the host society and thus weaken their Palestinian identity” (El-Abed 531). This would supposedly lead to the Palestinians abandoning their right of return. Actual fieldwork, conducted among Palestinians in Egypt, shows that the “major factors encouraging Palestinians to hide or even lose their sense of Palestinian identity, are the deprivation of basic rights and the uncertainties arising from their precarious legal status” (El-Abed 532). This denial of basic rights is demonstrated by the Lebanese government, who “assigned [Palestinian refugees] the legal status of foreigners, which has negatively affected their rights to health care, social services, education and property ownership” (Ibrahim 83). This has occurred despite the 1951 Refugee Convention giving refugees the right to provisions such as aid, employment, education, and the justice system (Holzer 842). Long-term refugee status has left Palestinians vulnerable to political manipulation, rights violations, and economic discrimination.

In addition to this vulnerability, refugee status is creating a dangerous culture of short-term benefits that damages long-term solutions. The actions of refugees’ grandchildren are an example of this. Even those grandchildren who live in “relative comfort”
still usually “list themselves as refugees” because Palestinians fortunate enough to be settled and involved in society still “enjoy the monetary and other benefits granted them by” the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) (Bartal). According to a 1968 study, many Palestinian refugees who were not originally located in refugee camps later moved in to them (Marx). This happened because in a refugee camp “[t]hey paid no rent and no municipal taxes and their water supply and sanitation were free” (Marx). These Palestinians have a special UN agency, the UNRWA dedicated to their welfare (Bartal); however, the UNRWA, itself, faces a similar conflict of short-term welfare that complicates solutions. This is because the UNRWA hires almost entirely out of the refugee population, with a continued “demand by Palestinians to increase staffing and thereby provide employment” (Marx). This set-up means that a resolution to the Palestinian refugee problem would eliminate the need for the UNRWA (Marx). This would in turn eliminate “the largest employer in the West Bank and Gaza Strip” (Marx). This creates a clear conflict of interest, which along with the benefits and drawbacks of refugee status have led many refugee camps to become permanent (Marx). This is not completely negative. Palestinians have “invested capital in improvements,” and currently refugee camps can be “among the better lower-class urban quarters” (Marx). Nonetheless, the permanency of refugee camps inhibits possible solutions. Evidences of this is seen in the “close-knit social networks” and situations that cause refugees to “not wish to leave their property, livelihoods, and friends in order to be resettled,” and help continue the “refugee existence” on through the generations (Marx). While the improvement of conditions for Palestinian refugees is good, its effects and the UNRWA’s conflicted position threaten to replace a permanent resolution with a stateless status passed on through generations.

If the international community is going to solve this problem while it is still possible, world leaders should agree upon Israel’s right to a Jewish-majority and therefore its justification to refuse the return of Palestinians. If all the refugees were to return, it would end the Jewish majority. Many see this an encouraging possibility. Israel’s tactics in preserving its Jewish majority are compared by critics “to Nazi Germany and apartheid South Africa” (Karsh 320), but those who say that there is no need for a Jewish-majority state...
ignore history. The establishment of the state of Israel gave proof of the dangerous reality that exists for Jewish people. During the United Nations debate about establishing a Jewish state, only two years after the Second World War and the Holocaust ended, the Arab League’s Secretary-General Abdel Rahman Azzam warned of a possible “war of extermination and momentous massacre” against the Jews (321). In the years following the 1948 birth of Israel, “nearly all of the 850,000-strong Jewish population living in Arab states” fled or were forced from their homes (Bartal). Many of these Jewish communities “predated the Muslim conquest of the Middle East by hundreds of years” (Bartal). Threats of extermination have continued through many Middle Eastern leaders and groups, including “the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) whose publicly stated goal since its creation in 1964 has been the destruction of the state of Israel” (Karsh 321). These threats have not stopped. Recently, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, then president of Iran, declared that Israel should “be ‘wiped off the map’” (321). Even some western academics have voiced their support for “the actual elimination of the Jewish state” (322). History demonstrates these threats are not new or going anywhere. In light of this reality, Israel’s position, which has remained the same since its first Prime Minister Ben-Gurion articulated “that a real solution of the refugee problem lay in the resettlement of the refugees in Arab states” (Nachmias), is not going to change. In addition, while Israel protects its ethnic majority, the country declared at its founding the goal of “absolute social and political equality of rights for all its citizens” (Karsh 333). In fact, Israel gave its Arab population “educational, cultural, judicial, and religious autonomy,” and this part of the population has made steady economic and lifestyle improvements since the creation of Israel (333). Now Israel’s Arab male population enjoys a life expectancy over eight years longer than the average Middle Eastern man does (333). These facts are in opposition to the claim that Israel is a modern day apartheid. This historical persecution and these recent threats should cause world leaders to accept Israel and its rights. Thus, in order to move forward with Palestinian resettlement, world leaders need to accept Israel’s right to refuse the return of Palestinians.

However, even if leaders acknowledge the need for a Jewish-state, many Arab countries and Palestinians will still claim
that Israel is responsible for the fate of the Palestinian refugees. While they are quick to fix blame for the plight of the Palestinians, Arabs and Palestinians usually ignore the parallel displacement of Jewish people. Because of the declaration of a Jewish State and the war that followed in 1948, approximately “700,000 Palestinians sought refuge in neighboring countries” (Peteet 3). In contrast, after the establishment of Israel 850,000 Jewish people were “expelled or escaped” from Arab countries (Bartal). The majority went to Israel where they “were settled during the 1950s in transit camps” (Bartal). Instead of maintaining these camps, Israel transitioned them “into development towns or neighborhoods” (Bartal). To explain the difference between the fates of Jewish and Palestinian refugees, many Palestinian advocates “argue that the Arab states were not empowered to represent them” and “claim … that Jews who emigrated did so because of Zionist manipulation rather than persecution and harassment” (Bartal). Historical evidence does not support this assertion of Zionist influence as the main reason for Jewish migration (Bartal). This evidence includes Syria passing a law that froze “all Jewish bank accounts,” Jewish people “being attacked by Arab mobs” in Egypt, and “a horrible pogrom [organized attack on a certain religious or ethnic group] in the Libyan capital of Tripoli” (Bartal). This population exchange suggests a shift of the responsibility for the Palestinians to the Arab countries that expelled or lost, depending on interpretation of events, hundreds of thousands of Jews. Furthermore, when politicians call for the payment of losses from Israel to the displaced Palestinians, they overlook, purposely or accidently, the property exchange that occurred between Israel and Arab countries. Estimated at the equivalent of 3.4 billion dollars, the value of property left behind in Israel by Palestinians is dwarfed by “the worth of Jewish assets left behind,” which were “estimated in 2003 at over $100 billion” (Bartal). A possible explanation for this disparity in property losses is that the population exchange was largely “an inequitable exchange of educated and often prosperous Jews for a population of uneducated refugees with no professional skills” (Bartal). These statistics regarding population and property indicate that the international community should not hold Israel mainly or solely responsible for the Palestinians’ fate. The Arab countries of the Middle East lost large Jewish populations. These Jews were in general taken in and aided by Israel; thus, it is
reasonable to infer, that these Arab countries should bear substantial responsibility for the settlement and aid of those Palestinians who fled Israel.

The Arab nations’ responsibility extends to resettling the refugees, a solution once considered inevitable. In the 1950s, most authorities saw the solution of resettlement and integration, rejected now by most, as the probable outcome. Much of the arguments for and against the Palestinian’s right of return come from the UN General Assembly resolutions 194 and 394 (Romirowsky). These resolutions declared the need for “the reintegration of the refugees into the economic life of the Near East, either by repatriation or resettlement” (Joffe). As soon as 1951, the reintegration of Palestinians refugees “was understood in diplomatic circles exclusively as resettlement” (Joffe). The U.N. Secretary-General Trygve Lie’s hope was that “refugees [would] lead an independent life in countries which have given them shelter” (Nachmias). Because of the poor economic statuses of Arab countries, the plan was to “offer the Arab governments vast resources” in exchange for integrating the refugees (Nachimas). Originally, “Arab states vehemently opposed resolution 194 and voted unanimously against it,” but many Arab countries quietly agreed to resettle Palestinian refugees with the incentive of western economic aid (Bartal). Unfortunately due to a combination of governments’ opposition, failure of funding to materialize, and a “misperception of the ultimate goals” these resettlement efforts did not solve the refugee problem (Nachimas). Despite the ultimate failure of these efforts, the fact that sixty years ago knowledgeable officials had accepted that Palestinians were not going to return to Israel supports resettlement as the most viable option.

Additionally, resettlement is realistic because the population of Palestinians in need of resettlement is more manageable than various estimates would suggest. The UNRWA has repeatedly expanded the definition of refugee to now when it includes Palestinians “who lost both their homes and means of livelihood as a result of the 1948 Arab-Israeli conflict” and their descendants (Joffe). Under this definition, there are close to five million Palestinian refugees. This number fails to account for the integration of Palestinians in Arab societies. While the resettlement efforts of the 1950s overall unsuccessful, it did result in the “resettling hundreds of thousands
of refugees in Jordan, Gaza, and the West Bank” (Nachmias). Since most Palestinian refugees have integrated at least somewhat, “only a quarter of the descendants of the Palestinian refugees still live in camps, the majority of these in Lebanon” (Bartal). Furthermore, the “majority of refugees and their descendants listed with UNRWA currently live in Jordan” (Bartal). Over two million refugees are registered in Jordan along with one and a half million other Palestinians, of which ninety-five percent “hold Jordanian citizenship and enjoy its benefits” (Bartal); therefore, the number of Palestinian refugees that would need help resettling is a very small percentage of this five million. The granting of citizenship, which would secure equal rights and identity for Palestinians, would not be significant change for most Arab countries; however, an exception is Lebanon where Palestinian refugees “are barred from numerous professions” (Marx). In contrast, to the perception that millions of refugees are destitute sitting in camps waiting to return to Israel, the facts actually point to a smaller, solvable problem.

Even with this historical acceptance and virtual assimilation of many Palestinians, Palestinian refugees and their advocates claim “the right of Palestinian refugees to return to their homes [remains] firmly anchored in international law” (Weaver 8). Although authorities closer to the establishment of laws, which are used to justify the right of return, accepted the legality of resettlement, actions of the UN, UNRWA, and Arab leaders have led to “the misrepresentation of resolution 194 as solely aimed at repatriation and compensation to the total exclusion of resettlement” (Joffe). This resolution clearly suggested that Palestinian refugees “should be allowed to return to their country of origin;” however, this resolution also extended to Jewish refugees and did not limit the options to only repatriation (Bartal). Payment for damages and resettlement were also possible solutions (Bartal). At the time of this resolution, the accepted solution for refugees was “resettlement in a third country” (El-Abed 535). This method for solving refugee crisis’ can be seen in the millions of Germans, Indians, Pakistanis, Armenians, Greeks, Turks and other people groups who were “driven from their lands and resettled elsewhere” in the twentieth century (Nachmias). This resolution and these examples are evidence that in theory the return of refugees to their country of origin is the ideal of international law, but the real-life application of such laws has historically
been of resettling refugees. Also, the assertion that Israelis’ have “no responsibility whatsoever toward the descendants of the 1948 Palestinian refugees and no obligation to aid them other than out of purely humanitarian concerns” (Bartal) based on the population exchange that occurred between Israel and Arab states weakens the Palestinian claim to a right of return. This evidence should lead to the evaluation of resettlement as a valid and acceptable option at least equal to the right of return in legality.

Since 1948, many world leaders and average citizens have debated what to do about the Palestinian refugees, but this problem is not solvable by words alone. Actions are necessary. A timely solution would relieve Palestinian refugees of many of the woes and abuses that come from being a stateless people and eliminate growing obstacles to a solution before they become insurmountable. World leaders need to base this solution on the acceptance of Israel’s Jewish-state and Arab nations’ responsibility for the Palestinians in their countries. If these positions are accepted, resettlement should be the clear solution; furthermore, resettlement is realistic and has legal and historical backing. This controversial situation affects real people and will continue to have negative consequences until world leaders rise to the challenge and resettle and integrate the Palestinians.

Works Cited


