

Policy Snapshot

20th June 2023

Palestinian Refugees and the Right of Return – World Refugee Day

What's the issue?

The continuous forced displacement experienced by Palestinians is at the core of the injustice imposed on the Palestinian people and Palestinian refugees comprise the majority of the Palestinian people. The realisation of the rights of Palestinian refugees, is therefore key to achieving peace and justice. Yet, despite their central importance, Palestinian refugees are frequently excluded from policy discourse, or worse, represented in dehumanising terms as either threats to security and stability or passive humanitarian victims. This hides the reality of their dispossession - which is ongoing - the UK's role, and the responsibility of the international community for upholding the rights of Palestinian refugees today.

Between 1947 and 1949, approximately 750,000 Palestinians - two-thirds of the Palestinian people at that time - were violently expelled or forced to flee their homes by Zionist militias during the creation of the state of Israel. Palestinians refer to this as the 'Nakba' - the Arabic word for 'Catastrophe'. Most Palestinians ended up in refugee camps in Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, Gaza, and the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, where they continue to reside to this day.

The *Nakba*, however, is not just a historical event; it is an ongoing project of colonisation, displacement and occupation that continues today. According to [BADIL](#) 9.17 million Palestinians are now refugees. As such, today Palestinians constitute the largest refugee population and the world's most protracted refugee problem.

In the *Nakba's* aftermath, the United Nations (UN) General Assembly passed Resolution 194, affirming the right of Palestinian refugees to return to their homes. The right of return is a fundamental universal right, enshrined in international human rights, humanitarian and customary law, which ensures that all displaced individuals can voluntarily return to their homes and have their properties restored to them.

Return is not only a fundamental right, it is the most practical solution to the Palestinian refugee problem. As the recent House of Commons International Development Committee Report on UK aid to refugee host countries concluded,

UNHCR surveys of refugee intentions indicate that most refugees wish to return to their country of origin, when it is safe to do so. Displacement crises will only be solved once communities have a safe and dignified route to return. Facilitating such routes must be strategic objectives of not only UK development policy, but UK foreign policy and diplomacy.

[UK Aid for Refugee Host Countries: Eighth Report of Session 2022-23](#),
International Development Committee

The Palestinian right of return has been declared an 'inalienable right' of the Palestinian people and reaffirmed in over 100 UN resolutions since 1948. However, since its inception Israel has consistently denied Palestinians their right to return, deporting or even killing those who have attempted to exercise it. At the same time, Israel passed the 1950 Law of Return, granting Jews from around the world the right to live in Israel on the basis of religion/ethnicity.

The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) was established in 1949, in recognition of the international community's responsibility for the creation of the Palestinian refugee crisis. Its mandate is limited to providing assistance - education, healthcare, and social services to Palestinian refugees - but not finding a solution to the plight of Palestinian refugees, which is a duty of the international community. UNRWA has been forced to rely on voluntary contributions from UN member states, resulting in repeated financial crises threatening its very existence. This month, UNRWA Commissioner-General Philippe Lazzarini warned that the Agency was on 'the brink of financial collapse'. At the same time, UNRWA has consistently faced attacks intending to delegitimise the Agency and the rights of Palestinian refugees. These political attacks aim at changing UNRWA's mandate and the definition of a Palestinian refugee in an attempt to fulfil Israel's strategic objective of marginalising the Palestinian refugee issue and disenfranchise millions of Palestinian refugees. The false claim is made that UNRWA uniquely assigns refugee status to both Palestinians who experienced the original displacement and their descendants. As UNRWA points out,

Palestine refugees are not distinct from other refugees in protracted refugee situations such as those from Afghanistan or Somalia, where there are multiple generations of refugees, registered by UNHCR as refugees and supported as such. Protracted refugee situations are the result of the failure to find political solutions to their underlying political crises. (1)

What's the UK position?

- The UK voted in favour of UN General Assembly Resolution 194, which affirmed the right of Palestinian refugees to return to their original homes.
- While the UK claims to uphold the international rule of law, it remains selective in its application and continues to reward Israel despite its violations. By allowing Israel to act with impunity and evade all accountability for all its actions and continuing to display diplomatic support for one of the most extreme governments in Israel's history,, it remains complicit in the denial of Palestinian rights, including the rights of Palestinian refugees.
- Historically, the UK has been one of the largest funders to UNRWA, reflecting some recognition of responsibility. However, between 2018-2021, the government cut funding to the UNRWA by 60%. These funding cuts have severely impacted the agency's ability to provide essential health and educational services, endangering the lives and well-being of approximately 5.7 million Palestinian refugees.

Why does it matter?

- The right of return is a universal right that is foundational in international law and remains the core demand of the Palestinian people, uniting Palestinians in Palestine and in exile. The majority of the Palestinian people today are refugees and the right of return is the central issue of the Palestinian cause. No peace is possible without ensuring the rights of Palestinian refugees.
- The UK bears a historic responsibility for the creation of the Palestinian refugee crisis, and was the colonial power whose severe repression of Palestinians laid the groundwork for the Nakba and the displacement of Palestinian refugees. The UK's complicity in Palestinian expulsion places an added moral obligation on the British state to uphold and defend the rights of Palestinian refugees today.

(1) UNRWA - Frequently asked questions. Available at: <https://www.unrwa.org/who-we-are/frequently-asked-questions>

- Palestinians today continue to face deep-rooted insecurity in their own homes with the ongoing threat of expulsion of Palestinian families, such as in the Sheikh Jarrah neighbourhood in East Jerusalem, and unlawful demolitions in the West Bank.
- In the UK, ignorance of the historical roots of ongoing Palestinian dispossession combined with efforts to distort and obscure it have entailed the dehumanisation of Palestinian refugees and a refusal to uphold their fundamental right of return. This has enabled the continuation of their dispossession through the ongoing Nakba.

What can British policymakers do?

1. **Educate themselves** on Palestinian history, the UK's role, and the current reality for Palestinians, enhancing their knowledge about Palestinian refugees, their social, economic conditions, and their civic rights and demands.
2. Work to ensure adoption of the International Development Select Committee's recommendation that facilitating safe and dignified routes for refugees to return to their country of origin are **'strategic objectives of not only UK development policy, but UK foreign policy and diplomacy'**, and that this applies to all refugee communities, including Palestinian refugees.
3. Ensure British policy **upholds the UK's obligation under international law** and its commitment to human rights and opposes repressive legislation and actions designed to limit accountability.
4. Take proactive steps to **consult meaningfully with Palestinians**, including British Palestinians, regarding this and other policy decisions which stand to directly impact them.
5. **Immediately restore funding to UNRWA** and work with others towards a **sustainable international funding mechanism** to ensure the dignity of Palestinian refugees until a just and durable solution is found.
6. **Resist all and any initiatives to undermine UNRWA's mandate** and the rights of Palestinian refugees in the international arena.
7. Ensure Palestinian refugees and the **right of return are at the centre of all diplomatic efforts.**

Where can I learn more?

- BADIL Resource Centre for Palestinian Residency and Refugee Rights: <http://www.badil.org/en/>
- Visualising Palestine, *Return Is Possible*: <https://visualizingpalestine.org/visuals/return-map>
- UNRWA: <https://www.unrwa.org/who-we-are>
- IMEU: <https://imeu.org/topic/category/nakba-refugees>
- Right of Return: [Joint Parliamentary Middle East Councils Commission of Enquiry - Palestinian Refugees](#) (2001), a UK cross-party initiative investigating and making policy recommendations related to the Palestinian right of return.
- 'Palestinians Register: Laying Foundations and Setting Directions - Report of the [Civitas Report](#)' (2006)

The British Palestinian Committee is an independent organisation working to ensure that British Palestinian perspectives are integral to public discourse and policy making on Palestine.

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