

Israel-Palestine: A Comparative Perspective

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And so, again there is war between Israelis and Palestinians. Wikipedia lists sixteen wars or war-like clashes since the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, that is, almost one every five years. Almost everyone who has attempted to analyze the causes of this seemingly eternal conflict has sought explanations in the course of history. This has often led to a kind of [historical debt accounting](#). Who attacked whom, who displaced whom, who committed abuses and massacres of whom?

Unfortunately, this historical search for the fundamental blame for the conflict has proved futile. It can be argued that many Palestinians were expelled by the Israeli army during the war in 1948, [but many chose to follow the calls of Arab leaders](#) to leave the country and then return [after their army's had "thrown the Jews into the sea"](#). Or as the Secretary General of the Arab League put it in 1947: "[This will be a war of extermination with extensive massacres that will be talked about like the Mongol massacres and the Crusades](#)". It can be noted that this was said only two years after the Holocaust.

However, the abuse and active displacement of parts of the Palestinian population by the Israeli army [is also well documented](#). All in all, it can be said that nothing of value for a resolution of the conflict has come out of this historical debt accounting that so many have been engaged in and continue to be engaged in.

A more fruitful way to understand this conflict is to use the comparative method established in the social sciences. Since in the social sciences, one cannot, as in large parts of the natural sciences, carry out real experiments, one possibility is to try to achieve explanations by comparing cases of a similar nature. If that is done, the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians will take a different turn. At the time of the Palestinian refugee disaster, [a large number of similar disasters unfolded in Europe](#). Close to half a million Finns were forced to leave Karelia in 1944 after the Soviet Union's attack. One hundred thousand Romanians were expelled from Bulgaria in 1941. More than one million Poles were forced from areas annexed

by the Soviet Union in 1945. More than three hundred thousand ethnic Italians were forced to leave Istria and Dalmatia after 1943. At least twelve million Germans who had lived since "time immemorial" in what is now Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and other Eastern European countries were displaced in 1945-46. Many had been active Nazis, but certainly far from all. Not least [the expulsion of the three million Germans](#) who lived in the Sudetenland in the Czech Republic was extremely brutal.

The interesting thing is that none of these many refugee disasters have produced anything that even comes close to all the massive violence we have seen between Israelis and Palestinians. So, why exactly has the Palestinian refugee crisis caused all this violence and suffering? The answer is simple, the other refugee populations have not to any great extent demanded a right to return. It was this very issue that made it impossible that in the famous Camp David negotiations in 2000, an agreement could not be reached between Israel and the PLO because [Yassir Arafat persisted](#) with that very demand. But as stated above, such a demand from leaders of a refugee population is unique. An interesting comparison can be made with the Finns [who were expelled from Karelia in 1944](#). Finland, which then had under four million inhabitants, was forced to receive a rapid wave of refugees that corresponded to twelve percent of its population. As a comparison, it can be mentioned that Palestinian refugees made up [less than two percent of the population of the Arab states that went to war with Israel in 1948](#). The Karelians are, in a way, Finns, but with a clear ethnic identity and dialect of their own. Many Karelians were not Lutherans like the Finnish population but belonged to the Russian Orthodox Church. Without being an expert on ethnic identities, I think it likely that they were about as distinct from the Finnish-speaking Finns of the time as the Palestinians were from the population of the Arab countries they fled to. However, it should be added that historically, Karelia is to some extent "[The Original Finland](#)". Among other things, the Finnish national epic Kalevala originates from Karelia.

However, there are some crucial differences in how the concrete refugee situation was resolved in these two cases. While the Palestinians were put in camps by the Arab states to which they fled and were generally denied integration and citizenship, Finland chose a different solution. The first and perhaps most remarkable thing they decided was: [No camps!](#) Finland was severely damaged economically after the two wars with the Soviet Union, but it was believed that experience from similar difficult situations in Europe showed that refugee

camps could become dangerous isolates and have a socially and psychologically degrading impact. Instead, several [remarkable efforts](#) were made to integrate the Karelians. The Finns who had more than one room per person in their dwelling were forced to house a Karelian refugee family. With the help of heavy additional taxes and large government loans, it was also ensured that the mainly agricultural Karelians got new land to cultivate, land that large farmers and landowners were often forced to let go of. All this must be compared to the reluctance of Jordan, Syria, and Egypt to integrate the Palestinians who were urged to flee in 1948. A further difference to other refugee disasters is that it is only in the Palestinian one that one legally [inherits refugee status](#).

Both Israeli Jews and Palestinians claim that the conflict is about the right to their "holy land". This is a completely unreasonable argument. Something you buy and sell in a market cannot have sacral status. Special places, such as special buildings in Jerusalem may have sacred status, but not land as such because it has a monetary value. A joint "desacralization" could have led to the following type of solution. Regardless of whether their parents or grandparents once fled of their own accord in the hope of returning soon to the protection of the victorious Arab armies or were displaced by Israeli forces, an injustice has been committed against the Palestinian refugees. Something that was theirs has been taken from them and for this, they are entitled to compensation. The property they left has a market price today, and the income lost can be estimated. Israel would simply compensate the refugees (in reality their heirs) financially for what they lost and in this way acknowledge the injustice they inflicted. In return, those who were to be compensated would renounce their right of return. The benefits would be settled through civil law by impartial courts and paid to individuals or families. This because the need to bypass the Palestinian authorities that are either labeled as terrorist organizations (Hamas) or [severely affected by corruption such as the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank](#). It can also be expressed as, since all attempts at a state-law solution have failed, a civil-law solution should be tried. The result would be a large group of fairly, or extremely, wealthy ex-Palestinian refugees, a civilized middle class who could invest for themselves and their children's education. Costly for Israel of course but this must be weighed against the prospect of fighting a war every five years. Is this completely unrealistic? Perhaps it is so considering how much blood has flowed and will now flow again. But it is far less unrealistic than the demand that five million Palestinians return to their old lands in the heart of present-day

Israel. It can be added that in 2014, the [EU actually proposed](#) such a solution and also said it was willing to assist Israel with a justifiable part of the cost - something that, unfortunately, was completely rejected by Israel. There is also research by prominent political scientists showing that the [combination of a serious apology plus financial compensation](#) could resolve this conflict.

The Palestinians' claim to the right of return in reality no longer applies to those who fled but must be their children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren, people who have always been close to the properties they demand to return to. Here, too, it is interesting to compare with the Karelian Finns. Finland's former president Mauno Koivisto was offered by Russia's former president Boris Yeltsin in 1991 [to buy back Karelia](#). A delegation which reportedly also included representatives of the Karelian Confederation went to inspect their "out-of-Finland". What they saw was that the Soviet infrastructure was in such poor condition that it would cost Finland enormous amounts of money to put the country in reasonable condition. So Finland refused. Nor was there any strong movement among the Karelian refugees (or their children...) to return to Karelia. Nor was there such a demand among the majority of the Finnish population despite Karelia's special place in Finnish history. The return of Karelia is practically a non-issue in Finnish politics. The Palestinians' demand to return, which is the reason why the conflict has never been resolved, is thus unique among the many simultaneous refugee disasters that hit Europe. Something has been taken from them and they have the right to be compensated for it, but the demand to return and Israel's unwillingness to provide compensation is the basis of this tragic conflict.

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