

Spineless Bookkeeping: The Use of Mizrahi Jews as Pawns against Palestinian Refugees

By: Yehouda Shenhav

In the last three years, we have witnessed an intensive campaign aimed at winning political and legal recognition of Arab Jews as “refugees.” The aim of this campaign is to create symmetry in public opinion between the Palestinian refugees and the “Oriental” Jews who arrived to Israeli in the 50s and 60s, presenting both populations as victims of the 1948 war. The Foreign Ministry, under the leadership of Deputy Minister Danny Ayalon, is intensively collecting evidence which would offset – as if it were an algebra equation – the testimonies of Palestinians regarding expulsion, looting and killings.

A couple of years ago, the Knesset passed a law ordering every Israeli government that deals with Arab representatives (i.e. Palestinians) to treat the Jews of Arab origin as refugees. Several weeks ago, the National Security Council published a paper recommending the government “create a linkage between the Palestinian refugees and the Jews of Arab origin.” Former head of the NSC Uzi Arad decided upon his appointment to lead a special team that would come up with the official Israeli policy on “the Jewish refugees of Arab counties.”

Arad has received Prime Minister Netanyahu’s blessing for his initiative. He set up a special body inside the NSC and had representatives from the Ministry of Justice, the Finance Ministry and the Foreign Ministry join the discussions. Historians, economists and representatives of Jewish organizations such as WOJAC (World Organization of Jews from Arab Countries) and JJAC (Justice for Jews from Arab Countries) were invited as well. The council recommended that the prime minister make the “Jewish refugees” and their compensations claims an inseparable part of the negotiations over the issue of Palestinian refugees.

Calls to define Jews from Arab countries as refugees were made in the past, but back then, they were silenced by Israeli governments. Why the change of policy? Partly due to a relatively new recognition that Israel will no longer be able to hide its responsibility for the Nakba.

The Foreign Ministry’s bookkeeper’s trick betrays the fear of the Palestinian claim of compensation and return – a central tenet of Palestinian demands. It proves that Israeli recognizes that the ’67 paradigm will not bring an end to the conflict, due to its denial of the Nakba. As a result of this recognition, the leaders of the new campaign hope to use the Mizrahi Jews to block the Palestinians from carrying out their “right of return,” and offset the compensation claims might be forced to pay for the Palestinian property that was expropriated by the Custodian of Absentee Property (the Israeli authority that confiscates and manages Palestinian property, most notably real estate). It is an idea that is historically twisted, unwise from a policy perspective and unjust from a moral point of view – as its history demonstrates.

A miserable history worth reciting

The campaign for the recognition of Jews from Arab countries as refugees was launched by no other than President Bill Clinton, during an interview he gave to Israeli Channel 1 in July, 2000. Ehud Barak, then the prime minister, declared this “achievement” in an interview to Israeli journalist Dan Margalit a month later.

Until then, Israeli governments had avoided recognizing Jews from Arab countries as refugees. They did so because (a) of the fear that such a declaration would reawaken what Israel had tried to erase and forget – the right of return; (b) a concern that Jews might submit compensation claims to Arab countries, and as a result – bring about lawsuits by Palestinians against Israel; and (c) because such a decision would have forced the state to update all of its history books, forming a new narrative according to which Mizrahi Jews didn’t come to Israel due to Zionism, but against their will. Any historian raising such a claim would have been labeled a “post-Zionist.”

The idea to equate Mizrahi Jews with Palestinian refugees was first cooked up by Bobby Brown, government advisor for diaspora affairs, and members of his office, along with representatives of organizations like the World Jewish Congress, the World Sephardi Federation, and the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations. Avi Beker, the secretary general of the Jewish Congress, and Malcolm Hoenlein, the executive vice chairman of the Conference of Presidents, convinced Professor Ervin Cotler, a Canadian member of parliament and expert in international law, to join the campaign. An umbrella organization was established, called “Justice for Jews from Arab Countries.” However, it did not manage to garner much excitement for the campaign, including from among the Jewish world. The campaign failed to enlist a notable declaration from central Israeli politicians until recently. That’s not surprising. This campaign has a miserable history that should be internationalized, because history can come in very handy.

In the 1980s, the World Organization for Jews from Arab Countries – WOJAC – was established. Yigal Alon, then foreign minister, feared that WOJAC would serve as a greenhouse for what he called “sectorial organizing.” Again, WOJAC wasn’t established in order to help Mizrahi Jews but rather to create a deterrent to block demands from the national Palestinian movement – primarily the demand to compensate refugees, and the right of return. The use of the term “refugees” wasn’t unreasonable, as the term had become central in the historical discourse and in international law, following World War II. UN Security Council Resolution 242, passed in 1967, referred to a “just settlement of the refugee problem” in the Middle East. In the 1970s, Arab states asked to specifically refer to “Arab refugees in the Middle East,” but the U.S. government, through Ambassador to the UN Arthur Goldberg, opposed it.

In a working paper prepared in 1977 by Cyrus Vance, then the secretary of state, ahead of a possible Geneva Conference meeting, he wrote about the pressure to find a solution to the “refugee problem,” without mentioning which refugees he was referring to. WOJAC, which had tried to put into use the term “Jewish refugees,” had failed. In addition to Arabs, many Zionist Jews all over the world were opposed to the initiative. I recommend that the organizers of the current campaign examine the anatomy of the organization that went from Zionist to post-Zionist in the course of its activities, and to take a page from the laws of political action’s unintended consequences.

The thinker behind the idea of “Jewish refugees” in WOJAC was Ya’akov Meron, the head of the department for Arab legal affairs in the Justice Ministry. Meron formulated the link in the most extreme thesis regarding the history of the Jews of the Arab world. He claimed that the Jews were expelled from the Arab countries in an act coordinated with Palestinian leaders, and called it “ethnic cleansing.” Meron sharply diverged from the Zionist epos, which he said produced romantic terms like “Magic Carpet” [the operation that brought Yemeni Jews to Israel] or “Operation Ezra and Nehemiah” [the airlift that brought Iraqi Jews], suppressing the “fact” that the departure of the Jews was the fruit of an “Arab policy of expulsion.” In order to complete the analogy between Palestinians and Mizrahis, WOJAC’s people even claimed that the Mizrahis lived in refugee camps during the 1950s (referring to transit camps for Jewish immigrants), just like the Palestinian refugees. This claim sparked angry complaints on the part of figures in the state’s founding institutions, which termed it “treason.”

Refugees and free will

The Foreign Ministry, which became alarmed by WOJAC’s tenacity, proposed to put an end to the campaign, claiming that classifying the Mizrahi Jews as refugees was a double-edged sword. At the time, Israel insisted upon maintaining a policy of ambiguity regarding this complex issue. In 1949, the state rejected a joint proposal by Britain and Iraq for a population swap (Iraqi Jews for Palestinian refugees), out of fear that it would have to be responsible for settling “surplus refugees” in Israel. The Foreign Ministry called WOJAC divisive and separatist, asking the organization to cease acting independently in opposition to state interests. In the end, the Foreign Ministry cut off funding to the organization. Justice Minister Yossi Beilin even fired Ya’akov Meron from the Justice Ministry’s department for Arab legal affairs.

It must be stated that there is no serious researcher in Israel or outside it that adopted the organization’s extreme rhetoric. Moreover, in its attempt to strengthen the Zionist thesis and assist the state in its war against Palestinian nationalists, WOJAC achieved the exact opposite. It presented a confused Zionist stance vis-a-vis the conflict, angered many Mizrahi Jews across the world – as it presented them as lacking motivation to move to Israel – and enslaved the interests of the Mizrahi Jews (especially over the issue of Jewish property in Arab countries) to what he accidentally termed “national interests.” He failed to understand that categorizing Mizrahi Jews as refugees opens a Pandora’s box that hurts both Jews and Arab.

Out of a desire to find a magic solution to the question of the refugees, the state readopted the formula, and is now promoting it with great enthusiasm all over the world. It will be interesting to hear the position of the Minister of Education regarding the narrative that the Jewish organizations present as part of the campaign. Will he immediately establish a ministerial committee to change the history textbooks so that they match the new post-Zionist genre? Every honest person, whether Zionist or not, must admit that the analogy between the Palestinians and the Mizrahi Jews is baseless. The Palestinian refugees did not ask to leave Palestine. In 1948, many Palestinian villages were destroyed, and nearly 750,000 Palestinians were expelled or fled from the borders of historic Palestine. Those who fled did not leave out of their own free will.

On the other hand, Jews from Arab countries arrived here through the initiative of the State of Israel, as well as Jewish organizations. Some of them arrived out of free will, some against their will. Some of them lived comfortably in Arab countries, and some lived in fear and under oppression. The history of the Mizrahi immigration is complex and cannot be resigned to one simplistic explanation. Many lost a great deal of property, and there is no doubt that they should be allowed to submit individual property claims against Arab countries, something Israel and WOJAC have rejected until today. For instance, the peace agreement with Egypt does not allow individual property claims against the Egyptian government. Jewish property is seen as the property of the State of Israel, and as important leverage to offset the future claims of Palestinian refugees.

Another example: During the Gulf War, the property of a Jewish-Iraqi family in Ramat Gan suffered damages. In their compensation claim, a seasoned attorney advised the family to include a house that had been confiscated by the Iraqi government in 1952. Israel's Foreign Ministry forbade the move, due to the state's policy of holding onto such property as leverage for future negotiations with the Palestinians.

The analogy between the Palestinian refugees and the Jewish Mizrahis is thus baseless, not to mention offensive and immoral. It serves to cause friction between Mizrahi Jews and Palestinians, it is an insult to a great number of Mizrahim and harms chances for real reconciliation. More than that: the analogy points to a clear lack of understanding regarding the meaning of the Nakba. The Nakba does not only refer to the events of the war. The Nakba is, at its core, the prevention of those who were expelled from returning to their homes, lands and families after the establishment of the State of Israel. The Nakba is an active and clear policy of the State of Israel – not just the chaos of war.

The temptation to use this concept of offsetting claims is understandable, but we cannot use scarecrows in order to refute the moral and political demands of the Palestinians. Such manipulation only worsens the crime and increases the psychological gap between Jews and Palestinians. Even if some of the Palestinians give up on realizing the right of return (as, for example, Dr. Khalil Shikaki claims), such tricks are not the way to achieve this end. Every peace agreement must be based on Israeli acknowledgement of past injustices and finding a fair solution. These accounting tricks turn Israel into a morally and politically spineless bookkeeper.

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