

Palestinians, Refugees,  
and the Middle East Peace Process



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REFUGEES,  

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D O N P E R E T Z



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# Foreword

Of all the problems in the Middle East, the issue of the Palestine refugees continues to be one of the most intractable. And despite the dramatic events of September and October 1993 (Israeli recognition of the PLO, signing of the Israeli-PLO accords, discussions of limited self-governance for Palestinians), the refugee issue remains unresolved. Indeed, the increasing number of refugees has led to ever larger allocations of funds from the international community to UNRWA, the UN agency charged with refugee care.

Although some observers believe that resolution of the political issues will also lead to resolution of the refugee dilemma, others believe that the refugee problem will continue to be a source of regional tensions and instability regardless of the political outcome. What, then, are the practical issues that need to be considered now in order to deal with this dilemma? Among the issues that Don Peretz analyzes in this balanced overview are the current status of the refugees; the capacities of the West Bank, Gaza, and the host countries (Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria) to absorb the refugee population already within their borders as well as those refugees likely to immigrate from the surrounding areas; and the need for educational, health, and social welfare facilities.

In Peretz's view, the Palestine refugee problem cannot be resolved except as part of an overall settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict. Issues such as the political identity of the Palestinians, the control of Jerusalem, and evaluation of and compensation for property

taken or left behind will only be determined within the context of a peace settlement, as is also true of larger regional issues such as economic development, water resources, and the environment.

At the same time, Peretz also argues that it will be impossible to resolve the Arab-Israeli conflict without confronting the Palestine refugee question and the many related issues presented in this volume. His well-informed and informative analysis gives us a solid foundation for exploring ways to come to grips with these complex issues.

Don Peretz completed this book while a visiting fellow at the Institute as part of a much larger USIP effort to contribute to peacemaking and conflict management in the Middle East through research and education. In early 1991, the Institute established its Special Middle East Program in Peacemaking and Conflict Resolution as a vehicle for its own projects as well as to facilitate coordination with other Institute activities. These have included numerous grants, fellowships, study groups, and a diplomatic simulation, as well as publications such as *Making Peace Among Arabs and Israelis: Lessons from Fifty Years of Negotiating Experience* by Kenneth W. Stein and Samuel W. Lewis; *Arms Control and Confidence Building in the Middle East*, edited by Alan Platt; and *The Arab World after Desert Storm* by Muhammad Faour. All these programs contribute to the Institute objectives of providing information and supporting activities related to peacemaking and conflict management, and analyzing ways in which more stable local and international frameworks can contribute to the peaceful resolution of conflict.

Richard H. Solomon, President  
United States Institute of Peace

## Preface

This study of Palestine refugees and Middle East stability was undertaken in 1992 when I was a visiting fellow in the Jennings Randolph Program for International Peace at the United States Institute of Peace in Washington, D.C. My interest and involvement in the subject began in 1947–48, when I observed the beginning of the problem firsthand as a stringer for NBC; in 1949, I worked with Palestine refugees in northern Israel as a representative of the American Friends Service Committee (Quakers) with the United Nations Relief for Palestine Refugees.

Early on it became evident to me and to other observers of the Middle East that the Palestine refugee problem was one of the most critical issues in the area and that peaceful settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict could not be attained without confronting the refugee problem. In 1952 I received a fellowship from the Ford Foundation to continue my study of the refugee problem. The results of this study were published by the Middle East Institute in 1955 as a book, *Israel and the Palestine Refugees*, and formed the basis of my Ph.D. thesis at Columbia University. In 1962 I extended this study under a grant from the Rockefeller Foundation; my observations were published in several articles in *Foreign Affairs*, *Middle East Journal*, *Jewish Social Studies*, *Orbis*, *Christian Century*, *Christianity and Crisis*, *Current History*, and other publications.

In my research for this and previous studies I made use of UN documentation; the Israeli, Middle East, and Western press; and

extended discussions with Israeli, U.S., and UN officials; representatives of Palestinian organizations; and refugees themselves. None of the individuals or organizations consulted is responsible for the content or conclusions of this study; these are based primarily on my own observations and discussions with those involved.

The purpose of this study is not to engage in a discussion of responsibility for the refugee problem but to examine the problem in the light of current realities, with a view toward clarifying aspects that may affect its resolution today. Nor is the purpose to offer new or unique proposals for solution of the problem; there is no shortage of such proposals. However, none of the proposed solutions is viable outside the context of an overall resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict. On the other hand, no credible resolution of the refugee problem can be achieved outside the context of regional economic and social development, for during the past 45 years the refugee problem has become part of the overall issue of regional development. Furthermore, any discussion of regional development must take into consideration the Palestine refugee issue.

Finally, let me address a terminology issue. The reader will no doubt notice that I use the term "Palestine refugee" rather than "Palestinian refugee." I chose the former term simply to conform to the practice of UNRWA, the agency charged with refugee care, whose full name is the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East. No political or other nuances were intended.