

## The Disengagement – Opportunity to Dilute the Refugee Problem

The Israeli Cabinet meeting, held last week, dealt with arrangements for passage between the Gaza Strip and Egypt (Aluf Benn and Amos Harel, *Ha'aretz*, 9/7). The international community has seemingly stipulated free movement between Gaza and Egypt as a condition for Israel to end its responsibility over Gaza.

Thus far, discussions regarding arrangements for passage across the Gaza border have mainly focused on security and economic aspects (e.g. customs envelope). The Re'ut Institute contends that **the issue of refugees should be considered as an additional aspect. The Israeli disengagement from Gaza has created an opportunity to promote the solution of this problem, even prior to a Permanent Status Agreement.**

### What is the Issue?

- About 60% of Palestinian refugees live in refugee camps in Gaza, the West Bank and the "Host-States" – Syria, Jordan and Lebanon. Some of these refugees are "Displaced Persons" – Palestinians who lived in the West Bank and moved to Jordan in '67.
- The Declaration of Principles (9/93) defined the refugee issue as one of the "Outstanding Issues" whose resolution would be deferred to a Permanent Status Agreement. However, a committee to deal with the issue of the Displaced Persons was established in accordance with the Interim Agreement, but their status has yet to be resolved.
- Any solution to the refugee issue entails dealing with a number of facets: (1) annulment of the "Palestinian refugee" status; (2) resolution of declarative aspects, such as the issue of responsibility and the right of return; (3) resolution of the individual and collective property claims; (4) arrangement of permanent place of residence for refugees; *and* (5) economic development and welfare.
- The UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian refugees (UNRWA), which is active in the refugee camps, perpetuates the unique status of the refugees, and is also the primary source for their welfare and employment.
- Israel's withdrawal from the Gaza envelope, and the transfer of control over crossing points to the Palestinians, will enable Palestinian refugees, for the first time since 1967, to officially establish their residence in Gaza.

### Why is this Important? Why Now?

- In the aftermath of the Disengagement Plan **a rare moment has arisen, in which it is possible to dilute the refugee problem, even before a Permanent Status Agreement:**
  - Palestinian refugees will be able to return to Gaza;
  - In Lebanon and Jordan calls to return the refugees to Gaza are being heard (Nachmias, *Ynet*, 8/25);
  - Abu-Mazen called upon Host Countries to confer citizenship upon the refugees;
  - The international community is promoting comprehensive development plans for Gaza.

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- Therefore, **Israel should re-examine its policy regarding the refugee issue in Gaza**, including issues such as: (1) **return of refugees to Gaza**; (2) **linkage between the economic development plans in Gaza and a solution to the refugee problem**; and (3) the continuation of UNRWA's presence in Gaza.

## Policy Options

- Israel may consider **diluting the refugee problem instead of aiming at a comprehensive solution** through:
  - Tacit acceptance of **refugees returning from Jordan and Lebanon to the PA territory in Gaza**. Although such a return would strain the Palestinian economy, it has the potential of reducing the legitimacy of Palestinian claims for the right of return;
  - Gathering international support for demanding **equal political rights for refugees** within the PA and opposing any distinction between their personal-legal status and that of the non-refugees;
  - International effort for building **permanent housing for the refugees in the refugee camps** within the scope of the development plan;
  - Promoting the **plan to end the presence of UNRWA in Gaza** and transfer its responsibilities to the PA. Since UNRWA is the largest employer in Gaza and a supplier of basic services to Palestinian refugees, Israel may demand the establishment of a comprehensive plan for gradual and systematic transfer of powers and responsibilities from UNRWA to the PA.

For additional sources see the Re'ut Institute website: [www.reut-institute.org](http://www.reut-institute.org):

- Re'ut Institute Concepts: "[Map of the Palestinian People](#)", "[Package Approach to Israeli-Palestinian Permanent Status Agreement](#)", "[Fragmentation and Dilution Approach to Israeli-Palestinian Permanent Status Agreement](#)", "[Historic Issues](#)", "[Permanent Status Agreement](#)" and "[UN General Assembly Resolution 194](#)".
- Re'ut Institute Publications: "[Agenda of Israeli-Palestinian Negotiations on Permanent Status](#)" and "[What Follows the Disengagement Plan](#)".
- Aluf Benn, Amos Harel, *Ha'aretz*, "Israel to seal Rafah crossing on Thursday as part of Gaza pullout" 9/7/05; Tzvi Barel, *Ha'aretz*, 8/20/05; Roe Nachmias, *Ynet*, "[Will Gaza Refugees return to the Strip?](#)", 8/25/05.

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