

The Arab Refugees . . . By Alfred Friendly

What Will They Really Do?

HEBRON, Israeli-occupied Jordan—Today, as for almost two decades, the visitor to a refugee camp is instantly

surrounded by the inhabitants, enveloped, almost stifled as if by swarming bees. Perhaps the outsider represents some faint flicker of hope to the Arabs; perhaps he is merely an object of curiosity or provides a moment of relief from their crushing boredom.



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Their demeanor is an inconsistent mixture of pride and misery, dignity and supplication, determination and wavering. They are withdrawn and yet voluble, handsome and unhealthy, intense yet unstrung.

"We will leave here only to go back to our old homes in Palestine . . ."

And yet, "Give us a paper saying we can get a job, any job, we will work anywhere . . ."

What will they really do? What will they allow to be done to them? More important, what will they allow to be done for them?

No one in a position of power to do anything to or for them, good or bad, is quite sure. Possibly, in the absence of that knowledge, nothing at all will be done. If so, they and their children's children will continue to rot, as most of them have for the last 19 years, in idleness, vain hopes and bitter hostility.

No one even knows how many there are. Close to two million, as the Arab states claim, with some 800,000 of them now in the lands under Israeli occupation? Probably less, for the camps had a tendency to draw anything up to twice the number of United Nations Works and Relief Agency rations as there were actual residents. Say about half a million still in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, the Jordanian lands west of the Jordan River and the Dead Sea.

HOWEVER unwilling Israel has been in the past, for good reasons and bad, to discuss resettling or compensating the Arabs who fled or were expelled from the new state in 1948-49, it now has an inescapable responsibility for succoring those newly come under its control. In the past, it could claim

that it had taken in as many Jewish refugees who fled in fear from Arab states as had fled from its boundaries after its war of independence. It could claim that the Arabs were a problem for Egypt, Syria, Iraq and Lebanon to solve.

But Israel cannot now have its cake and eat it, too. It declares that it will never return to Gaza and the West Bank to their former occupiers. The hard-liners would incorporate those areas into Israel itself.

The majority would have them set up as a sort of Israeli canton, with home rule but financial and security control by Israel. The least obdurate would permit the creation of a new Palestinian state, but insist on its severance from military alliance with existing Arab countries.

Whichever of the three alternatives, Israel cannot shrug off any people in areas to which it professes a degree of control, and at the same time uphold what it claims as its normal and ethical posture.

The best of assumptions—which fortunately are the probable ones—are that Israel will set about earnestly to take the refugees out of the camps, resettle a large proportion of them in Israel and in the rest of Palestine, and will have considerable financial help for the process from outside.

Of all countries in the world, Israel has demonstrated its ability to take a relatively huge influx of new people and integrate them, regardless of their previous culture and educational disabilities, into a cohesive society, doing useful work and living dignified lives.

IF ITS SECURITY from external attack is assured by reasonable peace settlements and a much heavier proportion of non-Jews within its borders ceases to be a danger to its survival, then Israel can be held to the task.

In the long run, however, the harder question to answer is whether the refugees themselves will agree to living under an Israeli-run government, or even in a Palestinian state that has any connection whatsoever with Israel.

Is their insistence on settling for nothing except return to the exact property

they once owned in Israel such to preclude anything else? Have they become so indoctrinated that they will reject all other alternatives? Is their hatred, real or conditioned, an eternal obstacle? Will they still be the subjects of incessant Arab propaganda—the propaganda to which they have been treated throughout 19 years—demanding war to the death with Israel?

"These people only want peace," every refugee camp director assures the American visitor. "They will work and live anywhere in Palestine, and under a Jewish government."

Are his words true, or only what he believes the American visitor and his Israeli escorts want to hear?

It is on the answer to that question that the solution to or the continuance of one of the most shameful tragedies of modern times depends.