

# Economic and Human Problems Facing Israel on the West Bank

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"Never mind the future political status of the West Bank. Whatever it is, we've got to prove now that what the Arabs didn't do for the refugees for 19 years, we can do."

The speaker, an Israeli official, was voicing Israel's inherited moral responsibility for some half million Arab refugees who live in the Gaza Strip and on the West Bank of the Jordan River and who were displaced from what now is Israel during the 1948 Palestine war.

The problem of these refugees—and, in a broader sense, of the West Bank occupation—is enormous, and a successful solution is no better than an even-money bet. The difficulties are two-fold: The personal one of Arab cooperation and the economic one of availability of resources.

The premise on which the Israelis are operating is that Israel, which has occupied Gaza and the West Bank since the June war, will be in possession of them for a long while. Majority opinion here is that Gaza is an integral part of Israel and should never be returned to Egypt, under any circumstances. And the unanimous opinion is that the West Bank must not be returned to Jordan without a directly negotiated peace and cooperation treaty with that country.

A second premise is that economic relations with the West Bank will be much the same whatever its ultimate disposition. Either it will be annexed to IQSRAEL, BE-annexed to Israel, become an independent state or be returned to Jordan.

Israel has already taken some steps to restore the West Bank's economy. It has made the Israeli pound legal tender, which means an infusion of new money into the area. It is paying the salaries of all former civil servants, including some teachers. It has picked

up all developmental projects scheduled in the former Jordanian budget, and has added to them. It is operating a program of public works—mostly roads and building projects. It has guaranteed the purchase, at previous prices, of all the harvest that is not disposed of through commercial channels.

But if the refugees of Gaza and the West Bank, including those who fled across the Jordan after the June war and who will return shortly, are to be given decent lives, much more must be done—and the costs will be greater.

## Per Capita Income

A measure of the problem is provided by per capita income statistics. On the West Bank it is about \$200 to \$250 per year. Israel's is about \$1000 to \$1100, with the quarter of a million Arab citizens enjoying perhaps three-fourths of the national average.

As for the 1948 refugees, hundreds of thousands of new jobs, and only part of them in agriculture, will have to be created if the refugees are to be able to lead more productive lives than was possible in United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNWA) camps.

One possible solution to the West Bank problem has three elements. The first is the creation of modern agricultural methods.

As it is, Israel can bring to the West Bank new supplies of water, insecticides and fertilizers, better seeds and much more intensive farming. For example, as soon as next year it should be able to triple the tobacco crops.

But improved agriculture is in itself not enough. The second task is creating new industries. At present, the West Bank has very little. It will require a great deal of money—no one knows how much at this stage, but much more than Israel can supply.

It has been suggested that the money must come from foreign sources, some from world Jewry and some from

the "have" nations. Following the June war, there was an outcry in those "have" nations about the said plight of the refugees, and some Israelis feel that concern should now be matched by funds to alleviate the condition of the refugees.

## Still A Gap

But even new investments, however generous, coupled with better farming would still leave a gap. The third element would be to find jobs for many of the refugees some place other Israel, Gaza and the West Bank. The Arab states are mostly underpopulated and in need of manpower. But for the time being the possibility of the refugees settling there as citizens is remote.

Another possibility that has been suggested is that jobs be looked for in such manpower-hungry countries as Canada and Australia and in Latin America. But those nations want only skilled workers.

Israeli planners, therefore, are beginning to feel that they must provide vocational training for refugees on a large scale. It is believed that if the refugees are given training and offered appropriate jobs many will agree to migrate.

But the whole process—improved farming, new investment and massive training—is a long-time proposition. It is surely a five- or ten-year task, and one to be accomplished only with generous help from the rest of the world.

It is to be accomplished, also, only if the Palestinians themselves will cooperate in it.