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Don Peretz and the Political Roots of the Palestinian Refugee Crisis

The Palestinian Refugee Crisis has remained a persistent humanitarian and political challenge in the Middle East throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. After the 1948 Arab-Israeli War, the Nakba left more than 700,000 Palestinians displaced from their homes¹ and they were forced to flee to various neighboring countries including Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, the West Bank, and Gaza.² The roots of this crisis lie partly in the United Nations' handling of the end of the British Mandate and the creation of Israel. John Fletcher-Cooke highlights that the UN's 1947 partition plan envisioned Palestine being separated into a Jewish and Arab state³, but the United Nations never built the necessary administration to implement it. As Britain withdrew its mandate in May 1948, no working authority remained to manage security⁴ and lead to a "total breakdown in administration and widespread instability."⁵

¹ Don, Peretz, "The Palestinian Arab Refugee Problem," *Jewish Social Studies*, Vol. 21, (Jan 1, 1959): 221.

² Anne Irfan, "Palestine at the UN: The PLO and UNRWA in the 1970s," *Journal of Palestine Studies* Vol. 49, No. (2020): 27.

³ John, Fletcher-Cooke, "The United Nations and the Birth of Israel 1948," *International Journal*, Vol. 28, (Autumn, 1973): 614.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 615.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 621.

In the aftermath of the war and the refugee displacement, the United Nations General Assembly established two organizations in late 1949 to address this crisis. The United Nations Conciliation Commission for Palestine (UNCCP) received the political mandate to negotiate return and compensation while the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) focused on providing short-term humanitarian relief to the refugees across the “five fields”.⁶ As Anne Irfan explains, the UNRWA originally operated on the belief that it would only remain in place until the UNCCP finalized a political resolution, however, the UNCCP became effectively inactive by the 1950s, failing to secure compensation or repatriation for Palestinians. As a result, the UNRWA emerged as the only operating UN agency dealing with Palestinians despite its “apolitical” mandate.⁷ This result created a structural imbalance where refugees depended on the UNRWA for important services while their political demands remained unaddressed and revealed the limits of humanitarian aid in resolving the deeper issues of displacement, political freedom, and compensation.

Don Peretz emerged as one of the first scholars to examine the Palestinian refugee crisis as an American, and American Jewish scholar who focused on Arab-Israeli conflicts. He first entered the field of Middle East refugee studies through his humanitarian work in 1949 when he volunteered with the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) in Acre and Gaza distributing food, clothing, and surveying refugee needs.⁸ His volunteering experience shaped the questions he later pursued as a scholar. In his earliest writings from the mid-1950s, Peretz approached the refugee crisis as an administrative and technical challenge, which reflected the United Nations

⁶ Anne Irfan, “Palestine at the UN: The PLO and UNRWA in the 1970s,” *Journal of Palestine Studies* Vol. 49, No. (2020): 27.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 27-28.

⁸ Geoffrey Levin, *Our Palestine Question: Israel and American Jewish Dissent, 1948-1978*, (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2023), 29-32.

belief that compensation and relief programs could resolve the problem. However, over the next decade, his analysis shifted as he began to emphasize the political and psychological aspects of the crisis, noting that unresolved issues of return, identity, and sovereignty made the conflict far more complex than acknowledged. This change over time reflects the changing realities in the Middle East. By the early 1960s, the refugee problem had transformed from what was believed to be a short-term humanitarian emergency into a long-term political conflict which deepened further after the 1967 Arab-Israeli War. By tracing this evolution in his writings, Don Peretz reframed the refugee crisis as a struggle over political rights, identity, and self-determination which later scholars built upon when analyzing the roots of Palestinian displacement and nationhood.

In his 1953 article “Problems of Arab Refugee Compensation” Don Peretz examines the early efforts of the United Nations Conciliation Commission for Palestine (CCP) to compensate refugees for their lost property after the 1948 war.⁹ Writing a few years after the Nakba, Peretz approached the refugee issue through an administrative and economic lens. He noted that the CCP had estimated around 80 percent of Israel’s land had originally been Arab-owned, making compensation of this property an economically vital but politically sensitive issue.¹⁰ Rather than framing Israel’s refusal to compensate refugees as morally wrong, Peretz interpreted the situation as a bureaucratic problem and stated that the CCP’s plan for a trust fund was a “functional approach toward solving the Palestine problem,” that prioritized practical administration.¹¹ This reflected the early 1950 belief that administration would be able to solve this difficult conflict. While Peretz proposed that compensation could “open the door to Arab-Israeli peace,” he also

⁹ Don, Peretz, “Problems of Arab Refugee Compensation,” *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 8, No. 4 (1954): 403.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 403-405.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 403.

acknowledged that it was unlikely to follow through given the political tensions and lack of trust on both sides.¹² He saw that both Israel and Arab states were unwilling to make compromises. Arab governments demanded full and individual compensation¹³, Israel refused to hold financial responsibility¹⁴, and Palestinian refugees themselves doubted that any international mechanism would restore their property or allow them to return home. This mutual distrust led Peretz to conclude that compensation alone could not move the conflict toward resolution. Although he remained objective in his analysis which aligned with early UN policy, his analysis began to expose the power gap between Israel and the refugees, which Peretz would soon address further in his later work.

In “The Palestine Arab Refugee Problem” (1959), Peretz expanded his analysis by emphasizing that the refugee crisis involved deep psychological and political dimensions rather than administrative ones. He observed that many refugees were still psychologically attached to their lost homeland, explaining that “in the minds of these refugees there still lingers the image of the Palestine they left a mere dozen years ago.” Even children born in exile were able to identify the exact towns that their families fled, a pattern Peretz interpreted as evidence that proves that they hold a memory of displacement similar to the Jewish connection to the Holy Land.¹⁵ Rather than blaming refugees for their slow pace of resettlement, Peretz argued that their morale suffered because the West, Israel, and Arab host governments failed to produce meaningful solutions, leaving refugees suspended in uncertainty.¹⁶

¹² Ibid., 416.

¹³ Ibid., 414.

¹⁴ Ibid., 412-413.

¹⁵ Don, Peretz, “The Palestinian Arab Refugee Problem,” *Jewish Social Studies*, Vol. 21, (Jan 1, 1959): 223.

¹⁶ Ibid., 224.

Peretz also argued that the refugee crisis was part of a larger political conflict between Arabs and Israelis. He criticized Israel and Western policymakers for offering what he called “technical solutions to a complicated psychological problem,” such as the Clapp and Johnson plans, which focused on economic development without fully acknowledging the Arabs’ political injustices.¹⁷ In Peretz’s view, this failure to recognize these political grievances guaranteed that the crisis would only continue. While he had small hope that a few emerging “politically influential individuals” within Israel might eventually soften Israeli policy and create the possibility for future compromise, he concluded that until attitudes on both sides changed, a rational solution to the refugee problem would remain unlikely.¹⁸

A primary source that highlights these political dynamics and the denial of return is a 1958 letter to *The New York Times* by Sami Hadawi, a member of the Palestine Arab Refugee Office (PARO). Written nearly a decade after the Nakba, Hadawi describes how Palestinians inside Israel continued to face expulsion and dispossession, showing that the refugee crisis was rooted in ongoing political decisions. Hadawi also cites Don Peretz’s estimate that 30,000 Palestinians became displaced within Israel, showing that Peretz’s work was already shaping public understanding of the crisis at the time and reinforces Peretz’s argument that humanitarian explanations hid Israel’s broader political control over Palestinian rights.¹⁹

Don Peretz’s 1963 article, “The Arab Refugees: A Changing Problem,” marked a major turning point in his interpretation of the refugee crisis as he shifted from viewing it as a short-term humanitarian emergency to understanding it as a long-term social, economic, and political

¹⁷ Ibid., 226.

¹⁸ Ibid., 226.

¹⁹ Sami, Hadawi, "Settling Arab Refugees: Attention Called to Displaced Group within Israel." *New York Times* (1923-), (Dec 02, 1958).

dilemma.²⁰ He explains that a major reason for this shift stemmed from the change within the refugee population. Immediately after the 1948 war, there were 725,000 refugees and by the early 1960s, it had increased by 400,000, meaning that “nearly 40 percent” of those refugees were part of a new generation who never lived in Palestine.²¹ While the older generation of refugees carried deep trauma and resentment towards those they blame for their displacement, the youth carried the same anger, but channeled it through education, personal growth, and a desire to live normal lives while maintaining the goal to return to their homeland.²² This new generation was not only more educated than their elders, but they were also more politically aware which showed a desire towards nationalism rather than relief.²³

This article also shows Peretz’s evolving view that economic solutions could not resolve the political problem. In host countries where refugees received employment such as Lebanon and Syria, they still faced discrimination and were not integrated socially or politically.²⁴ This only reinforced their exclusion and strengthened their desire for national recognition and return. Lastly, Peretz’s discussion of the UNRWA further reflects the political shift. He notes that while the UNWRA had implemented improved education and vocational training into camps, their efforts were limited due to the compromise concerns of host states on top of the refugees’ desire to keep their national identity symbolized through the use of UNWRA ration cards as identity documents.²⁵ Don Peretz concludes that the persistence of a feeling of “political homelessness”

²⁰ Peretz, Don, “The Arab Refugees: A Changing Problem,” *Foreign Affairs* 41, No. 2 (April 1963): 559.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*, 560.

²³ *Ibid.*, 561.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 562.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 562.

and their pursuit for self-determination demonstrated that humanitarian or technical reforms alone could not fix the core issues of the conflict.²⁶

In his 1968 article “Israel’s New Arab Dilemma,” Don Peretz argues that the 1967 Six-Day War fundamentally transformed the Palestinian refugee crisis by creating nearly 700,000 new refugees and placing over one million Palestinians under Israeli occupation. Peretz emphasizes that this displacement included Palestinians fleeing from the West Bank, Syrians expelled from the Jawlan/Golan region, and Egyptians evacuated from Sinai and the Suez Canal.²⁷ This demographic shift, according to Peretz, marked a turning point that showed the refugee crisis was no longer simply a humanitarian emergency. It was a structural and political problem caused by Israeli territorial expansion and the change in population dynamics in the newly occupied regions.

Peretz further argues that the post-1967 situation created a new political dilemma for Israel. They now had to decide whether to integrate, displace, or administratively control the large Arab population now under its authority. He describes public debates inside Israel about retaining the West Bank, Gaza, and the Golan Heights, and shows how political leaders favored permanent control or annexation.²⁸ This directly affected refugees, who were now governed by Israel military administrators and restricted by policies that controlled their return, movement, education, and economic opportunities.²⁹ Peretz concludes that refugees had become “subjects of occupation,” whose identity, political rights, and future were determined by Israeli governmental power rather than international agencies.³⁰ In this later work, Peretz’s analysis shifts firmly

²⁶ Ibid., 568.

²⁷ Don, Peretz, “Israel’s New Arab Dilemma,” *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 22, No. 1 (Winter, 1968): 45.

²⁸ Ibid., 49-52.

²⁹ Ibid., 52-57.

³⁰ Ibid., 57.

toward the view that the persistence of the refugee crisis stemmed from Israeli political authority over Palestinian land, mobility, and national identity.

Modern scholarship builds directly on Don Peretz's shift from viewing the refugee crisis as a technical problem to understanding it as a political one. Researchers such as Riccardo Bocco, Nell Gabiam, and Anne Irfan extend his concerns by examining how humanitarian aid, development policies, and systems of control continue to shape Palestinian displacement. Their work shows how Peretz's insights foreshadowed later analyses of power, governance, and the limits of relief.

Riccardo Bocco's "UNRWA and the Palestinian Refugees: A History Within History" (2009) builds on Peretz's argument that the refugee crisis cannot be solved through administrative or humanitarian measures alone, since UNWRA, despite its official non-political mandate, inevitably becomes entangled in politics.³¹ Bocco traces how UNRWA's mandate since its establishment in 1949 has been shaped by international donor agendas and political pressures, arguing that its humanitarian role has always carried political consequences. For example, he explains that UNRWA's implementation of its early "works programs" aimed at economic reintegration in the 1950s was framed as essential services and education which indirectly supported the Palestinian welfare without jeopardizing their political claims.³² He further explains that the agency's dependence on voluntary donor countries' donations has created perpetual instability and forces UNRWA to continually adapt to donor's political interests.³³ Most importantly, Bocco shows that UNRWA's provision of education and social-service

³¹ Riccardo Bocco, "UNRWA and the Palestinian Refugees: A History Within History," *Refugee Survey Quarterly*, Vol. 28, No. 2/3 (2009): 236.

³² *Ibid.*, 232.

³³ *Ibid.*, 233.

programs have played a central role in Palestinian refugee life, helping to shape national consciousness and even contributing to the rise of a Palestinian middle class. By the early 2000s however, education no longer offered the economic opportunities it once did, leading many refugees to doubt the value of long-schooling and highlighted the need for the UNRWA to adapt its educational programs and give the agency political weight despite its non-political mandate.³⁴ Together, these dynamics reveal that the UNRWA's humanitarian work cannot be separated from the political structures surrounding the refugees since its programs, funding, and daily operations are influenced by regional relations and donor countries. In this way, Bocco extends Peretz's insight that technical or relief-based solutions cannot resolve the refugee crisis, showing that the UNRWA as a humanitarian agency became connected with the political structures that continue Palestinian displacement.

Nell Gabiam's chapter 2 in "From Humanitarianism to Development: UNRWA and Palestinian Refugees" (2016) studies the UNRWA's reform era and develops themes that Don Peretz investigated decades earlier, especially the inability of humanitarian aid to address a crisis driven by political forces. After the Oslo Accords, donor states pushed UNRWA toward a development-oriented agenda, encouraging programs that would "restore the living conditions of Palestine refugees to acceptable international standards and set them on the road to self-reliance and sustainable human development."³⁵ This shift meant that UNRWA increasingly defined itself as a provider of social services and development programs rather than as an institution engaged in political advocacy, a departure that many refugees saw as abandoning their core rights. Refugees interviewed by Gabiam argued that the agency's educational services have "decreased"

³⁴ Ibid., 246.

³⁵ Nell Gambian, *The Politics of Suffering: Syria's Palestinian Refugee Camps* (Indiana University Press, 2016.), 54.

and its role has become “social and humanitarian,”³⁶ insisting that UNRWA should take on a political responsibility and advocate for their rights to the outside world.

These post-Oslo frustrations mirror ideas Peretz identified in the past. He warned that technical solutions would disregard the political nature of refugeehood and the central issue of return. Gabiam proves this by stating that refugees saw donor-backed development projects like the Neirab Rehabilitation Project, as attempts to make their displacement permanent which created the same “paranoia and cynicism” that Peretz documented in his writings.³⁷ In the end, Gabiam makes clear that UNRWA’s post-Oslo shift toward development only increased refugee distrust, proving Peretz’s concerns are still relevant today.

Anne Irfan’s analysis of Israeli policy in Gaza further illustrates the long-term political dynamics that Don Peretz touched on when he argued that Palestinian displacement must be understood as a political project rather than a humanitarian problem. Irfan notes that since 1948, Israel has put in place continuous “displacement/immobility nexus” designed to expel Palestinians while also denying them the right to leave the strip.³⁸ This system has made Gaza a target of Israeli attempts to “contain, immobilize, and ultimately expel” its population, including large-scale forced movement and restrictions.³⁹ Irfan traces this through decades of policy including mass expulsions after the 1948 War, the 1967 occupation, the closure restrictions on Gaza from the 1990s until now, and the blockade that Israel has on Gaza after Hamas took

³⁶ Ibid., 55.

³⁷ Ibid., 54.

³⁸ Anne Irfan, “Settler Colonialism and the Displacement/Immobility Nexus: Israeli Policy in Gaza Since 1948.” *Journal of Genocide Research*, (2025): 3.

³⁹ Ibid., 1.

control in 2007.⁴⁰ She argues that these policies are an example of a settler-colonial strategy made to control Palestinian movement and reshape the demographic.

Her emphasis on displacement as a structured political system echoes Peretz's early understanding that the refugee problem was not an accident of war but the result of intentional state policies. By highlighting how today's strategies of containment and forced movement mirror patterns Peretz analyzed throughout the 1950s, and post-1967 periods, Irfan demonstrates the lasting relevance of his critiques and how the political roots of Palestinian displacement have only intensified over time. Together, her findings show that the dynamics Peretz discussed are still shaping Palestinian life today, even as the political situation has changed.

In conclusion, the scholarship examined in this paper demonstrates the importance of Don Peretz's early insight that the Palestinian refugee crisis was never a temporary humanitarian problem, but a political one shaped by power, displacement, and state control. Across his writings from the 1950s through the post-1967 era, Peretz moved away from administrative explanations and highlighted how unresolved questions of return, sovereignty, and national identity formed the core of the crisis. Modern scholars such as Riccardo Bocco, Nell Gabiam, and Anne Irfan build on these ideas by showing how humanitarian aid, donor agendas, development reforms, and systems of governance continue to control Palestinian movement and manage refugee displacement without ever resolving it. Their research shows that the structural forces Peretz identified decades ago, including refugee mistrust, the politicization of UNRWA, and the use of displacement as a governing tool are still present in today's policies. Overall, the continuity between Peretz's analysis and modern studies reveals that the ongoing refugee crisis

⁴⁰ Ibid., 6-14.

cannot be separated from the political strategies that keep it going. Looking at these patterns over time shows that the crisis stems from long-standing systems of control that continue to shape Palestinians' lives, movement, and demands for national rights today.

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