



HOUSE OF COMMONS  
CHAMBRE DES COMMUNES  
CANADA

# **RECOGNIZING JEWISH REFUGEES FROM THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA**

## **Report of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development**

**Dean Allison  
Chair**

**NOVEMBER 2013**

**41<sup>st</sup> PARLIAMENT, 2<sup>nd</sup> SESSION**

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41<sup>st</sup> Parliament – 2<sup>nd</sup> Session

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# **THE STANDING COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

has the honour to present its

## **FIRST REPORT**

Pursuant to its mandate under Standing Order 108(2), the Committee has studied the Situation of Jewish Refugees from Middle Eastern Nations and has agreed to report the following:



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# RECOGNIZING JEWISH REFUGEES FROM THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA

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## Overview

In May 2013, the House of Commons Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development (“the Committee”) studied the historical experience of Jewish refugees from the Middle East and North Africa.<sup>1</sup> As part of its study, the Committee received testimony from representatives of Justice for Jews from Arab Countries, the Centre for Israel and Jewish Affairs, Jews Indigenous to the Middle East and North Africa, and a past president of the Communauté sépharade unifiée du Québec. The Committee also heard from two individuals who recounted their personal experiences of life in Iraq.

In the course of its hearings, the Committee learned of the discrimination and hardship faced by Jewish people living in the Middle East and North Africa in the twentieth century. Much of this discrimination, which was practiced by governments in the region against their Jewish populations, surged over the years in tandem with the crisis moments of the Arab-Israeli conflict, in particular the 1948–49 and 1967 wars. As a result, almost all of the Jews in Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Syria, Tunisia and Yemen eventually left their homes and communities, which had existed in the Middle East and North Africa for centuries.

The Committee was told of the need for the experiences of these Jewish refugees to be recognized; their narrative has to date been largely missing from international discussions of what took place in the Middle East following the end of the British Mandate of Palestine. The Committee was also told that without such recognition, the history of the region will be incomplete. Many of the witnesses who appeared argued that this issue is not only of historical importance; it should be addressed as part of contemporary efforts to achieve lasting reconciliation in the Middle East. As this report will show, the Committee agrees with these views.

The Committee would also underline its belief that recognition of the experiences of Jewish refugees does not diminish or compete with the situation of Palestinian refugees.

The sections that follow summarize the Committee’s study of these issues. The report concludes with recommendations to the Government of Canada.

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1 House of Commons, Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development (FAAE), [Minutes of Proceedings](#), 1<sup>st</sup> Session, 41<sup>st</sup> Parliament, 5 March 2013.

## Two Refugee Populations

In the twentieth century, armed conflicts produced a significant number of refugees in the Middle East, both directly and indirectly. The most important events in this regard were two major regional wars. The first Arab-Israeli war occurred in 1948–49, following the collapse of the United Nations plan for the partition of the British Mandate of Palestine into a Jewish state and an Arab state. In response to the declaration of the establishment of the state of Israel in May 1948, armies from Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon, Syria and the Transjordan attacked the new state. The conflict ended with the conclusion of armistice agreements that delineated the 1949 “Green Line”. The second major event was the 1967 war between Israel and Egypt, Jordan and Syria, which saw a swift and decisive Israeli victory. From that conflict, Israel assumed control over the West Bank and Gaza Strip, territory that had previously been administered by Jordan and Egypt, respectively, and which was home to a significant number of Palestinians.

As of 1 January 2013, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) reported that there are some 4.9 million registered Palestinian refugees. Around one-third live in camps in Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, the West Bank and Gaza Strip. According to the operational definition used by the UNRWA, “Palestine refugees are people whose normal place of residence was Palestine between June 1946 and May 1948, who lost both their homes and means of livelihood as a result of the 1948 Arab-Israeli conflict. UNRWA’s services are available to all those living in its area of operations who meet this definition, who are registered with the Agency and who need assistance. The descendants of the original Palestine refugees are also eligible for registration.”<sup>2</sup>

One of the main messages to emerge from the Committee’s hearings is that two refugee populations were created by the Arab-Israeli conflict: one Palestinian and one Jewish. The Committee was told of the rich Jewish heritage in the Middle East and North Africa, which had existed for approximately 2,500 years. However, those communities have for the most part been displaced since 1948. As Sylvain Abitbol, Co-President of Justice for Jews from Arab Countries, told the Committee, “even in Morocco, despite its tolerant attitude, only 3,000 Jews remain there today out of a population of approximately 265,000 in 1948.”<sup>3</sup> Dr. Stanley Urman, Executive Vice-President of Justice for Jews from Arab Countries, provided the Committee with statistics depicting the displacement of Jewish populations from countries in the Middle East and North Africa since 1948. These statistics are shown in Table 1 below.

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2 See: United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), “[Palestine refugees](#).” For statistics, see: UNRWA, “[In Figures, as of 1 January 2013](#),” January 2013. UNRWA also notes that its “contemporary mandate is to provide relief, human development and protection services to Palestine refugees and persons displaced by the 1967 hostilities in its fields of operation: Jordan, Lebanon, the Syrian Arab Republic, West Bank and the Gaza Strip.” See: UNRWA, “[Frequently asked questions](#).”

3 FAAE, [Evidence](#), 1<sup>st</sup> Session, 41<sup>st</sup> Parliament, 2 May 2013.

**Table 1: Jewish Population in the Middle East and North Africa, 1948–2012**

	1948	1958	1968	1976	2012 (est.)
<b>Aden</b>	8,000	800	0	0	0
<b>Algeria</b>	140,000	130,000	1,500	1,000	0
<b>Egypt</b>	75,000	40,000	2,500	400	75
<b>Iraq</b>	135,000	6,000	2,500	350	50
<b>Lebanon</b>	5,000	6,000	3,000	400	40
<b>Libya</b>	38,000	3,750	500	40	0
<b>Morocco</b>	265,000	200,000	50,000	18,000	3,000
<b>Syria</b>	30,000	5,000	4,000	4,500	~50
<b>Tunisia</b>	105,000	80,000	10,000	7,000	1,000
<b>Yemen</b>	55,000	3,500	500	500	100
<b>Total</b>	<b>856,000</b>	<b>475,050</b>	<b>76,000</b>	<b>32,190</b>	<b>4,315</b>

Source of statistics: Stanley A. Urman, “Displacement of Jews from Arab Countries 1948-2012,” in *Middle East Refugees: the Differing Treatment of Palestinians and Jews*, presented to the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development, House of Commons, 2 May 2013, p. 3.

Jewish people living in these nations left as a result of discrimination, intimidation and fear. Dr. Urman told the Committee that in the region, Jews and Christians had historically been considered “*dhimmi*”, a privileged minority but still second-class citizens” under Islamic rules. However:

The status of Jews worsened dramatically in 1948, as virtually all Arab countries declared war, or backed the war against Israel. Jews were either uprooted from their countries of residence or became subjugated, political hostages in the Arab Israeli conflict.

In virtually all cases, as Jews were forced to flee, individual and communal properties were seized and/or confiscated without any compensation provided by the Arab governments involved.<sup>4</sup>

In his written submission to the Committee, Dr. Urman included an estimated value of the lost assets of individual Jewish refugees — six billion dollars.<sup>5</sup>

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4 Ibid.

5 Stanley A. Urman, “Middle East Refugees: the Differing Treatment of Palestinians and Jews,” presented to the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development, House of Commons, 2 May 2013, p. 8.

Mr. Abitbol explained that the displacement described above and the measures that precipitated it “did not take place spontaneously nor in a vacuum.” He told the Committee,

On February 17, 1948, the Arab League's Political Committee, which included Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Jordan and Yemen, adopted a seven-point bill dealing with the treatment of Jews in Arab countries.

The bill included seven provisions including the following: that Jews must register as members of the state of the Jewish minority of Palestine, meaning that Jews became citizens of an enemy country, that is to say Israel; that Jews' bank accounts would be frozen; that these frozen funds would be used to fund the war waged by Arab countries against Israel; that Jews were to be imprisoned for Zionist activities. Jews had to prove that their activities were anti-Zionist and had to declare their willingness to join Arab armies at war with Israel [...]

These measures and others made the lives of Jews in Arab countries quite simply unbearable...<sup>6</sup>

Dr. Urman provided the Committee with several specific cases of these discriminatory practices, which in some instances were justified by discriminatory legislation. For example, the Nationality Code that was enacted in Egypt in May 1926:

...established that a person born in Egypt was entitled to Egyptian nationality only if their father belonged racially to the majority of the population of a country whose language is Arabic or whose religion is Islam. This provision later served, in the mid-1950s, as the official pretext for expelling many Jews from Egypt.<sup>7</sup>

Dr. David Bensoussan, past president of the Communauté sépharade unifiée du Québec, told the Committee of other “anti-Jewish measures,” including “the withdrawal of the right to vote for Jews in Libya in 1951.” Among many other incidents, he also noted “the pogroms in Djerada, in Morocco in 1948, in Damascus and Aleppo in 1948, in Benghazi and Tripoli in 1948, in Bahrein in 1949, in Egypt in 1952, and in Libya and Tunisia in 1967.”<sup>8</sup>

Shimon Fogel, Chief Executive Officer of the Centre for Israel and Jewish Affairs, referred to communications between Canadian diplomats abroad and the Canadian government in these years for further substantiation. He noted, for example, that “By March 1952, the Government of Canada received reports that Israel had absorbed over 300,000 Jews from Arab countries, including 120,000 from Iraq and another 50,000 from Yemen.”<sup>9</sup> Mr. Fogel also noted a cable that was sent to the Department of External Affairs in 1956 regarding the situation facing the Jewish population in Egypt. It reported that those individuals who had lost their Egyptian citizenship as a result of the

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6 FAAE, [Evidence](#), 1<sup>st</sup> Session, 41<sup>st</sup> Parliament, 2 May 2013.

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid.

9 FAAE, [Evidence](#), 1<sup>st</sup> Session, 41<sup>st</sup> Parliament, 7 May 2013.



1926 nationality code, and who did not have other citizenship, “were given a choice between leaving Egypt or being sent to a concentration camp.”<sup>10</sup>

The Committee received personal testimonials of the suffering experienced by individuals, families and communities in this period. Regina Bublil Waldman, President of Jews Indigenous to the Middle East and North Africa, described her family’s experience in Libya. Growing up in the 1950s in that country, Ms. Waldman recalled: “Our Jewish community was forbidden to...leave the country. We were denied citizenship. We were denied passports. We were denied the right to travel, yet we had to live in this very anti-Jewish environment.”<sup>11</sup> Then, in the period following the 1967 war, in an atmosphere that had seen rioting and intimidation against the local Jewish population, Jews were expelled from Libya under the order of the government and their property was confiscated. In Ms. Waldman’s words: “We were being expelled from the country we had lived in for over 2,000 years.” Her family was forced to leave with almost nothing — “one suitcase per person and the equivalent of \$25 per person” — eventually ending up in Italy. She later arrived in the United States as a refugee. Ms. Waldman noted that at the time of her birth in 1948, “the Jewish community of Tripoli constituted almost 30% of the total population of the city.” Today, her “whole community is extinct.”<sup>12</sup>

The Committee also learned of the experiences of Gladys Daoud and Lisette Shashoua, both of whom are originally from Iraq and are now Canadians. Ms. Daoud was a teenager in Baghdad when the 1967 Six Day War broke out. In its wake, she recalled that the Iraqi “government proceeded with a plan of total isolation and economic strangulation” against the Jewish population. As a student, Ms. Daoud, who had been admitted to universities in Baghdad and the United States, had her acceptance to Baghdad University “retracted” while she was also “refused a passport to study abroad.” The bank accounts of her family “were frozen” and their property “confiscated.” At the same time, they “were forbidden to leave Baghdad.” The situation became “so desperate” that Ms. Daoud’s family was forced to escape the country, eventually doing so in 1971.

Ms. Shashoua similarly noted the retaliatory measures that were instituted against Jewish businesses and business people, employees and students by the Iraqi government following the 1967 war, and the loss of personal property, including that of her family. She told the Committee that “In 1968 the random arrests intensified. Men were now tortured and forced to say they were spies.” In a notable and troubling incident in January 1969, following “mock” trials, 14 men were hanged publicly, 10 of whom were Jewish and accused of being Israeli spies. Ms. Shashoua said, “You can just imagine the sheer terror that dominated our daily existence after that horrid day.”<sup>13</sup> Ms. Daoud noted: “they were hanged in the public square and the population was given the day off and

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10 Ibid.

11 Ibid.

12 Ibid.

13 Ibid.

invited to gather and dance in celebration underneath the dangling corpses. I still have nightmares about being back in Baghdad and reliving the anguish of those days.”<sup>14</sup> Ms. Shashoua told the Committee that she too was forced to escape from Iraq. After many years, she was finally reunited with her parents in Canada.

The overall result of the ongoing Arab-Israeli conflict and the discrimination and intimidation practiced against Jews in various countries in the region was summarized by Dr. Bensoussan in his testimony: “...Jews who had been present in Arab Muslim countries for a thousand years were squeezed out in the span of one generation, and they had to choose exile to other countries.”<sup>15</sup> Dr. Urman informed the Committee that “Some two-thirds, or nearly 650,000 Jews, immigrated to Israel, while roughly one-third, or over 200,000 Jews, found a safe haven in countries other than Israel, including Canada.”<sup>16</sup>

### **The Need for Recognition**

The Committee was told repeatedly that it is important for there to be recognition of the experiences of Jewish refugees from the Middle East and North Africa. Witnesses argued that, to date, most historical accounts of the period have ignored this narrative. Dr. Urman also told the Committee more specifically that there has been a lack of recognition of Jewish refugees at the United Nations. He said:

...with respect to UN resolutions from 1949 to 2009, there has been a total of 1,088 resolutions of the Security Council and the General Assembly on every conceivable Middle East issue. One hundred and seventy-two resolutions have dealt specifically with Palestinian refugees.

There has never been any Security Council resolution, any General Assembly resolution, that specifically addresses the issue of Jewish refugees, or any resolutions on other topics that even mention Jewish refugees from Arab countries...<sup>17</sup>

The World Jewish Congress wrote to the Committee that “this incomplete version of history will not bring justice or closure to any of the victims of this painful conflict.”<sup>18</sup> In his testimony, Dr. Urman noted that “this is not fundamentally an issue about money; this is fundamentally an issue about recognizing the historic injustice to one population of refugees.”<sup>19</sup> Mr. Fogel stated that “The inclusion of the issue of Jewish refugees is meant to complete, not revise, the historical record.”<sup>20</sup> Recognition is also important

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14 Ibid.

15 FAAE, [Evidence](#), 1<sup>st</sup> Session, 41<sup>st</sup> Parliament, 2 May 2013.

16 Ibid.

17 Ibid.

18 Ronald S. Lauder, President, World Jewish Congress, letter to the Chair of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development, dated 17 May 2013.

19 FAAE, [Evidence](#), 1<sup>st</sup> Session, 41<sup>st</sup> Parliament, 2 May 2013.

20 FAAE, [Evidence](#), 1<sup>st</sup> Session, 41<sup>st</sup> Parliament, 7 May 2013.

because of what history can presage for events in current times. As Ms. Daoud told the Committee:

I hear every day that the Christians who are now a minority in all of the Arab countries are in the same desperate situation that we were in. In fact, they always said that after Saturday comes Sunday.

...

So history is repeating itself and now the international community has to do something. We see it happening.<sup>21</sup>

A complete and accurate historical record is therefore an essential component of public education and understanding of unfolding international events.

A number of witnesses made recommendations regarding how this recognition should be taken into account as part of Canadian policy, including with respect to Canada's stance towards the Middle East peace process.

Mr. Fogel argued that there needs to be "a formal recognition of Jewish refugees in Canada's foreign policy."<sup>22</sup> Mr. Abitbol recommended that "during all Canadian debates on the Middle East, any explicit reference to the required resolution of the Palestinian refugee problem be accompanied by an explicit reference to the rights of Jewish refugees from Arab countries."<sup>23</sup> Mr. Fogel said that Canada must "enshrine in our official policy that a refugee is a refugee, regardless of ethnic or religious background." He noted that, as the gavel holder of the multilateral Refugee Working Group, which was established out of the 1991 Middle East Peace Process in Madrid, "Canada is uniquely placed to raise the profile of the Jewish refugee issue and to ensure that it is given the fair consideration it merits among all parties engaged in the pursuit of a durable peace."<sup>24</sup>

Some witnesses indicated that raising this profile is not intended to undermine the rights and claims of Palestinian refugees. Mr. Fogel told the Committee that when Canada assumed the gavel of the Refugee Working Group, the parties involved decided to focus their "efforts on providing material help to Palestinian refugees so that they too could benefit from the peace dividends going forward..."<sup>25</sup> For various reasons, at the time of the Madrid conference in 1991, large numbers of Palestinian refugees were living in camps, a situation that, as noted previously, continues today. In the case of Jewish refugees post-1948, they were eventually resettled in Israel or found new homes in countries such as Canada. However, Mr. Fogel explained why these ultimately divergent outcomes do not

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21 Ibid.

22 Ibid.

23 FAAE, [Evidence](#), 1<sup>st</sup> Session, 41<sup>st</sup> Parliament, 2 May 2013.

24 FAAE, [Evidence](#), 1<sup>st</sup> Session, 41<sup>st</sup> Parliament, 7 May 2013.

25 Ibid.

alter the need to address — as part of any final peace settlement — the fact that two refugee populations were created over the years by the Arab-Israeli conflict. He argued:

...I think we would all agree there are acute problems confronting Palestinian refugees, who require attention today to materially enhance the quality of their lives.

It is only when we get to a point where we're actually starting to focus on what a comprehensive resolution looks like that we do an inventory of all of those outstanding issues that require some attention. From our perspective, attention to the Jewish refugee claims from Arab countries starts, and may end, with formal recognition...<sup>26</sup>

David Matas, Legal Counsel of Justice for Jews from Arab Countries, told the Committee that bilateral agreements between Israel and Egypt in 1978 and 1979 and Jordan in 1994, as well as between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization in 1993 and 1995 (as part of the Oslo Accords), did use “generic” language in reference to refugees.<sup>27</sup> Perhaps most importantly from a multilateral perspective, United Nations Security Council Resolution 242, which was adopted after the 1967 war and is typically considered as the basic framework for any settlement to the Middle East conflict, affirmed the necessity of “achieving a just settlement of the refugee problem.”<sup>28</sup> Witnesses argued that the resolution did not, therefore, distinguish between refugee groups.

Mr. Matas told the Committee that Jewish refugees are “entitled to redress” for violations of their rights. He further argued that “Canada should support the principle that in Middle East peace negotiations, all refugees should be treated with equity and justice.”<sup>29</sup> As he indicated in his written brief to the Committee, however, “one has to distinguish recognition of a right and its violation on the one hand, and awarding redress on the other.” He explained that, “when it comes to redress, there is a wide array of possibilities.” These can include, for example, truth and reconciliation commissions, the establishment of “Chairs at prominent universities to promote and preserve the rich Sephardic heritage and legacy,” the “establishment of Foundations to protect and preserve holy sites in Arab countries,” and compensation. Mr. Matas noted that “Redress, ultimately, will be decided by the parties directly involved in the negotiations.”<sup>30</sup> For his part, Mr. Fogel also argued against a prescriptive approach to determining redress. He said: “I would be really hesitant about our presuming to shape or to define how we get satisfactory redress. The contribution we can make is to bring closure to the conflict, to allow for all of the stakeholders to feel that they’ve been noted, recognized, and validated.”<sup>31</sup>

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26 Ibid.

27 FAAE, [Evidence](#), 1<sup>st</sup> Session, 41<sup>st</sup> Parliament, 2 May 2013.

28 United Nations Security Council, *Resolution 242 (1967) of 22 November 1967*, para 2 (b).

29 FAAE, [Evidence](#), 1<sup>st</sup> Session, 41<sup>st</sup> Parliament, 2 May 2013.

30 David Matas, “Rights and redress for Jewish refugees from Arab countries,” submission to the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development, 2 May 2013, Ottawa, pp. 7-8.

31 FAAE, [Evidence](#), 1<sup>st</sup> Session, 41<sup>st</sup> Parliament, 7 May 2013.

## **Recommendations**

Based on its consideration of the testimony and submissions it received, the Committee puts forward the following recommendations to the Government of Canada:

### **Recommendation 1**

**The Committee recommends that the Government of Canada officially recognize the experience of Jewish refugees who were displaced from states in the Middle East and North Africa after 1948.**

### **Recommendation 2**

**The Committee recommends that the Government of Canada encourage the direct negotiating parties to take into account all refugee populations as part of any just and comprehensive resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian and Arab-Israeli conflicts.**



## APPENDIX A LIST OF WITNESSES

Organizations and Individuals	Date	Meeting
<b>Communauté Sépharade Unifiée du Québec</b> David Bensoussan, Past President	2013/05/02	77
<b>Justice for Jews from Arab Countries</b> Sylvain Abitbol, Co-President David Matas, Legal Counsel Stanley Urman, Executive Director		
<b>As individuals</b> Gladys Daoud Lisette Shashoua	2013/05/07	78
<b>Centre for Israel and Jewish Affairs</b> Shimon Fogel, Chief Executive Officer		
<b>Jews Indigenous to the Middle East and North Africa</b> Regina Bublil Waldman, President		





## **APPENDIX B LIST OF BRIEFS**

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### **Organizations and Individuals**

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**Communauté Sépharade Unifiée du Québec**

**Jews Indigenous to the Middle East and North Africa**

**Justice for Jews from Arab Countries**

**World Jewish Congress**



# REQUEST FOR GOVERNMENT RESPONSE

Pursuant to Standing Order 109, the Committee requests that the Government table a comprehensive response to this Report.

A copy of the relevant *Minutes of Proceedings* ([Meeting No. 2](#)) from the 41st Parliament, Second Session and ([Meeting Nos. 77, 78, 83, 88](#)) from the 41st Parliament, First Session is tabled.

Respectfully submitted,

Dean Allison

Chair



## **Supplement to the Main Report – New Democratic Party of Canada**

New Democrats wish to thank the witnesses for their important and often highly personal testimony, which shed significant light on the experiences of Jewish refugees from the Middle East and North Africa. This historical experience is one that must be better known by all Canadians. It is also an occasion to recognize and condemn the injustices and anti-Semitism experienced by many Jewish refugees, and to recommit to the protection of refugees everywhere.

New Democrats are in support of Recommendation 1, which calls on the Government of Canada to officially recognize the experience of Jewish refugees who were displaced from states in the Middle East and North Africa after 1948.

