

Jewish 'refugee' lobby seeks to eclipse Palestinian losses

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A broad coalition of Jewish lobby groups has made a series of breakthroughs this year in its campaign to link the question of justice for millions of Palestinian refugees with justice for Jews who left Arab states in the wake of Israel's establishment 60 years ago.

Referring to these Jews as the "forgotten refugees" and claiming that their plight is worse than that of exiled Palestinians, the campaign has scored political successes in recent months in Washington, London and Brussels.

Last week, the campaign received a major fillip when one of Israel's largest political parties announced that restitution of property for Arab Jews was a central plank of its platform for the general election scheduled for February.

Shas, a religious fundamentalist party and the third biggest in the current parliament, said it will refuse to support any government that reaches a deal with the Palestinians unless it first forces the Arab states to compensate these Jewish emigrants.

Shas, which has a record of opposing peace agreements with the Palestinians, draws its support chiefly from Jews who migrated to Israel from Arab countries – known in Israel as the Mizrahim.

The party is likely to be the power broker in the next government. Its refusal to accept terms offered by Tzipi Livni, the prime minister-designate, especially on Jerusalem, forced her to call the election last month.

The international campaign highlighting the suffering of Arab Jews, led by Justice for Jews from Arab Countries (JJAC), a pressure group drawing together dozens of Jewish groups in the US and Europe, has made dramatic headway over the past year.

After heavy lobbying, the US House of Representatives passed a resolution in April declaring that no Middle East peace could be achieved "without addressing the uprooting of centuries-old Jewish communities in the Middle East, North Africa and the Persian Gulf". George W Bush, the president, was also said to be "very conscious" of the Arab Jews' plight.

In recent months, members of JJAC have also addressed the British parliament, the United Nations and the European Parliament.

And last month, the group officially moved its operations into Israel, promising to bring strong pressure on the next government.

A central claim of the JJAC campaign is that the Jewish exodus associated with the 1948 war dwarfs that suffered by the Palestinians. JJAC argues that at least 850,000 Jews were forced out of 10 Arab countries, compared to 720,000 Palestinians expelled from the territory that became Israel.

Using dubious figures, one economist, Stanley Zabudoff, produced a paper this year for the Jerusalem Centre for Public Affairs arguing that Arab Jews' losses, at \$6 billion in today's figures, are 50 per cent higher than Palestinian losses.

Yitzhak Cohen, a Shas spokesman, echoed that claim: "The uprooted Jews' problem is equal to, if not greater than, the Palestinian refugees' problem."

An equivalence between Jewish and Palestinian property losses as a consequence of the 1948 war has been drawn by Israeli politicians on a number of occasions in peace negotiations.

The issue was raised during the later stages of the Oslo talks, at the Camp David negotiations in 2000, and again at the conference called by Mr Bush a year ago at Annapolis. A cabinet minister, Rafi Eitan, has the issue included in his portfolio.

This year, both Ehud Olmert, the outgoing prime minister, and Ms Livni have emphasised the plight of Arab Jews in private conversations with visiting heads of state.

The reason is clear. Proponents of the Arab Jews' case argue that what occurred during the 1948 war was an "exchange of populations", suggesting that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has already been settled in a manner similar to the conflict between Greece and Turkey in the 1920s, when hundreds of thousands were displaced from their homes.

Unlike Shas, however, Israeli governments have been reluctant to go public with such claims - a fact recently lamented by Uzi Dayan, the country's former National Security Adviser.

This is because the equivalence argument fails to withstand minimal scrutiny. There are a number of grounds for rejecting the case made by the JJAC, Shas and government officials.

First, it holds the Palestinians accountable for actions for which they had no responsibility. In fact, the cost of the exodus of Jews from Arab states was borne chiefly by the Palestinians themselves, whose land, homes and belongings were transferred to these Jewish immigrants.

Second, although historians are agreed that the Palestinians were expelled by Israel in 1948, there is little evidence that most Arab Jews were forced from their homes.

According to the Israeli historian Avi Shlaim, whose family left Baghdad in 1950, most of these Jewish migrants left of their own accord, even if under pressure from Zionist agencies. The largest numbers came from Morocco, lured to Israel by Zionist officials who promised them a better life.

Only in the case of the small Jewish populations in Egypt and Libya was compulsion involved.

And third, and most embarrassing for Israel, there is overwhelming evidence that its secret Mossad agency carried out false-flag operations in Arab countries that endangered local Jews and significantly contributed to the exodus.

The involvement of Israel in bombing campaigns in both Egypt and Baghdad – and possibly elsewhere – is mentioned, for example, in the diaries of Moshe Sharrett, the former foreign minister. The explosions were designed, in his words, to “liven up the Middle East”.

A majority of the Jews from Arab states ended up in Israel, where today they constitute nearly half of the Jewish population. Shas makes it clear that its primary goal in raising the issue of restitution is to foil any attempt by the next government to reach a peace deal with the Palestinians.

Benjamin Netanyahu, the leader of the right wing Likud party and the candidate most likely, according to polls, to become the next prime minister, is also known to be sympathetic to the principle of tying the question of Jewish and Palestinian refugees.

Should a new White House under Barack Obama try to revive the Middle East peace process, Shas may yet offer Mr Netanyahu precisely the escape hatch he is seeking.

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