8. International Security and the Question of Reintegration

After much contention and debate United Nations General Assembly adopted Resolution 393 (V) on December 2, 1950. The Resolution stated:

without prejudice to the provisions of paragraph of General Assembly resolution 194 (III) of 11 December 1948, the reintegration of the refugees into the economic life of the Near East, either by repatriation or resettlement, is essential in preparation for the time when international assistance is no longer available, and for the realization of conditions of peace and stability in the area.¹

The Resolution went on to direct UNRWA “to establish a reintegration fund which shall be utilized for projects requested by any government in the Near East and approved by the Agency for the permanent re-establishment of refugees and their removal from relief.” The AFSC had discussed reintegration for close to a year, but with its adoption by the United Nations it became an international goal. Defining reintegration, however, was subject to changing geopolitical contingencies.

Throughout 1949 and 1950 a series of developments fundamentally reshaped the global scene and changed the Western, and especially American, perspectives on the Middle East generally, and the Palestine Arab refugee question specifically. Western defense interests had been given new shape and urgency by the Communist takeover of northern China in January 1949, the creation of NATO in April, and the detonation of the Soviet Union’s first atomic weapon in August. Cold War issues began to dominate foreign policy planning as never before, and reached new levels with the issuing in April 1950 of NSC-68, a classified national security report, which situated the conflict with the Soviet Union as central and existential for the West, and that moved the United States closer toward a policy of containment.² The beginning of the Korean War in June 1950 also shifted American priorities still further, particularly in the
areas of military alliances and the conduct of the war through the United Nations.

For the United States and Great Britain, Middle East affairs, including arms control efforts such as the Tripartite Declaration and refugee policy, were being viewed increasingly through the lenses of superpower competition and anti-communism. Foreign aid would also be restructured in view of the larger Cold War situation, such as through the US Mutual Security Act of 1951, and regional defense projects such as “Middle East Command” and the “Middle East Defense Organization” would be launched. The October 1951 proposal for a “Middle East Defense Command” relied heavily on Western basing rights in the Canal Zone but came a week after Egypt repudiated the Anglo-Egyptian Treaty of 1936, and the Anglo-Egyptian Agreement of 1899. Egypt quickly rejected the new proposal. Stable relations with both Israel, which was moving away from its brief early position of official neutrality toward the West, and with the Arab states, which were feared could fall under Communist sway, then became central concerns for both the State Department and the National Security Council.

In November 1951 the American Chiefs of Middle East Missions again met in Istanbul but with a completely different strategic outlook. In a document generally concerned with power politics, the threat of Communism, and the need to strengthen Greece, Turkey, Israel, and the Arab regimes, the Palestine Arab refugee issue found a central place. It was stated, with some apparent relief, by the participants that while during the course of 1950 “the Arabs have not abandoned the principle of repatriation, and may be expected to reaffirm it, they show signs of becoming more realistic as to the obstacles to any satisfactory implementation of this principle, and are giving serious thought to the alternative of compensation and to the concept of reintegration.”

The conference also expressed some satisfaction that Israel had voiced interest in resolving the issue of the refugees’ blocked bank accounts that was regarded as evidence of Israeli “good will.” But the official American orientation toward the refugee issue was stated clearly, “The hard core of approximately 800,000 refugees, on relief and in temporary shelter, constitutes a serious threat to stability, and an important impediment to peace between the Arab states and Israel.” With stability in mind, the report endorsed the goal of “reintegration” but it also made clear that the term was being used in a specific sense with respect to UNRWA’s task of “direct reintegration, especially in rural areas, financed by international funds.” It recommended that “reintegration should be approached as an economic