Foreign Workers, Refugees and Prospects for an Israeli–Palestinian Agreement

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ABSTRACT  David Bartram argues that Israel’s recent acquisition of a sizable foreign labour force carries the potential to complicate negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians, especially concerning Palestinian refugees. Though officially temporary, many foreign workers in Israel show signs of long-term settlement, recalling foreign worker experiences in Western Europe and elsewhere. As the Israeli government attempts to manage foreign workers’ demands for proper treatment and respect for human and civil rights, what is likely to emerge is the extent to which the country is unprepared to offer any meaningful membership to new populations of non-Jews. The foreign worker episode, then, may reinforce Israel’s resistance to demands for the return of Palestinian refugees. As Israel and the PLO/Palestinian Authority stumble towards (and sometimes away from) a comprehensive peace agreement, a new factor in the equation needs to be considered: Israel’s new foreign labour force. In this paper the author reviews the history of Palestinian refugees and surveys the problems associated with Israel’s recent experience with foreign workers. The importation of these workers signals a transition in Israel’s development trajectory that is in all likelihood irreversible, at least in the short term. Specifically, with low-wage foreign labour now constituting more than 10 percent of Israel’s labour force, the size of the foreign labour population has easily reached a critical mass that typically leads to permanent settlement and the formation of networks that encourage sustained migration. The availability of low-wage foreign labour is also severely hampering efforts to increase productivity in certain sectors, notably construction. It is argued here that the presence of this new non-Jewish population in Israel is likely to complicate negotiations with the Palestinians concerning difficult outstanding issues, in particular the fate of Palestinian refugees from the 1948 Israeli–Arab war. The structure of the Israeli state is not well suited for coping with the prospect of non-Jewish immigration of any type. The government’s handling of the foreign workers issue highlights the difficulties involved and has raised sensitivities concerning Israel’s ‘self concept’ as a Jewish state. One likely consequence is an increased resistance to demands for the return of Palestinian refugees. This episode thus illustrates the effect of economic development choices on inter-state relations.

KEYWORDS  exile; Israel; labour; migration; Palestine; refugees
Background

There have been two major waves of Palestinian refugees associated with two Arab–Israeli wars, in 1948 and 1967. The 1948 refugees, exiles from what is now Israel proper, pose a far more difficult problem and are the relevant group for this paper. I will not enter into the controversy over who bears responsibility for the uprooting in 1948 – it may be that trying to resolve this long-running dispute is counterproductive for the effort to resolve the situation of the refugees themselves. (For an interesting contribution to the debate, see Morris, 1987; and for a critique of Morris, see Finkelstein, 1995.)

Determining the numbers involved has been fraught with controversy as well. Estimates of refugees from the 1948 war range from 520,000 (the Israeli number) to over 900,000 (an Arab figure); a United Nations estimate put the number at 726,000, and the British figure was 810,000. This was a very high proportion of those formerly resident in what became Israel: after the war there were only 160,000 Palestinians left, and these became Israeli citizens. The very high rate of natural increase among Palestinians has augmented the ranks of refugees significantly. There are currently more than 3.2 million people registered with the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNWRA); this figure, however, includes refugees from the 1967 war (some of whom were also 1948 refugees and were uprooted a second time) and is probably overstated by UNWRA’s inability to record deaths accurately (Arzt, 1997). In addition, less than one-third of those registered, or about one million, are currently resident in refugee camps. Among Arab countries, only Jordan has offered refugees citizenship; in other countries, Palestinians live with a tenuous and often difficult legal situation.

Palestinian refugees, including the descendants of the original residents of pre-1948 Israel, have invested heavily in the idea of ‘return’. Even many descendants of refugees who were born abroad and have citizenship in, say, the US or Canada, typically define themselves as ‘from’ a certain village or city in Palestine. The experience of exile and the hope of return have been the subject of a rich literature (Rubinstein, 1991). More importantly, ‘return’ has been a consistent political demand of Palestinian leaders, including those with whom Israel has been negotiating at least since 1991.

Palestinian conceptions of what return will realistically entail have evolved, however. Many Palestinians now understand that many, perhaps most, refugees will never return to Israel proper. This realism is evident in Palestinian leaders’ acceptance of the UN General Assembly Resolution 194 (III), which (in addition to insisting that refugees should be allowed to return) raises the possibility that refugees not choosing to return are entitled to compensation for lost or damaged property (Khalidi, 1992). Still, as many observers have noted, it is inconceivable that a meaningful final settlement between Israel and the Palestinians (and some other Arab countries) can be reached without Israel allowing at least a small number of Palestinians to return, at least for symbolic purposes. A recent proposal from an American writer (Arzt, 1997) suggests that Israel should allow 75,000 refugees in Lebanon to return to the Galilee area in northern Israel; Palestinian definitions of ‘symbolic’ could well involve a higher number.

Most Israeli political parties, reflecting public opinion among most Jewish Israelis, have expressed firm opposition to the return of 1948 refugees. This opposition, however, was not always absolute. In 1949, the government, under pressure from the US and other countries, agreed to permit 100,000 refugees to return, if it were agreed that doing so would close the matter. Arab leaders rejected these terms, and Israel later withdrew the offer. Before 1967, Israel allowed 40,500 refugees to be reunited with family members who had remained in the country after 1948 (Peretz, 1993). And after the 1967 war, the government allowed about 10,000 Palestinians to return to annexed East Jerusalem, again for family reunification. In each case, however, the Israeli government emphasized that these actions constituted humanitarian gestures; Israel has always firmly rejected the notion that they are under any legal obligation to permit any return whatsoever. The most important argument for Israelis in this context is that a mass return of refugees, and a Palestinian fertility rate substantially higher than that of Israeli Jews, would combine to create a non-Jewish majority in Israel in a relatively short time.