

## Gazans deserve the right to freedom of movement - opinion

**Civilian populations are allowed and even encouraged to flee combat zones to avoid danger. Why can't Gazans?**

By ARI ZIVOTOFSKY NOVEMBER 21, 2024 13:43



Palestinians make their way as they inspect the damages at Jabalya refugee camp, in the northern Gaza Strip, May 30, 2024(photo credit: REUTERS/OSAMA ABU RABEE)

In many ways, the world treats the Arabs of [Gaza](#) differently than other people – and often to the Gazans’ detriment. This is true with regard to the violation of their basic right to freedom of movement. Over the years, the international community has agreed upon certain fundamental rights that all inhabitants of planet Earth should be entitled to, yet these same nations are now denying one of those rights to a particular group.

The “International Bill of Human Rights” is an informal name given to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (adopted in 1948), the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (both having been adopted in 1966 and coming into force 10 years later). Regarding freedom of movement, Article 13 of the declaration and Article 12 in the covenant both declare that everyone has the right to leave any country, including his own.

Indeed, for all of human history, people have been migrating in the hopes of a better life, and that has been true of the residents of Gaza in recent times as well. And until recently, there was no widespread objection from world leaders. Estimates vary widely, but since [Hamas](#) violently seized control of Gaza in 2007 and imposed their fundamentalist Islamic rule, likely over a quarter of a million young Gazans relocated, with the limiting factors preventing even greater numbers being Hamas bureaucracy and the hesitancy of some countries to accept them.

Although infamously flouted by the former Soviet bloc, this right is in general respected. For example, Cuba, which used to trample it, is currently experiencing economic hardships and political uncertainties that have led to a mass exodus of about 500,000 in the last three years, leading to a 3% drop in the island’s population.

DURING ARMED conflict, there is often a desire of citizens on both sides to flee the embattled region. The last decade has witnessed major conflicts that spawned floods of refugees, none of whom were told by the international community to stay put. Two years ago, [Russia](#) invaded neighboring Ukraine, from which the world has absorbed over five million Ukrainians and nearly a million Russians as they fled the conflict zone. Afghans have been leaving for years, and in the wake of the Taliban takeover following the botched 2021 US withdrawal, millions have fled.



At the beginning of the war, Biden made sure to draw a connection between Hamas and Putin. Destruction followed Russia's missile attack in Ukraine. (credit: REUTERS)

The Syrian civil war and governmental atrocities have motivated millions of Syrians to relocate since 2011. Lebanon has been a less-than-ideal location for many years, as the civil war of 1975-1990 was followed by the ascendancy of Hezbollah, which continues to terrorize the country. This has led to emigration of such magnitude that more Lebanese now live outside of their country than in it; Brazil probably has more Lebanese than Lebanon has. No one has suggested that the international community block them from leaving.

Middle Eastern Jews saw their own migration. In the 1940s, murderous antisemitic rampages in Arab countries where Jews had lived for millennia resulted in almost a million Jews fleeing their homes, abandoning their property and assets, and resettling in Israel and other Western countries, resulting in those Arab countries becoming essentially Judenrein.

Those are but a few examples of recent mass migrations.

There have also been forced or encouraged “population transfers” or “resettlement” of masses of people, often based on ethnicity or religion, sometimes as a means to defuse tensions and encourage nonbelligerent coexistence.

Greece and Turkey have twice been involved in mass transfers that have indeed brought quiet, if not peace, to the region. Muslim-majority Turkey and Christian Greece fought a bitter war ending in 1922, at which point the League of Nations initiated a plan to move Greek Muslims to Turkey and Turkish Orthodox Christians to Greece. The plan was pushed by Fridtjof Nansen, High Commissioner for Refugees of the League of Nations, and eventually 1.5 million Christians and half a million Muslims moved to the other sides of the border, quiet ensued, and Nansen was awarded a Nobel Peace Prize. That of course did not mean the two countries had become friends, and in 1974 the Turkish army invaded Greek-ruled Cyprus, leading to a division of the island. In order to bring stability there, which has so far endured, both sides agreed to permit voluntary relocation from the other side, and within the next year about 150,000 Greek-Cypriots moved from the northern Turkish side to the southern Greek side and about 60,000 Turkish-Cypriots crossed to the north.

The Indian subcontinent has seen its share of migrations (although not necessarily resulting in peace). When India was being granted independence from the colonialist British Empire, the local Muslims demanded a Muslim-majority country alongside India and were given East Pakistan (today Bangladesh) and West Pakistan (today Pakistan).

In order to make the newly established countries more religiously homogeneous (Muslims do not seem to get along with non-Muslims), more than five million Hindus and Sikhs moved south from Pakistan to India leaving their homeland over 96% Muslim, and millions of Muslims moved the other way, although a large number remained behind and still comprise over 15% of the Indian population.

### **A cause that people care about?**

DO THE nations of the world actually care about the welfare of the Gazans or are the Gazans mere pawns being used to harm Israel? Gaza is unquestionably a mess. After Israel pulled out in 2005, Hamas took control and spent the massive foreign donations digging tunnels and accruing weapons, and now the full-scale war they

started has left the coastal enclave devastated. It would make sense for the world to support, even encourage, the suffering Gazans to leave, a desire of many people in war zones.

A poll conducted by the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research (PSR) just before the Simchat Torah massacre of October 7, 2023, found that nearly a third of Gazans were interested in emigrating – and for those between 18-29, it approached half, with the overwhelming motivations being economic and educational. One can assume that due to the war, those numbers are even higher. Similarly, according to a January 15 article in this newspaper, over three-quarters of Israelis favor voluntary emigration of Gazans.

The global community welcomed the Ukrainian and Afghan refugees without any hint that they should stay and watch their countries burn. Why is choosing to flee a combat zone or an economically challenged region deemed logical and acceptable for all except the Gazans? Politicians from around the world complain about the supposed civilian death toll in Gaza, yet one concrete step available to them is to provide them with a safe haven. Yet when Israel suggested voluntary Gazan emigration, the EU and UK slammed it.

To complain about the Gazan suffering and to also bar them from leaving is the height of hypocrisy. Nobody, not the neighboring Arab states, not the wealthy Gulf sheikhdoms, not the enlightened West, not even the litigious South Africa are offering refuge to Gazans. And not only are they not offering refuge, they are insisting that they stay put and be barred from leaving.

Prior to the current war, emigrating Gazans left via Egypt. At present, neither Israel (for obvious reasons) nor Egypt permits them to transit. However, I would like to believe that if the world showed real willingness to take in Gazans, Israel would work with the international community to facilitate their exit. Only America has started toying with the idea recently.

Voluntary relocation is a recognized right. The migration of Gazans should not only be allowed, but should be encouraged. Many Israelis and Gazans are in favor. The UN, foreign countries, and all those claiming to be concerned for the welfare of the Gazans should give them no less consideration than they do to fleeing Syrians, Afghans, Ukrainians, and Sudanese.

There is no moral or legal justification to deny Gazans the right and ability to flee what has now become an inhospitable locale. And yet the Biden administration and other Western leaders have been preventing Gazan emigration. Their freedom of movement should be respected, and they should be given a chance to build new lives in another land – and thereby also contribute to stability in the Middle East.

*The writer is a professor of neuroscience at Bar-Ilan University.*