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The Wall Street Journal, February 32

If Indians and Pakistanis Can Relocate, Why Can't Gazans?

Population transfers aren't a Trump innovation. There are plenty of examples from the 20th century.



Displaced Palestinians pass through Salah El-Deen Street in Gaza, Feb. 12. PHOTO: ALI HAMAD/ZUMA PRESS

Full text :

President Trump's idea that the U.S. will take over the Gaza Strip and relocate two million Palestinians has elicited outrage and derision. But even if the idea never comes to fruition, it has this virtue: It puts a spotlight on the world's double standard toward Israel.

Many population transfers have taken place over the past century. In the 1920s, Greece and Turkey agreed to a forced population swap: Greek Orthodox Christians in Turkey moved to Greece, while Muslims in Greece moved to Turkey. After World War II, millions of Indians and Pakistanis were forced to find new homes, as were ethnic Germans from Czechoslovakia and the Soviet Union. In the 1970s, Uganda expelled Indians. Only in the Palestinian case has the refugee question festered endlessly.

Mr. Trump's idea involves transferring Gazans to other nations and turning the Gaza Strip into the "Riviera of the Middle East." Where would the Gazans go? "It could be Jordan, and it could be Egypt, it could be other countries," Mr. Trump told reporters last week. In a Truth Social post, he elaborated that Palestinians would be resettled "in far safer and more beautiful communities, with new and modern homes."

It's easy to see why many people find this off-putting. We aren't used to viewing knotty geopolitical problems through a real-estate development lens. *The Egyptians, Jordanians and Saudis all appear less than enthusiastic at the prospect of an influx of Palestinians.* Longtime U.S. allies, including the U.K. and France, have also criticized the idea.

Nonetheless, the discussion highlights a double standard. Following the creation of Israel in 1948 and the first Arab-Israeli war, some 600,000 to 700,000 Palestinians fled their homes. Yet the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East today supports nearly six million Palestinian "refugees." That's because the U.N. counts not only displaced Palestinians but also their descendants as refugees. "A great-grandchild of Palestinian refugees born in Damascus today is considered a Palestinian refugee," Daniel Pipes, president of the Middle East Forum, said in a phone interview.

Contrast this with other countries. In the turmoil following Israel's creation, some 800,000 Jews fled or were expelled from their homes in North Africa and the Middle East. Today the descendants of these Mizrahi Jews make up about half of Israel's population. Israel never stuck them in permanent refugee camps or used them as a geopolitical bargaining chip.

Or take the partition of India. In 1947 the departing British carved out Pakistan from Muslim-majority areas of India. The bloodshed that followed—with Hindus and Sikhs on one side and Muslims on the other—led to some two million deaths and uprooted 18 million people, according to estimates from a 2008 Harvard study.

Both India and Pakistan worked hard to integrate the new arrivals. Two Indian prime ministers (Inder Kumar Gujral and Manmohan Singh) were partition refugees, as were two Pakistani military rulers (Zia ul-Haq and Pervez Musharraf). Had the U.N. set up a special agency to look after the Indian and Pakistani refugees' descendants, it would be responsible for tens of millions of people today.

No one expects Pakistan to transform its religious demography by offering a “right of return” to descendants of Hindu and Sikh refugees. Why should it be any different for Israel?

Arab states deserve blame for the plight of Palestinians. “The ironic thing about Palestinians in Arab countries is that their cause is sacrosanct, but the people themselves are treated badly,” said Mr. Pipes. Jordan, unlike most Arab states, has extended citizenship to most Palestinian refugees within its borders, yet about 160,000 of them—mostly those displaced from Gaza—remain stateless. Lebanon, meantime, houses some 250,000 stateless Palestinians, nearly half in refugee camps.

Across the region, Palestinians face discrimination in access to employment, government services and property ownership. The Census Bureau estimates that the U.S. houses 172,000 Palestinians. That's more than the Palestinian population in many Arab countries.

“In the last 100 years, populations have moved repeatedly,” David Friedman, a former U.S. ambassador to Israel, said in a phone interview. “Sometimes it's not fair. Sometimes it's justified from a humanitarian perspective. But whatever happens, when it's over, it's over. This is the only place where it's weaponized.”

No one knows if Mr. Trump's plan will succeed. Removing Gazans by force would create a humanitarian crisis, but it's not unreasonable to believe that the majority would leave if given the chance to build a better life elsewhere. Either way, we wouldn't even be having this conversation if Arab states had welcomed Palestinian Arabs the way many other countries around the world have welcomed refugees.