

40 Days of Prayer—Lenten Focus on Refugees

Week 5: Palestine

The current situation: The Palestinian refugee crisis is the oldest in the world, dating back to the Arab-Israeli war in 1948. It is also the largest. Palestinian refugees actually outnumber Syrian refugees, but a different agency oversees their relief and social services—the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA). According to UNRWA, there are currently 5.2 million registered Palestine refugees living in or near refugee camps in Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, including East Jerusalem. Adding nonregistered refugees and persons who have been denied reentry after traveling abroad puts the Palestinian refugee population at 7 million.

Many refugee families have been displaced twice, in 1948 and again during the Six-Day War in 1967. Some who fled to Syria have been displaced a third time as a result of that country's civil war.

Israel's refusal to allow Palestinian refugees to return to their homes—and Palestinian insistence on it, in accordance with UN Resolution 194, Article 11—is a major sticking point in resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

The UN resolution, adopted by the UN General Assembly on Dec. 11, 1948, states that “refugees wishing to return to their homes and live at peace with their neighbors should be permitted to do so at the earliest practicable date, and that compensation should be paid for the property of those choosing not to return.”

The UN General Assembly made Israel's admission as a UN member conditional upon implementation of Resolution 194, and has reaffirmed the resolution more than 100 times since then. Israel has never complied.

The United Methodist Church has affirmed Palestinian refugees' right to return and called on Israel to cease other infringements on Palestinian human rights, including the “continued military occupation of the West Bank, Gaza, and East Jerusalem, the confiscation of Palestinian land and water resources, the destruction of Palestinian homes, the continued building of illegal Jewish settlements, and any vision of a ‘Greater Israel.’” (UMC Resolution 6111, adopted May 3, 2012)

How did the crisis start? Approximately 750,000 Palestinians fled from their homes and became refugees as a result of targeted violence during the 1948 war that led to the founding of Israel. Between 500 and 600 Palestinian villages were depopulated and many of those communities were later destroyed. None of the refugees has ever been allowed to return.

What to pray for:

- To see with the heart. Fear has created blindness to the humanity of the other in the Holy Land.

- An end to the military occupation of Palestinian land that legitimizes oppression, displacement, and apartheid.
- Hope in the absence of hope, with the “refugee problem” now almost 70 years old.
- Protection for Palestinian children. Since 2000, at least 8,000 Palestinian children have been arrested and prosecuted in an Israeli military detention system notorious for the systematic ill treatment and torture of Palestinian children. Israel is the only country in the world that prosecutes children in military courts.
- Courage for US legislators to challenge Israel’s continued displacement of the Palestinian people: settlement building continues apace, though every US administration since 1967 has opposed it as an obstacle to peace.
- Compassionate engagement of all parties to the conflict.
- A just peace.

For more information see UNWRA (<https://www.unrwa.org>), AFSC (<https://www.afsc.org/resource/palestinian-refugees-and-right-return>), and the UMC (<http://www.umc.org/what-we-believe/opposition-to-israeli-settlements-in-palestinian-land>).