

2000

## Stefan A. Riesenfeld Symposium Closing Address: Lessons from the Palestinian Diaspora

Khalid Abdallah

---

### Recommended Citation

Khalid Abdallah, *Stefan A. Riesenfeld Symposium Closing Address: Lessons from the Palestinian Diaspora*, 18 BERKELEY J. INT'L LAW. 285 (2000).

Available at: <http://scholarship.law.berkeley.edu/bjil/vol18/iss2/9>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Law Journals and Related Materials at Berkeley Law Scholarship Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Berkeley Journal of International Law by an authorized administrator of Berkeley Law Scholarship Repository. For more information, please contact [jcera@law.berkeley.edu](mailto:jcera@law.berkeley.edu).

# Stefan A. Riesenfeld Symposium Closing Address: Lessons from the Palestinian Diaspora

By  
Dr. Khalid Abdallah,  
Former Chief Representative of the League of  
Arab States to the United States\*

Rapporteur: Ms. Hannah Garry\*\*

Thank you very much. I start by thanking the members of the *Berkeley Journal of International Law* for inviting me. Certainly, there is a common feature bringing together all of these tragedies, but each one has its own features. The Palestinian tragedy is unique in one sense, but not in others.

Palestinians are increasingly cynical about the prospect of their return to their homeland. I hope that all predictions will be wrong and that finally, peace will prevail. The Palestinian diaspora is a very long journey, now over fifty years old. Sometimes, when people are talking about the Palestinian diaspora, they have in mind the fifty or more percent of the Palestinian people living

---

\* From 1994 to the present, Dr. Khalid Abdallah has been the Chief Representative of the League of Arab States to the United States. As Chief Representative, he directs the Arab League Office in Washington, D.C. He has also been the Chief Representative of the League of Arab States to Austria. Other positions previously held by Dr. Abdallah include: Deputy Assistant Secretary for Palestinian Affairs General Department, Secretariat General, League of Arab States, Cairo, Egypt; Director, Department of Strategic Studies, Secretariat General for Economic Affairs, League of Arab States, Tunisia; Director, International Economic Affairs Section, Secretariat General for Economic Affairs, League of Arab States, Tunisia; and Chief Planner, Warsaw Planning Development Office, Warsaw, Poland. Dr. Abdallah has also taught on international political economy at the School of Islamic and Social Sciences, Leesburg, Virginia and on economic planning as a Lecturer in the Department of Planning, Faculty of Education, Garyounis University, Garyounis Al-Bayda, Libya. Dr. Abdallah has participated in a variety of conferences and workshops at the United Nations and at universities, institutions and other venues around the United States. He has written several articles on the Arab economy and has been a frequent commentator on Arab and Middle East issues on television and radio, including CNN, PBS, Voice of America, MBC, ANA, and others. Dr. Abdallah earned his Masters and Ph.D. in Economics at the Central School of Planning and Statistics, Warsaw, Poland, through scholarships received from the Municipality of Baghdad, Iraq and Ministry of Education, Poland.

\*\* 1999-2000 Managing Editor, *Berkeley Journal of International Law*.

outside of historical Palestine. But most Palestinians, if not all, have experienced, in one way or another, the trauma of exile.

The diaspora began in 1948 with the expulsion of the Palestinians from their homeland. Those Palestinians actually were expelled, not as textbooks or some reports in the Western media try to represent, based on the Israeli narrative that those Palestinians were actually listening to the Arab countries to flee Palestine so that the Arab countries could go in and liberate Palestine for them. This myth has been shattered by many new historians, Israeli historians. When the Palestinians fled their home and tried to return in November of 1948, they were physically prevented from going back. Even when some returned, they found that their villages, 1,418 villages at least, were burned. Early in June 1948, the demolition of villages took on the character of a political mission to prevent refugees from returning; the destruction of these villages was the key to preventing the return of Palestinians and establishing Jewish settlements. It was a retroactive transfer.

Palestinians found their villages demolished and could not return; they entered the era of diaspora. What about the Palestinians who stayed in Palestine? Many of them have become refugees, even in historic Palestine, because Israelis began to evacuate them from their land, forcing them to live in other parts of Palestine. The exile of Palestinians also occurred for those who remained in Israel.

I want to quote Bendriski talking about how the Israeli authorities issued laws allowing the Israelis to confiscate Palestinian land—the law of the absentees. But the Israelis imposed other laws as well. The emergency regulations regarding absentee property eventually became the absentee law of 1950, in which all Palestinian property was nationalized and could serve as a convenient means for gaining control of land belonging to Arab citizens of Israel who were not absentees. Confiscating their land was accomplished by a simple method. The area would be designated as an enclosed area/closed area and Israelis would not allow the Arabs to cultivate, since under-cultivation made it impossible for them to tend their plots. Then, the Ministry of Agriculture would send them warnings that, unless they cultivated that land, it would be classified as fallow and confiscated.

I mention these things because we cannot understand the lessons of the diaspora unless we understand what happened in 1948 and even before. What are the lessons? This is a subjective matter. No one would agree with others on how to draw lessons. I might represent the view of many Palestinians:

The hypocrisy of the Western powers is evident in the transference of the burden of the guilt. Jews were persecuted in Europe for many years; not only persecuted, but also put into fire. Instead of standing up to their obligations, European countries tried to find a solution to the Jewish question in another part of the world—Palestine. And so, the Palestinians felt it was a kind of hypocrisy to give them Palestine instead of integrating them. European countries transferred the problem to the Palestinian nation.

Another aspect of this is the “supremacy” of European morals. Britons wanted Jewish cooperation in prosecuting Germany and promised Jews a homeland. In Europe, there was disregard for the principles declared at the beginning of the 20th century—when President Wilson declared the right of self-determination around the globe. But the wishes of the Palestinians were ignored. They were never asked how they felt about the partition of their country. And, to add insult to injury, when Palestine was partitioned, the Jewish community constituted 31% of the population and received 50% of the land while the 69% of the Palestinians got the rest.

The bitter denial of their existence and plight is the justification of the Jewish conquest. The Zionist project started by claiming there was a land without people for a people without land and upheld this claim until 1964; the existence of the Palestinians was denied. More importantly, there was the collusion of the Western powers, not only in denying the plight of their existence but in their racist attitude towards the Palestinians. Consider how Mr. Churchill regarded the Palestinians. Norman Finkenstein wrote in the *Rise and Fall of Palestine* that “Churchill’s justification for the Jewish conquest equaled Roosevelt’s argument—comparing the Palestinian Arab to a dog in a manger. Churchill maintained, ‘I do not agree that a dog in a manger has the final right to the manger though he be there for a very long time. I do not admit that a wrong has been done to the blacks in Australia or the Indians in America . . . .’”

Many people wonder why the Palestinian question has not been resolved for so long. Even now, there is a kind of racism shifting the blame for the decisions of Western governments to another people—the Jewish people.

The Palestinians, after so many years into the diaspora, living mostly in camps and harassed by the governments that were governing, came to the conclusion that the world would not pay attention, would not care and would not be spurred to action, unless they made them pay attention and care for their plight. So, the *idea of organizing and defending one’s self* came into existence. The Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) was formed. And here again, we see the hypocrisy of the West. Instead of seeing the presence of the PLO as a signal for them to address the Palestinian question in a manner that would resolve it and satisfy the demands of the Palestinians, they instead started to concentrate on the operation and the behavior of the PLO. The core issue was forgotten and left aside. The whole media and discussion and debate in the Western countries were in operation. Here again, they labeled the Palestinians and turned them into terrorists. I have an answer to that by Michael Palumpo: “it is ironic that the news media mentions PLO terrorism but fails to mention that it was the Zionists who first used terrorism in the Middle East planting bombs in Arab markets or other crowded areas.” Thus, they not only failed to see the core issue behind the PLO, but they failed to see the true origin of the violence in the region.

The Intifada, of course, brought to us the understanding that when people organize themselves, when they are smart enough to resist in ways that will make the world pay attention, then they can bring certain results. Here, I can

say it has been the major factor to force the Israelis to come to the negotiating table.

What is the peace process about? How does it tackle the Palestinian diaspora? As you know, when the peace process started in Madrid, the parties agreed to two types of negotiation—bilateral and multilateral. The bilateral accords stated that certain questions and the final status issues would be left to the end—one of these was that of the refugees. Of course, Palestinians, as the weaker party, had to accept this stipulation, and they hoped that after moving on certain issues with the Israelis that they would accept that the Palestinians desire to move toward peace and the Israelis would then agree with our demands for the refugees. The multilateral accords address matters of water, security, economic cooperation and refugees.

What is the position of the various parties on this question? The Israeli position is the following—they are not responsible for it; it is the Arab's fault. This is contrary to the writings of the new historians—Elam Papei and others who are Jewish. They also introduce into the picture the Arab Jews who migrated to Israel. Israel insisted that negotiations focus on rendering assistance to Palestinian refugees with a view to resettling them wherever they are now. They would be given bread and milk provided that the Arab countries would naturalize them. Israel maintains that it is not responsible for the problem or its resolution. I am talking about how some Israelis who are not 100 percent with Israel but are pro-Israeli in resolving this question. They say that we should be looking forward and not backward; let's not talk about what happened in the past; they are here and we need to solve their question now. But if you do not look at the causes of the question, how can you resolve it justly? Surely, the Israelis themselves always look backward and never forward in justifying their presence in Palestine. They also assume that the problem is regional in scope. They say the solution should be regional in scope. While they insist that Arab countries naturalize most of the Palestinians, they say Israel should accept only 50,000-100,000 refugees because all should share the blame. They say we should be realistic in accepting this fact. This is a license for violating international laws and norms.

The following elements are necessary for solving the problem of the Palestinian diaspora. First, it must be recognized that the refugee question is essentially a political one, not just a humanitarian one. It is, first of, all national and political. Second, the Palestinian refugees are not just those registered by UNHCR. Third, a just and fair solution to the Palestinian diaspora should be based on existing UN resolutions—#194 in particular. You must establish objective criteria. The right thing to do is go back to the UN resolutions as the organization whose resolutions are championed by the Western countries.

What I wanted to convey is that what Palestinians want is a peaceful resolution which demands a final, just and comprehensive implementation of a solution. Why not have one democratic secular state in the whole of historic Palestine in which all Jews, Palestinians and Christians will live together?