

Brief Overview of the Committee

The Middle East Multilateral Summit (MEMS) is primarily responsible for addressing issues concerning conflict, security, and political and socio-cultural matters within the region of the Middle East. This committee shall address these topics as they arise.

The MEMS works closely with a number of other UN committees some of these are: the General Assembly, the Security Council, the UNDP/DPR the United Nations Department of Political Affairs Division for Palestinian Rights, the UNISPAL the United Nations Information System on the Question of Palestine, and the UNRWA the United Nations Relief and Works Agency. The Middle East Multilateral Summit has come together with these committees in the attempts to find solutions to pressing issues in the region.

Topic 1: Palestinian Refugees

Statement of the Problem

The fate of Palestinian Refugees and the future of peace in The Middle East are closely tied together. The problem of the refugees and the right of return presents formidable obstacles to the achievement of a lasting, peaceful resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The problem is significant not only because of the sheer number of refugees but also because of the need for a multilateral solution that is acceptable to all the countries in the region that have been affected by the issue.

In the negotiations for peace between Palestine and Israeli parties are likely to find it especially difficult to arrive at mutually satisfactory solutions of the refugee problem. For the Palestinian Refugees their right to return to their homes and or receive compensation for their loss is seen as a fundamental issue that must be resolved. Israel refuses to consider the idea of allowing the refugees to return in mass and reclaim their land as it sees them as a threat to the Jewish state. These are two completely opposed views that result from the strikingly different view of the issue. The Palestinians feel that they were forcibly expelled by Jewish forces or left in a panic flight to escape massacres committed by Jewish forces. While at the same time Israelis see the situation as a result of the war that the Arab nations launched against Israel making the refugee a problem of the region not Israel.

The sheer size of the refugee group only magnifies the issue in light of the strong difference in position. There exist many different counts of the actual number of refugees the UNRWA figure of 3,469,109 refugees (January 1998) as the minimum number, including 1,308,438 in the territories (548,874 in the West Bank and 759,564 in Gaza); some Palestinian sources argue that the total figure is as high as 4,900,000. This huge number of people drastically magnifies the differences in stance between the Palestinians and Israel. For any solution will be expensive and place a great strain on any country, that must bear it.

Currently this strain is spread out over all the countries in the region and the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) which provides education, health, and relief and social services to 3.7 million registered Palestine refugees in Jordan, Lebanon, the Syrian Arab Republic, the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. This is not a final solution and the counties affected are interested in getting the refugees place permanently some place other than where they are now.

Besides the political and economic sides of this issue is the fact that the Palestinian refugees are frequently denied basic human rights because they lack permanent citizenship. This prevents them from attending school, receiving health care, getting jobs, participating in government and owning property it also severely limits their freedom of movement in and between countries.

Finding a solution to the Palestinian refugee problem is a very complicate and difficult-to-achieve goal. The large number of refugees complicate the problem along with the number of international players in this issue, and the extreme difficulty of finding a realistic satisfactory solution. If peace is to replace violence in the Middle East, the refugee problem has to be solved. Moreover, the search for a realistic solution for the Palestinian refugee problem along with taking immediate actions to improve the standards of living for the refugees is very rewarding due to its huge humanitarian aspects and is a step on the path of peace.

Brief History of the Problem

The roots of the problem go deep into the turbulent history of both the Palestinians and the Israelis. The roots of the problem can be traced back as far as the 19th century. Most recently it is a result of the conflict between Israel and its neighbors during the 1940's.

Starting in the later half of the 19th century foreign immigration to Palestine increased significantly including many Zionists seeking to establish a Jewish home land. During World War I this area suffered as it became the sight for many campaigns of that war and eventually became controlled by Great Britain. Following this the British supported the creation of a Jewish home land through the use of unfair laws that led to the confiscation of land to the benefit of Jewish settlers. Following World War II on 29 Nov 1947, the UN adopted a resolution that decided to partition Palestine into an Arab and a Jewish state, while Jerusalem and its environs were to be international. This division was biased towards the Jewish minority which received not only a larger piece but also the more fertile areas. This led to armed conflict between the Zionists and the Palestinians and Arabs. During this conflict many civilians died but the pivotal point was the massacres of Deir Yassin that was committed by the Irgun gang and resulted in the killing of about 240 civilians the news of which led many Palestinians to flee their homes in search of security. Then in 1948 the state of Israel was declared and recognized by the major world powers. Quickly following this war broke out between Israel and the Palestinians backed by the Arab armies of the region. After a year Israel emerged triumphant and in control of the rest of Palestine. Palestine had ceased to exist.

This is not the end of the plight of the Palestinians, for in 1967 Israel launched a surprise attack on the Arab countries, fearing that an Arab invasion was imminent. This resulted in a surprisingly quick 6 day war with Israel the victor and occupier the West Bank, the Gaza strip, the Sinai desert, and the Golan Heights. As a result about 400,000 Palestinian refugees were forced out into the neighboring Arab countries mainly into refugee camps.

Not all those who were displaced by these conflicts are actually considered refugees though. When we talk about the Palestinian refugees, we must understand who we are talking about and the number of people this represents. The Working Group (RWG) held in Ottawa, Canada on 13 May 1992 gave this definition.

The Palestinian refugees are all those Palestinians (and their descendants) who were expelled or forced to leave their homes between November 1947 (Partition Plan) and January 1949 (Rhodes Armistices Agreements), From the territory controlled by Israel on that latter date. This ... coincides with the Israeli definition of absentees, a category of Palestinians meant to be stripped of its most elementary human and civil rights: Any person was declared to be and absentee if he was, on, or after 29th November 1947 a citizen or a subject of any of the Arab states; in any of these states for any length of time in any part of Palestine outside the Israeli-occupied area, or in any place other than his habitual residence even if such place as well as his habitual abode were within Israeli-occupied territory.

Currently the Palestinian refugees are spread throughout the region and the world most of them in countries surrounding Israel and the in the occupied territories. Many of them in camps maintained by the UNRWA, United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East.

Past United Nations Action

There are two main areas of action taken by the UN in relation to the Palestinian refugee problem. The first is providing humanitarian assistance to the refugees mainly through the UNRWA. The second is issuing several UN security Council resolutions that ask for the restoration of the refugees to their homes.

Following the 1948 Arab-Israeli conflict, UNRWA, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East, was established by United Nations General Assembly resolution 302 (IV) of 8 December 1949 to carry out direct relief and works programs for Palestine refugees. The Agency began operations on 1 May 1950. In the absence of a solution to the Palestine refugee problem, the General Assembly has repeatedly renewed UNRWA's mandate, most recently extending it until 30 June 2002.

Since its establishment, the Agency has delivered its services in times of relative calm in the Middle East, and in times of hostilities. It has fed, housed and clothed tens of thousands of fleeing refugees and at the same time educated and given health care to hundreds of thousands of young refugees.

UNRWA is unique in terms of its long-standing commitment to one group of refugees and its contributions to the welfare and human development of four generations of Palestine refugees. Originally envisaged as a temporary organization, the Agency has gradually adjusted its programs to meet the changing needs of the refugees. Today, UNRWA is the main provider of basic services - education, health, relief and social services - to over 3.7 million

There is a series of United Nations and Security Council resolutions issued since 1948 that have recognized Palestinian nationhood, sovereignty and right of return. In December 1948 the Security Council unanimously adopted Resolution 194,

maintaining that Palestinian refugees wishing to return to their homes, “and live in peace with their neighbors,” must be allowed to do so “at the nearest opportunity possible.” It also recognized the right of Palestinians to compensation if they did not wish to return. Israel’s membership in the UN was contingent upon it agreeing to Resolution 194 when they were entered Israel refused to comply with the resolution. This led to the adoption of Resolution 513 which was to allow for assistance to refugees in building homes elsewhere if they did not return to their original homes. In 1973, the General Assembly issued Resolution 3089, reiterating the Palestinian refugees’ right of return. This led to the adoption of Resolution 242 which established the concept of land for peace as a basis for a solution to the refugee issue.

This is not a complete list of all UN resolutions or actions but shows the main attempts at solving the issue and dealing with the humanitarian concerns.

Proposed Solutions

There are three areas that should be examined as sources for solutions to the Palestinian refugee problem. The first is in returning them to their original homes in accordance with Resolution 194 and 3089. The second is compensation to be paid to the refugees instead of letting them return to their homes. The third would be to improve the living conditions of the refugees. In determining this solution, one must acknowledge that anything short of complete agreement on both sides to the solution will not create a lasting solution. In addition, only solving for the humanitarian concerns of the refugees does not create a long-term solution; at some point another solution beyond that will have to be found.

Bloc Positions

In discussing final status issues, Palestinians and Israelis approach the question of the refugees and the right of return from radically different perspectives. The Palestinian narrative maintains that the Zionists forcibly expelled the Arab refugees in 1948. The Palestinians insist on the right of the refugees to return to their homes or, for those who choose not to do so, to accept compensation. And they demand that Israel unilaterally acknowledge its complete moral responsibility for the injustice of the refugees’ expulsion.

In contrast, the Israeli narrative rejects the refugees’ right of return. Israel argues that it was the Arabs who caused the Palestinian refugee problem, by rejecting the creation of the State of Israel and declaring war upon it -- a war which, like most wars, created refugee problems, including a Jewish one. Israel sees the return of Palestinian refugees as an existential threat, insofar as it would undermine the Jewish character and the viability of the state.

In Lebanon, in view of the delicate demographic/political balance, their status is particularly sensitive from a political and socioeconomic standpoint, and the government is likely to insist that a solution to the refugee question involve their total removal.

Spokespersons for the Jordanian government have indicated that Jordan (rather than, say, the PLO) will seek to negotiate with Israel regarding compensation for the assets that Palestinians now resident in Jordan were forced to abandon in Israel in 1948. Considerations regarding "demographic security" are also likely to move Jordan to encourage relocation of a significant portion of its refugee population to the West Bank within the framework of a settlement. In their peace treaty, Israel and Jordan agreed to a Jordanian role in final status negotiations on the refugee question.

Near unanimous UN resolutions since 1967 declare that Israel has no right to assert its sovereignty over Jerusalem. Near unanimous UN resolutions since 1949 endorse the position that Palestinian Arab refugees possess the "inalienable right of return" to the homes that they left in 1948. Both positions are supported by the US and Canada.

Topic II: Water Rights

Statement of the Problem

One of the most significant problems facing the Middle East region is a lack of water resources a problem that is heightened by a growing population and tensions over allocation. The Middle East being an arid region face not only a lack of rain fall but also a lack of rivers and underground aquifers. Heightening the problem is that many of the regions conflicts have been attributed to disputes over control of the little water resources that do exists. In addition to the potential for conflict over the resource it is becoming clear that under existing uses there simply will not be enough water for the growing population. The problem is a combination of allocation issues and use issue both of which need to be addressed to solve the problem of the area.

The Middle East region is facing major water constraints with only Turkey, Iran, and the Sudan having water consumption levels above the currently accepted minimum. The entire region is facing a critical shortage because there is simply not enough water to go around, and claims and counterclaims have inflamed already emotional sentiments. The most severely affected area is Gaza, which faces problems of contamination and salinity in the little water it controls. In Gaza alone the lack of water affects almost a million people, many of them refugees. Despite the lack of water resource the little that does exist has been over-exploited by an ever increasing population and inefficient and wasteful use, irrigation systems are inefficient and half of all urban supplies are lost through leakage. The uncontrolled dumping of waste increasingly contaminates the aquifers, rivers and reservoirs in Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia and Egypt. The Middle East serves as an important example of what happens when water use exceeds supply because it is the first major region in the world to run out of water.

The tensions surrounding the allocation of water and the control of water rights increase the already heightened tensions in the area and serve as a potential source of conflict. Israel is involved in a succession of water disputes with Syria, Lebanon and Jordan, as well as with the Palestinian Authority (PA). Syria and Iraq, together, are locked in bitter acrimony with Turkey over the flow of the Euphrates. As populations increase - as they are, at a rapid pace - the equation will become more intractable, especially since most of those involved are wary of one another if not downright suspicious. Water supply has become part of the volatile region's strategic equation, with Israel, Turkey and Egypt the controlling powers of the main river basins - the Jordan and the Litani in Lebanon, the Euphrates and the Tigris, and the Nile - insisting their requirements take precedence over other claimants. With all these disputes and conflicting claims many feel that the next war in the Middle East will be over water. Water is becoming the most precious commodity in the region for almost all have less then they need and all need more to support their growing populations and economies. According to Ahmad Abu el-Shamat, a Syrian professor of economics and international law, "the water issue has emerged as one of the most urgent problems that has threatened Arab security over the past two decades because more than 85% of Arab water resources originate from non-Arab lands".

In a arid area water is always important and a potential source of conflict but in the Middle East right now the situation is becoming critical. There simply is not enough water in the region to support the growth of the population and economies of all the countries. The little water that does exist is under increasing threat of contamination from pollution or seawater seepage either, of which makes it unusable for irrigation or human consumption. The water that remains is not used efficiently instead it is wasted through leakage and farming practices that allow most of it to evaporate away. This puts great pressure on countries to secure all the water they can leading to tensions over disputed border claims and issues for those down stream if the water is not allowed to flow at normal rates as a result of up stream uses.

This is a problem that must be addressed not only to solve for the immediate tensions in the area but to also provide for the future population of the area. If this issue is not addressed in a cooperative and regional manner the water that is there now will be used up or become unsuitable for use and there is a great chance for there to be another regional war. If either of these happen this historical and religiously significant area could become unsuitable for continued human occupation.

Brief History of the problem

The history of the water problem in the Middle East is framed by disputed borders that were determined by far off powers or recent military conquest. It is an issue that gets tied up in both strategic and cultural issues. The area is also suffering the worst drought in six decades. It is however not a new issue and has been the source of many conflicts over the years.

As mentioned in the Bible, conflicts over the Jordan River have occurred since inhabitants moved to the area in ancient times: "And Gideon sent messengers throughout all the hill country of E'phraim, saying, 'Come down against the Mid'ianites and seize the water against them as far as Beth-Bara'ch, and also the Jordan'". The recent conflict between Jordan and Israel dates back to the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, which was followed by the Israeli War of Independence. Israeli fears that Jordan and Syria were planning to divert the headwaters of the Jordan were seen by some as a prime cause of the Arab-Israeli war in 1967 and many believe Israel's presence in south Lebanon was motivated as much by a desire to control the Litani River as to maintain a security zone against cross-border raids.

These conflicts have been aggravated by the lack of clear boundaries and rights between the countries of the area. This is mainly due to the fact that the borders have been drawn up by foreign powers following the first world war and reflect their interest not necessarily those of the people who actually live there, the 1923 border between Syria and Mandatory Palestine is a good example. The 1923 border came out of seven years of negotiations between France and Britain, the mandatory powers for Syria and Palestine respectively - and represented significant gains for Palestine over the 1916 Sykes-Picot agreement, under which France had secured not only the entire Golan for Syria, but also most of the area's key water resources, including part of Lake Kinneret.

By 1920, after Britain had captured the Golan in World War I from the Turks, it was agreed that Britain would hold a significant chunk of the Golan. But in the final 1923 deal, the British gave up those land rights to the French, preferring in return to secure the whole of the Kinneret and other water sources for Palestine. As the chief British negotiator Lt. Col. S. F. Newcombe put it: "Road rights for the French and water rights for Palestine." Both sides ignored the fact that PICA, the Palestine Jewish Colonization Association, had years earlier purchased 20,000 acres on the Golan.

From this starting point many wars have been fought that make the determination of the actual border even harder. In the 1948 War of Independence, the Syrians used that advantage in terrain to capture areas west of the 1923 border. In the settlement following the 1948 war the Syrians demanded that the border be redrawn to reflect their wartime gains. In a compromise position they were supposed to pull back and leave the area demilitarized, with the question of sovereignty to be decided at a later date. However the sovereignty question was never decided Syria did not remove its troops and Israel acted like it had full sovereignty over the area. This area became hotly disputed with many skirmishes and eventually out right conflict and ultimately erupted into the 1967 Six-Day War. While the 1967 war established the existing boundaries they are still hotly contested and the water under them is a key issue. To complicate matters many of the aquifers are shared between countries and are being over exploited by both sides.

Past United Nations action

The UN, the World Bank and other organizations have launched efforts to bring governments together to rethink water policies and face the harsh reality of the disaster that stares them in the face if they do not work together. However, given the deep-rooted hostilities that still exist in the region, it could be a long time before a workable joint effort on water management and sharing by the countries of the region could emerge.

Beyond this the UN is involved with the refugees of the area one of the groups most seriously hurt by the lack of water.

Proposed Solutions

Solutions for the problem must address both allocation and use issues. There is simply not enough water to go around and even if all available water was divided up fairly and the borders were not contested many would be left with out enough. The first step to be taken is to get the claims to water resolved. With guarantees made that those who control the source of the water will not deny it to those down stream. Equally important is developing more efficient uses of the water and implementing programs to protect the little water that exist from pollution and over exploitation. This will mean new ways of irrigating, fixing city water systems and reforming water use practices. This solution will probably require regional cooperation and a sharing of technology.

An alternative solution is the investment in Desalination this is an expensive option that so far only some of the Gulf states have been able to afford. The World Bank estimates the regional states would have to invest \$45-60 billion in water over the 10 years from 1996 to achieve an integrated water management system; that is far beyond their means

Block Positions

Israel, gripped like the rest of the Middle East by the worst drought in six decades, tried to reduce the water flow to Jordan from the Yarmouk River earlier this year. It was forced to rescind that move - albeit only for 1999 - rather than jeopardize its 1994 peace treaty with the Hashemite kingdom, its closest Arab partner.

The Arab League, meanwhile, has accused Israel of stealing underground water in the West Bank and selling a fifth of it back to the Palestinians.

In Iraq, the drought has meant cutbacks in electricity generation -already sporadic because of UN sanctions. Hydroelectric dams on the Tigris and Euphrates rivers are running at only 30% of capacity because of reduced water flows, according to Abdel Tawab al-Mollah Howseish, director of Iraq's Military Industrialisation Organisation. The FAO reported in June that Iraq will soon be gripped by "catastrophe" after losing 70% of its crops in rain-fed regions that have traditionally been the country's breadbasket.

Egypt, striving to green the Western Desert with water from the Nile and boost food production for a mushrooming population, has warned Ethiopia, one of nine other states seeking more water from that great river, that it faces military action if it increases the amount of water it is taking.

Syria, in dispute with Turkey over shrinking water flows from the Euphrates, is suffering its worst drought in 25 years. It is so concerned that the state-controlled media no longer publishes rainfall figures. Agriculture is being hard hit, with wheat, cotton and barley exports sharply reduced this year (30% of workers are farmers).

Iran has been forced to sharply increase its rice imports this year (using scarce resources because of the 1998-99 plunge in oil prices) from 250,000-800,000 tons to alleviate the near-collapse of agricultural production caused by a 42% drop in rainfall.

The shortage of water is a global problem that is even starting to affect water-rich countries such as the USA. Yet it is most acute in the Middle East, where the problem increasingly resonates with political and security challenges. Many see it as a potential cause for war as populations swell while water sources, particularly underground aquifers, steadily diminish.