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Ahead Of 75th Anniversary Of The Nakba, Palestinian Leadership Stresses It Will Never Relinquish Refugees' Right To Return To Their Homes

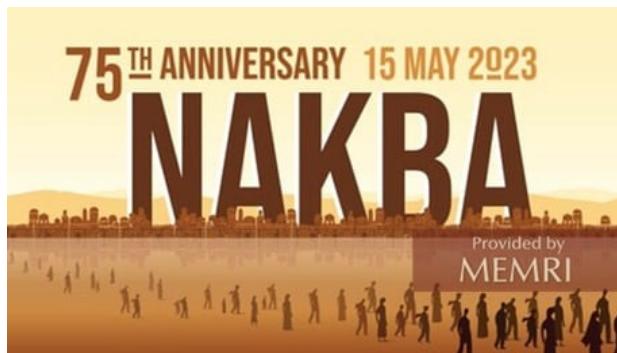
On May 15, 2023, the UN General Assembly will for the first time hold an event to commemorate the Palestinian Nakba. The event, marking the 75th anniversary of the Nakba, will be attended by Palestinian Authority (PA) President Mahmoud 'Abbas, who is expected to use this platform to underscore the issue of the Palestinian people's right of return. The decision to hold event was one of the outcomes of a Palestinian diplomatic campaign that calls, *inter alia*, for recognizing the right of Palestinian refugees to return to their homes inside the state of Israel.

In the past year, PA, PLO and Fatah leaders have continued to stress their uncompromising insistence on the right of the Palestinian refugees and their descendants to return to their homes, a right they contend is guaranteed by UN Resolution 194.^[1] This demand has in fact been part of the official Palestinian position for years. The meaning of this demand is that the refugees would be allowed to return to the territory of Israel on the 1948 borders, which contravenes the call for a two-state solution and is aimed at eliminating Israel in its current, Zionist, form.^[2]

Statements by Palestinian officials on the right of return were especially conspicuous lately, amid the Palestinian preparations for the UN event marking the 75th anniversary of the Nakba, and also at the celebrations marking the 58th anniversary of Fatah's founding.

The issue of the right of return also came up in the context of a bill recently introduced in the U.S. House of Representatives, which calls to set conditions for U.S. contributions to UNRWA and to restrict the definition of Palestinian refugee. The bill drew furious responses from Palestinian officials, who reiterated that the refugees' right of return to their homes is sacred, non-negotiable and permanent, and that they will never relinquish it. A Palestinian columnist even called to sue the U.S. lawmakers who promoted the bill in international courts.

It should be noted that, on the 75th anniversary of the Nakba, a memorial to the Nakba will be unveiled in Ramallah. The memorial, whose construction was initiated by President 'Abbas, highlights the values of the Palestinian "dispersion, struggle and hope."



Banner announcing the UN's high-level event to commemorate the 75th anniversary of the Nakba (Source: Un.org)

This report reviews the recent discourse in the PA, PLO and Fatah on the right of return.

President 'Abbas "Will Never Give Up The Palestinian Refugees' Right Of Return"

On November 30, 2022, following a Palestinian campaign, the UN General Assembly adopted a resolution to commemorate Nakba Day for the first time. A majority of 90 states voted in favor of marking the 75th anniversary of the Nakba with a high-level event at the General Assembly on May 15, 2023.^[3] PA President 'Abbas will speak at the event, and is expected to underscore the Palestinian people's right of return. In his speech on the occasion of the 58th anniversary of Fatah's founding, 'Abbas said that the UN event will be an answer to "the false Zionist narrative."^[4]

'Abbas also addressed the upcoming UN event, as well as the issue of the right of return, at an *iftar* (meal breaking the daily Ramadan fast) held on April 14, 2023 at the presidential headquarters in Ramallah.^[5] While the Palestinian news agency WAFA published only a brief summary of his speech, a much more detailed report was published by journalist Ramzi 'Odeh in the PA daily *Al-Hayat Al-Jadida*. He wrote: "The speech included over 50 instances of terms related to the refugees, return, expulsion and Nakba... The President noted the importance of marking the 77th [sic] anniversary of the Nakba all over the world, including at the UN [event], which he himself will attend this year, in order to mark the anniversary and demand that the international community fulfill its moral and legal obligations towards the Palestinian people, chief of them its obligation to recognize an independent Palestinian state with Jerusalem as its capital as well as [the right of] the Palestinian refugees to return to their homes..."

"In [stressing] the issue of the refugees, the President was not [expressing] just a political position but also a personal one, for he, his family and all the people of his city, Safed, experienced [displacement] when they were uprooted from their city in 1948 as a result of the mass extermination carried out by the Zionist gangs... Anyone who heard [the President's] speech understood how much bitterness his words carried as he addressed a people who was expelled from its land in front of the entire world. He himself speaks the language of the refugee who will never stop struggling for his rights. In his speech the President promised everyone that he will never relinquish the Palestinian refugees' right of return, for it is a sacred

right and one of the basic Palestinian principles, like the [principles of the independent Palestinian] state and of Jerusalem. These positions, and the historic significance of the speech, are not surprising, given that the President is himself a refugee and holds the key of return[6] in his heart, his mind and his thought."[\[7\]](#)



President Abbas speaking at the iftar at the presidential headquarters in Ramallah (Image: Wafa.ps, April 15, 2023)

Ahead Of Nakba Anniversary At UN, PLO Stresses That Palestinian Refugees' Right To Return To Their Homes "Is Sacred And No Statute Of Limitation Applies To It"

Ahead of the 75th anniversary of the Nakba, the PLO department of refugee affairs held several meetings in Gaza and Ramallah. In their statements about the preparations for this day, PLO officials stressed their intention to highlight the refugees' right to return to their homes. In one of the meetings in Gaza, Ahmad Abu Houli, head of the department of refugee affairs and a member of the PLO Executive Committee, said that the activities on that day would "convey important political messages to the international community and stress the need to end the occupation, establish a Palestinian state with Jerusalem as its capital, [realize] the Palestinian refugees' right to return to the homes from which they were expelled in 1948, in accordance with [UN Resolution] 194, and provide international protection to our Palestinian people against the crimes of the Israeli occupation." He also noted that the anniversary events would include a high-level ceremony at the UN, including a speech by the PA President, as well as popular activities and diplomatic campaigns.[\[8\]](#)

The Palestinian news agency WAFA reported that, in another meeting ahead of the anniversary, held on February 14 in Ramallah by the PLO's department of refugee affairs and department of diaspora affairs, Ahmad Abu Houli "informed the participants about a decision taken by President Mahmoud 'Abbas regarding the 75th anniversary event at the UN, [namely] regarding the need to unite the efforts so as to convey [the message] of our [Palestinian] cause to as many countries as possible around the world." Abu Houli emphasized that the upcoming UN event marking the Nakba's anniversary "constitutes international recognition of our people's rights," and that "the right of return is sacred and no statute of limitations applies to it." He added that "we must instill the concept of return in the younger generation through events commemorating the Nakba."

PLO Executive Committee member Wasel Abu Yousuf said at this meeting that the Nakba activities at the UN would "acknowledge and attest to the right of our people to return to the homes from which they were expelled," and added: "These activities are our voice and our message to the entire world, that this right cannot be undermined."[\[9\]](#)

PLO Officials Slam U.S. Congress Bill Seeking To Limit Palestinian Refugee Status and Withhold U.S. Contributions From UNRWA: U.S. Is An Enemy; We Will Fight To Defend UNRWA And Right Of Return

Statements reiterating the insistence on the right of return were also heard in response to a bill (H.R.1102) introduced in the House of Representatives on February 17, 2023. The bill calls to set conditions for U.S. contributions to UNRWA and to restrict the definition of Palestinian refugee to individuals displaced in 1948, thus denying this status to their descendants.[\[10\]](#) The bill drew furious responses from PLO officials, who stated that these moves against UNRWA were meant to eliminate the right of return and the entire Palestinian cause.

Head Of PLO Department Of Refugee Affairs: The Refugees' Right To Return To Their Homes Is Non-Negotiable

PLO Executive Committee member Ahmad Abu Houli, head of the organization's department of refugee affairs, addressed the U.S. bill in a February 21, 2023 meeting with representatives of the PLO factions and of residents of the Al-Jalil refugee camp in Lebanon's Beqaa Valley. According to the Palestinian news agency WAFA, "Abu Houli underscored that the right of the Palestinian refugees to return to the homes from which they were expelled in 1948 is non-negotiable... The Palestinian refugee camps, [he added], will continue to be the bulwark defending the right of return and the rock on which all the plots and efforts to revoke this right will be dashed, [including attempts to] redefine the [status of] refugee and withhold this right from the children and grandchildren of the [original] Palestinian refugees." He clarified: "The attempts of the U.S. Senate [sic] to pass this bill are aimed at redefining [the status of] Palestinian refugee and limiting it to the first generation of those displaced during the Nakba, thus reducing the number [of refugees] to only several thousand and denying this status to anyone who has received residency status or citizenship in the [countries] where the [Palestinian] refugees live. [The U.S.], along with other countries, is acting to gradually dismantle UNRWA and integrate the Palestinian refugees in the local societies of the countries where they live... [But these attempts] will fail, and will not

harm our people, which has [already] thwarted the Deal of the Century." Al-Houli added: "Marking UNRWA as a target for attack is aimed at eliminating the refugee issue, and the measures taken by Congress complement the plan of the extremist right-wing Israeli government, headed by Binyamin Netanyahu, which denies the Palestinians' rights, chief of them the right of return. The answer to the attempts of the U.S. Senate to pass this racist bill, which contravenes humanitarian law and international [resolutions], will be voiced by our people, wherever they are, as part of the activities to mark the 75th anniversary of the Nakba. It will also be voiced by the UN member states, which in December 2022 voted overwhelmingly... to mark this anniversary in 2023, including with a high-level event at the UN General Assembly on May 15. [This event] constitutes UN recognition of the Nakba and the tragedy of the Palestinian people, which was expelled and forced to emigrate from its land by the Zionist massacres and terror in 1948... The projects carried out by the [PLO] department of refugee affairs, based on guidelines from President Mahmoud 'Abbas, will continue until the refugees return to their homes and to their homeland, Palestine."[\[11\]](#)



Ahmad Abu Houli, member of the PLO Executive Committee and head of the organization's department of refugee affairs, on a visit to the Al-Jalil refugee camp in Lebanon (Image: Wafa.ps, February 21, 2023)

PLO Executive Committee Member: UNRWA Is The Main Symbol Of The Right Of Return; That Is Why We Will Continue To Defend Its Existence

UNRWA Accountability and Transparency Act, introduced in the U.S. Congress. He said: "The bill the U.S. Congress is trying to pass is meant to cancel any unique status enjoyed by UNRWA and by the descendants of the Palestinian refugees, by denying refugee status to these descendants." The bill, he added, "is an attempt to redefine the Palestinian-Israeli conflict," and promoting it would be "a recipe for eliminating the Palestinian cause by removing the issue of the refugees as a main focus of negotiations." He clarified that "undermining UNRWA's role and redefining the status of 'Palestinian refugee' is a dangerous proposition," and part of "a dangerous series of [decisions] that began in the Trump era, when he stopped funding UNRWA... Today this series continues with an attempt to transfer UNRWA's services and tasks to the countries hosting [the refugees] and to the [UN] High Commissioner for Refugees, with the ultimate aim of eliminating the refugee issue."

"UNRWA," Majdalani concluded, "is the main political symbol of the Palestinian refugees' right of return, and therefore we will defend its existence and ongoing activity despite the dire condition of the Palestinian cause, and firmly oppose anything that undermines [UNRWA's] independence, neutrality and authority."[\[12\]](#)

Popular Front For The Liberation Of Palestine: The Bill Is A Declaration Of War; We Will Continue The Resistance Until The Refugees Return To Their Homes

UNRWA Accountability and Transparency Act also drew fire from the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), which is part of the PLO. The organization's department of refugee affairs called it a declaration of war against the Palestinian people and against the refugees, and a new Palestinian Nakba. A statement issued by the department said: "When the American plots reach the level of completely eliminating the issue of the refugees – which is the main manifestation of the tragedy and the Nakba of the Palestinian people – of denying refugee status to the children and grandchildren of the [original] refugees, and of redefining the Palestinian-Zionist conflict, this is a dangerous American escalation that targets the principles and rights of our people and the very heart of our cause, which is the issue of the refugees." The statement added: "We will not [recognize] the legitimacy of this artificial and usurping entity [Israel]. [The Palestinian people] will continue its resistance in every way until [this entity] is defeated and all the refugees return to the homes from which they were expelled, whether the American imperialism likes this or not."[\[13\]](#)

Columnist In PA Daily: The U.S., Which Acts To Eliminate The Right Of Return, Is An Enemy Of Our People; The U.S. Lawmakers Should Be Sued

'Omar Hilmi Al-Ghoul, a member of the PLO's Central Council and a columnist for the PA daily *Al-Hayat Al-Jadida*, responded to the UNRWA Accountability and Transparency Act in an article he posted on his personal Facebook page. In the article he attacked the U.S., calling it "the main enemy of the Palestinian people and of its political and legal rights," and advised the Palestinian leadership to sue the lawmakers promoting this bill in international courts.

Al-Ghoul wrote: "The U.S. was a chief partner in the issuance of the Balfour Declaration in November 1917, in the approval of the British Mandate in June 1922, in the resolutions of the San Remo Conference in April 1920, in establishing and supporting the Zionist enterprise state in 1948 over the ruins and the Nakba of the Palestinian people, and in ensuring the security of the illegal state of Israel and its advantage over the Arabs at

large and the Palestinians in particular. It [thus] goes without saying that the U.S. and its allies among the capitalist Western states are the main enemies of the Palestinian people and its political and legal rights, since they are responsible for the devastation of these rights, now and in the past, and for eliminating the very roots of the Palestinian cause. [The U.S. is now doing this] through the bill submitted by 14 congresspeople on February 15, 2023, which seeks to eliminate the main issue, namely the issue of the Palestinian refugees and their right to return to their homes, based on UN Resolution 194..."

"This old-new attack is based on redefining who counts as a Palestinian refugee, in order to reduce their number, from over 7,000,000 refugees in the diaspora to [only] several tens of thousands, and in order to dismantle UNRWA by withholding funding and gradually destroying its institutions..."

"This criminal American plan, which Congress [is considering], requires [us to undertake] a comprehensive national reassessment of the relations with the U.S. even before [the bill] is passed – especially since Washington spearheads the opposition to [our] national rights and is working energetically to neutralize the Palestinian people, eliminate all its rights, perpetuate the existence of the state of the Zionist expulsion and occupation enterprise on all the national territory of historical Palestine, and eliminate the Palestinian narrative from the root..."

Al-Ghoul then listed the measures the Palestinians should take, in his opinion, in order to confront this situation, including "taking serious and rapid [measures] to escalate the popular resistance throughout Palestine, from the river to the sea, by every means and based on a comprehensive national plan"; "[suing] Israel and its murderers in international courts, especially in the International Criminal Court [in Hague]," and "[suing] U.S. Congresspeople and Senators in international courts, and [acting to] revoke all the U.S. laws that are hostile to the [Palestinian] national interests and contravene the UN laws [sic] pertaining to the conflict..."[\[14\]](#)

Fatah On Anniversary Of Its Founding: We Will Never Relinquish Our Right To Return To The Homes From Which We Were Expelled

Fatah, the ruling party in the PA and largest faction in the PLO, also frequently stresses the demand for the right of return. Statements to this effect are often part of its rhetoric, especially in speeches and major events. For example, in a statement it issued on December 29, 2022, on the occasion of the 58th anniversary of its founding, Fatah emphasized that it will never relinquish the right of return, saying:

"O our loyal people... As we mark the anniversary of the movements' founding this year, our Palestinian revolution and Palestinian cause are experiencing a unique period in the history of the conflict with the occupation and with its American sponsor, whose policy is to eliminate [the Palestinian cause]... The Palestinians in the [West] Bank, the Gaza Strip, the refugee camps and the diaspora are one unit [with] one hand and one voice in the struggle for liberation and return, and we will never give up our people's right to return to its homeland and to the homes from which it was expelled and displaced. This is a right to which no statute of limitation applies, and we will continue to demand it and to fight in every way, by every means and in every forum until the [right] of our people to return is fully realized."[\[15\]](#)

PA Prime Minister and Fatah Central Committee member Muhammad Shtayeh also underscored the right of return in his speech that day in a Ramallah rally, saying "I congratulate you on the anniversary of the revolution and of Fatah's founding, and emphasize that we continue to stand strong and that this revolution [will persist] until [we achieve our] state and [our] victory... The impressive popular turnout [at this rally] is a political message to the world that you support the legitimacy [of the Palestinian leadership], headed by President Abu Mazen [Mahmoud 'Abbas], [and want] a state with Jerusalem as its capital and the return [of the refugees] to the homes from which we were expelled..."[\[16\]](#)

PA To Erect Nakba Memorial

As part of the events marking the 75th anniversary of the Nakba, the Palestinian leadership also intends to erect a memorial to the Nakba that will highlight the right of return. On December 20, 2022 President 'Abbas instructed the PA government to construct "as soon as possible" a memorial marking the 75th anniversary of the Nakba and establishing the Palestinian narrative,[\[17\]](#) and on January 9, 2023 a competition for designing the memorial was announced in the Palestinian press. The announcement stated that the memorial must reflect the Palestinian people's grief over the Nakba and the elements of "dispersion, struggle and hope" in the Palestinian narrative. On March 6, 2023 the winning entry was chosen, and on April 18 a plot was allocated to establish the memorial as well as a museum dedicated to the Nakba in Ramallah's Independence Park.[\[18\]](#)

[1] Israel contends that this resolution does not legally establish the refugees' right to return to its territory.

[2] On the Palestinians' uncompromising insistence on the right of return, see MEMRI reports: Special Dispatch No. 9618 - Palestinian Authority Minister And PLO Executive Committee Member Majdalani: UNRWA Is The Political Symbol Of The Right Of Return - November 1, 2021; Inquiry & Analysis Series No. 1521 - Palestinian Authority: The Palestinian Refugees' Right Of Return Will Never Be Canceled; No To Trump's Plan, Which Revokes It - July 8, 2020; Special Dispatch No. 8068 - On 71st Nakba Day, Palestinian Authority, Fatah Emphasize: We Will Never Renounce Right Of Return, We Will Torpedo 'Deal Of The Century', May 16, 2019.

[3] Press.un.org, November 30, 2022.

[4] Wafa.ps, December 31, 2022.

[5] Wafa.ps, April 15, 2023.

[6] Keys – representing the homes the refugees left behind – have become a symbol of the Palestinian right of return.

[7] *Al-Hayat Al-Jadida* (PA), April 18, 2023.

[8] Wafa.ps, March 7, 2023.

[9] Wafa.ps, February 14, 2023.

[10] The bill proposes to define a Palestinian refugee as a person who: "(1) resided, between June 1946 and May 1948 in the region controlled by Britain between 1922 and 1948 that was known as Mandatory Palestine; (2) was personally displaced as a result of the 1948 Arab-Israeli conflict; and (3) has not accepted an offer of legal residency status, citizenship, or other permanent adjustment in status in another country or territory" (Congress.gov, February 14, 2023).

[11] Wafa.ps, February 21, 2023.

[12] Wafa.ps, February 19, 2023.

[13] *Al-Quds Al-Arabi* (London), February 19, 2023.

[14] Facebook.com/OmarElghoulOfficial, February 20, 2023.

[15] *Al-Hayat Al-Jadida* (PA), December 30, 2022.

[16] *Al-Hayat Al-Jadida* (PA), December 30, 2022.

[17] Wafa.ps. December 20, 2022.

[18] *Al-Ayyam* (PA), January 9, 2023; wafa.ps, March 6, 2023; wafa.ps. April 18, 2023.