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**EVIDENCE**

**Thursday, May 2, 2013**

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**Chair**

**Mr. Dean Allison**



## Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development

Thursday, May 2, 2013

• (1140)

[English]

**The Vice-Chair (Mr. Paul Dewar (Ottawa Centre, NDP)):** Colleagues, it's good to see everyone back.

Today we will be starting our study on the situation of Jewish refugees from Middle Eastern nations. We have four guests who will present today. We're going to hear, in order, from Mr. Abitbol, Mr. Urman, Mr. Matas, and Mr. Bensoussan.

We have given you each 10 minutes for your presentation. If you wish to cut it down a bit, that would be fine.

We will hear from our guests, and then we'll have questions from members, but first of all, let me thank you and invite you to present in the order I just mentioned.

We'll start with Mr. Abitbol, please.

**Mr. Sylvain Abitbol (Co-President, Justice for Jews from Arab Countries):** Good morning.

[Translation]

Mr. Chairman, as co-president of Justice for Jews from Arab countries, I am here to give you an overview of our presentation.

Mr. Stanley Urman will speak to the international community's response to the problems of Jewish refugees in Arab countries. Mr. David Bensoussan will then present a historic perspective and Mr. David Matas will present a legal perspective.

Thank you for inviting us to appear.

I will begin the presentation. My name is Sylvain Abitbol. I am pleased to be here today as co-president of Justice for Jews from Arab Countries—JJAC—an international coalition of Jewish communities and organizations that represent the interests of Sephardim and Mizrahim Jews that were displaced from Arab countries. Our mandate is to ensure that justice for Jews from Arab countries appear on the international agenda and that their rights be guaranteed as a legal and fairness issue.

I would like to thank the Canadian government for its leadership, both Prime Minister Stephen Harper, the Minister of Foreign Affairs John Baird, and you yourself, Mr. Chairman, for the leadership you have shown in organizing these hearings before the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development, in order to address an injustice that has been ignored by the international community for far too long.

In the quest for peace in the Middle East, we need governments such as yours, that demonstrate leadership and search for sustainable solutions, and are not silenced by political opportunism, since the challenge is clearly monumental. The tragedy of the conflict in the Middle East is reflected in the hundreds of thousands of victims who were ejected from their homes, who lost their livelihoods and who have been deprived of all they owned.

It is the policy at JJAC that the legitimate call to guarantee the rights and reparation for Jews displaced from Arab countries not be used to counter Palestinian rights and claims. It is simply a recognition of the fact that there are two groups of refugees in the Middle East, whereas the world is only concerned with Palestinian refugees. It is also important to ensure that the rights of hundreds of thousands of Jews displaced from Arab countries remain recognized and dealt with in the future. This is the only way to ensure a sustainable and balanced solution for all the Middle East refugees.

When JJAC began its work, about 12 years ago, no government was interested in examining the rights of refugees from Arab countries. Only JJAC has undertaken a series of initiatives to raise the issue of Jewish refugees on the international stage. I have appeared before the United Nations Human Rights Commission in Geneva and my colleagues have testified before the European Parliament in Brussels. JJAC has participated in official government hearings that took place in the American Congress, at the House of Lords in London and at the Chamber of Deputies in Rome.

I appear before you today as a Canadian, proud that my own government has planned these hearings and in the hope that the rights of all the refugees in the Middle East will be recognized, including Jewish refugees from Arab countries, and that that recognition will be enshrined as a principle of Canadian foreign policy. I am also appearing as a Jew from an Arab country.

Born in Morocco, I was one of the luckier ones since I was born in a Muslim country that is relatively tolerant. Morocco is one of the rare Arab countries in which Jews live and have lived in relative peace, thanks to the leadership of several successive sultans who behaved nobly. Yet, even in Morocco, despite its tolerant attitude, only 3,000 Jews remain there today out of a population of approximately 265,000 in 1948.

Others were not so lucky. During the 20th century, large Jewish populations were persecuted and finally, displaced, in countries such as Iraq, Yemen, Lebanon, Syria, Egypt, Tunisia, Libya and Algeria. A little later, you will hear experts tell you about massive human rights violations against Jews: persecution, violence, mandatory arrest and detention—and I myself have been arbitrarily detained—expulsions, expropriation of community assets and of Jewish personal assets. The list of injustices is as long as it is varied.

These measures, taken in many Arab countries, did not take place spontaneously nor in a vacuum. Documents have been discovered by JJAC in the United Nations High Commission for Refugees in Geneva.

• (1145)

**Mr. Paul Dewar:** Excuse me, Mr. Abitbol.

Could you please slow down to accommodate the interpreters?

**Mr. Sylvain Abitbol:** They reveal that the League of Arab States was colluding to use their Jewish citizens as leverage in their struggle against the State of Israel.

On February 17, 1948, the Arab League's Political Committee, which included Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Jordan and Yemen, adopted a seven-point bill dealing with the treatment of Jews in Arab countries.

The bill included seven provisions including the following: that Jews must register as members of the state of the Jewish minority of Palestine, meaning that Jews became citizens of an enemy country, that is to say Israel; that Jews' bank accounts would be frozen; that these frozen funds would be used to fund the war waged by Arab countries against Israel; that Jews were to be imprisoned for Zionist activities. Jews had to prove that their activities were anti-Zionist and had to declare their willingness to join Arab armies at war with Israel. It was inhumane.

These measures and others made the lives of Jews in Arab countries quite simply unbearable. In most of these Arab countries, Jews realized they had no long-term future, and that their children and family had no future in their country of origin. In seeking to leave, many chose to move to Israel, whereas others chose other countries that offered refuge. This displacement took place between 1948 and 1972 and over 856,000 Jews left their homes in Arab countries. They left empty-handed.

However, whether displaced Jews from Arab countries moved to Israel or elsewhere, they were considered by the United Nations High Commission for Refugees as refugees under international law. To its credit, Canada opened its doors and offered safe harbour to Jews fleeing Egypt, Syria, Libya, Iraq or elsewhere. This is a commendable part of this country's history which must be remembered.

In closing, I would like to reply to the following question: why now? Why must refugees from Arab countries now be included in peace negotiations in the Middle East? The answer is fundamental. Many detractors claim that Israel is an illegitimate state, that Jews are foreigners and do not belong in the region. This is an obscene and grotesque twisting of history.

We should be reminded at every opportunity that for over 2,500 years, well before the arrival of Christianity and Islam, large Jewish populations lived in the Middle East and in North Africa. We Sephardic Mizrahim Jews are the aboriginal peoples of that region. We are the native inhabitants of the Middle Eastern region and we must not allow the rich and vibrant heritage of this region's Jews to be erased from the history books.

On the basis of these truths, Mr. Chairman, I respectfully recommend that the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development take the following actions.

Firstly, that the committee publish a statement recognizing that two groups of refugees have been victims of the Israeli-Arab conflict and both groups should be treated fairly throughout the peace process in the Middle East. Secondly, that the committee introduce a resolution in the House of Commons ensuring that the rights of all bona fide Middle Eastern refugees be fully acknowledged, and that during all Canadian debates on the Middle East, any explicit reference to the required resolution of the Palestinian refugee problem be accompanied by an explicit reference to the rights of Jewish refugees from Arab countries.

For peace in the Middle East to be sustainable and long-lasting, we must ensure that the rights of all refugees, both Arab and Jewish, be recognized and guaranteed as an issue of legal rights and fairness.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

**Mr. Paul Dewar:** Thank you.

I would now like to give the floor to Mr. Urman.

• (1150)

[English]

**Dr. Stanley Urman (Executive Director, Justice for Jews from Arab Countries):** Thank you, Mr. Chairman, honourable members of this committee, ladies and gentlemen.

I want to thank you for convening these hearings on Jewish refugees from Arab countries. I also want to commend you for seeking truth and justice, which in Middle East affairs is often a very daunting task. This particularly applies to the issue of refugees.

The Arab-Israeli conflict has dominated Middle East affairs for more than 65 years. The ultimate and inevitable victims of these years of strife are the peoples of the region, Arabs, Jews, Christians, and others, who were uprooted from their countries of birth and were forced to find safe havens and homes elsewhere.

Two of these groups, Arabs and Jews, were both recognized as bona fide refugees by the relevant United Nations agencies. Yet when the issue of refugees is raised within the context of the Middle East, people invariably refer to Palestinian refugees, virtually never to Jews from Arab countries.

Asserting rights and redress for Jewish refugees is not intended to argue against any claimed Palestinian refugee rights. They stand on their own merits. It is a legitimate call to recognize that Jewish refugees from Arab countries, as a matter of law and equity, possess the same rights as all other Middle East refugees.

David Bensoussan, my colleague, will provide a historical perspective which shows that the status of Jews in the region is long standing. Jews and Jewish communities have existed in the Middle East, north Africa, and the gulf region for more than 2,500 years, fully 1,000 years before the advent of Islam.

Following the Muslim conquest of the region, under Islamic rules, Jews and Christians were considered "*dhimmi*", a privileged minority but still second-class citizens. Jews were, for a period of time, permitted limited religious, educational, professional, and business opportunities, but this changed dramatically in the 20th century, as witnessed by a widespread pattern of persecution and the mass violations of the human rights of Jewish minorities in Arab countries.

The deterioration in their status was precipitated by official decrees and legislation that denied human and civil rights to minority populations, that expropriated properties, and that removed minorities from civil service and other forms of employment.

Edicts of expulsion were enacted in Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, Libya, Syria, and Yemen. Many Arab regimes stripped Jews of their citizenship.

By way of example, in Iraq, Law No. 1 of 1950, entitled "Supplement to Ordinance Cancelling Iraqi Nationality" was utilized to deprive Jews of their Iraqi nationality.

In Egypt, the Nationality Code, enacted on May 26, 1926, established that a person born in Egypt was entitled to Egyptian nationality only if their father belonged racially to the majority of the population of a country whose language is Arabic or whose religion is Islam. This provision later served, in the mid-1950s, as the official pretext for expelling many Jews from Egypt.

In Libya, the Council of Ministers in 1962 issued a royal decree that provided that a Libyan national forfeited his nationality if he had any contact with a Zionist, defined as someone who had acted "morally or materially in favour of Israel interests". This vague language allowed authorities to deprive Jews of Libyan nationality at will.

The mass exodus of Jews from Arab countries was precipitated by several factors, including the rise of Arab nationalism, the establishment of sovereign Arab Islamic states, and the Arab-Israel conflict. Jews were often victims of murder, arbitrary arrest and detention, torture, and executions. The danger was well known.

Here we see an article which appeared in *The New York Times* on May 16, 1948, just two days after the state of Israel was proclaimed.

The status of Jews worsened dramatically in 1948, as virtually all Arab countries declared war, or backed the war against Israel. Jews were either uprooted from their countries of residence or became subjugated, political hostages in the Arab Israeli conflict.

In virtually all cases, as Jews were forced to flee, individual and communal properties were seized and/or confiscated without any compensation provided by the Arab governments involved.

The result was the displacement, or to use today's jargon, the ethnic cleansing of Jews from some 10 Arab countries.

What are the numbers? In 1948 there were 856,000 Jews resident in some 10 Arab countries. Today less than 4,500 remain.

● (1155)

From the chart that appears, you will note that coinciding with every Arab-Israeli conflict, i.e., 1947, 1956, 1967, and 1976, each time the Arab-Israeli conflict resumed, the number of Jews in Arab countries dropped precipitously.

By way of comparison, the next chart provides estimates of Palestinian refugees. This original document was discovered in the archives of the UNHCR in Geneva. It lists estimates on the number of Palestinian refugees as provided by the British, by the U.S., by Palestinians, by Israel, and by the UN. Shown is a typed version of the original document.

The United Nations Conciliation Commission in September 1949, estimated that there were 726,000 Palestinian refugees displaced as a result of Israel's War of Independence. The highest quote comes from the United States authorities, who said that there were 875,000 Palestinian refugees. The Israelis, of course, are on the low end, at 650,000 Palestinian refugees.

The world knows well what happened to Palestinian refugees. Less known is what happened to Jewish refugees.

The majority of Jews displaced from Arab countries immigrated to Israel to fulfill the Zionist dream of returning to the ancient homeland of the Jewish people. Some two-thirds, or nearly 650,000 Jews, immigrated to Israel, while roughly one-third, or over 200,000 Jews, found a safe haven in countries other than Israel, including Canada.

Mr. Chairman, I would suggest there are two fundamental questions which this committee must address.

Number one, were Jews displaced from Arab countries really refugees? We can see here that on two occasions the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees determined that Jews fleeing Arab countries were indeed bona fide refugees under international law, under the protection of the High Commissioner for Refugees. The first time was in 1957, relating to Jews fleeing from Egypt. The second time was a declaration in 1972 in reference to Jews fleeing from North African countries.

You will be hearing later from my colleague David Matas, who will underscore how, under international law, the rights of Jewish refugees from Arab countries are compelling and how their recognition finds expression in numerous legal and political declarations: Resolution 242, the Madrid conference, etc.

Number two, even if Jews fleeing Arab countries were refugees, do they have any rights today, over half a century later, when they are no longer refugees? The answer to that question, similarly, is yes.

There is no statute of limitations on the rights of refugees. The passage of time does not negate refugee rights to petition for redress for mass violations of human rights, as well as for physical and material losses. If a refugee leaves behind assets, including bank accounts and pension plans, they do not lose their rights to these assets, notwithstanding how many years have passed.

In reality, there were two populations of refugees, Arabs and Jews, in roughly the same numbers, in roughly during the same time period, both legally declared refugees under international law. It is important to note how the international community through the United Nations reacted to these two populations of refugees that emerged at the same time.

Our research revealed startling differential and disproportionate treatment by the United Nations in favour of Palestinian refugees, as opposed to Jewish refugees. We examined three factors: one, UN resolutions; two, how many UN agencies dealt with Palestinian or Jewish refugees; and three, what resources were provided to Palestinian and Jewish refugees.

On number one, with respect to UN resolutions from 1949 to 2009, there has been a total of 1,088 resolutions of the Security Council and the General Assembly on every conceivable Middle East issue. One hundred and seventy-two resolutions have dealt specifically with Palestinian refugees.

- (1200)

There has never been any Security Council resolution, any General Assembly resolution, that specifically addresses the issue of Jewish refugees, or any resolutions on other topics that even mention Jewish refugees from Arab countries. This differential UN pattern of exclusivity focusing only on Palestinian refugees continues to this very day.

Notwithstanding the plight of Jewish refugees, although never mentioned, there is one seminal UN resolution on the Middle East that must be looked at more closely: United Nations Security Council Resolution 242.

Still considered the primary vehicle for resolving the Arab-Israeli conflict, Resolution 242 stipulates that a comprehensive peace settlement should necessarily include “a just settlement of the refugee problem”.

No distinction is made between Arab refugees and Jewish refugees. This was the intent of the drafters and the sponsors.

Even unstated, in the face of 172 resolutions specifically on Palestinian refugees, the language of Resolution 242 suggests that the UN must consider the legitimate rights of all Middle East refugees, Jews and Arabs as well.

With respect to the second criteria, 10 UN agencies were mandated or created to deal with the rights and welfare of Palestinian refugees. Only the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees dealt with Jews, and it was only for the recovery of assets.

With respect to the third criteria, resources, between 1950 and 2007 the United Nations, through UNRWA, contributed \$13.7 billion to maintain and sustain Palestinian refugees in geographically mandated areas of the West Bank, Gaza, Syria, and Jordan. By contrast, we have found only one grant of \$35,000 that the United Nations High Commissioner contributed to Jews fleeing Egypt, and it was a grant that was converted to a loan and had to be paid back.

With respect to assets lost, estimates project \$6 billion in losses for Jewish refugees, and \$3.9 billion in losses for Palestinian refugees.

In closing, let me ask one final question. Why is it important to talk about Jewish refugees 60 years after the fact?

While there is no symmetry between the two narratives, there is one important factor that applies to both, namely, the moral and legal imperative to ensure that the rights of all bona fide refugees are fully acknowledged, respected, and addressed within any putative resolution of the conflict in the Middle East.

For any peace process to be credible and enduring, it must equitably address all populations of refugees that arose out of the Arab-Israeli conflict. There must be a recognition of the historical injustice perpetrated upon Jewish refugees from Arab countries.

Let there be no doubt that where there is no remembrance, there will be no truth; where there is no truth, there will be no justice; where there is no justice, there will be no reconciliation; and where there is no reconciliation, there will be no durable peace between and among all peoples in the region.

Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

**The Vice-Chair (Mr. Paul Dewar):** Thank you so much.

We'll now go to Mr. Matas.

Welcome back to the committee. Please, go ahead.

**Mr. David Matas (Legal Counsel, Justice for Jews from Arab Countries):** Thanks for having me back again. I did have a written brief, which I think should have been distributed and translated. I will try to skip over it, so to speak, rather than read it out.

The Jewish refugees from Arab countries are entitled to recognition of their rights and acknowledgement of the violation of those rights. They are, further, entitled to redress for those violations. It would be an injustice if the rights of Palestinian refugees were recognized and their rights redressed and yet the rights of Jewish refugees were ignored and their violations not redressed, when both sets of violations arose from the same conflict.

As Stan Urman has indicated, I do have kind of a legal brief here where I'll go through some of the foundations for the assertion of Jewish refugee rights. I refer first of all to the two statements from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, which Stan Urman actually put up on the screen.

Sadako Ogata, when she was High Commissioner for Refugees—before that she was a Japanese academic—opened up the archives of the UNHCR to researchers. It had been closed before. Stan Urman and I went to Geneva and went to the archives and found these documents that are quoted here, and they were made public for the first time through our research.

There are a number of multilateral initiatives, which have been generic in nature and not focused specifically on Palestinian refugees. There's been the Madrid conference and the road map. What I should say about the Madrid conference is that Canada is the convener of the refugee working group, and so this issue should be of importance particularly to Canada. There's the road map to the Middle East and there's also Resolution 242. Stan Urman mentioned it was generic, but there's more to the history than that, because if you look at the *travaux préparatoires*, the history of that resolution, the Soviets at the time had actually tried to get the resolution specific to Palestinian refugees. Arthur Goldberg was the American representative at the UN at the time. He talked about that debate afterwards and said that basically the others insisted and persisted and the Soviets withdrew, and the reason the language was generic was to encompass the Jewish refugees.

We then have these bilateral agreements between Israel and Egypt in 1978, Israel and Egypt in 1979, Israel and Jordan in 1994, and Israel and Palestine in September 1993 and September 1995. Again the language is generic, and it's apparent from the generic language it's meant to apply to both populations. For instance, the Egypt 1979 agreement says, "Parties agree to establish a claims commission for the mutual settlement of all financial claims". The very reference to mutuality means that both populations are being considered.

There's also been recognition by states of the two different refugee populations. There were very strong statements by U.S. President Bill Clinton in July 2000, which are quoted in my brief, and by former U.S. President Jimmy Carter as part of the Camp David accord brokerage in October 1977. Canadian Prime Minister Paul Martin actually made a very strong statement in June and July 2005. He said, "A refugee is a refugee and that the situation of Jewish refugees from Arab lands must be recognized. All refugees deserve our consideration.... I did not imply that the claims of Jewish refugees are less legitimate or merit less attention than those of Palestinian refugees." So there's already a Canadian history here.

I have a section here where I acknowledge that the two refugee populations are not the same. There are significant legal differences between the two. In this section I mentioned four of them. This is part of a much longer analysis I've done, where there are many more differences I've pointed out. If any members of the committee are interested, I could send it to them.

• (1205)

Jewish refugees, at the time of their displacement, met the standard international law definition of refugees. Palestinian refugees, in contrast, are not refugees in the standard international law sense. This is so in a variety of ways, some of which I've mentioned here. By pointing out these differences, Justice for Jews from Arab Countries do not mean to suggest that Palestinians who are artificially labelled refugees do not justify our concern or that they have not suffered. On the contrary, the very quarantining to the label and life of refugees has been a large part of the plight of the Palestinians, which needs alleviation. The distinctions between the Palestinian and Jewish refugee populations both highlight the unfair limitation to the life of refugees that has been inflicted on Palestinians and the real criteria for refugees, which Jews from Arab countries have met.

I give by way of example four differences.

First, the Jews from Arab countries come within the generic refugee definition, which is a universal standard applicable to all. Palestinians have a separate agency and a separate definition, which is tied to a geographic location and to the benefit of a specific population. The agency is the United Nations Relief and Works Agency, UNRWA, which has its own specific definition on its website, which you can look at.

Second, the status of Palestinian refugees is hereditary, unlike that of Jewish refugees, or indeed other refugees. The descendants of Jewish refugees from Arab countries do not inherit the refugee status of their parents, but Palestinians do.

Third, if you acquire a new nationality and you're a refugee, you cease to be a refugee. That's true of Jewish refugees from Arab countries. It's true for refugees generally, but not true for Palestinian refugees, who maintain refugee status even though they are nationalists of another state that's both willing and able to protect them. There are an estimated two million Palestinians who have refugee status with UNRWA despite having Jordanian nationality.

Fourth, and this is the last difference I mention here, the duration of residency is different. All the world's other refugees, including Jewish refugees from other countries, must have had nationality or habitual residence in the country from which they fled. UNRWA, in contrast, requires only a two-year residency. Palestinian refugees need only to have been living in the British Mandate Palestine for two years between June 1946 and May 1948 to be eligible for UNRWA refugee status.

The last section I have here deals with redress. The principle is quite simple. Jews from Arab countries are entitled to invoke the right to redress because of the injustices inflicted upon them that caused their displacement. Even if they've ceased to be refugees because they have acquired the nationality of Canada, Israel, or another country, the right to redress for the violations has not disappeared. When it comes to redress, there's a wide variety of possibilities. I've listed some here. Redress ultimately will be decided by the parties directly involved in the negotiations. Canada is a country committed to equity, and the rule of law cannot be indifferent to the result. Canada should support the principle that in Middle East peace negotiations, all refugees should be treated with equity and justice.

Thank you very much.

• (1210)

**The Vice-Chair (Mr. Paul Dewar):** Thank you very much, Mr. Matas. It's good to see you again.

**Mr. David Matas:** Thank you.

**The Vice-Chair (Mr. Paul Dewar):** Mr. Bensoussan, we'll turn the floor over to you, sir, for 10 minutes.

[Translation]

**Dr. David Bensoussan (Past President, Communauté Sépharade Unifiée du Québec):** Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Allow me to thank the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development for the opportunity to give you a historical perspective on those we have come to group under the forgotten Jewish exodus from Arab countries.

The personal research I have done out of interest on the topic has been published in a number of books and articles. I will try to give you a general overview in the time provided to me today.

There has been a Jewish presence in Arab-Muslim countries since well before Islam was introduced and it dates back to before the 6th century before the current era. These communities have disappeared or are in the process of disappearing in the majority of Arab-Muslim countries. In fact, 865,000 Jews were excluded in the very countries they were born in and felt that they had to leave.

I am going to begin by talking about the traditional legal status of non-Muslims in Muslim countries, then I will talk about the changes in Jewish-Muslim relations during the pre-colonial and colonial periods, finally I will list some of the discriminatory measures that were taken against Jews and that led to the quasi-disappearance of Jews in these countries.

Let us begin with the status of dhimmis. Non-Muslim minorities in Muslim countries have the status of dhimmi, which means “tolerated” or “protected”. This flows from the assertion that Jewish and Christian scripture was distorted by their unworthy depositories. It is legislated under the Pact of Umar which was amended several times with the addition of other discriminatory measures. A dhimmi is in an inferior position within Muslim society: they have special taxes, wear recognizable clothing, are the subject of humiliating measures, and do not have legal status when they are involved in a legal matter involving Muslims.

Shia Islam considers Jews to be a source of impurity. While the conditions of Jews have differed between countries, some features overlap for Jews in Morocco, and in the Ottoman and Persian Empires.

In the 19th century, several travellers, consuls and educators, sent out by the Alliance israélite universelle, sent back alarming reports on the situation of Jews, including the following: daily humiliation, objects of scorn, submissive to the point of atrophy, constant insecurity, abductions, densely populated Jewish quarters, dramatic impoverishment and seriously unsanitary living conditions. They described nightmarish fanaticism on the one hand and resignation on the other.

The difficult circumstances of Jews, who made up 0.5% to 3% of the population, depending on the country, was also raised by Muslim chroniclers. Jews automatically became the scapegoats whenever there was political instability, a military defeat or difficult economic conditions, as well as drought. Massacres and plundering happened on a regular basis. You have the list in your document; reading it would be rather tedious at this point.

There were nonetheless the elite and the leaders who were close to power and enjoyed certain privileges. Generally speaking, the rulers

were benevolent to a certain degree—of course there were exceptions—but their decisions were not always applied accordingly. For example, the decree agreed to in 1864 by the Moroccan ruler and the philanthropist, Moses Montefiore, on the cessation of mistreatment of Jews, never actually changed anything.

Jews were accused of ritual murder in Damascus in 1840 and in Cairo in 1902. In the Ottoman Empire, there were reforms that ended the mandatory wearing of distinctive clothing and the special tax on non-Muslims, but once again, in the more remote areas of the Empire, this was never enforced.

What happened during the pre-colonial and colonial periods? Being on the fringes of the 19th century expansion of Europe, many Jews sought consular protection, and the parameters were set down at international conferences in Tangier, Madrid, Lausanne, and so on. Algerian Jews obtained the right to French nationality in 1870, Tunisian Jews obtained it at their request in 1923 and Moroccan Jews maintained their status of dhimmi when Morocco became a protectorate.

A large number of Jews acquired Egyptian nationality but this was quietly withdrawn in 1940 which left about a quarter of Jews without a nationality. In Yemen, Sharia law was applied in 1948 and Jewish orphans were taken in order to be converted to Islam, a practice that had been in use since 1922.

I should point out that improved legal status for Jews did not always translate into improved lives, because mentalities do not evolve as quickly as one might hope.

• (1215)

Overall, the westernization of Jews in countries where the majority is Muslim preceded that of Muslims by more than one generation because of, among other reasons, the reach of the school network of the Alliance israélite universelle. Under the colonial regime, Jews were finally able to live outside the Jewish quarter, the *mellah* or *hara*, and they no longer had to wear distinctive clothing. Many Muslims saw this as changing the Jewish status that they felt had been carved in stone by Islamic law. The tradition of prosecuting Jews during difficult domestic times, as well as the resentment against colonial power and the emancipation of Jews, were all key factors in triggering anti-Jewish actions, as happened in Fez in 1912, in Cairo in 1945, and so on.

In order to avoid antagonizing the Muslim majority and even the anti-Semitic European colonists, the colonial authorities often turned a blind eye to the abuse of Jews, for example in Baghdad in 1942. No doubt Jews were considering leaving their country if they could not achieve equal rights.

During the Second World War, a pro-Nazi regime came to power in Iraq and the sweeping pogrom, the *Farhoud*, was carried out in 1941. The Mufti in Jerusalem was the self-appointed voice of Nazi propaganda and he encouraged Bosnia Muslims to join the Waffen SS. As well, Jews in Libya were sent to death camps in Europe and a number in Jews in Tunisia were made to do forced labour.

After the war, there was growing insecurity in eastern Jewish communities. There had been a pogrom in Libya in 1945, anti-British and anti-Semitic riots within the same year in Egypt, in Syria, Yemen and Aden in 1947, and Jews were excluded from the Syrian and Lebanese administrations in 1947. The political committee of the Arab League, made up of seven countries, proposed in 1947, well before Israel's independence, that the assets of Jews be frozen.

Israel's independence and their surprise victory over invading Arab armies was a miracle in the eyes of Jews. Pressure was put on Jews who were told to prove their loyalty by opposing the Jewish state and the Arab press was full of invective against Israel and Jews. People left in a panic for Israel from several countries despite threats to destroy the newly formed state.

There were multiple anti-Jewish measures: non-renewal of professional licences in Iraq, a prohibition on leaving Iraq in 1948 and Yemen in 1949, the withdrawal of Egyptian nationality from Jews, who then became stateless in the 1950s, and the withdrawal of the right to vote for Jews in Libya in 1951.

Add to that the pogroms in Djerada, in Morocco in 1948, in Damascus and Aleppo in 1948, in Benghazi and Tripoli in 1948, in Bahrein in 1949, in Egypt in 1952, and in Libya and Tunisia in 1967. There were arrests and expulsions in Egypt in 1956, economic strangulation by spoliation in Iraq in 1951, in Syria in 1949, in Libya in 1970, or by exclusion in Syria and Lebanon in 1947, in Libya in 1958, in Iran in 2000, or by allowing Egyptian business only in Egypt in 1961. Jewish heritage was destroyed in Oran in 1961 and in Libya in 1969 and 1978, there was police abuse and abductions of young girls with forced conversions in Morocco from 1961 to 1962, Jews were kidnapped in Lebanon in 1967, there were public hangings in Baghdad in 1969, anti-Semitic clichés were used in the Arab press, and campaigns were used to increase anti-Jewish sentiment and incite hatred, using Zionism as an excuse. After the Six-Day War, this rhetoric increased considerably.

Even though there were assurances of equality before the law in countries considered to be moderate, such as Morocco and Tunisia after their independence, membership in the Arab League meant a full boycott in terms of relations or contact with Israel. Mail was prohibited, it was difficult to get a passport, and any media that did not portray Israel extremely negatively was prohibited from reporting. This boycott absolutely prevented any dialogue that could have led to mutual understanding.

In conclusion, modern times opened the door to the possibility of the dignity of citizenship for Jews, and prejudice compelled them to leave their place of birth. The end of commonplace servitude in Muslim-Arab countries was dramatic for the Muslim world, which is why Arab nationalism has made Palestine its focal point for mobilization. Zionism represents Jews who have reclaimed their dignity and defend themselves, in other words the antithesis of dhimmis.

One must consider, furthermore, that the measures taken against Jews varied from one country to another.

●(1220)

Once they were promulgated, the measures taken to protect Jews were rarely applied. In addition, it did not take much to arouse the people's animosity toward Jews, regardless of these measures.

The policy of terror and exclusion led to ethnic cleansing without regard for rights or a possessions that were lost, confiscated or abandoned, or to discriminatory measures along with their vicious propaganda, which ultimately led to an exodus that was practically forced, and often people left very quietly.

These discriminatory measures came in different forms and varied depending on the country. If it had not been for the Arab media's anti-Israeli frenzy and the discriminatory measures against Jews, it is highly likely that some of them would have decided to stay in their country. The feeling of insecurity constantly hung over Jewish communities. Their departure became necessary for their survival, otherwise it was just a question of time before they would be taken hostage by the potential unrest, which they were sure they would fall victim to next.

Therefore, Jews who had been present in Arab Muslim countries for a thousand years were squeezed out in the span of one generation, and they had to choose exile to other countries.

I am ready to answer your questions and go into more detail on the brief presentation that I just gave.

Thank you.

[English]

**The Chair (Mr. Dean Allison (Niagara West—Glanbrook, CPC)):** Thank you very much. We're going to start with questions from our members.

Madame Pécelet, you have seven minutes, please.

[Translation]

**Ms. Ève Pécelet (La Pointe-de-l'Île, NDP):** Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I would like to thank the witnesses for agreeing to give their presentations which were very fascinating.

My questions is as follows:

The organization Justice for Jews from Arab Countries was created in 2002. Since its founding, I would like to know how it has developed over recent years and what your priorities have been, and the areas which you focus on.

[English]

**Dr. Stanley Urman:** Justice for Jews from our countries has had one primary objective since its founding, which is to ensure that the rights of Jewish refugees are on the international agenda as a matter of law and equity.

When we meet, as we have, with members of Parliament in Europe and South America and elsewhere, the question is, what do we want? Do we want money? Is this about compensation? We say no, this is not fundamentally an issue about money; this is fundamentally an issue about recognizing the historic injustice to one population of refugees.

Our only request, our only demand as it were, would be that in any Middle East negotiations, if Palestinian refugees are on the table, as they should be and they will be, then Jewish refugees must also be on the table for discussion.

What's the solution? I can give you any number of potential solutions that have been proffered by experts over the last 65 years—and there are solutions. That's another thing we should remember. There are not only problems inherent in the refugee issue, there are also potential resolutions of the issue. But that's not for me to decide, that's for the interlocutors themselves to decide.

Our only suggestion is that it be on the table as a legitimate issue that today affects close to 50% of the population of Israel, who are either themselves Mizrahi Jews, or descendants of Jews who were forced and displaced from Arab countries.

• (1225)

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Sylvain Abitbol:** I would like to add something if I may.

There is a lot of anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism in the world. It can be seen in our universities. It can be seen in the way that the State of Israel is demonized. The overarching principle of all these actions against Israel and that support anti-Semitism is based on the way refugees from Arab countries are treated.

**Ms. Ève Pécelet:** Precisely, that ties in my next question.

I would like to hear your opinion on the international reaction to your campaign. You answered this to some extent, but perhaps you have something else to add?

**Mr. Sylvain Abitbol:** There are three types of reactions.

First, there are the countries and national institutions which react very favourably. However, very often they do so with some surprise because they were not aware of this issue, given that we have not talked about it in 50 years. It is to be expected that refugees will react by starting from scratch. They work like they have always done, they rebuild a family in their new host country, and they give back to that country much more than they receive from it. That is what our parents taught us and that is what we teach our children. This is resurfacing now because the issue of recognizing the authenticity of the State of Israel is being raised. As for the population's reaction, we have not seen any. We try to demonstrate that two nations have suffered and that is something they have in common.

The third element is the press and Arab media. When we were in London at the House of Lords, people from the television network Al-Jazeera were present. An Arab journalist asked a question in Arabic to a Jew of Iraqi origin. This journalist was flabbergasted. Indeed, he was not aware of the situation. What is even more serious is that in the Jewish community many people are not aware of it either.

There is substantial work to be done. You are right to ask these questions. The reactions are mixed. The Arab media, however, naturally reacted very unfavourably. In one of his analyses, Alan Dershowitz said that when Hanan Ashrawi, the Palestinian negotiator, heard about our demands, she said that Jews from Arab countries are not refugees in Israel because Israel is their country. By saying that, she officially admitted that Israel is the land of the Jews.

Today we are in a time of transformation, and we hope that with the support of the government, whether it be that of Canada or the United States, we will be able to change this story slightly and restore it to its rightful place.

[*English*]

**Mr. David Matas:** There are, one can see by looking at the Middle East conflict, not just military conflicts, but also conflicting narratives. If we're going to resolve the conflict, we have to iron out these conflicting narratives. One way of doing it is to bring to the forefront this issue of Jewish refugees from Arab countries, which is not widely known, and does give a different perspective on this whole issue.

We are asking for redress for the victims, but one important element of redress is simply recognition that this has happened, a truth telling, an acknowledgement of the victimization. If that could happen, it would not only provide a form of redress to these victims, but it would also be a step towards ironing out these conflicting narratives.

**The Chair:** Thank you, very much. That's all the time we have.

We're going to move to Mr. Dechert.

**Mr. Bob Dechert (Mississauga—Erindale, CPC):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, gentlemen, for being here today and for bringing this very important issue to our attention, and through us to the attention of our fellow members of Parliament, and I hope to the Canadian people.

I appreciated your comments in your opening statements about the leadership our government has shown on this and other issues.

I have a number of questions for each of you. I wonder if I can start with you, Mr. Matas, since you're the legal scholar here today.

Could you tell us the number of United Nations resolutions that have been passed regarding the plight of Palestinian refugees, and if any have been passed with respect to the Jewish refugees? Perhaps you could compare those for us.

• (1230)

**Mr. David Matas:** In fact, as Stan Urman has mentioned, there have been quite a lot of resolutions passed about Palestinian refugees and none that have specifically mentioned Jewish refugees. There's Resolution 242 of the Security Council that is generic in nature and was purposefully intended to be generic and encompass both populations.

Unfortunately, what we've seen in the Middle East is not only the Arab League and Islamic Conference states, many of them engaged in military war against Israel, but an attempt to destroy the state of Israel by other means, through demonization and delegitimization. They often do that through using their voting power at the General Assembly, and in the specialized bodies.

The UN Human Rights Council, since its inception replacing the commission, has had a majority of states from the Organization of Islamic Conference because they are a majority of each the regional blocs, of the African and Asian blocs, and those two blocs have a majority of the council.

What we see is this endless parade of not just resolutions about Palestinian refugees, but condemnation of Israel for a wide variety of ways that are simply the continuation of the wars against Israel by other means.

Canada, when it was on the council, was frankly the only country in many cases that was voting against these resolutions and making statements about it. I think Canada now has an important and significant history to live up to in this area of standing up against the delegitimization of Israel.

Part of it is the focus on the Palestinian refugees as a victim population to the exclusion of Jewish refugees, which plays into this I would say false narrative of the Jews as perpetrators.

**Mr. Bob Dechert:** If a resolution was to be put forward at the UN General Assembly, do you have suggested wording as to what it should look like? Is there something you could provide to the committee? Would it be your recommendation to this committee that we recommend in turn to the Canadian government that they put forward such a resolution?

**Mr. David Matas:** I am happy with Resolution 242. I'm not necessarily saying one has to mention specifically each refugee population. I think a generic wording would be sufficient, something like "all refugee populations".

**Mr. Bob Dechert:** So Resolution 242 is sufficient, or does something need to be added to it?

**Mr. David Matas:** Stan, why don't you....

**Dr. Stanley Urman:** I'll just draw your attention to a resolution that was adopted by the U.S. House of Representatives in 2008. The major call was for the President of the United States—or in this case the Government of Canada—to instruct its diplomats to use its voice to ensure that in any and all Middle East discussions, any explicit reference to Palestinian refugees is matched by an explicit reference to Jewish refugees.

**Mr. Bob Dechert:** Perhaps our analyst could get a copy of that. We'll take a look at it.

I'll ask you another question, Mr. Urman, while you're at the microphone. You mentioned the assets that were seized by Jewish refugees in many countries. I think you pointed out that the amount is approximately \$6 billion. Can you give us some description of the types of assets that were seized, what happened to them, and how they compare with the kinds of assets that were seized from the Palestinian refugees?

**Dr. Stanley Urman:** Different countries treated Jewish populations differently, but in terms of assets, there were of course individual assets. By that I mean homes, bank accounts, property, pension plans, jewellery. When people were told they must leave, or when people fled, they were only allowed to take out 20 British pounds sterling and had to leave everything behind.

In some cases it was just informally taken over by others. In some cases it was formally expropriated by governments.

By way of example, in Iraq it was an orchestrated displacement of Jews where everyone who wanted to leave in 1950 had to register and the government established Law No. 5, which set up a custodianship, and all the Jewish property went under the control of the custodianship, not seized, not owned by the Iraqi government,

but being maintained by the Iraqi government. Whereas in other countries such as Egypt, absolute expropriations of property, government taking over assets....

The important thing to also note with Jewish refugees, in juxtaposition to Palestinians, is that Jews also had communal property, extensive holdings of synagogues and cemeteries and schools and libraries and social clubs. Those vast assets are not included in that \$6 billion figure. There are good records of what was available and that has entirely been taken over.

• (1235)

**Mr. Bob Dechert:** Do most of those communal assets now belong to the various states involved?

**Dr. Stanley Urman:** That's correct.

**Mr. Bob Dechert:** I was recently in Turkey and heard a similar thing from the chief rabbi in Istanbul. I know there's a process under way there to try to recover some of those assets, especially the former synagogues.

**Dr. Stanley Urman:** And—*vive la différence*—Morocco is one country that is trying its best to preserve Jewish communal assets. It put a plaque on a Jewish school recently to mention that it was a school, and it is refurbishing some of the cemeteries.

Each country has a different narrative in terms of its particular treatment of Jews.

**The Chair:** Please give a quick response, because we're out of time.

[*Translation*]

**Dr. David Bensoussan:** Major expropriations took place in Iraq, Egypt, Libya and elsewhere. However, in other countries, most people left on the sly. They liquidated their assets very quickly, willing to take any price, and they often did so during their escape. Most people who left did so secretly. People simply abandoned their possessions. They lost everything.

[*English*]

**The Chair:** Thank you very much.

Mr. Rae, you have seven minutes, sir.

**Hon. Bob Rae (Toronto Centre, Lib.):** Thank you, and thanks to our visitors for a very compelling presentation.

I'm going to start by asking for a bit of clarification. I was interested in a comment of Mr. Urman's, when he said that there's no symmetry between the two experiences, which is a view that I have, too.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Abitbol spoke of a common experience between the two, but I think that in order to be fair, one must acknowledge that these were two different experiences. No one is demanding refugee status due to the historic situation, but this does not mean that the two experiences can be seen as mirror images of each other.

[*English*]

Is that right?

**Dr. Stanley Urman:** You said—

**Hon. Bob Rae:** Let me say for the record that Mr. Abitbol is shaking his head and Mr. Urman is nodding his head. I just want to understand this.

**Some hon. members:** Oh, oh!

**Dr. Stanley Urman:** We're in perfect sync. As they say, "You're right and you're right."

There is no history or geography that would allow for any just comparative on the narrative of Palestinian refugees. The only way we talk about them, and the only symmetry—to use that word—is based on the fact that both were victims of the Arab–Israeli conflict, both were determined to be refugees under international law, and virtually the same numbers became refugees around that time period.

For us, any discussions of the Middle East refugees must include both populations. That's the only symmetry between the two narratives, as we see it.

**Mr. Sylvain Abitbol:** That's what I meant by symmetry.

**Hon. Bob Rae:** Okay. That's a helpful clarification.

The second thing is on the chart facing us. This is just a suggestion, but I would suggest to you that your statement that there were no communal losses by Palestinian refugees is frankly argumentative. I think you'd find it very difficult to convince a Palestinian refugee who has not been able to return to his parents' or grandparents' place, where in fact whole communities were evacuated, and where there were schools and places of worship that have been left.... To suggest that there were no communal losses whatsoever is a tough case to argue, and I don't think you have to argue it.

You see, there are some examples in which I see you trying to make a parallel situation, saying, "They got this, and we didn't get that." The experience after 1948 was so completely different in terms of what happened. Yes, there was terrible discrimination in every one of the Arab capitals mentioned. Yes, there was horrific anti-Semitism. Yes, people left without anything, and people were deprived of their property and their way of life. That's a situation that has continued right up until the present day in some countries. But it's still not possible to say that the treatment of those people upon their arrival in Israel was the same as the treatment of the people who are, for whatever reason, and we can argue all of the circumstances surrounding the Palestinian issue.... It's a different set of issues.

I'm concerned as you make your argument, which I think is a very powerful one, that as in many arguments, if you make it a little too aggressively, let's say, you get a reaction from other people: "Wait a minute. How can you say there were no communal losses of Palestinian refugees?" They would argue with that.

I don't think you have to make that case in order to make your case. That is my suggestion.

• (1240)

**Mr. David Matas:** Let me respond, if I may. One of our principles, which we have tried to follow throughout, is not to talk down or undercut or deny the rights or plight of Palestinian refugees. Our position is not that they don't have rights or that they weren't treated badly; on the contrary. Some of the accusations, and this relates to a previous question about how the international community

has reacted to this issue.... One of the reactions has been that this is an attempt to deny Palestinian refugees their rights. It's absolutely not.

I think the caution you give is a wise one, because obviously, as we walk through this, sometimes we may despite our best principles not stick to them consistently in terms of the details of the advocacy.

I think the point is taken; in terms of principle, we agree.

[*Translation*]

**Hon. Bob Rae:** I ask the question in the context of the events that occurred this week and the fact that the Arab League and the Government of Israel are starting to discuss the possibility of holding negotiations, therefore our words and arguments will have significant consequences. We are not discussing things in theory, but rather in practice. We understand the importance of truth and reconciliation. As I have always said, for true reconciliation to take place, a certain level of truth needs to be restored.

Not everybody agrees on what happened, but we must recognize the experiences of others. This aspect of the human experience is important. And that is what gives importance to our arguments.

I congratulate you on the work that you have done, but I think that the committee has some work to do in order to find the words to accurately express the thoughts that we share.

[*English*]

**The Chair:** Thank you very much, Mr. Rae.

We're going to start our second round of questions, of five minutes, with Mr. Van Kesteren.

**Mr. Dave Van Kesteren (Chatham-Kent—Essex, CPC):** Thank you, gentlemen, for coming this morning.

It's a sordid tale when we look back at the way people have been treated, and specifically we're talking about Arabs and Jews, but you have only taken the story so far. I think about what you experienced in World War II.

Many people don't realize that in places such as England and France these things took place too. In 1492, of course, there was the expulsion from Spain. In World War II.... We took a trip to Ukraine recently and we went to Lviv. Much of that city, probably a quarter of it, was inhabited by Jewish people.

I have to say that I understand your argument and I completely sympathize with it, but you're leaving out a very important element, and that is if you're looking for some fair play and some recognition of what has taken place in history, and I know that this is a really sensitive issue, why haven't you included what happened to you in Europe? If you think about those things, they are just as tragic. I know that compensation isn't your issue.

Just let me finish my line of thought. It's very simple for us on the western side to look at this and say, "They have a point. These Arabs have not treated them right." But there should probably be—not probably.... We should really own up to the fact that we—when I say "we", I mean our western culture—are just as guilty of those....

• (1245)

[*Translation*]

**Dr. David Bensoussan:** I would like to address an aspect that is perhaps more psychological than anything else.

Those who lived in Europe for years never wanted to talk about their experience. They were referred to as displaced persons. It took years for them to be able to express themselves. Today, we talk about the holocaust regularly.

In the Sephardic and Jewish worlds of Arab Muslim countries, people are finally starting to talk about things that, to some extent, others wanted to silence. It took some time to get to that point. What we are calling for is well defined and very clear in my opinion. It directly affects Arab League countries, with whom there will be discussions. This is extremely important in the context of the narrative and of the development of the conflict.

[*English*]

**Mr. Sylvain Abitbol:** I'd like to go back to your question. The history of the European Jewry of the Holocaust is very well known in the world. Even if we have Holocaust deniers, I think the world knows what happened in Europe. It's very well documented. Movies have been made, testimonials have been made, and books have been written, but we believe that what happened to us, to people like me, people of my origin, has not been known, and it is a very sad story.

I would like to relate comments made by U.S. Senator Jerry Nadler when he joined us in Israel for a conference on these very subjects. When he went through security, he was asked a question by a young Israeli security officer. She asked him, "Why are you going to Israel?" He said, "Because there is a conference on Jewish refugees from Arab countries." She said, "I never knew there were Jewish refugees from Arab countries."

We believe that it's about time to educate our own children and to also let the world know what happened. It's not a parallel with the Holocaust; each history is a different history and each experience is a different experience. Even out of the same conflict, two populations are living it differently.

**Mr. David Matas:** If I may follow up, in the written materials we've done on this, we have referred to the Holocaust and the victims of the Holocaust as a point of comparison, because there were the Nuremberg trials, there's the recognition that Sylvain Abitbol talked about, and there is elaborate redress, not enough, but at least it's there.

The Holocaust victims who are now in Israel and who themselves were refugees—many of them still have integration problems and resettlement problems—are getting some form of help in dealing with it. The refugees from Arab countries who have many of the same problems, because they too are refugees and they too have integration and resettlement problems, don't get any compensation at all because of their refugee situation. That is one of the ways in which the rights that were violated have a continuing effect, which needs to be remedied.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much.

That's all the time we have, Mr. Van Kesteren.

We're going to pop back over to the other side with Mr. Dewar.

You have five minutes, sir.

**Mr. Paul Dewar:** Thank you, Chair.

Again, thank you to our guests for their testimony.

I think the idea that most people are unaware of this is reflected in that little story you told us.

One of the things that I also agree with—Mr. Rae made the point—is that it's about how it's presented. I concur with that. I think your strong argument, and Mr. Matas has talked about the narrative, is that narrative: who are we talking about, where are people from, and what is the issue?

Again, we've been through this so many times before. I'm somewhat hopeful, again, that after recent reports there's an opportunity to see people getting back to the table, and an opportunity for people to start to deal with all of the dilemmas that people have been trying to solve for many years. The notion of what a refugee is obviously is central to that.

Mr. Matas, I think you mentioned the idea of Canada having the gavel for the process of refugees. I also note that Canada recently sent a special envoy to the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation. On those two openings or opportunities for Canada, how do you see both of those opportunities as ways to express the issue? Do you see an opportunity, particularly in the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, to bring the issue forward or not? You mentioned, and I've certainly heard it many times from both sides, particularly from the Palestinian side, the need to remind Canada that we hold the gavel for the process of refugees. I would like your thoughts on that.

• (1250)

**Mr. David Matas:** Well, in fact, I have talked with officials in the Department of Foreign Affairs about how to use that gavel, and I have raised it in context of this issue. They've historically been reluctant to do so because of the pushback they anticipate from the other side.

In my view—and frankly, I think instruction from this committee might help—raising this issue isn't something that would be harmful in getting to a resolution of the dispute. On the contrary, I think it would be helpful. In his closing remarks, Stan Urman kind of did it in a very rhetorical way—convincing to me—in saying that you can't have peace without understanding, reconciliation, and so on, and that we can't realistically expect to have a lasting peace if we walk away with these competing narratives. We do have to settle them.

The Arab League, I have to say, has not been sympathetic on this issue. In terms of the Jordanian, Israeli, or Palestinian bilateral agreements, that's fine, they've been okay, but the Arab League has not budged on this issue. We just saw them budge this week on land swaps, so there's a lot of potential flexibility, I think, and now is a fluid time. We should take advantage of that fluidity and our leadership in this issue to raise this issue and to push this issue.

**Mr. Paul Dewar:** I have a final question. To what extent is there a typical Jewish refugee experience? We're hearing from different parts of North Africa and the Middle East. We've seen the statistics you presented. Mr. Matas talked about a narrative. Is there a way to say what is a typical Jewish refugee experience, or is that something that is too diverse to be put together?

**Dr. Stanley Urman:** I think there is a narrative but it's not an individual narrative. The narrative is that Jews had lived in this region for centuries before the advent of Arab states. To varying degrees in different countries, Jews were persecuted or Jews were allowed to live benignly under the ruling of enlightened despots. Jews around the time of the founding of Israel were subjected to persecution and state-sanctioned repressions. Irrespective of the country in which they resided, Jews ultimately left.

By way of example, we spoke about Morocco. Morocco is the example of a country we point to where tolerance rules the day and the benevolence of a succession of Moroccan kings has really allowed Jews to live there in peace. Yet in Morocco where there were 265,000 Jews, today there are fewer than 3,000, and this is in the best of all countries.

So the narrative is that irrespective of the way each country reacted to their Jewish populations, they were displaced. They were legally determined to be refugees and they went to wherever they could find safe haven, two-thirds to Israel and a third elsewhere, including Canada. That's the typical narrative of the Middle East refugee.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much.

Do you want to make a quick comment?

[Translation]

**Dr. David Bensoussan:** Some refugees left their country in tragic and dramatic circumstances. I am thinking of Iraq, Egypt, Libya and even Syria, where the situation has been absolutely horrible. Elsewhere, there were examples of enlightened despots in Morocco and elsewhere.

Despite this appearance of openness, I can tell you that in the 1960s in Morocco, the minister of Islamic affairs strongly promoted Islam and converting Jewish minors who were kidnapped from practically everywhere. Officially, measures were in place, but in reality things worked differently.

Gradually, it became difficult to obtain a passport, kidnappings took place and there were attacks on the public in certain places. Examples like these undermined the people's trust and dashed their hopes of having a future in a given country. So they left secretly. I would suggest that there are two different scenarios, but that in fact, they each result in identical conditions.

• (1255)

[English]

**The Chair:** Thank you very much.

We're going to finish off with Ms. Brown for five minutes.

**Ms. Lois Brown (Newmarket—Aurora, CPC):** Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I know that Mr. Dechert has another question to ask, so I'll try to keep mine concise.

The people who have moved to Israel as refugees, has there been any social service available to them to deal with this? I would liken it to post-traumatic stress disorder. Has there been any recognition in Israel of the problem and have any services, either through social services or health care, been assigned to that?

**Dr. Stanley Urman:** I'll give a quick response and I'm sure others will add to it.

The integration of Jews from Arab countries in Israel is a controversial story. Israel was at war, under attack from six Arab armies. The population virtually doubled within a very short period of time. Israel tried as best she could to integrate refugees. But we do have pictures and newsreel footage of Jews in refugee camps in the most squalid, unsanitary tents. There were issues relating to shortages of food. There were issues relating to disease. Israel was in the middle of a war. So there were no social service agencies waiting at the beck and call of immigrants to try to assist them.

Moreover, there were many who came to Israel who felt that the traditional Ashkenazi leadership of Israel at the time was not as sensitive as it could have been and should have been to the rich history and vibrancy of these refugees who were coming to Israel and didn't appreciate the vast resources, and skills, and talents that they brought. So for many Ashkenazi Jews, Sephardim were not up to the status of Ashkenazi who came from Europe, were well-heeled, well-educated, etc.

It has been a struggle for Sephardic Jews. Today, even 65 years later, there are still Sephardic Jews in Israel who live in abject poverty, generations removed from the time that their parents or grandparents came to Israel destitute. The ramifications of Jews as refugees still lives on in Israel today.

[Translation]

**Dr. David Bensoussan:** I would say that it was an electric shock for both of them. The State of Israel had nothing at all. Within two or three years, 600,000 refugees arrived. But the required resources were not available. Particularly in terms of social services, and that was extremely difficult. Things have changed a great deal, but it took a lot of time for that to happen. It is a situation where the West and the East had to live and build together. Things have changed a great deal, and it has been for the better. It is not all ideal yet, but today's reality is not at all like what it was in the past.

[English]

**Mr. Bob Dechert:** Gentlemen, thanks for your comments again.

Mr. Abitbol, I have a question for you. You mentioned in your opening remarks that there were many situations of murder, torture, and arbitrary arrest suffered by Jewish refugees. As you know, there are a number of international human rights organizations. Some of the organizations that appear regularly before our committee are Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and others. What, if anything, have they said about the circumstances and plight of Jewish refugees?

**Mr. Sylvain Abitbol:** Nothing that I know of...

**Mr. Bob Dechert:** Why do you think that is?

**Mr. David Matas:** I should say, though, that what we're talking about is events. Most of these refugees came before many of these NGOs were founded. Amnesty started in the 1960s, Human Rights Watch was after that. Hopefully, if they had been around at the time, they would have said something, but they weren't.

**Mr. Bob Dechert:** Did they say anything about the Palestinian refugees, Mr. Matas?

**Mr. David Matas:** Yes, but you see the situation is, we have this group of Palestinians who, I would say, are artificially cantoned in this refugee description to their own disadvantage.

**Mr. Bob Dechert:** Excuse me, we're short of time.

Your position is the reason that those organizations don't talk about Jewish refugees is that the events that happened occurred prior to the creation of those organizations. Are there any international organizations that existed at the time that have spoken out on this issue?

• (1300)

**Mr. Sylvain Abitbol:** No.

**Mr. David Matas:** As far as I'm concerned, I'd be happy to have them all speak out on the issue.

**Mr. Bob Dechert:** I want to ask Mr. Abitbol another question.

You mentioned murder, torture, arbitrary arrest, and other things. Can you give us a few examples?

**Mr. Sylvain Abitbol:** We have well-documented examples that can be sent to the committee, definitely, with names, dates, and addresses. We have everything documented.

**The Chair:** That would be helpful.

**Dr. David Bensoussan:** We have a few books. Perhaps I could mention one which is very compelling.

**Mr. Sylvain Abitbol:** Can you maybe just take one example?

**Mr. Bob Dechert:** Yes, give us one example if you can.

[Translation]

**Dr. David Bensoussan:** There is the book entitled *Juifs en pays arabe. Le grand déracinement 1850-1975*, by George Bensoussan. There is also mine, called *Il était une fois le Maroc*.

[English]

**Mr. Bob Dechert:** Is this a relative of yours, Mr. Bensoussan?

**Dr. David Bensoussan:** No, not at all. He's from Algeria; I'm from Morocco.

**Mr. Sylvain Abitbol:** We do have a lot of well-documented instances with names and situations—

**A voice:** I have myself.

**Dr. Stanley Urman:** Two individuals who have stories, incidents, are coming to testify on Tuesday.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much.

I apologize for not being here when you got started. I'm glad I got to hear some of the testimony. We do appreciate your time today.

To my colleagues, that's all for today.

With that, the meeting is adjourned.

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