TEACHER RESOURCE

UNDERSTANDING THE REFUGEE CRISIS

Primary Sources

The information in the Refugees video is based on primary sources such as Israel's Declaration of Independence or UNRWA's definition of Palestine refugees, or on primary sources such as the historian Benny Morris' book accounting the war (titled "1948"), or historian Efraim Karsh's 2014 article "1948, Israel, and the Palestinians: Annotated Text." We encourage you to look up these sources as well as others relating to the war, and to come up with your own understanding of these events.

Palestinian vs Zionist Narratives

The conventional Palestinian narrative holds that Zionist forces expelled Palestinian Arabs to ensure a decisive Jewish majority in the future state of Israel, and Arab armies intervened. Israel is at fault.

The conventional Zionist narrative holds that after the UN recommended the establishment of the state of Israel alongside an Arab state, the Arabs rejected the proposal and declared war, encouraging Palestinian civilians to vacate their homes to make way for the oncoming Arab armies. The Arabs are at fault.

As we have learned in the Refugees video, both of these narratives on their own do not provide an accurate, comprehensive understanding of the origins of the refugees.

To summarize, Arabs became refugees in 1 of 4 ways:

1. Some of the wealthy Arabs left in the early stages of the war.
2. Some were encouraged to leave by the invading Arab armies.
3. Some were expelled once the war began.
4. Most of them fled the conflict zone looking for a safe haven.

Policy and Attitude

A hint to a possible solution for the refugee problem can be found in Mike Wallace's 1958 interview of Abba Eban, Israel's former Ambassador to the U.S and the United Nations, and later Israel's Minister of Foreign Affairs:

"But the refugee problem, Mr. Wallace, isn't the cause of tension. The refugee problem is the result of an Arab policy. An Arab policy which created the problem by the invasion of Israel, which perpetuates it by refusing to accommodate them into their expanding labor market, and which refuses to solve the problem which they have the full capacity to solve."

"There is, I think, a basic immorality in this attitude of Arab governments to their own kinsmen whose plight they could relieve immediately, once the will to relieve it existed. All world opinion admits that the problem can only be solved on a regional basis by opening the vast resources of the Arab world to this Arab refugee population, and if there were such an effort on their part to approach a regional settlement, Israel would make its due and just contribution."