

Together these refugees and their descendants now number about two million. As a further consequence of the 1967 conflict, approximately one million Palestinians who remained in the West Bank and Gaza came under Israeli rule. Unified by a feeling of dispossession and defeat, the Palestinians now have emerged fully conscious of their identity and anxious to give that identity political expression. Our respect and affection for Israel and Israelis is not diminished by concern for the lot of the Palestinians.

Arab-Israeli Perceptions and Canada's Role

The fluctuating tensions, violence and wars of the past fifty years in the Middle East have clouded perceptions among Arabs and Israelis and fostered mistrust. It is not surprising that few in the area can think dispassionately about the situation. The search for peace has been further complicated by the prolonged lack of communication between the parties. Until the recent negotiations between Egypt and Israel, Arab and Israeli governments had never talked to each other on any continuing basis during the past thirty years. Even now the dialogue is along narrow channels. As a result, Arab and Israeli perceptions of each other sometimes lack realism and understanding. Arabs, for instance, often fail to realize that the grim historical experience of Jews in the Holocaust and earlier naturally creates a profound concern about security on the part of Israelis. On the other hand, it seems difficult for the Israelis to appreciate fully the depth of feeling among the Palestinians about their plight as a dispossessed people despite the parallels with some aspects of previous Jewish experience.

With such gaps in mutual understanding, it is not unnatural for those on one side of the dispute to believe that the positions taken by extremists constitute the accepted aims of the other side. Israelis sometimes tend to believe that for Arabs in general, any settlement must provide for a secular state composed of Israel as well as the West Bank and Gaza Strip, a position that would negate the concept of Israel as it now exists. They perhaps question that the more moderate attitude towards Israel expressed by many Arab governments in recent years is sincere. At the same time, a number of Arabs with whom I spoke referred to the extreme claims for a greater Israel which are expressed by some Israelis, and argued that expansion was the real objective of that country. This problem of perception is further complicated by the fact that Arab countries and even the Palestinians are frequently in sharp disagreement among themselves on objectives and methods. Within Israel there are also widely divergent views, and national policy formation is a complex and intricate process.