

Can the IDP label be used in Israel/Palestine?

by Dina Abou Samra and Greta Zeender

Identifying IDPs in Israel and in the OPT – on the basis of the definition provided by the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement¹ – is difficult. UNRWA considers all those who lost their homes in 1948 as refugees, yet the Guiding Principles define IDPs as those who have fled their homes but who have not crossed an internationally recognised border.

Palestinians who fled or were driven from their homes during and after the 1948 war but who remained within what became the state of Israel are clearly identifiable as IDPs. Tens of thousands of Arab villagers were displaced within Israel on the destruction of their communities. Bedouin communities suffered several further waves of internal displacement after the war, and continue to live in particular hardship, particularly in the Negev.² Lack of data on the numbers displaced in 1948 complicates estimation of IDP numbers. The National Committee for the Rights of the Internally Displaced in Israel (a Nazareth-based organisation) estimates the number of IDPs – in the Galilee, in the mixed Arab/Jewish cities of Haifa, Akka and Jaffa and in the Negev – to be around 250,000.³ The Badil Resource Centre for Palestinian Residency and Refugee Rights estimates there are 275,000 IDPs.⁴ IDPs constitute around a quarter of Israel's Arab population.

IDPs have not been registered in either Israel or the OPT, generally live among the rest of the population and cannot easily be identified. The most complex group to define methodologically are Palestinians displaced from their homes in Gaza and the West Bank as a result of evictions, house demolitions or confiscation of property. While it seems logical to consider them as IDPs, some of them are also refugees under the UNRWA operational definition, as they or their descendants were displaced during the 1948 war. Thus there are Palestinians in the OPT who, uniquely, can be considered both as IDPs and refugees.

Unlike the refugee status defined in the 1951 Refugee Convention or the UNRWA operational definition of a refugee, the IDP definition in the Guiding Principles is purely descriptive and does not grant special rights. The main purpose is to draw attention to the IDP's particular situation and to the rights this person should enjoy but which are often violated in a displacement situation.

Palestinian NGOs, international organisations and the media generally call Palestinians displaced as a result

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of house demolitions and evictions as 'homeless' people, rather than IDPs. Some UN representatives working to assist Palestinians see no benefit in applying the IDP label to Palestinians, given that the UNRWA refugee status confers some level of assistance and the IDP label is purely descriptive. They also point to the similar needs of the displaced and of the local population, since most Palestinians have been affected by displacement and statelessness. In any case, they say, IDPs in the OPT make up only a very small group compared to the approximately 1.7 million UNRWA-registered refugees.

IDMC argues, however, that the IDP label brings visibility to displaced Palestinians who are not refugees and to those refugees affected by secondary displacement which may

exacerbate their vulnerability and exhaust their coping mechanisms. The IDP label identifies rights and guarantees under international human rights and humanitarian law, whereas the term 'homeless' does not. We advocate for recognition of internally displaced populations in Israel/Palestine based on the UN Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement. These give visibility to people whose specific plights may well otherwise be forgotten by authorities as well as by local and international humanitarian organisations. The UN should take a clear and official position on displacement in Israel and in the OPT. The Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), as well as OCHA's Internal Displacement Division, and the Representative of the UN Secretary-General on the Human Rights of IDPs, could issue a position paper on the case of internal displacement in the Israeli-Palestinian context from a legal and operational point of view.

Further research needs to be undertaken on population movements within Israel and the OPT and the psychosocial impact of long-term displacement. Methodologies and standards developed to document displacement as well as to achieve durable solutions for IDPs in other conflict-affected countries, including compensation schemes, may provide useful models to draw on.

Dina Abou Samra and Greta Zeender are analysts with the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre www.internal-displacement.org/ Emails: Dina.Abousamra@nrc.ch Greta.Zeender@nrc.ch

1. www.unhcr.ch/html/menu2/7/b/principles_lang.htm

2. See article by Kathrin Koeller, pp38-39

3. www.reliefweb.int/library/documents/2005/gidp-isr-2jun.pdf. ADRID, winner of the 2002 Body Shop Human Rights Award, can be contacted at adridd@palnet.com or idpalestine48@yahoo.com

4. www.badil.org/Refugees/facts&figures.htm