

You Cannot Be a Refugee in Your Own Country

by [Sammy Stein](#) (June 2025)



One of the most misunderstood and politically charged aspects of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is the status of Palestinian refugees. A lesser-known fact is that many Palestinians living in the West Bank and Gaza—territories often regarded as the foundation of a future Palestinian state—are still officially classified as refugees. This raises an obvious question: how can someone be a refugee in their own homeland?

Under normal circumstances, the term “refugee” refers to individuals who have fled their country due to conflict or persecution and cannot safely return. This definition, grounded in international law and upheld by the United Nations

High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), applies to almost every displaced population around the world. Except, that is, for the Palestinians.

Palestinian refugees are the only group administered not by the UNHCR, but by a separate body—the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA). Established in 1949 after the first Arab-Israeli war, UNRWA uses a radically different and uniquely political definition of refugee status.

According to UNRWA, a Palestine refugee is someone whose normal place of residence was Palestine between 1 June 1946 and 15 May 1948, and who lost both home and means of livelihood due to the 1948 conflict. However, the key difference is that this status is passed down through generations, regardless of whether the descendants have ever fled or crossed a border.

This means that a Palestinian born in Ramallah in 2001 to a family originally from Haifa—who has lived his entire life under Palestinian governance—can still be officially classified as a refugee. This is not merely a bureaucratic oddity; it's a political construction that has no precedent or equivalence in international refugee law.

UNHCR, by contrast, defines refugees as those who are outside their country of nationality due to a well-founded fear of persecution. Once such individuals are able to return home, resettle elsewhere, or acquire new nationality, they cease to be refugees. The ultimate aim of refugee law is to offer temporary protection until a long-term solution is found—be it repatriation, integration, or resettlement.

But UNRWA's approach is different. It does not seek permanent solutions. Its mandate is not to resettle or integrate, but to provide relief and education. Consequently, Palestinian refugee status is effectively permanent, inherited, and

disconnected from current geographical or political realities. As a result, the number of Palestinian refugees has increased from 700,000 in 1948 to over 5 million today—most of whom have never been displaced in any conventional sense.

This approach has serious consequences, especially in the context of a two-state solution. If Palestinians living in the West Bank and Gaza—territories seen by the international community as forming the core of a future Palestinian state—are still considered refugees, what does that say about the viability of that state? How can you be a refugee while living under your own flag, voting in your own elections, and being governed by your own institutions?

Retaining refugee status in these areas undermines both the legal meaning of the term and the political goal of Palestinian self-determination. It creates a paradox in which a potential future citizen of Palestine is simultaneously labelled as someone without a homeland. This contradiction hinders not only peace negotiations but also nation-building.

Furthermore, the continued designation of Palestinians as refugees—even in territories governed by Palestinians themselves—has distorted development priorities. Rather than focusing on economic growth, infrastructure, and institutional capacity, enormous resources are funnelled into sustaining a refugee system that encourages the preservation of exile as an identity.

This system also produces perverse incentives. Refugee status is often linked to access to aid, education, and social services—creating a dependence on a designation that was originally meant to be temporary. Meanwhile, host countries like Lebanon, Syria, and Jordan often use the refugee label to deny Palestinians full citizenship and political rights, arguing that their ultimate home lies elsewhere.

Even within the Palestinian territories, the absurdity is

clear. A Palestinian living in Nablus who works for a Palestinian institution, votes in Palestinian elections, and lives under Palestinian law may still be classified by UNRWA as a refugee. This would be inconceivable in any other conflict zone.

The implications are not just semantic. They affect every aspect of peace efforts and state-building. Firstly, they obscure who will be part of a future Palestinian state and who may demand to return to Israel. Secondly, they fuel a narrative of unresolved exile—even in areas that are already governed by Palestinians. Thirdly, they divert international focus and funding toward maintaining refugee status instead of promoting citizenship and national development.

Worst of all, this perpetuates hopelessness. Refugee camps in Gaza and the West Bank—meant to be temporary—have existed for over 70 years. To call them “camps” today is to deny that generations have grown up, lived, and died there, with no intention or ability to move elsewhere. It sustains the illusion that these are transient communities when, in fact, they are not.

UNRWA, whether by design or inertia, preserves the trauma of 1948, rather than helping people move past it. While historical memory is important, using refugee status as a political tool indefinitely does not serve peace, justice, or the dignity of the people involved.

If a Palestinian state is to become a reality, then those living in Palestinian territories must be viewed not as displaced exiles, but as citizens of that emerging nation. Holding onto refugee status as a permanent identity only delays that future. It confuses legal definitions, stalls diplomatic solutions, and embeds a sense of impermanence where stability is desperately needed.

Ultimately, continuing to define Palestinians living within Palestine as refugees undermines both international law and

the prospects for peace. It is not logically sound, legally consistent nor politically helpful. If the goal is genuine self-determination and a lasting resolution to the conflict, then it's time to retire the fiction of "refugees in their own country."

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Sammy Stein was born a Jewish Palestinian, a description that causes much confusion with people, and now lives in Glasgow. He has two daughters, two grandchildren, and is married to Vicci. Sammy is Chair of Glasgow Friends of Israel, which celebrated its tenth anniversary in May 2025.

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