

## **A "Symbolic Repatriation": the Formulation of the "Family Reunification" Procedure, 1949-1955**

Jacob Tovy

One of the principal outcomes of the 1948 Arab-Israel war was the creation of a refugee problem when between 600,000–760,000 Arabs who once lived in the areas which eventually formed part of the State of Israel became refugees in the neighboring Arab countries and in the Arab parts of the then Palestine. Israel's policy on this issue evolved as the war raged on and, by the mid-1950s, was finally formulated. According to this policy, the new State was prepared to play its part towards solving the refugee problem in several areas, including the reunification of splintered Palestinian families in the boundaries of the State of Israel.

The main claim of this paper is that the Israeli initiative on the issue of family reunification resulted directly from American and UN pressure on Israel during the course of the Lausanne Conference (April-September 1949) as they called on Israel to agree to a compromise on the question of repatriation. Israel in its efforts to block "the mass repatriation" was forced to permit "a symbolic repatriation," i.e., the absorption of several thousand refugees as part of the family reunification plan, which would neither endanger Israel's security nor threaten its economic, political and social life. Israel continued to implement this reunification policy long after the external pressure relating to the issue of the refugees' repatriation had dissipated. There were two reasons for this ongoing policy: first, the need to present an Israeli contribution, even if only a symbolic one, to solving the refugee problem, as the principle of the refugees' repatriation had been shifted to the back burner by the Western powers and the UN; and second, the intensive pressure exerted by the Palestinians living in Israel who were backed by the left-wing political parties to continue the reunification policy.