

Introduction

Since 1948, the Palestine Arab refugee problem has been a focal point in the conflict between Israel and its Arab neighbors. During the first 20 years after the creation of Israel, many observers perceived the refugee problem as the most crucial issue; thus major attention was devoted to it in the expectation that resolution of this problem would be instrumental in ending the conflict. Western policymakers continue to regard resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict as a major, if not the most important, prerequisite for achieving political and social stability in the Middle East, and many regard solution of the refugee problem as the key to peace between Israel and its Arab neighbors. This is not to imply that the region is not confronted with a host of other problems that create instability, or that within the context of the Arab-Israeli conflict there are not numerous other issues in dispute. However, the refugee issue cuts across the spectrum of problems, and the fate of the refugees is therefore related to such other complicated issues as regional economic and social development, the use of water resources, and political stability in several countries in the area.

- ◀ UNRWA area of operations. From *United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East, 1991/92* (UNRWA Public Information Office, 1992). According to UNRWA, this map “may not be considered as an authority on the delineation of international boundaries.”