

Refugees in a State of Refuge

Vietnamese Israelis and the Question of Palestine

On 5 June 1967, Israeli forces launched a series of airstrikes against Egyptian airfields, initiating the Six Day War against the neighboring states of Egypt, Jordan, and Syria.¹ By the war's conclusion on 10 June 1967, Israel had radically expanded its territorial control over Palestine, commencing the ongoing occupation of Gaza and the West Bank and conquering the Sinai Peninsula, a territory it later rescinded, and the Golan Heights, the western portion of which remains occupied. Four hundred thousand Palestinian refugees were displaced in what became known as al-Naksa. Exactly one decade later, on 10 June 1977, Captain Meir Tadmor of the Israeli cargo ship *Yuvali* rescued a group of sixty-six Vietnamese refugees—thirty-four men, sixteen women, and sixteen children—who were floating adrift in the South China Sea, having escaped from the coastal town of Phan Thiết by fishing boat four days earlier.² One of the rescued people, Dr. Tran Quang Hoa, a former army surgeon, explained: “Conditions in Vietnam were unbearable. We feared for our lives. I couldn’t support Communism—I suffered too long from them.”³

Before Captain Tadmor picked up the refugees, five ships had passed by without offering assistance, thereby violating international maritime law. The *Yuvali* had initially rushed by as well, but when Tadmor caught sight of the boat and heard the refugees’ cries for help, he turned the ship around.⁴ Tadmor initially tried to drop the displaced Vietnamese off at a refugee camp, but they were denied asylum in Taiwan, Japan, and Hong Kong. Finally, after weeks of debate, on 21 June 1977, newly elected prime minister Menachem Begin announced that the State of Israel would resettle the sixty-six Vietnamese refugees as his first official act in office—the first time that a non-Jewish population would be offered asylum and eventual citizenship in the self-proclaimed Jewish nation.⁵ Two more waves would follow in 1979, bringing the total number of Vietnamese refugees resettled in Israel-Palestine to 366.⁶

I begin with this temporal juxtaposition—10 June 1967 and 10 June 1977—in order to emphasize that Israel's resettlement of Vietnamese refugees was inherently structured by its settler occupation of Palestine—an occupation that Zionists argue is necessary to ensure refuge for displaced Jews. Indeed, Prime Minister Begin empathized with the Vietnamese refugees because “their plight evoked memories of Jews fleeing Nazi Germany and being denied entry to Palestine.”⁷ In a speech with President Jimmy Carter on the White House lawn on 19 July 1977, he elaborated: “We remember, we have never forgotten that boat with 900 Jews, having left Germany in the last weeks before the Second World War for Cuba. . . . We have never forgotten the lot of our people, persecuted, humiliated, ultimately physically destroyed. And therefore, it was natural that my first act as Prime Minister was to give those people a haven in the land of Israel.”⁸ Explaining his executive decision to offer asylum, Begin translated the post-1975 Vietnamese refugee crisis into a Jewish context, drawing visual parallels between “that boat with 900 Jews”—the SS *St. Louis*, which left Germany on 13 May 1939 but was turned away by the United States at Havana and forced to return to Europe, where many died at the hands of Nazis—and the iconic images of Vietnamese boat people that were then circulating in the postwar international media. Focusing on the figure of the boat refugee, Begin suggested that the Jewish experience of Holocaust refugeehood uniquely positioned the self-identified Jewish nation of Israel to empathize with the displaced Vietnamese refugees, the majority of whom had fled Vietnam, also by boat, following the withdrawal of US troops from Vietnam, the Fall of Saigon, and the anticolonial reunification of the country under communist rule.

In his welcome speech to Prime Minister Begin, President Carter also projected parallel histories of Jewish and Vietnamese refugeehood:

I was particularly impressed that the first official action of [Begin's] government was to admit into Israel sixty-six homeless refugees from Vietnam who had been floating around in the oceans of the world, excluded by many nations who are their neighbors, who had been picked up by an Israeli ship and to whom he gave a home. It was an act of compassion, an act of sensitivity, and a recognition of him and his government about the importance of a home for people who are destitute and who would like to express their own individuality and freedom in a common way, again typifying the historic struggle of the people of Israel.⁹

In his praise of Begin's humanitarian gesture, Carter noted the “historical struggle of the people of Israel” brought on by Holocaust displacement. By referencing the anticomunist Vietnamese refugees' own pursuit of “individuality and freedom” in Israel, he also drew implicit parallels between Israel and the United States as Western nations similarly positioned to safeguard such democratic values.

Carter and Begin's characterization of Israel as a democratic nation of Jewish refugees capable of extending empathy to Vietnamese refugees did not account for the contemporaneous context of Palestinian refugeehood. Indeed, any discussion

of Vietnamese and Jewish refugeehood must also triangulate Palestinian refugeehood—the settler colonial removal of Palestinians from their native homeland. In the speech quoted above, Carter elided the archipelagic history of both US intervention in Vietnam, which exacerbated Southeast Asian displacement, as well as US financial and military support of Israel, which has facilitated Palestinian displacement. By doing so, he helped Begin to direct international attention *away* from Israel’s settler occupation of Palestine and instead depict Israel as a humanitarian state of refuge.

Based on an analysis of newspaper articles, Israel State Archives (ISA) documents, and interviews conducted with Vietnamese Israelis between 2015 and 2016, this chapter posits that Israel’s resettlement of 366 Vietnamese refugees during the late 1970s should be read as a performance of humanitarianism intended to recuperate Israel’s image in the international sphere. Whereas the US military used humanitarian rhetoric during Operation New Life to justify settler militarism in Guam, as discussed in the previous chapter, the Israeli government mobilized humanitarian discourse to elide international critiques of Palestinian dispossession, instead emphasizing Israel’s own history of Holocaust displacement to project a shared sense of refugeehood with the most visible refugee crisis at the time, the Southeast Asian boat refugee exodus.¹⁰ Publicizing Israel’s humanitarian act of Vietnamese refugee resettlement, furthermore, helped to depict Israel as a benevolent Western democracy rather than a settler colonial aggressor—a rhetorical move that Candace Fujikane has identified as “yellowwashing” and Rebecca L. Stein has characterized as a “humanitarian alibi.”¹¹ Vietnamese refugees were thus positioned in a structurally antagonistic relationship to the Palestinian liberation struggle, regardless of individual intent.

This chapter details the three waves of Vietnamese refugee resettlement to Israel-Palestine that facilitated Vietnamese Israelis’ refugee settler condition: the vexed positionality of refugees made citizens in a settler colonial state. It asks: How and why were these Vietnamese refugees resettled by the Zionist state, despite their non-Jewish status? How did they fit into Israel’s existing racial landscape? How has the exemplary case of Vietnamese refugee resettlement been discussed in regard to Israel’s more recent refugee crises? My objective in this chapter is not to debate the sincerity of Israel’s actions but rather to critique how the humanitarian resettlement of Vietnamese refugees went hand in hand with the settler colonial displacement of Palestinian refugees. Refugee acts of refusal of such Zionist rhetoric present openings for relating otherwise.

THREE WAVES: VIETNAMESE REFUGEE RESETTLEMENT ON NATIVE PALESTINIAN LAND

To unpack the refugee settler condition in Israel-Palestine, it is important to first map out Jewish, Palestinian, and Vietnamese subjects’ overlapping claims to refugeehood. In the State of Israel, Ashkenazi Jews maintain a monopoly over refugee

discourse. Despite the fact that Israeli citizens who trace their family histories to the Holocaust constitute a demographic minority in Israel-Palestine, the historical catastrophe of Holocaust refugeehood figures prominently in the Israeli state's overarching story of Jewish refugeehood: a national narrative that traces its origins to Jewish exile following the fall of the Second Temple in 70 CE, and that depicts Zionism as the rightful return of the Jewish people to the Holy Land from which they were displaced. Indeed, this privileging of the figure of the Holocaust refugee in Israel's national narrative elides other waves of Jewish immigration and racial formation in Israel: Ashkenazi Jewish elites, inspired by European forms of nationalism and socialism, who settled Palestine prior to World War II; Yemeni Jewish laborers recruited by these Ashkenazi pioneers to build the Zionist state; Mizrahi and Sephardic Jews from North Africa, Spain, and the former Ottoman Empire who fled their Muslim-dominated Arab nations after 1948 and who remain underrepresented in positions of power despite their demographic majority in Israel; Indian and Ethiopian Jews who suffer discrimination via simultaneous forms of invisibility and hypervisibility; and post-Soviet "Jews"—many of whom are actually Christian—who were allegedly brought to Israel-Palestine to "whiten" the Arab-majority population in the late 1980s and 1990s.¹² Today, white-presenting Ashkenazi Jews are disproportionately represented in Israel's government, businesses, and higher education, despite their demographic minority status. This elitist control over key positions of power further consolidates their influence in shaping Israel's self-image as a nation of Holocaust refugees.

Israel's national narrative of Jewish refugeehood can, in turn, either be activated to enact empathy with other refugee populations—such as the Vietnamese boat people—or deny refugee status to them—as is the case with Palestinians. In 1977, Prime Minister Begin asserted that "the Israeli people, who have known persecution, and know, perhaps better than any other nation, what it means to be a refugee, couldn't watch the suffering of these wretched people. It's only natural to grant them a refuge in our country."¹³ In this quote, "wretched people" refers exclusively to the Vietnamese refugees; such a designation did not extend to displaced Palestinians, who were excluded from "our country."

Palestinians, meanwhile, have had a vexed relationship to "refugee" status ever since the term's inception as an internationally recognized legal category. The 1951 United Nations Refugee Convention, which Israel signed yet never adopted into its own national legislation, purposely excludes displaced Palestinians. Initially written in response to the mass uprooting of European peoples following World War II, the 1951 Convention, and the later 1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees, declared that Palestinians were already protected by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA), established in 1949 following the State of Israel's declaration of sovereignty on Palestinian land. To complicate matters, some early General Assembly resolutions refer to Palestinians as "refugees," but following Resolution 3236's passage in 1974, Palestinians were referred to as a "people," reflecting arguments that their displacement was not a

problem of refugeehood *per se* but rather a denial of their national right to self-determination.¹⁴ Adding another layer of complexity, the UNRWA's own registry of Palestinian refugees is incomplete because it defines Palestinian refugees "in relation to relief, not rights."¹⁵ According to Ilana Feldman, "Because the definition was developed to implement the UNRWA relief mandate, rather than to account for Palestinian loss and displacement (as relevant to UN resolutions and Palestinian political claims), it did not ever include the whole of the population that had claims to property, to return, and to national self-determination."¹⁶ Since refugee status is a precondition for the Palestinian Right of Return, should UN General Assembly Resolution 194, which resolved that "refugees wishing to return to their homes and live at peace with their neighbors should be permitted to do so at the earliest practicable date," ever come to fruition, lacking an official body to register Palestinian refugee status—especially for later generations born outside of their national homeland—is particularly problematic. Such ambiguities highlight the fraught relationship that displaced Palestinians have to the legal category of "refugee" under international law.

Arab nationalists initially supported the decision of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to leave jurisdiction over Palestinian refugees to the UNRWA, since they worried that the 1951 Convention, which advocated the resettlement of refugees in other nation-states of asylum, would preclude Palestinians' Right of Return to their ancestral lands in occupied Palestine.¹⁷ Such preclusion would effectively surrender the newly established State of Israel to the Zionist settlers. In practice, however, this distinction between the jurisdiction of the UNHCR and the UNRWA has often benefited Israel. This effect is evidenced, for example, in meeting notes from the twenty-ninth and thirtieth sessions of the UNHCR during the late 1970s, which largely focused on the Southeast Asian refugee crisis. At the twenty-ninth session, held at the Palace of Nations in Geneva 9–17 October 1978, High Commissioner Poul Hartling stressed the "universality of refugee problems," even as the issue of Palestinian refugeehood remained woefully underdiscussed.¹⁸ In one instance, Lebanon's delegate asked for assistance regarding "the vast problems confronting the displaced persons in his country as a result of recent events," but the UN press release detailing this exchange refrained from explicitly naming the Palestinian refugees as such or identifying the cause of their displacement: the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) invasion of Lebanon in March 1978.¹⁹ Such rhetorical elision effectively erased Palestinian refugeehood from the UNHCR archive.

A year later, an unpublished report sent by Israeli ambassador Eviatar Manor to the International Organizations Department in Israel detailing the thirtieth session of the UNHCR, held at the Palace of Nations in Geneva 8–16 October 1979, drew special attention to a speech by Iran's delegate, who invoked Palestinian refugeehood in relation to the contemporaneous Southeast Asian refugee crisis and expressed his support for the Palestine Liberation Organization's (PLO) struggle.

To Manor's relief, however, the "conflict in the Middle East" was not otherwise mentioned, and the session's delegates agreed that the UNHCR's jurisdiction did not extend to Palestinian refugees.²⁰ As a whole, this session, which invoked the 1951 United Nations Refugee Convention to emphasize the UNHCR's commitment to "saving refugees at sea," privileged the rescue of Southeast Asian refugees at the same time that it rejected the plight of Palestinian refugees as beyond its purview—a decision that implicitly worked to Israel's benefit.²¹

Such complicated and competing definitions of refugeehood lead to conflicting politics of national belonging and "return." Israel's Law of Return—which grants automatic citizenship to diasporic Jews who "return" to Israel—precludes not only Palestinians' Right of Return but also any codified legal procedure for non-Jewish refugees to gain asylum, let alone citizenship, in the State of Israel. Furthermore, Jewish immigration to Israel is conceived of in biblical terms as *aliyah*, an accession to Mount Zion in Jerusalem; the Hebrew word for (presumed Jewish) immigrants to Israel, *olim*, is derived from this term. To this day, Israel has no standardized legal process for naturalizing non-Jewish persons.

Prime Minister Begin's resettlement of sixty-six Vietnamese refugees (*plitim mi-Vietnam*) in 1977 was therefore quite an exception to Israel's own immigration and asylum policy. According to Yehudit Hueber, a Ministry of Interior official, this was "the first time Israel had received a party of non-Jewish refugees." Furthermore, he said, although "Israel normally gives no aid to non-Jewish immigrants," the "Vietnamese would receive the same aid offered to Jewish newcomers."²² Upon arrival at Ben Gurion Airport on 26 June 1977, each refugee was given \$70 in shekels, canned food, and a packet of tea. They were transferred to Ofakim, a Zionist development town consisting of Yemenite and North African immigrants located seventy-five miles south of Tel Aviv, where they were greeted with welcome signs and a youth band playing "Jerusalem the Gold." At the welcome ceremony, Israeli minister of immigrant absorption David Levi chastised the other ships that had ignored the leaking boat full of refugees, urging them and others to instead follow Israel's humanitarian example: "Let them do as we have. May they lend a hand to save women and children who are in the heart of the sea without a homeland, and lead them to safe shores."²³ Contrasting the response of those ships' respective nations with the magnanimity displayed by Israel, this statement was directed toward an international audience of nation-state leaders.

During the first six months of resettlement, the Vietnamese refugees stayed at an absorption center in Ofakim, learned Hebrew, and received subsistence subsidies and free medical insurance from the government.²⁴ In December 1977, they moved to more permanent housing around Tel Aviv where they were given loans and grants to purchase new furniture and appliances. Eventually the refugees found employment in tourism, industry, fishing, and medicine; one family opened a Vietnamese restaurant. All the refugees were of ethnic Vietnamese origin, and several spoke English and French in addition to Vietnamese.

Because the 1952 Entry into Israel Law does not offer any standardized naturalization policy for non-Jewish immigrants to Israel-Palestine, the Vietnamese refugees' legal status was largely improvised. They first received special tourist visas that granted them permission to find permanent work.²⁵ Then they were given identity cards and temporary residency permits that included limited civil rights to employment, fair housing, social security, pensions, and medical insurance. Finally, those who chose to stay in Israel-Palestine were granted permanent residency status and the promise of citizenship after five years.

From a purely demographic perspective, Prime Minister Begin's resettlement of a mere sixty-six Vietnamese refugees may appear insignificant, especially when compared to the hundreds of thousands of Southeast Asian refugees resettled by the United States, Canada, France, and Australia. The event's rhetorical significance, however, outweighs its demographic impact, as evidenced by the profusion of press articles documenting it. Israel made sure to publicize its humanitarian act of Vietnamese refugee resettlement in order to promote a favorable image in the international sphere, particularly given ongoing critiques of Israel's treatment of Palestinians within its 1948 borders and in the occupied territories of Gaza and the West Bank. In December 1978, for example, Kastel Films wrote to the Israel Film Service with a proposal to create a film about the resettlement of the first wave of refugees, which would have great "propaganda value": "We are talking specifically about a positive 'publicity film' whose aim is to show the attractive side of Israel, without disguises and reservations, as a nation of refugees ready to give shelter to other refugees from a distant country, without having any cultural, religious or ethnic connection with them."²⁶ In this proposed film, Vietnamese refugees would be racialized as passive victims upon which to write a narrative of Israeli humanitarian aid. The words of one Israeli reporter succinctly pinpoint the problem of Israel's seeming obsession over international representation: "There's something suspicious about the self-gratitude of the heads of the establishment, the wish to prove with the media to the whole world how moral and pretty we are, how we look after the Holocaust refugees of other countries, as if we can't follow our own conscience without the whole world knowing about it."²⁷ In sum, Israel's resettlement of Vietnamese refugees was a self-conscious performance of humanitarianism for an international audience.

Part of Israel's publicity campaign was in response to the specificity of Begin's positionality within Israeli politics. Earlier in his career, Begin had served as the leader of the Zionist paramilitary organization Irgun, which operated in Mandate Palestine between 1931 and 1948, and then as the head of the early right-wing political party Herut, meaning "Freedom." Given their militant tactics, both organizations have been accused of terrorist activities, making Begin a controversial figure. In 1977, Begin's candidacy for prime minister as the head of the Likud party was supported by a coalition of working-class Mizrahi Jews and Orthodox Jewish conservatives, both of whom felt alienated by the Ashkenazi socialist elite. His

electoral victory marked the first time in Israeli history that a right-wing party had won control of the theretofore left-wing-dominated government. Begin's resettlement of the sixty-six Vietnamese refugees as his first act in office was therefore partly intended to quell Western concerns that his newly formed right-wing government would jeopardize Israel's established legacy of Ashkenazi liberalism.

We can also read Begin's act as a strategic response to United Nations General Assembly Resolution 3379 (1975), which denounced Zionism as a "form of racism and racial discrimination." This resolution severely harmed Israel's reputation internationally and would not be revoked until the 1991 passage of Resolution 46/86, which was put before the UN General Assembly at the United States' behest. With the resettlement of the Vietnamese refugees, Begin sought to counter Resolution 3379's characterization of Israel as a racist nation of Zionist aggressors by reframing the country as a multicultural haven for displaced refugees. Such multicultural inclusion, however, did not extend to Palestinian refugees, let alone most non-Jewish asylum seekers who followed the Vietnamese.

Media representations of Vietnamese refugees in Israel-Palestine tend to narrate the second and third waves of resettlement as natural progressions following the first. However, Israel did not initially plan to accept more refugees following Begin's original humanitarian gesture. In 1978, when Yigael Yadin, serving temporarily as deputy prime minister while Begin traveled overseas, proposed that Israel absorb another group of Vietnamese refugees, the majority of the Cabinet, Israel's executive branch, rejected the proposal.²⁸ Then, on 11 November 1978, Dov Shilansky (Likud) and Akiva Nof (Democratic Movement), two members of the Knesset, Israel's legislative body, made separate procedural motions to either fully absorb or offer temporary shelter to 2,500 Vietnamese refugees stranded on the *Hai Hong*, a ship that had anchored off the coast of Port Klang in October but was refused permission to land in Malaysia. The motion was sent first to the Knesset Committee and then to the Committee of Interior Ecology. By the time Israeli leaders addressed the issue, Canada had already offered to resettle the ship's refugees.²⁹ In a similar vein, at a UN meeting that took place 11–12 December 1978 in Geneva on the question of Southeast Asian refugees, Israeli leaders agreed that Ambassador Joel Barromi should offer medicaments but that Israel should not commit to absorbing more refugees at that time.³⁰ In his initial protest of the decision, Barromi highlighted the public relations advantages of Vietnamese refugee resettlement: "Our participation is of value for propaganda purposes since a refugee tragedy is involved."³¹ Furthermore, he argued, "it is not good for us now to show indifference to a problem which many compare to the story of the Exodus."³² Barromi was ultimately overruled, however, and Israel refrained at the UN meeting from offering to resettle more refugees.

Israel's stance would change less than a month later, however. In late December 1978, the rusty freighter *Tung An* marooned in Manila Bay, leaving more than 2,300 Vietnamese refugees stranded.³³ About 240 of these refugees were granted

asylum in countries such as France, West Germany, New Zealand, Switzerland, Britain, and Hong Kong. On 8 January 1979, Begin and the Cabinet ministers offered to resettle 100 refugees from the *Tung An*.³⁴ The Cabinet vote on the question of Vietnamese refugee absorption was 11–2 with four abstentions. According to a press report,

Religious Affairs Minister Aharon Abu Hatzeira of the National Religious Party and Housing Minister Gideon Patt of Likud voted against the airlift on grounds that Israel should not become involved in a refugee problem that was beyond its ability to solve. Three of the four abstaining were Foreign Minister Moshe Dayan, Interior Minister Yosef Burg and Agriculture Minister Ariel Sharon. The fourth minister abstaining was not identified. The majority of the Cabinet, however, felt Israel should set a moral example in this instance.³⁵

Although it is unclear what precipitated the majority of the Cabinet to change its stance regarding the resettlement of more Vietnamese refugees in less than a month's time, they were likely swayed in part by the deluge of earnest letters from Israeli citizens and the Jewish diaspora that echoed Begin's 1977 assertion that as a nation of Jewish refugees, Israel should empathize with the Vietnamese refugees and absorb a greater number of them.³⁶

When announcing the Cabinet's decision, Cabinet secretary Arye Naor echoed Begin in citing the Jewish experience of the Holocaust as influencing the Cabinet's vote: "We remember the experience of our brethren during World War II who were seeking in vain for shelter."³⁷ He also stressed that this decision to absorb a second wave of Vietnamese refugees was largely symbolic, meant to encourage "other nations to follow."³⁸ Likewise, the Committee of Interior Ecology noted, "Israel should serve as an example to richer, bigger, and more developed countries which did not display generosity and did not agree to allow displaced people to enter their countries."³⁹ Israel sought to frame itself as a moral nation, rather than a settler colonial one. Indeed, following Naor's announcement, Avi Pazner, chancellor of the Israeli Embassy in Washington, DC, and head of the Foreign Ministry's Press Division, promptly wrote to Israel's Department of Journalism and Publicity and the Government Press Office, "It would be of much use for our image if the arrival of the refugees to Israel will receive wide coverage on the media, particularly the television networks. I suggest we think how to bring about maximum coverage, including interviews with refugees who will express their thanks to the State of Israel for the humanitarian gesture."⁴⁰ Pazner sought to solicit expressions of gratitude from the Vietnamese refugees in order to augment Israel's performance of humanitarianism in the international sphere.

In January 1979, Israeli leaders dispatched Jewish Agency representative Yehuda Weissberger to Manila from Bombay to help select the refugees to be offered asylum in Israel. Via private correspondence, they instructed Weissberger to favor multilingual and professional refugees who had traveled with their families.⁴¹ He

was to avoid unmarried adults or orphans: individuals who compromised not only the heteronormative ideal but also the fiction of racial purity. Such deviations from the nuclear family norm increased the likelihood of miscegenation, which could disrupt the ever-fragile Jewish national identity.⁴² Unmarried adults, it was speculated, would marry Jewish partners; Jewish parents would have to adopt refugee orphans. Nuclear families of refugees, in contrast, would presumably remain self-sufficient. Thus, the Israeli state's humanitarian gesture of refugee resettlement was underwritten with concerns about intermarriage, inadvertently echoing the yellow peril racialization of Asian immigrants in North America.

By the time Weissberger arrived in Manila Bay, the refugees had been stranded on the *Tung An* for several weeks, having been refused entry into the Philippines. They had run out of provisions and were dehydrated and starving. According to Tran Tai Dong, who was eighteen at the time, Weissberger approached the *Tung An* in a small boat, called out to the captain, and explained that Israel would offer asylum and resettlement to large, "complete" families of seven to ten people.⁴³ The families who met this criteria were then invited onto the small boat for an interview. Weissberger ended up offering asylum to Tran and his family: an ethnic Chinese father, a Vietnamese mother, and nine children. Although they did not know anything about Israel-Palestine at the time, the family accepted Weissberger's offer since they had "no other choice."⁴⁴ As a whole, the group Weissberger selected were of ethnic Chinese background and middle-class status—part of the large exodus of Chinese Vietnamese merchants from South Vietnam who were targeted by the country's communist leaders after the Fall of Saigon.

In public interviews, Weissberger was careful to hide Israel's selection preferences and to focus instead on parallels between the boat refugees escaping Vietnam and Jewish refugees fleeing the Holocaust, as other Israeli leaders had done. On 14 January 1979, for example, Weissberger told a Reuters reporter that the sight of the *Tung An* was "tragically reminiscent" of the more than sixty refugee boats he remembered coming to the Mandate of Palestine after World War II.⁴⁵ However, the *Tung An* was "far worse than almost any boat which brought refugees to Israel in the 1940s except perhaps for the famous refugee ship *Exodus*," which was turned away by the British Mandate authorities. Drawing parallels between Vietnamese refugees seeking asylum in the present and Holocaust refugees seeking refuge in Historic Palestine, Weissberger thus not only represented Israel as a nation of Jewish refugees well positioned to empathize with the Vietnamese refugees, but also moralized the history of Zionist settlement in Palestine as one of refugee displacement.

Eliding Israeli leaders' initial hesitancy to resettle more Vietnamese refugees after the first wave of sixty-six, Weissberger asserted that "everyone in Israel was unanimous in welcoming those refugees." He also claimed that, even if the refugees were not Vietnamese, "we would still take some, because we have suffered so greatly as refugees ourselves and cannot remain indifferent and watch the



FIGURE 7. The second wave of Vietnamese refugees, from the freighter *Tung An*, marooned in Manila Bay, are greeted at Ben Gurion Airport by the first wave of resettled Vietnamese, January 1979. Photo by Milner Moshe, courtesy of the Government Press Office (GPO) of Israel.

sufferings of our fellow beings crowded on a refugee ship.”⁴⁶ Israel, however, had and continues to have a strict asylum policy, and Weissberger’s statement has been disproven time and again. For example, around the same time the Cabinet was debating whether to admit the second wave of Vietnamese refugees from the *Tung An*, it also discussed whether to send assistance to Ethiopian Jews who had been the principal victims of civil warfare ever since Ethiopian emperor Haile Selassie had been deposed in 1974 and replaced by a military regime.⁴⁷ Although the Israeli rabbinate had decided in 1975 that the Ethiopian Jews were indeed “legitimate” Jews, the government had been slow to act, prompting Ethiopian Israeli protesters to hold a demonstration in Jerusalem on 8 January 1979. Shouting in Amharic, “Begin, hear our voice and save our brothers,” they waved signs that read “S-O-S” and “Begin Let My People Come.”⁴⁸ The case of the Ethiopian Jews was complicated by not only the Israeli government’s support of the Ethiopian government in its war with the Arab-backed Somalis, and by extension Emperor Selassie’s policy of rejecting Ethiopian Jewish immigration to Israel, but also by Israel’s latent politics of anti-Blackness.⁴⁹ This juxtaposition emphasizes the exceptionalism of the Vietnamese refugee case: not only were Vietnamese refugees absorbed (while Palestinian refugees were expelled) and given resettlement benefits similar to those of Jewish immigrants, but they were also offered asylum quicker than this group of Ethiopian Jews, who shared a religious background with the Israeli Jews



FIGURE 8. Vietnamese refugee child, wearing a *kova tembel* and holding an Israeli flag, at Ben Gurion Airport, January 1979. Photo by Sa'ar Ya'acov, courtesy of the Government Press Office (GPO) of Israel.

but lacked the preferred whiteness implicit in the Zionist project. It would not be until the 1980s that Israel would engage in large-scale operations to bring Ethiopian Jews to Israel, such as Operation Solomon in 1991. Vietnamese Israelis therefore exist in an uneasy “third space” created by a “racial triangulation” of Israeli Jews and Arab Palestinians, as well as white Ashkenazi Jews and Black Ethiopian Jews—two binaries that admittedly erase those caught in between, such as Arab Jews, the Mizrahim.⁵⁰

On 24 January 1979, the second wave of Vietnamese refugees—fifteen families consisting of 103 people total—landed in Tel Aviv, having left the *Tung An*, boarded a KLM plane in Manila, and transferred to an El-Al plane in Athens.⁵¹ After being welcomed at Ben Gurion Airport by the first wave of Vietnamese refugees, they were promptly driven to an absorption center in Afula, a Zionist settlement town in

Marj ibn ‘Amir (Jezreel Valley) in northern Israel-Palestine that had displaced the Arab village of Al-‘Affula. Founded in 1925 on lands purchased by the American Zion Commonwealth, Afula was the first planned urban settlement in Historic Palestine, indexing the United States’ early archipelagic entanglement with Palestinian dispossession. As with the first wave of Vietnamese refugees, the Israeli government provided subsidized, furnished apartments and free Hebrew lessons to the new arrivals. Tran remembers arriving in his family’s assigned apartment in the middle of the night and finding bread on the table for breakfast the next morning.⁵² After several months, the refugees found jobs at the Afula Hospital, the Ford factory in Nazareth, and the dairy factory at Kibbutz Tel Yosef and moved into more permanent government-subsidized housing in upper Afula. Even so, they faced discrimination for their non-Jewish status. For example, although the refugees were promised tax exemptions for the first six months by a representative of the Ministry of Immigrant Absorption in Haifa, the local tax evaluation clerk insisted that the tax exemption was only given to Jewish immigrants, or *olim*, with an *oleh* certificate.⁵³ Furthermore, whereas the refugees were promised three months of Hebrew language instruction, their *ulpan* classes were cut short after just a month and a half, forcing the refugees to take on working-class jobs inferior to the ones they had held in Vietnam as middle-class professionals.

Despite these setbacks, the second wave of Vietnamese refugee resettlement was largely seen as successful—a point that Israel made sure to stress to the international community and the UNHCR. In a telegram dated 1 February 1979, Minister of Foreign Affairs Moshe Dayan—who, as noted above, had originally abstained from the Cabinet vote on whether or not to resettle the second wave of Vietnamese refugees—thanked High Commissioner Poul Hartling for the UN’s assistance in transferring the Vietnamese refugees, “whose ordeal reminds of the ships carrying Jews around the world, during the darkest hours of our history.”⁵⁴ Like previous Israeli leaders, Dayan translated the Vietnamese refugee crisis into a particular Holocaust refugee context, emphasizing Israel’s position as a historic victim—a nation of Jewish refugees—over its concurrent role as an oppressor—a settler colonial state.

After the first two waves of Vietnamese refugee resettlement, Israel again hesitated to accept additional refugees. Around this time, the Association of South-east Asian Nations (ASEAN)—including Thailand, Singapore, the Philippines, Malaysia, and Indonesia—expressed concern over the unexpectedly large influx of boat refugees from Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos and the slow rate of refugee resettlement in Western countries.⁵⁵ On 25 May 1979, UN secretary general Kurt Waldheim sent an urgent telegram to world leaders requesting more financial contributions and increased commitments to refugee resettlement.⁵⁶ In a response to Waldheim dated 5 June 1979, Begin wrote that Israel would send an additional financial contribution to the UNHCR but that it was unable to accept more South-east Asian refugees at the time, given the “heavy burden laid on Israel in providing

a home and shelter for *Jewish* immigrants and refugees” via the Law of Return.⁵⁷ Begin reminded Waldheim of Israel’s resettlement of the first two waves of Vietnamese refugees, and again reiterated Israel’s special connection to the Southeast Asian refugee crisis: “The grave and compelling humanitarian problem arouses profound sympathy and understanding amongst our people, with its own history and experience of persecution and homelessness. The Jewish People [are] uniquely familiar with the tragedy of the unwanted refugee and his plight.”⁵⁸

An escalation in the boat refugee crisis stirred Begin to action just two weeks later, however. On 18 June 1979, Prime Minister Hussein Onn told Waldheim that due to overcrowding in Malaysia’s refugee camps, “Any boat carrying Vietnamese illegal immigrants that tries to enter Malaysian waters and attempts to land will be towed away and given assistance to proceed on its journey.”⁵⁹ Furthermore, refugees currently residing in Malaysia who were not accepted by resettlement countries or their country of origin would be expelled, “the only alternative to their being left to rot in the camps.”⁶⁰ Rumors spread that Malaysian officials would start shooting boat refugees to deter their arrival.⁶¹ Alarmed, Hartling called for an emergency UNHCR conference in Geneva.

In a letter sent to world leaders on 19 June 1979, Begin expressed concern that an international conference would be an “exercise in futility,” given the past inefficiency of such meetings in safeguarding Holocaust refugees during World War II: “As a Jew I cannot forget the useless conferences at Evian [in 1938] and Bermuda [in 1943], whose end results were the non-saving of even one Jewish child out of the one-and-a-half million Jewish children who were dragged to wanton death. Among the Vietnamese refugees there are many children and they, too, may lose their lives until such a time as an international conference convenes, until its deliberations get under way and until its resolutions are adopted.”⁶² Establishing a special connection between Jewish refugees and Vietnamese refugees, Begin again interpolated the Southeast Asian refugee crisis in a longer history of Jewish refugeehood, going so far as to characterize the contemporary moment as another “Holocaust.” He urged state leaders to, rather than convene an international conference, tell Hartling directly that they would commit to resettling a portion of Malaysia’s refugee population proportionate to their country’s “size of territory and population,” thus ensuring a quicker humanitarian outcome.⁶³ Begin thus positioned himself as an international leader on refugee issues, even as he limited the demographic burden imposed on his small country. In response, the PLO criticized Begin’s letter as “a cynical and blatant propaganda gesture on the part of the state, which deliberately caused the exodus of hundreds and thousands of [Palestinians] out of their homeland.”⁶⁴ Begin’s humanitarian gesture toward the Southeast Asian refugees again elided Israel’s role in displacing Palestinian refugees.

Begin sent his proposal to President Jimmy Carter, the UNHCR in Geneva, and forty-nine prime ministers. He received replies from countries as diverse as Samoa, Italy, the Dominican Republic, Singapore, Papua New Guinea, Japan,

Australia, Luxemburg, Colombia, Uruguay, Costa Rica, Greece, Lesotho, Finland, Jamaica, Germany, Canada, the United Kingdom, South Africa, and Chile.⁶⁵ At Begin's urging, the Knesset unanimously approved a similarly worded resolution on 20 June 1979: "In the name of a nation that in this generation has experienced the most terrible of all holocausts, the Knesset calls upon all parliaments to take action towards the acceptance and absorption of the Vietnamese refugees."⁶⁶ Waldheim responded that he thought an international conference would still be prudent and asked Begin whether his government would comply.⁶⁷ Begin telegraphed his agreement to participate in the conference, which would take place 20–21 July 1979 in Geneva, though he again expressed concerns that the conference would be a tragic repeat of Evian and Bermuda.⁶⁸

On 1 July 1979, in response to the UNHCR's request, Begin's administration committed to resettling an additional 200 refugees.⁶⁹ At the UN Conference on Indochinese Refugees in Geneva three weeks later—the largest international conference to date on Southeast Asian refugees—US vice-president Walter F. Mondale echoed Begin's political rhetoric when he cited the Evian conference and drew parallels between the Southeast Asian refugee crisis and the Jewish Holocaust three decades prior: "If each nation at Evian had agreed on that day to take in 17,000 Jews at once, every Jew in the Reich could have been saved."⁷⁰ Evidencing the political entanglements between the United States and Israel, Mondale urged international leaders, "Let us not re-enact [the Evian conference's] error. Let us not be the heirs to their shame."⁷¹ Other US politicians invoked similar parallels. For example, in a November 1978 letter to Israeli ambassador to the United States Zvi Rafiah, New York congressman Stephen J. Solarz explained that he was driven to help the "15,000 homeless and helpless Cambodian refugees in Thailand" by the "haunting reminder of the European refugees who tried without success to find a refuge in our own country from the horrors of Hitlerism almost forty years ago."⁷² He concluded that "our own government, mindful of its failure to do anything for those who were fleeing the previous European Holocaust, is determined not to turn its back on the victims of the present Asian Holocaust."⁷³ In a July 1979 letter to the UNHCR, Vietnamese refugees recently resettled in California also invoked the Holocaust to critique the Vietnamese communist government's human rights abuses and stress the urgency of Vietnamese refugee resettlement: "As long as the present mad rulers in Hanoi stay in power the Indochinese exodus will continue just like the Jewish holocaust ended only after the fall of Hitler. We need help in ridding our homeland of the criminals who are as vicious and coldblooded as any Nazi storm-trooper."⁷⁴ In comparing Vietnamese refugee flight to the "Jewish holocaust," these Vietnamese Americans invoked a sense of moral imperative. That moral imperative, however, privileged a history of Jewish refugeehood over the contemporaneous reality of Palestinian refugeehood.

In August 1979, A. Ben-Yohanan, director of the Asia and Oceania Division of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, instructed Weissberger to return to Southeast

Asia to select 200 more candidates for refugee resettlement. This time, the Israeli committee in charge of Vietnamese refugee resettlement expressed a preference for refugees of ethnic Chinese descent and warned Weissberger to avoid refugees from Cambodia or Laos.⁷⁵ Such preferences, however, reproduced global hierarchies as to which refugees were considered worthy of care: refugees from Laos and Cambodia were often overlooked in favor of refugees from Vietnam, given the widespread knowledge of the United States' controversial war in Vietnam and the relative ignorance of President Nixon's "Secret War" in the neighboring nations. Furthermore, ethnic Chinese entrepreneurs in Vietnam—who had made up the second wave of refugees resettled in Israel-Palestine—were often wealthier and more educated than ethnic Vietnamese refugees from the countryside and, therefore, would presumably have an easier time readjusting to their new home. In sum, Israel's explicit ethnic preferences betrayed the pragmatic calculations underwriting the Zionist state's humanitarian gesture.

Guided by the committee's specifications, Weissberger's initial plan was to offer asylum to 63 relatives of Vietnamese refugees already resettled in Israel-Palestine—most of whom were stationed in the Malaysian refugee camps—and to select an additional 120 refugees from the Philippines.⁷⁶ The 200-person refugee quota would be filled soon after, once the number of family reunification cases had been confirmed. However, when Weissberger arrived in Malaysia, 36 out of the 45 refugee relatives *refused* to go to Israel-Palestine—a country that they either did not recognize or did not think could offer them many opportunities—and Weissberger could not track down the other nine.⁷⁷ Such refusals evidence the ways refugees enacted agency over their own futures, however limited and constrained. In the end, Weissberger did not select any refugees from Malaysia—the country that had precipitated Begin's call to resettle an additional 200 refugees in the first place.

Weissberger also encountered problems at Camp Palawan in the Philippines, where he judged that most of the "good" refugees had already departed, having been offered asylum in the United States or Australia, and only what he called "problematic families" (*mishpakhot ba'ayatiyot*) remained.⁷⁸ For Weissberger, the category of "problematic families" included single parents, orphans, and widows—those who, as with the second wave of refugees, were presumably more likely to invite miscegenation with the Jewish population. Although he spent a month interviewing hundreds of refugees in Manila, Weissberger ended up selecting only fifty-five individuals (thirteen families) from Camp Palawan. Included in this group were Hoài Mỹ Nguyễn and his wife, who when they fled Vietnam by boat, never expected that they would end up in *nước Do Thái*, the "land of the Jewish people."⁷⁹ By the time Weissberger offered them asylum, they had been waiting in the refugee camp for almost two years and were eager to secure permanent resettlement. Once in Israel-Palestine, they would give birth to Vaan Nguyen, a prominent Vietnamese Israeli poet (discussed in chapter 6).

Under pressure to complete the 200-refugee quota, Weissberger sent a flurry of telegrams to various ministries in Israel to secure permission to visit the refugee camps in Thailand and Hong Kong.⁸⁰ They obliged. At the Songkhla refugee camp in Thailand, however, Weissberger encountered a similar situation: "90% of the residents were selected by the U.S. (that began to absorb at a rate of 6,000 a month) and what was left were fractures of families" that had been waiting in the camps for months, passed over by other resettlement nations.⁸¹ Furthermore, no refugees expressed interest in traveling to Israel-Palestine, since only a few had even heard of the country before, so Weissberger advertised Israel's asylum offer over the local radio station.⁸² Tellingly, these radio announcements were made in Chinese rather than Vietnamese, betraying Israel's preference for ethnic Chinese refugees from Vietnam. Of the group of refugees who finally expressed interest in immigrating to Israel-Palestine, 35 percent were infected with tuberculosis and twelve had leprosy, so, in the end, Weissberger accepted only 63 refugees (nineteen families) from Thailand.

Weissberger then proceeded to Kai Tak camp in Hong Kong, where he found "exemplary order, discipline and control of the residents, which were clearly missing in the previous three countries."⁸³ Here, too, however, he faced difficulties. First, the heads of refugee families were required to go out and work for their sustenance, so Weissberger encountered only women and children in the camp. Second, as in Thailand, very few refugees desired to go to Israel-Palestine, which they viewed as a war-stricken country, so Weissberger distributed publicity pamphlets, which included positive testimonies from the second wave of refugees in Afula, to encourage interest. Of those who eventually expressed the intent to resettle in Israel-Palestine, 41 passed the required medical tests and were accepted by Weissberger. However, on the day of departure, a woman went into labor, so her family was left behind and told to petition for immigration to Israel-Palestine at a later date. In the end, Weissberger accepted 38 people (nine families) from Kai Tak camp.

Meanwhile, in mid-September 1979, the Israeli ship *ZIM Sydney*, steered by Captain Ilo Eidelstein, was directed by a US scout plane to a nearby boat containing 41 refugees.⁸⁴ The Israeli ship dropped the Vietnamese refugees off in Singapore, with the promise to resettle them if no other state would take them. Although Israeli officials had initially decided that the 41 refugees would not count toward the country's 200-refugee quota, they soon changed their minds once they encountered so many difficulties in locating refugees willing to immigrate.⁸⁵ These 41 also initially refused to go to Israel-Palestine, unanimously demanding resettlement in the United States. However, after a "vigorous publicity action," the refugees finally agreed, and Israel was, in Weissberger's words, "saved . . . from disgrace."⁸⁶

On 22 October 1979, the 197 refugees from the Philippines, Thailand, Hong Kong, and Singapore were flown from Bangkok via Athens to Israel-Palestine, where they were housed in a new absorption center in Sderot, a city in southern

Israel-Palestine near Gaza that at the time was mostly populated by Moroccan Jews.⁸⁷ Sderot was founded as a development town in 1954 on the remains of the Palestinian village of Najd, whose residents had fled Zionist violence during al-Nakba. Although Weissberger had initially sought out ethnic Chinese refugees with entrepreneurial experience, the group he ended up recruiting consisted mostly of ethnic Vietnamese families who had worked as fishermen and farmers.⁸⁸

This third wave of refugees was met with mixed reactions in Israel-Palestine. The minister of immigrant absorption, Azriel Veldman, and the head of the Sderot town council, Amos Hanania, accompanied Vietnamese refugees from the first two waves to the airport to welcome the third group.⁸⁹ The local schoolchildren of Sderot gave the newcomers red roses and Israeli flags. But some Jewish residents expressed resentment at the Vietnamese refugees' special treatment. One commented, "It hurts me to see that they are bringing here non-Jews that will get better apartments than ours."⁹⁰ Like the first two waves of Vietnamese refugees, this third wave did not qualify for all the rights granted *olim* under the Law of Return; however, the fact that they were given special assistance at all still generated resentment from those who believed that the Israeli state should privilege the needs of its Jewish citizens.⁹¹ These negative feelings would continue to haunt the Vietnamese refugees in the following decades, even as they gained Israeli citizenship and birthed a generation born in Israel-Palestine yet largely still considered perpetual foreigners.

So far, this chapter has argued that both Israeli and American politicians drew symbolic parallels between Jewish refugees and Vietnamese refugees, between the Holocaust and the Vietnam War, in order to assert Israel's special role in alleviating the Southeast Asian refugee crisis and to retroactively underscore the morality of Zionist settlement of Historic Palestine during World War II. Such rhetorical overtures, however, were made at the expense of Palestinian refugees, as a short article in the *Jerusalem Post* dated 18 June 1979 makes explicit. This article begins by comparing the expulsion of ethnic Chinese minorities from Vietnam with the genocide of Jews in Europe, and ends by calling on the United Nations to turn its attention *away* from Palestinians, who allegedly do not constitute a "real" refugee problem: "The UN's refugee effort has for long been bogged down in the political entanglements of the Palestinian refugees, whose problem it is committed, under pressure from the Arab world, not to solve. It would be refreshing, for a change, if it devoted its energies to a *real refugee problem* that urgently requires the saving of tens if not hundreds of thousands of lives."⁹² Blaming Arab nations for exacerbating Palestinian refugeehood by insisting upon the Right of Return, this article pits Palestinian refugees against Southeast Asian refugees in a seeming competition for the UN's limited resources. In a parallel critique, Israeli leaders publicly derided Israel's neighboring Arab gulf states for *not* assisting with the Southeast Asian refugee crisis, distinguishing Israel as the sole Western democracy in the so-called Middle East.⁹³ Such rhetoric, by extension, positioned Vietnamese Israelis

as refugee settlers whose asylum and eventual citizenship in the settler colonial state of Israel was predicated on the ongoing displacement, dispossession, and disenfranchisement of native Palestinians. Thus did the refugee settler condition in Israel-Palestine develop, marking structural antagonisms between Vietnamese refugees and Palestinian refugees, Vietnamese Israelis and Palestinian liberation fighters—two groups differentially positioned in relation to Israel's own national narrative of Jewish refugeehood.

GIVING VOICE: REFUGEE GRATITUDE, REFUGEE REFUSAL

As part of its attempt to frame Israel as a nation of Jewish refugees uniquely positioned to empathize with the Southeast Asian refugee crisis, the Zionist state has often called upon Vietnamese refugees to express gratitude for their humanitarian rescue. The series *Features from Jerusalem*, for example, features Tran Thuan, an English-speaking spokesman for the second wave of ethnic Chinese refugees from Vietnam, who had told “Israelis how grateful I am” shortly before landing at Ben Gurion Airport in January 1979.⁹⁴ Five months later, Tran followed up: “People have been very helpful and kind and we’re already beginning to feel very much at home.”⁹⁵ More extensively, a July 1979 promotional booklet entitled “The Absorption of Vietnamese Refugees: The Israel Experience / L’Intégration des Réfugiés Vietnamiens: L’expérience d’Israël,” published by the Israeli Department of Information for Immigrants (*Olim*) and stamped by the Ministry of Immigrant Absorption, includes three letters from resettled refugees expressing gratitude to the Zionist state. Invoking fraternal language, Minister of Immigrant Absorption David Levi opens the booklet by emphasizing that Israel was “among the first to accept brother refugees from Indo-China” because “we the People of Israel know the taste of being pursued and to wander—homeless—amongst the peoples of the world.”⁹⁶ Presenting the booklet as the “story of the successful integration of two groups of Vietnamese refugees to my country,” Levi addresses an international audience when he calls on “other countries to follow suit and accept similar groups of refugees.”⁹⁷

The first letter in this booklet was written by Dr. Tran Quang Hoa (quoted at the beginning of this chapter). On behalf of the first wave of refugees, he expresses “deep thanks and deep gratitude coming from our heart[s] and our mind[s].”⁹⁸ Tran reports that after two years, all members of the first group have resettled in the Tel Aviv region in “houses provided by the Ministry of Immigrant Absorption and by the administration of the places where people are working.” Furthermore, he writes, “we all feel happy and satisfied with our social and professional life in the places where we are living.” He concludes, “We always remember that we owe all our success to the generosity of the people and the Government of Israel.”⁹⁹ Tran depicts Israel as a humanitarian nation and the refugees’ resettlement as a

success—a testimony that the Ministry of Immigrant Absorption intentionally packaged and distributed in this booklet to showcase Israel's magnanimity.

Similarly, in the second letter, translated into English and French from Hebrew, Long Li Tin Lau, a youth who traveled to Israel-Palestine with the first wave of refugees ahead of his parents and siblings, recounts his harrowing flight from Vietnam, his rescue by the Israeli ship *Yuvali*, and his first days in the country: "The people of Ofakim were very kind to us. After a year, we 10 children who had no parents, were told that we will be moved to a youth village where we will live and study together with other Israel kids. They brought us to a beautiful place called *Meier Shfeyah* Youth Village. They received us with open arms and provided us with everything. We learned Hebrew and other subjects and felt like everyone else."¹⁰⁰ Although Lau says he was made to feel "like everyone else," his experience may have been an exception. Indeed, his testimony is at odds with the experiences of many Vietnamese Israelis I interviewed in 2015–16, suggesting that his positive testimony might have been hand-selected for this promotional booklet. Meanwhile, in the third letter, Tran Thuan (quoted above from *Features from Jerusalem*), details the second wave of refugees' experiences: a generous welcome in Afula, receipt of free health care for six months plus meal subsidies, ease in finding jobs, and resettlement in more permanent housing thanks to grants from the Jewish Agency. He ends his letter by thanking the "kind-hearted and helping friends as we have here in Israel!"¹⁰¹

The expressions of heartfelt gratitude depicted in this promotional booklet are countered, however, by instances of refugee refusal to ventriloquize the Zionist narrative of state benevolence and refugee indebtedness. These are moments of slippage when the Israeli state could not orchestrate the intended refugee response. As discussed in the previous section, Yehuda Weissberger encountered many examples of refugee refusal to move to Israel-Palestine while on his mission to select the third wave of refugees. Refugees refused to evidence Israel's self-representation as an attractive refuge, instead holding out for the chance to resettle elsewhere.

A 1986 Associated Press story by Jonathan Immanuel likewise depicts refugee refusal alongside refugee gratitude. He reports that the "young Vietnamese tend to see themselves as Israelis. Huynh Minh, for example, says his favorite subject in school is the Torah, the five Books of Moses which speak of God's promise to give the land of Israel to the Jews."¹⁰² However, when he interviews Dr. Tran Quang Hoa, who by 1986 had found a job as a heart surgeon at Tel Hashomer military hospital near Tel Aviv, the doctor expresses concern whether Vietnamese refugees would ever be truly welcomed into Israeli society: "This society looks Western, but in its depths it is basically religious. Can we really be Israeli without being Jewish?"¹⁰³ This tone is markedly different from the unreserved gratitude Tran expresses in the letter featured in "The Absorption of Vietnamese Refugees: The Israel Experience," discussed above. Israeli leaders meanwhile attempted to dismiss Tran's concerns. In the article, Ministry of Religious Affairs official Daniel

Rossing insists that Judaism does not encourage conversions and, therefore, “there is no reason at all why they should feel they have to change their religion in order to be Israelis.”¹⁰⁴ Immigration official Arie Korat, in contrast, acknowledges the material disadvantages of not converting to Judaism: because the Israeli-born children of Vietnamese refugees are not automatically drafted into the Israel Defense Forces (IDF), they could “miss out on job opportunities and government benefits restricted to veterans.”¹⁰⁵ These structural disadvantages exacerbated many Vietnamese refugees’ feelings of alienation and discrimination in Israel-Palestine. Refusing Israel’s narrative of successful resettlement, by 1986 “scores” of refugees had “left to join relatives in Western Europe and the Americas because they were unable to fully integrate, and only 200 remain.” Furthermore, “most of those who stayed are scattered throughout the country, and the community is not closely knit.”¹⁰⁶ Driven apart by economic precarity, Vietnamese Israelis struggled to maintain a sense of ethnic community in Israel-Palestine.

Today, Vietnamese Israelis continue to practice refugee refusal by countering Israel’s exclusive claims to their identity. Disrupting a narrative of unidirectional resettlement, some individuals embody archipelagic orientations, living and working in Vietnam or the United States for several weeks or years at a time before returning to Israel-Palestine.¹⁰⁷ Others acquire multiple passports and nationalities. Hoài Mỹ Nguyễn, for example, recently petitioned the Vietnamese embassy in Tel Aviv for Vietnamese passports for himself and his family.¹⁰⁸ In 2015, he served as a translator for Vietnamese foreign laborers recruited to work in Israel’s agriculture and irrigation sectors, thereby bridging the gap between the Vietnamese embassy in Israel, the overseas laborers, and Israeli society. Putting aside the communist-anticommunist divisions of Vietnam’s civil war, Nguyễn and others work to develop a more archipelagic vision of Vietnamese community—one that recognizes kinship across nation-state borders.

VIETNAMESE ISRAELIS TODAY: TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY REPRESENTATIONS OF “MODEL REFUGEES”

After the third wave of Vietnamese refugees resettled in Sderot in October 1979, Israel did not absorb any more refugees from Southeast Asia, refusing even family reunification requests.¹⁰⁹ Between 1979 and 2009, Israel offered asylum to only four other non-Jewish groups: 84 Bosnian Muslim refugees in 1993, who were granted temporary residence in Israel-Palestine until the end of the Bosnian War (a humanitarian act that was critiqued for directing attention away from the contemporaneous deportation of 400 Palestinian Muslims); 112 Albanian Muslim refugees from the Balkan War in 1999, who were granted six-month tourist visas but not absorbed like the Vietnamese; 5,895 Lebanese Christians (Southern Lebanon Army members and their families) in 2000, following Israel’s withdrawal from southern Lebanon; and 500 Sudanese asylum seekers from Darfur, who were

granted temporary residency permits in 2007.¹¹⁰ None of these groups were considered “convention refugees,” meaning that their asylum in Israel-Palestine was not structured by the 1951 United Nations Refugee Convention but was left, rather, to the discretion of the Ministry of Interior, precluding any legal precedent.¹¹¹ In 2009, in an attempt to standardize asylum policy in response to a large influx of asylum seekers, Israel established a Refugee Status Determination Unit (RSD) under the Ministry of Interior, which works closely with the UN to process asylum claims.¹¹²

Today, asylum seekers come to Israel-Palestine from three main regions: the majority from African countries (mostly Eritrea and Sudan but also Congo, Liberia, Ghana, and Somalia); a few from Europe (including Yugoslavia, Russia, and Ukraine); and a more recent surge from Syria.¹¹³ In 2018, there were about 36,000 stateless African asylum seekers living in Israel.¹¹⁴ More often than not, these asylum seekers are imprisoned, granted temporary residence but forbidden to work or apply for citizenship, or deported to seemingly neutral third countries such as Rwanda or Uganda (sometimes under the smokescreen of “voluntary repatriation”).¹¹⁵ The Vietnamese refugee case, therefore, is exceptional: not only was it the first instance of non-Jewish resettlement in the self-proclaimed Jewish nation, but it has since proven to be a key exception to Israel’s otherwise strict asylum policy. Indeed, Hebrew distinguishes between “refugees” and “asylum seekers”—*plitim* versus *mevakshei miklat*—and while the former is used to refer to the Vietnamese, the latter is reserved for contemporary stateless peoples in Israel-Palestine. At the very level of language, then, Israel draws parallels between Vietnamese “refugees” and Jewish refugees, even as it denies such parallelism to Black and Arab “asylum seekers,” let alone displaced Palestinians.

Why were the Vietnamese refugees granted asylum and eventual citizenship in Israel-Palestine in the late 1970s, while the vast majority of asylum seekers since then have been turned away? The answer to this question is complex, indexing both domestic and international concerns. First, Israeli leaders could control the number of Vietnamese refugees they resettled. The Southeast Asian boat refugee crisis was both geographically and politically distant from the State of Israel. Sans escort by transcontinental flight, unwanted refugees from Southeast Asia had no means to claim asylum within Israel’s borders. Furthermore, the international community did not hold Israel politically responsible for the Southeast Asian refugee exodus and, therefore, praised rather than critiqued the token number of refugees it did absorb. In other words, 366 was seen as humanitarian excess, rather than a woefully inadequate response. In contrast, current refugee crises are geographically and politically much more proximate to Israel. Many of today’s asylum seekers cross into Israel-Palestine by foot, given its shared border with Syria and its geographically intermediary location between Africa and Europe. As a result, the number of asylum seekers from such places as Syria, Eritrea, and Sudan is much larger in scale, and Israeli leaders worry that resettling a handful

of these asylum seekers would set a dangerous precedent that could threaten the Zionist state's precarious Jewish demographic majority. Then there is the case of Palestinian refugees, to whom the State of Israel continues to deny the Right of Return. The 366 Vietnamese refugees, in contrast, never presented a demographic threat to the Zionist nation.

Second, as argued above, Israel's resettlement of the Vietnamese refugees was a performance of humanitarianism for an international audience. The hypervisibility of the Southeast Asian refugee crisis presented an already set stage upon which Israeli leaders could rehabilitate their national image after the Six Day War. In contrast, more recent refugee displacement from Eritrea and Sudan has not generated as much international concern, in part because the United States has not pledged as much support; and although the Syrian refugee crisis *has* generated international sympathy in recent years, the potential benefits to Israel's self-image that would come from granting asylum to Syrian refugees are far outweighed by Israel's demographic concerns regarding a mass influx of non-Jewish Syrian refugees, some presumed to be Palestinian "terrorists."

In sum, the Zionist framing of the Vietnamese refugee case as exceptional reproduces anti-Black and anti-Arab stereotypes of Asian docility. Within Israel's racial landscape, Vietnamese refugees have become "model refugees" who do not threaten to disrupt the existing social order: a stereotype that then codes non-Vietnamese subjects—primarily Black and Arab asylum seekers, as well as displaced Palestinians—as always already suspect. Such a conception of "model refugees" resonates with the racialization of Asian subjects in the North American context as "model minorities." When drawing such comparisons, it is important to note, however, the distinct racial politics in Israel-Palestine versus the United States. In Israel-Palestine, white-presenting Ashkenazi Jews constitute a demographic minority even as they dominate key positions of power, and nonwhite Mizrahi and Sephardic Jews have often aligned themselves politically with right-wing populist leaders, given their exclusion from elite Ashkenazi socialist circles. In the United States, in contrast, white Americans who have dominated key positions of power constitute a demographic majority, while people of color have largely turned to left-of-center political parties and organizations to form effective coalitions. As such, although Vietnamese Israelis cannot be considered "model minorities" in the North American sense, many of the characteristics attributed to this stereotype—such as incorporation into what Quynh Nhu Le calls "settler racial hegemonies" at the expense of Indigenous, non-Vietnamese, and nonwhite subjects—apply, solidifying their structural position as "model refugees" within Israel-Palestine's racial landscape.¹¹⁶

Given Israel's strict asylum policy and its ongoing settlement and occupation of Palestine, the exceptional case of Vietnamese Israeli refugee resettlement continues to be re-cited in the contemporary context in order to either critique or rehabilitate Israel's image in the international sphere. A 2015 article in the *Los Angeles*

Times entitled “One Country That Won’t Be Taking Syrian Refugees: Israel” and a 2017 feature essay in *Foreign Policy* entitled “Inside Israel’s Secret Program to Get Rid of African Refugees,” for example, reference Prime Minister Menachem Begin’s 1977 resettlement of sixty-six Vietnamese refugees in their critique of Israel’s contemporary asylum decisions.¹¹⁷ These two articles notably fail to acknowledge the subsequent two waves of Vietnamese refugee resettlement, which generated less international attention than the first, spectacularized act. They also do not account for the ways Vietnamese refugee resettlement continues to direct international attention away from ongoing Palestinian displacement.

Zionist writers cite the case of Vietnamese refugee resettlement as well, though with the opposite intent of promoting a more positive image of Israel to a global readership. In 2012, for example, both Shoshana Bryen’s article “Israel and the Boat People” in the *Times of Israel* and Menucha Chana Levin’s “Vietnamese Boat People in the Promised Land: Memories of Holocaust Refugees, but with a Different Ending” on *aish.com*, a Jerusalem-based Jewish-content website launched in 2000, commemorated the thirty-fifth anniversary of the arrival of the first wave of Vietnamese refugees to Israel in 1977.¹¹⁸ Both articles portray Israel sympathetically, and both echo earlier rhetoric that interpolates the Vietnamese case in a longer national narrative of Jewish refugeehood. For example, Bryen writes:

The experience of Jewish refugees and the hopelessness of statelessness made Israel sensitive to the hopelessness of people from another place, another culture, another war, giving the Vietnamese a place to start over.

(For those rolling their eyes on behalf of stateless Palestinian refugees: It is precisely the Jewish experience with statelessness that impels Israel to continue to seek a mechanism by which Palestinians can achieve the state the Arab states declined on their behalf in 1948—without losing the State of Israel.)¹¹⁹

According to Bryen, Israel’s resettlement of the Vietnamese refugees was not hypocritical in regard to Israel’s policy toward Palestinian refugees, since Israel officially supports a two-state solution. This invocation of a two-state solution, however, fails to acknowledge the settler colonial foundation of the State of Israel, the continual disenfranchisement of Palestinians living within Israel’s 1948 borders, and the ongoing settlement of the occupied West Bank and Gaza. Blaming Arab nationalism rather than Zionist aggression for the current lack of an independent Palestinian state, Bryen invokes Vietnamese Israelis as a form of “yellow-washing” in her attempt to defend Israel from criticism.¹²⁰

Sarit Catz’s 2012 article “On Refugees and Racism, a Double Standard against Israel,” published by the Committee for Accuracy in Middle East Reporting in America (CAMERA), is even more defensive of Israel. In response to major news outlets that had critiqued Israel for the recent repatriation of undocumented African migrants, Catz offers examples of Israel’s benevolence toward racialized refugees, such as the “*black* Ethiopian Jews” in the 1980s and 1990s and the

Vietnamese in the 1970s.¹²¹ Catz's use of italics here is pointed, as well as her vehement assertion that "never before had black Africans been taken from Africa, not from freedom to slavery but from slavery to freedom. No other nation has ever done that. Only Israel." In a move that can be called "blackwashing"—akin to Fujikane's theorization of "yellowwashing"—Catz paints Israel as a haven for African diasporics, denying a longer history of structural anti-Blackness in Israel.¹²² As the United States promotes a narrative of American exceptionalism in order to elide the archipelagic nature of its military empire, so too does Israel promote a story of Israeli exceptionalism: one of unparalleled morality and supposed racial liberalism.

Some Zionist writers cite the Vietnamese case to argue that the Israeli state's recent asylum decisions tarnish Israel's reputation. In her 2012 article "I Remember When Israel Rescued Non-Jewish Refugees," Lisa Goldman juxtaposes a portrait of Eritrean refugees "who were left to bake in the desert sun for a week without food or medical help, while the army prevented activists from bringing food or a physician to examine them," with an image of Israeli magnanimity toward the Vietnamese refugees.¹²³ Israeli writer Hillel Halkin offers a pragmatic solution to the question of Sudanese asylum seekers in his 2007 article "A Shame on Israel." Chastising Prime Minister Ehud Olmert's unsympathetic response to the Sudanese refugees who crossed the border from Egypt into Israel-Palestine, Halkin argues that Olmert should have accepted a small number of Sudanese refugees as a symbolic gesture, akin to Begin's move of "pure theater" in the 1970s.¹²⁴ Halkin agrees with Olmert's assertion that Israel cannot solve the Sudanese refugee problem—indeed, he believes that Israel already suffers from too many "illegal foreign laborers." Nonetheless, he posits that absorbing a token number of Sudanese refugees would help to counter some of Israel's negative "propaganda."¹²⁵

Extending Halkin's argument, Hirsch Goodman, in a 2014 *New York Times* op-ed entitled "Losing the Propaganda War," bemoans the fact that "Israel is letting itself be branded an apartheid state—and even encouraging it."¹²⁶ In addition to citing the military buildup in the occupied territories as contributing to this negative propaganda, Goodman writes: "Instead of welcoming Eritrean and Sudanese refugees seeking asylum—the way that a former Likud Party prime minister, Menachem Begin, did in 1977 with the Vietnamese boat people, saying they reminded him of Jewish refugees during the Holocaust—Israel is confining today's asylum-seekers to a camp in the desert, providing reams of footage to those who want to prove Israel is a racist society."¹²⁷ Conversely, to accept a token number of Eritrean and Sudanese refugees in the present would vastly improve Israel's vexed image in the international sphere. Such open displays of political calculation in the contemporary moment shed light on some of the rhetorical considerations at play during the original period of Vietnamese refugee resettlement in the 1970s. The image of Begin welcoming the Vietnamese refugees to Israel helped to

recuperate Israel's reputation by directing attention away from the Zionist state's apartheid policies.

Other Zionist organizations appropriate the case of Vietnamese refugee resettlement to assert Israel's moral superiority in the Middle East.¹²⁸ For example, as part of their "Israel: The Oldest Democracy in the Middle East" campaign, BlueStar, a nonprofit 501(c)(3) organization "dedicated to empowering the next generation of Israel advocates and leaders," distributed a poster asking, "Which Middle Eastern Country Provided Refuge and Citizenship to 350 Homeless Vietnamese Desperately Seeking Political Asylum? Only Israel." On the poster, the question and answer appear in stark white text against a ruby-red backdrop.¹²⁹ Designed to criticize the surrounding Arab nations as a region of "tyranny and unrest" and align Israel with a Western political order of liberal democratic rule, this poster again translates Vietnamese refugee displacement into a longer history of Jewish Israeli refugeehood. Two black-and-white photos of seemingly destitute Southeast Asian refugees are followed by the statement, "Many Israelis know first-hand what it is like to be shut out from freedom. Despite its small size, Israel has managed to reach out and provide humanitarian relief and aid to others in times of need."¹³⁰ Such assertions of course neglect to account for Israel's tendency to deny asylum to the vast majority of its asylum seekers and to continually dispossess native Palestinians.

And what about Israel's special relationship with the United States? An archipelagic framework prompts recognition that Israel's reticence to offer asylum to contemporary asylum seekers was paralleled by the Trump administration's own policy of severely reducing refugee resettlement to the United States. Like Israeli leaders, President Donald Trump justified his position by painting refugees from Muslim countries as potential terrorist infiltrators. Interestingly, the "model refugee" rhetoric used to depict Vietnamese Israelis has also been used in reference to resettled Vietnamese American refugees, as made apparent by headlines such as "As Trump Bans Syrian Refugees, a Look Back at When California welcomed 50,000 Displaced People" and subtitles such as "The US was once a leader on refugee policy—then Trump came to power."¹³¹ Indeed, like the pro-Israel articles cited above, these newspaper articles point to the United States' humanitarian resettlement of the Vietnamese refugees in the 1970s to establish a point of contrast to the nation's recent asylum policy. They also argue that such humanitarianism ultimately benefited the United States' geopolitical influence abroad. According to political scientist Idean Salehyan, "When the United States is seen as a good actor on the international stage, that's incredibly important as a tool of some would say soft power in generating goodwill and fostering cooperation with other things that we care about as well."¹³² In both the Israeli and US contexts, then—and here we must include the unincorporated territory of Guam—Vietnamese refugees have been depicted as "model refugees": those whose resettlement generated a positive

image for their respective nations while directing international attention away from ongoing settler colonial violence.

“REFUGEEITUDE”: FIRST- AND SECOND-GENERATION MEDIA FATIGUE

According to Vinh Nguyen, “refugeetude” is a “form of subjectivity—an experience, consciousness, and knowledge that lingers even when the legal designation is lifted.”¹³³ Even after gaining citizenship in the State of Israel, many Vietnamese Israelis continued to feel like refugees: unsettled, unwelcome, not fully at home in the Zionist state. Furthermore, many passed this condition of refugeetude down to their children, via what Marianne Hirsch calls “postmemory.”¹³⁴ In response to media narratives that depict Vietnamese Israelis as “model refugees,” first- and second-generation Vietnamese Israelis have sometimes expressed media fatigue: that is, a frustration that the media constantly turn to them to evidence Israel’s humanitarianism in order to rehabilitate the Zionist state’s image in the international sphere.

Media fatigue is exemplified in Simona Weinglass’s 2015 article “35 Years On, Where Are Israel’s Vietnamese Refugees?,” which responds to Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s recent refusal to offer asylum to Syrian refugees.¹³⁵ What is striking about this article, however, is that it veers in style from previous articles of this genre. Weinglass openly describes her *difficulty* in finding Vietnamese Israeli informants. She scouts out a restaurant owned by ethnic Chinese refugees from Vietnam in Bat Yam, for example, but the husband and wife refuse to talk to her:

Asked if he could be interviewed, a 50-ish Vietnamese man smoking outside said, “No, I am just a cook, go inside and talk to the management.”

Inside, a woman who appeared to be his wife, said in fluent Hebrew, “No, my Hebrew is not good enough.”

Why do you think people in the Vietnamese community are so reluctant to be interviewed?

The woman smiles and shrugs.

Is it because you want to be left in peace?

The woman nods, a glint of assent in her eye, then looks away. The conversation is over.¹³⁶

Weinglass messages twenty Vietnamese Israelis over Facebook, but only one responds with “Hi! I’m not interested, thanks.” She also contacts Vietnamese Israeli poet Vaan Nguyen, but Nguyen “declines an interview on the subject of Vietnamese refugees,” saying she would rather be interviewed regarding her book of poetry.¹³⁷

Nguyen explains, “Whenever there is a humanitarian crisis somewhere, I get calls from various media outlets asking to interview me about the refugee experience. I don’t feel like a refugee. I’m the daughter of refugees.”¹³⁸ Nguyen bears

witness to the media's frequent attempts to recuperate Israel's reputation by recalling the narrative of Vietnamese refugee resettlement whenever Israel is critiqued for its contemporary asylum policies. Such narratives flatten Vietnamese Israelis into one-dimensional "model refugees," eliding their complicated subjectivities. Nguyen resists Weinglass's questions, refusing to participate in Israel's performance of multicultural humanitarianism for an international readership.

Nguyen also critiques Netanyahu's exclusion of Syrian refugees, asserting that "compassion has no race."¹³⁹ Yet she is also careful to qualify her argument, distinguishing it from those who hope to restore Israel's international image in order to perpetuate the state's discrimination against and dispossession of native Palestinians: "Bibi will only enhance his resume if he absorbs a few hundred refugees who will not change Israel's demographic balance one iota. My family is not thriving here, but they have hope and a future. It's all relative: at least we're alive."¹⁴⁰ Nguyen refuses to play the role of the grateful refugee—she insists that her family is "not thriving"—yet she also pragmatically advocates the resettlement of Syrian refugees, acknowledging the material precarity of statelessness. In the contemporary political moment, it is the Vietnamese Israeli, then, rather than the Jewish refugee, who calls for Israel's compassion.

Such refugee compassion, it must be noted, does not always translate into Vietnamese Israeli solidarity with displaced Palestinians. In other words, Vietnamese Israelis' media fatigue with the "model refugee" stereotype does not necessarily entail wholesale rejection of the Zionist monopoly on refugee discourse—a discourse that embraces Vietnamese refugees and their descendants as legitimate refugees, akin to Jewish refugees, even as it rejects the asylum claims of Syrians, Eritreans, and Sudanese and refuses the Right of Return to displaced Palestinians. According to Tran Tai Dong (quoted above in regard to the second wave of resettled Vietnamese refugees), "The government doesn't complain about us, and we don't complain about the government."¹⁴¹ By not complaining, however, Vietnamese Israelis register their tacit acceptance of the Zionist state's ongoing settler colonial violence, evidencing the refugee settler condition.

I end this chapter with the story of Cuc Huynh Sears, whom I met in 2016 in Petah Tikvah, a Jewish suburb 6.59 miles east of Tel Aviv. Petah Tikvah was founded in 1878, following the sale of Palestinian lands in the village of Mulabbis to Orthodox Jewish settlers from Europe, and became a permanent settlement in 1883 with the financial help of early Zionist Baron Edmond de Rothschild. Sears's refugee journey evidences archipelagic connections between Vietnam, Guam, and Israel-Palestine. After fleeing Vietnam in April 1975, Sears and her daughter My Linh were processed in Guam during Operation New Life.¹⁴² One week later, Sears's husband, a US serviceman who had stayed behind in Vietnam, arrived in Guam, called Sears's name on the intercom loudspeaker, and escorted her and her daughter to first Hawai'i and then California. Haunted by the war, this husband unfortunately passed away. When she was thirty, Sears met her current husband,

an American Jew, in Oxnard, California, where he was serving in the US Navy. This husband had always dreamt of retiring in Israel-Palestine, and in the mid-2000s Sears acquiesced, becoming the first Vietnamese in the country to convert to Judaism. Tracing the *nước* that connects Sears's multiple movements across Guam, the continental United States, and Israel-Palestine—seemingly disparate “islands” of settler colonialism, US militarism, and Indigenous struggle—renders visible an interconnected archipelago of Vietnamese refugee resettlement.

Part three turns to cultural production in order to theorize potentials for solidarity between Vietnamese refugees and Indigenous Chamorros and Palestinians across the structural antagonisms produced by the refugee settler condition. Attending to what Quynh Nhu Le calls “settler racial tense,” chapters 5 and 6 engage the temporal dimensions of settler colonialism in Guam and Israel-Palestine, respectively.¹⁴³ Because solidarity does not yet exist in the social sphere, these chapters are speculative and aspirational, offering a political vocabulary for relating otherwise. Chapter 6 returns to the Israel-Palestine context via a close reading of Vaan Nguyen's poetry in relation to Palestinian poet Mourid Barghouti's *I Saw Ramallah*, as well as the film *The Journey of Vaan Nguyen*. Read together, these chapters enact an archipelagic methodology—one that maps the refugee settler condition and challenges to it across Vietnam, Guam, and Israel-Palestine.