Palestinian Refugee Experience in a Changing Humanitarian Order

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1- Introduction

Palestinian refugees are among the largest and longest-lasting of what the UNHCR – the body responsible for protection and assistance for the bulk of the world’s refugees – terms protracted refugee communities. Displaced Palestinians do not by and large come under the jurisdiction of the UNHCR but are rather provided services by UNRWA [UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees]. This difference in service provider is just one of the distinctive features of the Palestinian refugee experience, its longevity being another. Despite this distinctiveness, it would be a mistake to describe the Palestinian refugee condition as utterly exceptional – as neither comparable to any other case nor relevant to understanding the broader humanitarian world. In fact, precisely because of the longevity of displacement and of the humanitarian response to that displacement Palestinians have experienced the full range of transformations in humanitarian practice over the past sixty years. For this reason, examining this particular experience can provide an excellent window into understanding the broader post-world war II humanitarian order. Similarly, given the importance of humanitarian assistance to Palestinian communities in different countries and over more than sixty years, looking at transformation in humanitarian practice through this period can help us understand the experience of being a Palestinian refugee over the long-term.

This paper does not try to follow the entire apparatus as it has transformed over this time. Rather it highlights a few exemplary forms of humanitarian practice to suggest something of what is at stake in these transformations. The interventions considered are: rations provision, camp structure and infrastructure, and development projects. These forms of assistance work together as part of a larger humanitarian system so it would be a mistake to overstate their distinctions. Recognizing this, it is nonetheless possible (and important) to point to some key differences in the targets of these forms. All are directed at the protection and promotion of human life – and particularly of vulnerable life – but each focuses on a different aspect of that life. For rations delivery the first and primary goal is to ensure the physical survival of a population. Camp structures and infrastructure clearly have a survival aim in mind – as shelter is a basic human need – but this field of humanitarian materials also works on both familial and social life, as the spaces which people occupy (whether domestic or public) directly shape relations in both these realms. For development – whether large-scale works projects or, more recently popular, small-scale and micro-finance projects – the idea of progress, not just continuity of life or community, but transformation of both is a principal goal.

In looking at forms of humanitarian practice that have related, but also distinct, targets and goals it becomes possible to see the complicated terrain that constitutes humanitarianism – and therefore to understand more clearly how refugees might be impacted by changing humanitarian practice over the
long run. In terms of the focus of this conference – on Palestinian refugees across generations – I approach this concern less by looking at the question of identity head on and more by considering the conditions, material objects, institutions, and structures of practice that help shape that identity.

2- The humanitarian system over sixty years

UNRWA is the single most significant agency providing humanitarian assistance to Palestinian refugees. Still aid provision began before UNRWA was created and even after its establishment there have always been multiple actors in the humanitarian field – including host governments, local NGOs, international humanitarian agencies (such as CARE, MSF, and Save the Children), political actors (such as the PLO and Hamas), and religious institutions. Mapping this entire field is beyond the scope of this paper, but I would like to note some of the key transformations in humanitarian practice over this sixty year period.

The UN was involved in providing humanitarian relief to Palestinian refugees from the earliest days following their displacement. Initially delivery of this relief was managed by organizations commissioned by the UN to distribute supplies (the American Friends Service Committee [AFSC] in Gaza, the League of Red Cross Societies in the West Bank and Jordan, the ICRC in Lebanon). As in any humanitarian crisis the first step for each of these organizations was the work of “triage” (Nguyen 2010), determining which persons were eligible for assistance. This triage proceeded along several lines: determining who should count as a “refugee” (both displaced and dispossessed), identifying who was in need, and categorizing people’s relationships (family size and condition). It is important to recognize that not all aspects of this triage were about determining who was in the greatest need (as the medical origin of this term suggests), but equally about figuring out how people fit – or didn’t – into an emerging set of humanitarian categories. At times these categorical imperatives were in fact at odds with people’s material needs (as in Gaza where natives were not recognized as refugees even when they were often dispossessed of their property and in very significant need) (Feldman 2007).

The first assistance provided was food rations, clothing, tents, and basic medical care. Education was first undertaken as a voluntary effort by refugees who had been teachers in the Mandate school system, and was fairly quickly taken up as a service provided by the humanitarian agencies (Feldman 2008: 211-12). Once UNRWA was established it sought to fulfill its dual mandate of providing both “relief” and “works” to Palestinian refugees by exploring possibilities for development projects that might take refugees off the ration rolls and enable their communities to be self-sustaining. These projects, including one in Jordan modeled on the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA), generally foundered in the face of limited capacity, refugee opposition to anything that might undermine their return home, and difficulties with host governments (Al Husseini 2010: 8).

The question of the political consequences of humanitarian interventions also arose early on in relation to the infrastructure of refugee camps. As displacement wore on with no sign of resolution, UNRWA began the task of improving the housing in camps – and of replacing tents with more solid (and potentially more permanent) structures. Refugees responded differently to these projects in different places. In Syria and Lebanon refugees actively resisted any projects that they thought “might mean permanent resettlement” (UNRWA (a): 25). Accordingly, “experimental houses, erected by the Agency, have been torn down; and for many months, in Syria and Lebanon, there was widespread refusal to work on agency road-building and afforestation schemes” (UNRWA (a): 25). In Gaza, by contrast,
UNRWA reported a smooth implementation of the building project: “The new camp construction programme in Gaza was completed before the onset of the winter of 1954-55, and now no refugees in camps in Gaza remain in tents. The Agency’s Gaza officer has however, some 2,800 applications for shelter from persons outside camps; in addition births, marriages, and other social changes create a demand for shelter that has so far not been met” (UNRWA (b): 3). The politics of both building and rehabilitation of shelters has been a recurring issue over the years – though again one that is quite differently inflected in different places.

Every change in UNRWA services has been contentious, reflecting refugee concern that these changes might indicate a lessening international commitment to a just resolution of their situation and a material hardship when changes meant a retrenchment in services. Changes in rations regimes have acutely linked these two concerns. When UNRWA was first established it provided regular rations to all refugees on its lists – indeed being registered with UNRWA meant being on the rations rolls. Quite quickly this total provision (which was never universal as there were all sorts of reasons why people might not have been registered on the rolls) became qualified by gradations in need. That is, if one of the first questions for UNRWA had been ‘needy or not?’ it was quickly transformed to ‘how needy?’ Income scales were developed to determine when – and by how much – a family’s rations might be cut. New categories of refugee status were created to mark different levels of access to services. Finally – in 1982 for most fields and in the early 90s for Lebanon – the widespread provision of rations was halted. From this point on only families that qualified as “hardship cases” received rations – and only in limited amounts. Moments of crisis – such as the Israeli blockade of and attack on Gaza – are often accompanied by a return to rations distribution on an emergency basis.

As an agency that is entirely dependent on voluntary contributions and with an ever increasing client population, UNRWA is under constant financial pressure. It is frequently underfunded – meaning that contributions do not meet its budget requirements. It is no surprise, therefore, that services have decreased over the years and that the organization relies heavily on volunteer labor by refugees themselves to manage programs. In Jordan, for example, UNRWA has initiated a number of social service programs – such as the women’s program committees, rehabilitation centers, and old age support – for which it provides almost no budget support. The programs are meant to be self-sustaining – and in a number of places they have control over properties on which they are able to collect rents – and most of the people who work for these programs do so on an essentially volunteer basis. They receive nominal compensation for their work, but it is largely symbolic. Other developments in UNRWA programming over the years have included the introduction of micro-finance programs, the development of human rights curricula, and an increasing focus on non-communicable disease – all of which reflect changing priorities in international humanitarianism more generally. Just as in other areas of humanitarian and development interventions a considerable amount of the programming directed at Palestinian refugees is driven by donor agendas (Al Husseini 2010; Rempel 2010).

Having identified the general trajectory of UNRWA services over the life of the Palestinian refugee problem, I turn now to say a bit more about the three forms of humanitarian action that are my focus

1 Interview, UNRWA field office, 22 December 2009.
here. This discussion seeks to begin to develop a picture of the humanitarian landscape within which people act and therefore is meant to be suggestive more than definitive.

3- Rations: basic sustenance and refugee life

Rations are among the most basic and urgent of humanitarian goods. Because of this immediacy and the way that food aid sustains the most fundamental aspects of life rations provision can seem to exemplify the humanitarian focus on “bare life” (as Giorgio Agamben (1998) terms it). I should note that the reference to bare life does not mean simply a focus on the biological, but additionally the imposition of restrictions on the capacity of persons (refugees/victims) targeted by these interventions to exercise a broad range of human capacities - to express both biological life and political life. Rations provision is in fact a highly contested political field, one in which both aid providers and refugees confront and struggle over the meaning of aid. Questions and confrontations emerge at multiple junctures in the rations process – from the calories provided, the procedures for distribution, and the uses to which refugees put the food given them. In each of these areas rations limn the line between providing for simple survival and refugees seeking resources for additional aspects of living.

When recipients and providers struggle over procedures and regulations for rations provision one of the issues at stake – even if not always clearly articulated – is about the meaning of rations themselves. Are they meant only to sustain life in the biological sense (clearly an important goal) or are they also part of a broader intervention into lifestyle? When refugees, for instance, sold some of their rations to be able to purchase other goods, UNRWA officials had mixed reactions. At some points such sales were seen as a problem – evidence that those recipients were not wholly in need and were using rations not for sustaining “life itself”, but rather as a fungible resource for developing and maintaining a “lifestyle.” At other moments, though, aid providers recognized that the inadequacy of rations provided for the sustenance of life (UNRWA reports indicate both a relatively low calorie provision and a highly restricted diet) meant that refugee lives often in fact depended on their capacity to mobilize such resources.

If humanitarian attitudes about the meaning and use of rations were varied and sometimes contradictory, refugee attitudes have been equally complex. In the current rations regime – one that is, in most UNRWA fields, limited to “special hardship cases” and which provides very little in the way of rations even for those who qualify – the question of lifestyle looms large. Many refugees question the grounds on which determinations of need are made. In this case the question is not about rations being used as fungible resources, but about whether having other sorts of fungible resources should disqualify one for rations eligibility. In interview after interview in Burj Al-Barajneh refugee camp near Beirut people described their frustrations with the home inspections that are part of this determination. 2 I was told that any material object that people have in their houses – a tv, satellite, refrigerator – could keep them out of the category of needy. But refugees see these as different matters. They believe quite strongly that even the most destitute – the most abject, to use UNRWA’s new vocabulary – deserve something more than bare survival, more than just “life.” They too deserve some pleasures – something

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2 As part of a multi-sited research project tracing the Palestinian experience with humanitarian assistance in the years since 1948 I have been conducting ethnographic fieldwork in refugee camps in Lebanon, Jordan, and the West Bank. This fieldwork includes observations of humanitarian programs and interviews with refugees from multiple generations.
that amounts to a “lifestyle.”

4- Camps: defining the boundaries of refugee space

The question of the camp has been a subject of considerable debate and discussion among anthropologists in recent years. This discussion has been characterized by two almost divergent emphases. One thread of conversation references Giorgo Agamben’s work and approaches the camp as a space of exception: a space beyond law and order, inhabited by persons nearly wholly stripped of *bios* (political life) and reduced to the position of *homo sacer* (a person whose death has no meaning). For Agamben the paradigmatic camp form is the Nazi death camp, though he also clearly identifies humanitarian spaces and practices as part of the phenomenon he explores and decries (1998). Anthropologists who have developed this investigation of the camp as a space of exception have highlighted the vulnerability of living outside of law.

Another line of inquiry about refugee camps has approached the camp as a space of almost maximum regulation, noting its utility not only as a place to house and protect vulnerable persons, but also for maximizing the bureaucratic management of life that is part and parcel of humanitarian endeavors. Camps make almost every aspect of humanitarian aid delivery easier: from head counts, to rations delivery, to healthcare provision. It is for this reason that urban refugees have created particular challenges for aid delivery. In this line of inquiry the emphasis is on the camp as a space that produces refugees as manageable persons and populations. Of course, it is not only scholars who have puzzled over the meaning and impact of camps for refugee life. Aid providers and refugees alike have expressed concern about its effects. In the Palestinian context this question has often been particularly acute in debates about the implication of changes in camp infrastructure for Palestinian political rights, and most especially the right of return (these debates have been quite different in different fields) (Gabiam 2012).

Another feature of the Palestinian case, and not entirely unique to it, is a set of challenges around defining the camp as a space – both in terms of boundaries and in terms of status. Palestinian refugees always lived in a range of spaces – and never more than half lived in camps. Beyond camp vs town living, there has been another distinction between “official” and “unofficial” camps, or between “gatherings” and “camps.” These spaces, which neither fit easily within the framework of UNRWA practice nor fall entirely outside it, in some ways trouble the smooth operation of humanitarian action. In addition, and not surprising given the longevity of Palestinian displacement, the boundaries even of official camps are often murky. As populations have increased and with camps having no horizontal space to grow (vertical growth has been significant) in many places camps have spilled beyond their borders. Similar housing style, roadways, and populations exist on either side of an official – but often entirely unmarked – camp boundary. Over the years both aid providers and refugees have had to contend with categorical irregularities and spatial uncertainties as they plan services and live their lives. This murkiness around both category and space suggests that we may need to privilege a third line of analysis around refugee camps. Neither space of exception nor field of total regulation, we also need to explore camps as dynamic places of living. These places are not fixed either bureaucratically or spatially. They are sites of negotiation, contestation, and affective experience and looking at their borders can be a way into understanding this range of experiences.
5- Development projects: changing the conditions of living

The questions that arose in relation to shelters and camps make it abundantly clear that humanitarian action is about much more than basic survival. It also raises key questions about the future of the community being aided – about its progress and indeed about its development. Although some humanitarian organizations seek to sharply distinguish their work from that of development agencies, in practice these distinctions are difficult to maintain. This is especially true in the case of long-term refugees such as the Palestinians where crises of survival are superseded over time by the general problem of living with and in displacement for extended periods. In the Palestinian case the development question was further complicated by UNRWA's mandate to be a “works” as well as “relief” agency and by the complicated politics of efforts to develop works projects, particularly the concern of refugees and host countries that such projects would undermine the refugee right of return and delay or derail resolution of the Palestinian national problem.

That development projects were politically challenging is not a unique characteristic of the Palestinian case – even a cursory review of the literature on development shows how widespread such concerns are – though the particular political questions of this case are especially charged. Similarly, the trajectory of development efforts for Palestinians over the past sixty years – broadly speaking moving from large-scale works projects which targeted entire communities, and which often envisioned significant environmental reconfiguration, to an emphasis on more micro-development efforts which target individual capacity building – is a result both of the specific challenges of development in the Palestinian refugee case and of broader transformations in the development field.

In early large-scale development projects – such as a proposal to develop portions of the Sinai for agricultural use and the resettlement of refugees living in Gaza – much of the hoped for social transformation was future oriented. The goal was to raise a new generation who, in the word’s of one UNRWA official, would be “removed from the debilitating and frustrating environment and the bitterness they will imbibe from the older generation who remember the old life in Palestine . . . this will at least mean that 75,000 children (average family) will not become refugees, who might otherwise have done so.” Those already living as refugees (particularly those who were middle-aged and already raising families) were seen as essentially lost causes. The hope lay in raising a new generation that would have both a different lifestyle and a different set of life hopes. For a range of reasons the Sinai project, and others like it, failed. Ultimately it proved difficult keep Palestinians from being refugees as long as they were born into and lived in displacement.

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3 UNRWA Inactive Files, Box 2, E-810-5, Sinai Project—Construction Agreement.
4 UNRWA Inactive Files, Box 2, E/810—Part , Egypt—Sinai Project General, Memo to Chief, Technical Division from Leslie J. Carver—Acting Director, Subject: Feasibility Report, 31 December 1954.
5 UNRWA Inactive Files, Box 2, E/810—Part 1, Egypt—Sinai Project General, Summary Record of Discussion Held in Colonel Gohar’s Office in Cairo at 10:30 am on 18 August 1955; and Error! Main Document Only. UNRWA Inactive Files, Box 2, E/810—Part 1, Egypt—Sinai Project General, To Henry R. Labouisse—Director, UNRWA, From Alexander E. Squadrilli—UNRWA Representative to Egypt, 2 November 1955.
More recent development efforts, which are part of a global landscape of neoliberal economic practice, target individuals in the first instance (though the hope is certainly that social change will occur through individual change). In addition, they are present as much as future-oriented. That is, the goal is to remake lives and opportunities for current generations. The goal is not to make them non-refugees, but to enable them to live more productive lives whatever their categorical position. Typical of such projects are courses that seek to prepare refugee youth for the job market by learning to both understand and articulate their own personalities, skills, and values. If earlier projects foundered in part because they did not recognize the political significance of trying to change categorical positions without resolving underlying causes, some of today’s projects may fail because – despite the planners’ awareness of such impediments – they cannot account for the extent to which such categories necessarily impede “capacity.”

6- Conclusion

This brief discussion of three forms of humanitarian effort and conditions over the course of more than sixty years of displacement and assistance suggest some of the ways that humanitarian action structures refugees’ lives. As people live their lives (as individuals, families, and communities) they necessarily respond to changes in humanitarian practice – sometimes through complaint or opposition, sometimes through an adjustment in lifestyle. To fully show how this happens would require considerably more space than I have here, but there is no doubt of the importance of humanitarian work – whether addressing life or lifestyle, whether targeting individuals or communities, whether seeking to remake the present or the future – in shaping Palestinian experience and identity.
7- Bibliography


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