

**LIFE LIVED IN RELIEF:  
Palestinian Refugees and the Humanitarian  
Experience**

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The Occasional Papers of the School of Social Science are versions of talks given at the School's weekly Seminar. At these seminars, Members present work-in-progress and then take questions. There is often lively conversation and debate, some of which will be included with the papers. We have chosen papers we thought would be of interest to a broad audience. Our aim is to capture some part of the cross-disciplinary conversations that are the mark of the School's programs. While Members are drawn from specific disciplines of the social sciences—anthropology, economics, sociology and political science—as well as history, philosophy, literature and law, the School encourages new approaches that arise from exposure to different forms of interpretation. The papers in this series differ widely in their topics, methods, and disciplines. Yet they concur in a broadly humanistic attempt to understand how, and under what conditions, the concepts that order experience in different cultures and societies are produced, and how they change.

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## LIFE LIVED IN RELIEF: PALESTINIAN REFUGEES AND THE HUMANITARIAN EXPERIENCE

In 1948 approximately 750,000 Palestinians were displaced from their homes, going both to neighboring countries such as Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon and to the parts of Mandate Palestine that became the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. Today, there are 5 million Palestinian refugees registered with the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees [UNRWA], the body charged with providing assistance to Palestinians across the Middle East. 1.5 million of these refugees live in one of the 58 official UNRWA camps.

Humanitarian assistance to refugees was first provided by UN-commissioned “volunteer agencies” (what would now be called NGOs). As the longevity of the crisis became apparent, the UN established UNRWA as the agency responsible for providing assistance to Palestinians in the five primary fields of displacement.<sup>1</sup> This assistance has changed significantly over the years: as the emergency of flight ebbed into the chronic need of long-term displacement, as new occasions of crisis erupted, as population growth strained available resources, as budgetary constraints mandated retrenchments, and as ideas about what constitutes “good” humanitarian practice have changed. Palestinians are among the world’s longest-lasting refugee populations and as such have experienced the full-breadth of post-World War II humanitarianism. Their apparently exceptional experience in fact resonates widely.

Humanitarianism exerts a powerful claim on the global imagination. It appears to many as almost the ultimate form of doing good, a path to engagement across distance and difference that is governed by compassion and care, rather than by strategic alliances and cynical political calculations. Others are much less sanguine about the extent to which humanitarianism has so thoroughly saturated the global landscape. People express concern about what other kinds of engagements and solutions are occluded by the humanitarian frame. Among what Fiona Terry calls the “paradoxes of humanitarian action” and David Kennedy describes as the “dark sides of virtue” are the possibilities that humanitarian intervention may prolong conflicts that cause the suffering it seeks to alleviate; that principles of neutrality and confidentiality may impede calling perpetrators to account; that, in serving as gateways to assistance, procedures of refugee identification and registration may also impose restrictions on victims’ actions; and that the need to mobilize international compassion to support humanitarian endeavors may involve some degree of exploitation of people’s suffering.

Even as these constraints are real and significant, identifying them does not provide a sufficient account of humanitarian effects. There are ways in which humanitarian action, without intending to, serves as a space from which people can act politically and can provide a language to press such claims. Limit and possibility are linked in humanitarianism’s effects on those it seeks to help. We need, therefore to understand not just the humanitarian “politics of life”—that is, calculative engagements with bodies and subjects in the

management of aid delivery—but also the “politics of living”—ways that people survive, strive, and act within humanitarian spaces (Feldman 2012).

My project explores these lives and politics across the length and much of the breadth of Palestinian exile. Displaced Palestinians live across the globe, but I focus on those who live within the jurisdiction of the humanitarian apparatus established to aid them soon after 1948. The sources for this investigation are both archival and ethnographic. The documentary record—with UNRWA’s archive at the center—includes material on the full temporal and geographic scope. My ethnographic fieldwork was conducted over a five-year period (2008-13) primarily in four refugee camps (Jerash, Wihdat, Burj al Barajneh, and Dheisheh) in three fields of operation (Jordan, Lebanon, and the West Bank). Conditions in Syria and the Gaza Strip made fieldwork there impossible. I did do extensive fieldwork in Gaza during an earlier time (1998-1999) that also informs my analysis. In the camps I interviewed hundreds of people, refugees from multiple generations and humanitarian workers. I observed a number of different humanitarian projects in action. I focus on UNRWA in my talk today, but my research includes other actors as well.

This research has been driven by questions about humanitarianism: how does humanitarian practice shift as circumstances change from acute crisis to chronic conditions of need? What are the ethical and political consequences of crisis interventions and longer-term practices for both providers and recipients? It has also been driven by questions about the Palestinian experience: How has Palestinian community been shaped by the humanitarian condition? What are the generational differences in how Palestinians respond to the assistance regime? How do refugees who are living within a humanitarian framework make use of its tools (material, discursive, legal) to make claims for themselves to multiple audiences? I am examining the effects on Palestinian society and political community of a life lived in relief over an extended period of time.

### **What is humanitarianism?**

I should start by saying a bit more about what humanitarianism is. And it is several things at once. It is an arena of legal regulation meant to protect civilians and refugees: including the body of International Humanitarian Law (the laws of war), refugee conventions such as the 1951 and 1967 conventions on the status of refugees, and institutions such as the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), which are meant to enact these legal protections (Palestinians have some distinct frameworks and institutions). This legal arena describes humanitarian obligations. Humanitarianism is also a discursive field, in which images of suffering and other emotional tugs circulate and motivate donation to charities and claims for exceptions to ordinary procedures. In this field humanitarian compassion predominates. It is also a set of procedures and a kind of practice: the delivery of emergency aid—food, shelter, medicine—in the face of disaster or conflict, the provision of social services over periods of extended displacement, and increasingly the deployment of a diverse range of interventions such as psycho-social services and micro-credit projects. These procedures

involve both obligation and compassion—and often highlight the extent to which they are in tension.

Humanitarianism also has a distinct temporality: it is often defined as a crisis response, with the goal of saving lives and moving on. The circumstances that would permit the realization of this vision appear increasingly rare. The UNHCR, for instance, estimates that two-thirds of the global refugee population experience protracted displacement.<sup>2</sup> In addition to the extended temporality required by prolonged circumstances of need, some organizations seek a broader mandate than the narrowly defined goal of “saving lives,” venturing into either (or both) human rights or development under the banner of humanitarianism. Nonetheless, bounded-crisis intervention has seemed to be the heart of the humanitarian field.

### **Punctuated humanitarianism: the challenge of the long-term**

So, with a more than sixty-five year displacement, the Palestinian case is an extreme instance of a widespread phenomenon: the need for organizations oriented toward emergency to respond to circumstances that are “protracted.” The broad trajectory of Palestinian refugee experience moves from “crisis” to chronic needs—what Elizabeth Povinelli (2011) calls “cruddy” conditions. Povinelli specifically contrasts suffering that is “catastrophic, crisis-laden, and sublime” with that which is “ordinary, chronic, and cruddy” (2011: 3). Palestinians share experiences of poverty and immobility with others around the world who are part of what is sometimes referred to as the “precariat.”<sup>3</sup> It is this sort of suffering, which often persists below the threshold of an “event,” that Povinelli terms cruddy.

Even though they are common, protracted situations strain the limits of the humanitarian imaginary, and also of humanitarian resources. Humanitarian actors cannot alleviate the causes of people’s suffering, but in crises they can effect a change in the circumstances in which they are living. In the chronic conditions usually facing Palestinians, it often seems that humanitarian actors cannot do even that. Humanitarian purpose becomes murky in circumstances where people are not in immediate risk of dying, but also where their difficult lives cannot be much improved. What can, and should, humanitarians do when nothing they do seems likely to have much effect?

Living, long-term, with humanitarianism also creates distinct challenges (and opportunities) for recipients. Just as providers are uncomfortable with their purpose over an extended period of time, recipients worry about the deleterious effects on their societies and psyches of long-term need.

Further, the movement to the chronic is not a linear one. Palestinians have experienced long periods of chronic poverty, marginalization, and political stasis that have been repeatedly punctuated by times of acute crisis: the 1967 Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip, the civil war in Lebanon with its assaults on Palestinian camps (1975–90), the blockade of Gaza (2007– ), the conflict in Syria (2011– ). The emergency circumstances produced by each crisis are sometime thereafter transformed (again) into

chronic conditions of need and restriction. One of the challenges that humanitarian actors face is being buffeted between the catastrophic and the cruddy and trying to respond alternatively to both situations. This is, in other words, a punctuated humanitarianism.

Punctuated humanitarianism has consequences for both providers and recipients. For providers, these consequences include: confusion about purpose, frustration with having to cover the same ground multiple times, and anger with the apparent incapacity (or unwillingness) of political actors to resolve the underlying conditions that make emergencies repeat and chronic need persist. When the smoke clears from a latest round of catastrophic violence, humanitarians make the rounds to see what remains: of the lives people were living and of the projects which their agencies have supported. When the President of ANERA (American Near East Refugee Aid) went to Gaza immediately after the ceasefire began in summer 2014, he reported that: “Our preschools are a mess. We renovated approximately 50 over the past three years . . . Initial assessments reveal that about 60% of the schools have sustained damage. . . Without cement and other building materials our hands are tied.” Humanitarian actors may be mobilized by emergency, may understand better how to act when faced with a crisis to which they can respond directly, but they suffer the losses of these cycles of destruction. This is the humanitarian double condition produced by the returned (and ever returning) crisis: a renewed clarity of purpose along with a growing sense of being trapped in a cycle of futility.

For recipients, punctuated humanitarianism further means that people move in and out of different relationships to the humanitarian apparatus. In the chronic conditions in Wihdat camp, for instance, many people I spoke with professed no real connection to humanitarian services, even as they lived in a camp, sent their children to UNRWA schools, and, sometimes at least, received healthcare from UNRWA clinics. But what they felt to be their most acute problems—poverty and lack of opportunity—they managed on their own. As one camp resident put it to me, contrasting current conditions with a past when UNRWA provided rations: “Today we are men and fathers. We run after the loaf of bread. And the loaf of bread here in Jordan is round . . . so it can drive away. So it will keep on going away and you will keep chasing after it. And this is it. If you work, you eat and live. If you sit down, you’ll be hungry. And this is our life here in Jordan.”

Even as crises generate renewed humanitarian responses, sometimes a crisis can limit humanitarian access. For instance, during the War of Camps (1985-1988) in Lebanon, a siege imposed on Palestinian refugee camps near Beirut meant that UNRWA could not provide its usual services. Remembering those days people describe near starvation conditions. Images from Yarmouk camp in Syria during the recent conflict (2011-) paint a similar picture. Even when humanitarians can access people in crisis, as in Gaza during the Israeli assaults of 2009, 2012, and 2014, they are often limited in the help they can offer. In Gaza they have been able to provide food, but not safety.

For both recipients and providers the challenges of long-term, punctuated humanitarianism produce tremendous frustration and can make people feel defeated. But defeat is not the only response. Humanitarian actors and recipients have also met these

circumstances with creativity and experimentation, seeking ways around the impasses of the Palestinian present (impasses that have been different in different “presents”).

So with this opening to other possibilities, I want to turn to the question of Palestinian politics in humanitarian conditions.

### **The politics of living in humanitarian circumstances**

In my research I have been interested in both the politics of humanitarianism—how it shapes subjects, alters societies, enforces (or disrupts) geopolitical inequities—and politics in humanitarianism—how people living inside this system seek to change their circumstances, make claims of various kinds, lead their lives in ways that they (and their community) see value in. And, of course, these aspects of humanitarian effect are not wholly separable: what people do with humanitarianism is inextricably intertwined with what it does to them. One way of putting the question of this entanglement is to ask: what form does politics take when it is pursued in the context of the avowedly non-political—the neutral actor—the humanitarian apparatus? Getting to a fuller answer to this question is part of my work for this year, but for now I’ll lay out what I see as some of the contours and conditions of this “politics of living.”

Humanitarianism does not seem to offer an adequate framework for political action. But it is the world in which many Palestinians live, and therefore it has been a place from which politics emerges (but that doesn’t mean it ends there). Because of the on-going and often heated regional conflicts in which the Palestinian refugee problem is embedded, the political import of aid to Palestinians is a subject of frequent debate and may be harder to forget than in some other cases. UNRWA has been criticized from all sides: both for sustaining a Palestinian refugee identity that some wish would go away and for not offering sufficient protection to Palestinians to ensure their rights and resolution of their situation. Palestinian refugees, those engaged in the politics of living in humanitarianism, are acutely aware of the political import of both their lives and the assistance provided to them.

I am interested here in noninstitutionalized, everyday forms of political life: small-scale efforts at making claims and seeking to make a change in the conditions of one’s existence. Palestinians have certainly not lacked for formal politics. Their political organizations have engaged in military action, state-building, and popular resistance. And political movements and formal organizations have also had important interactions with humanitarianism. Both the PLO and Hamas—at the moment the two main institutional actors on the Palestinian political scene—negotiate with humanitarian agencies, discourses, and law, as well as engage in humanitarian work themselves. As important as these movements have been, a focus on them alone does not provide an adequate account of the range of Palestinian politics.

This politics has often revolved around the two poles of loss and restoration. A key part of the politics of loss has been to achieve recognition that, in fact, a loss has occurred: that Palestinians have been displaced and dispossessed as both individuals and as a national

community. From the beginning, humanitarian assistance was viewed by Palestinians as potentially contradictory to that aim: recognizing need, but no particular crime. The formulation of UNRWA as an agency with the dual mandate of “relief” and “works”—the latter aimed towards resettlement—was rejected by refugees largely because of this failure of recognition.<sup>4</sup>

As an existential matter, Palestinian life itself operates as a political fact and helps define a political community. Palestinians have long given political valence to the mundane qualities of everyday life. *Sumud* (steadfastness)—staying put in the face of Israeli occupation—has been an explicit part of resistance to Israeli dominance over the West Bank and Gaza (Shehadeh 1982; Tamari 1991). Even outside the territory of historic Palestine, the political value of simply being—being Palestinian, claiming Palestinianness—has been a vital part of national struggle (Schulz and Hammer 2003). There is also a calculus of life in these efforts to gain recognition for Palestinian existence. Inevitably, certain spaces of existence, certain ways of living, are accorded greater value in the existential struggle for Palestinian community. The humanitarian apparatus—its material features, its discursive conditions, its categorical imperatives—is one key forum in which, and through which, these contests occur.

Recognition of loss is a necessary, but not sufficient, response to the Palestinian condition. The second demand is for restoration, again of both individual and national losses. The “right of return” (*haq al-awda*) is the most widely repeated claim in this area. But a literal return does not exhaust the ways that Palestinians think about restoration. An independent Palestinian state (on whatever portion of Palestine is possible), compensation, and other mechanisms for establishing a sovereign community are all part of this terrain. The politics of restoration frequently generates conflict between Palestinians and UNRWA as Palestinians claim that protecting and promoting national rights and demands should be part of the basket of humanitarian responsibilities, while UNRWA officials generally insist that this sort of politics is beyond their mandate and authority.

Despite the stance of neutrality, impartiality, and non-political care that is central to humanitarian self-definition, humanitarianism is a space of political expression and it creates (often unwittingly) particular tools for that expression. Palestinians use these tools to make rights claims to a variety of audiences: host countries, the international community, Israel, and their own leaders.

To focus my discussion a bit more, I want to turn now to one of the things I have been looking at in my research: the life and definition of the category “refugee.”

### **Political life without political status**

The humanitarian category “refugee”—a starting point for political life in the humanitarian condition—is not intended to confer political status. It is, in fact, intended to suspend politics and to instead privilege basic human life. This absence of political status is one of the lines along which the refugee is formally distinguished from its putative other: the citizen. Of course, we know that the refugee category is tremendously political in a range of ways:

decisions about who qualifies for entrance into the category, determinations about the benefits that derive from this status, and the distinctions that are made between these persons and other, related categories (migrants, internally-displaced persons, undocumented immigrants) all reflect political judgments. Recognizing its saturation with political effects, it still matters that those who pursue their politics as refugees do so without an ascribed political status.

Hannah Arendt (1951) and Giorgio Agamben (1998) might suggest that this lack of status creates a fundamental block to possibility, ensuring that refugees can only be apprehended as “bare life” or “scum of the earth.” It is certainly the case that refugee politics create problems for refugee recognition. This is in part because of the suspension of politics I noted above. The “bargain” of humanitarian categories and humanitarian assistance seems to require that refugees keep that part of themselves in abeyance.<sup>5</sup> Of course, the humanitarian relation is not in fact a contract, and those who become refugees have not necessarily signed on to this limit. And they often do not act accordingly. In contrast to Arendt and Agamben, Jacques Rancière proposes that ascribed categories may matter less than the actions people undertake: the efforts by formally excluded persons to be “seen and heard as speaking subjects within a social order that denies that they are qualified to participate in politics” (Schaap 2001: 30). As Rancière puts it: “a political subject, as I understand it, is a capacity for staging such scenes of dissensus” (2004: 304). Refugees are often political in this sense: working to disrupt the common sense order of things and claiming for themselves a different place in the world.

Still the category matters. And I don’t think that accounting for how it matters involves simply choosing between Rancière and Arendt. The category does not simply perform an exclusion from politics. But it does shape how refugees stage scenes of dissensus. Political capacity is not generic, but specific. The aim of refugee politics is not only that refugees be recognized as political actors, but also that the category be understood as “world-forming” (Schaap 2011: 24) in itself.<sup>6</sup>

This general puzzle has a distinct inflection in the Palestinian instance, where people are not only distinguished from citizens as refugees,<sup>7</sup> but are distinguished from most other refugees by the particularities of their refugee definition. This Palestinian exception has seemed to many to be a problem. Palestinians and their supporters frequently note the absence of protection and other humanitarian rights in its definitional structure. Opponents of Palestinian political claims frequently seize on definition as a way to reduce these claims, trying to limit the refugee category to individuals who were themselves displaced in 1948, and to exclude their descendants and any sense of communal loss.<sup>8</sup> This attention to the refugee category by Palestinians’ “enemies” is one indication of how politically generative it has been.

### **Defining refugees**

The category of a Palestinian refugee has always been an incomplete one. The definition is

an operational rather than a legal one—developed to identify those persons eligible for UNRWA services, rather than to account for Palestinian claims to property, to return, and to national self-determination. UNRWA’s basic definition of a Palestinian refugee is a person “whose normal residence was Palestine for a minimum of two years preceding the outbreak of the conflict in 1948 and who, as a result of this conflict, has lost both his home and means of livelihood.” Because the first concern of the definition was access to relief, definitional discussions quickly centered around the question of eligibility, and here “operational instructions” were key to the ongoing work of category elaboration. Women who married non-refugees lost their eligibility, and therefore fell outside the category (along with their children). People who had financial resources in 1948 were never registered; those who acquired income later were moved into new categories that were elaborated to describe non-relief eligible refugees. Policing these category boundaries was made urgent by the fact that limited financial resources meant that there were strict ceilings on the number of people who could receive rations in each country—ceilings that inevitably meant that some eligible people—notably children—were not allowed onto the rolls. So the rectification of the rolls—purging the lists of fraudulent registrations and keeping up with changes in income or other status that effected eligibility for rations—was an issue of great importance. The investigation procedures which resulted from these eligibility concerns were a source of considerable tension, between UNRWA and the host countries, as well as between UNRWA and the refugees.

### **Policing categories**

Maintaining a place within the humanitarian system provided some stability for Palestinian refugees. It also served as a ground from which they could seek a better life for themselves and their families. This was a somewhat tenuous security, however. Any change in life circumstances could threaten people’s position within the system. The definition of an “eligible refugee” as well as the multiple levels of access to services had the certainly unintended effect of introducing new forms of loss into Palestinian life.

That the investigation of legitimate need and proper presence on the ration rolls was a source not only of political tension, but of a great deal of personal anguish, is made clear in a series of documents on an investigation conducted by UNRWA in Lebanon in 1964.<sup>9</sup> It should be noted that in these cases—and, in fact, in most Agency service encounters—the personnel who were the face of UNRWA were themselves refugees (who constitute the vast majority of the Agency’s staff). According to reports on this case, a family of nine (all receiving rations) was subjected to a routine investigation into their circumstances. During the initial investigation, the male head of household reported a monthly income of 125 Lebanese pounds. This income level mandated a reduction in rations—leaving the family with an allotment of five. After the intercession on their behalf by the wife’s employer, the matter was re-investigated. At this time the husband produced a certificate from his employer indicating that his salary was 60-70 pounds/month. When investigators followed up with

the employer—asking to see his books to determine the validity of the certificate—it was determined that the certificate had been falsified.

At this point investigators asked the husband and wife to come in for a meeting, in the course of which the wife began to verbally attack the investigators. In her invective she used the language of rights to describe access to services, saying: “You unjust, you who does not fear our Lord, how dare you cancel the rations of the children without any right.” She and her husband went on to threaten the investigators, saying that higher officials in UNRWA would ensure they got their rations and that the investigators would be fired. They also threatened to “tell them that you took . . . a bribe for cancelling our rations.” The investigators reported that they tried to calm the situation—so as not to provoke any of the many other refugees who were waiting for interviews. The wife repeated her insistence that they would not lose the rations, but also added (in an acknowledgment of some uncertainty) that “I shall bring all my children to your house and you will be responsible for their feeding.” She mobilized the languages of need, right, justice, and power in her attempt to secure her family’s status.

Even as a final determination on this family’s rations was left unresolved in the documents in the file—the outstanding question was whether still more rations should be cut because of the wife’s salary rather than whether any should be restored—UNRWA’s deputy commissioner-general explained that

I well understand how distressing these cases can be and how harsh the removal of rations must seem to refugees who have struggled to get back on their feet again after the terrible experience of the last fifteen years. But UNRWA . . . has to apply its eligibility rules as fairly and as uniformly as it can. . . . Our funds are so limited that if we continue to give rations to a family which is capable of supporting itself (even though with difficulty), the result can only be that we deprive some other, still more deserving, family on the waiting list for rations.<sup>10</sup>

In this case there was no question that everyone in the family fit the general definition of a Palestine refugee, but they were in the process of losing their place within the category of eligible refugees. Traumatic cases such as this highlight some of the impact of living in and through UNRWA’s categories of recognition. A new form of loss and dispossession was introduced into Palestinian experience by UNRWA’s definitional practice. As the quote above suggests, UNRWA officials were certainly aware of the wrenching nature of this loss, but as humanitarian actors charged with managing scarce resources for a large population, they could not relieve this new suffering. People’s location within the category of eligible refugee was a matter of deep personal concern about the fate of oneself and one’s family. This location was also a matter of national significance (Al Hussein 2000). This national significance was particularly evident in debates over the meaning of UNRWA recognition. Although I don’t have time to go into these debates here, I’ll note that there were a lot of

discussions among UNRWA officials, between UNRWA and refugees, about how refugees ascribed political import to refugee status and about the possibility that UNRWA might have some responsibility to provide this recognition.

### Refusing registration

As would be expected, the vast majority of eligible refugees registered for aid. But there were occasional refusals. Why might some people refuse? And why might other people wish that more refusal might have been possible? One reason is the existential crisis that sudden need produces. The experience of finding oneself suddenly dependent, in need when one had always been self-sufficient, is often humiliating. Another reason are the political consequences people see arising from humanitarian assistance.

In the course of my research in the Jerash refugee camp in Jordan, a camp populated largely by people who were refugees to Gaza in 1948 and displaced a second time to Jordan in 1967, I heard several stories of refusing registration. The circumstance of double displacement means that the camp's residents experienced at least two threshold moments. Jamal, whose family is from the Beersheba region in southern Palestine, described an instance of post-1948 refusal. When the family was displaced to Gaza his grandfather, as head of household, refused to register them with UNRWA because "he did not want to be a refugee." Since refugee status passes down to children through the male line, this initial decision to refuse has had multi-generational consequences. Following UNRWA criteria, which reserves the official refugee category for 1948 displacement, Jamal's family is considered *nazihiiin* [displaced] in Jordan, rather than *laj'iin* [refugees]. This distinction has real consequences for their eligibility for humanitarian services.

In registration refusals such as that of Jamal's grandfather, several things seem to have been at stake. These refusals seek to make a change in existential and political conditions. As Jamal noted about his grandfather's choice, it was a refusal to accept his condition: to try to refuse to be (to become?) a refugee. This refusal entailed accepting, maybe even insisting upon, a certain degree of exposure and suffering in order not to acknowledge or be trapped by the categorical condition of loss. To this extent, refusing registration is also a refusal of one of humanitarianism's central hierarchies: precisely the differential capacity to put oneself at risk. What we see in this case is an insistence on the part of victims of their capacity to remain exposed: to refuse the transfer of agency over life that humanitarian intervention entails. Humanitarianism seeks to remove people from threat, to save them from exposure. Refusing to enter the system, to accept assistance, to register as a refugee, is in part an effort, not simply to be exposed as displaced persons already are, but to choose exposure for a larger purpose. Such capacity is what is often denied refugees, both by their circumstances and by the structure of humanitarian practice.

Since refugee registration was a family matter, refusal was not only addressed to humanitarianism, it resonated within families. UNRWA's choice to have the head of household do the registering and to have status descend through the male line has meant

that the humanitarian system is patriarchal (Cervenak 1994) and in this it intersects with gendered and generational hierarchies that are part of Palestinian society. Registration refusal does not disrupt these hierarchies, but rather reveals their effects. In Jamal's family's case the effect has been multi-generational.

Another refusal story I heard in Jerash, this one about the 1967 second displacement to Jordan, shows how refusal could be a source of contention within families. Im Taha described how Jordanian officials registered people coming across the Allenby bridge into Jordan—in the process switching their place of UNRWA registration from the Gaza Strip to Jordan. Her husband did not want to register because he was afraid that registering in Jordan would mean they would not be able to go back to Gaza. His concern was not about being registered as a refugee *per se* (the family was registered), but with maintaining his status as a refugee registered in the Gaza field. As he sat at a distance from the registration, Im Taha, who was concerned first and foremost about getting help for herself and her children, registered herself as being the wife of another man—who she said had been missing for six months. In this way she got a tent and food supplies despite her husband's refusal. If part of what was at stake in Jamal's grandfather's refusal was an enactment of the capacity to remain exposed, Im Taha appears to have refused precisely such exposure. This case was a secondary refusal in several senses: Abu Taha refused a second registration, one that would confirm his second displacement. Im Taha refused Abu Taha's refusal, choosing the immediate welfare of her family over a claim about status. Abu Taha's refusal may have tried to disrupt paternalism, but it underscored patriarchy. Im Taha's refusal of his refusal intervened in patriarchy, the second sort of hierarchy.

For Palestinians and providers, these minority actions have tended to fade into the background of the much larger story of refugee registration and the widespread and initially comprehensive aid system. Even as the effects lingered for individuals, they are not really part of the collective story of displacement. If anything, the role that registration refusal plays in this collective story is precisely about its absence. In conversations with Palestinian refugees over the years I have heard many people lament that there wasn't more refusal by Palestinian refugees to enter into the humanitarian system. This lamentation must be understood as part of the extremely conflicted feelings Palestinians have about humanitarian aid in general and UNRWA in particular. On the one hand, UNRWA's presence is viewed as an acknowledgment of the international community's responsibility for Palestinian suffering and its obligations to restore their rights. On the other hand, people identify the persistence of humanitarianism as an impediment to a political resolution, and some see it as part of a concerted plan to thwart Palestinian aspirations for independence and restoration.

One person told me a story from the early days of UNRWA that was meant to underscore the point that the acceptance of UNRWA services was detrimental to Palestinian political aspirations. He told me about a friend of his who met an American working with UNRWA who tried to give him some political advice: "The American told my friend: 'this food you eat from UNRWA I want to tell you something but do not say that I told you. If

you reject the provisions and do not eat and 20 people die because of hunger, then they will take you back soon to your homes.’ But we did not have that awareness. If we told people to do so they would have refused.” The very structure of the story highlights the imbalance of power and capacity that he thought refusal might have worked against: it was an American who offered the political insight. It was the Palestinians who lacked “awareness” and who would have refused the advice.

The relatively rare rejections of humanitarianism illuminate the perceived stakes of participating in this system and underscore how difficult it is to remain apart from it. Each of these instances also provides a window into ways Palestinians judge themselves. As they experience and evaluate humanitarianism and its consequences for the possibilities of their lives, refugees are not only concerned with what is being done to them, but with their, sometimes necessary, complicity in the process. Refusals at the very edge of possibility—which refusing aid in circumstances of acute need certainly is—can rarely change much, precisely because they are inevitably so rare. But they do enable us to better understand how recipients understand the stakes of humanitarian intervention.

## **Conclusion**

I have outlined struggles over and through the definition of categories. The Palestinian experience with humanitarianism also involves other struggles: struggles over services (their extent, kind, and style) and over humanitarian mandates. There are also struggles in the humanitarian landscape that are not primarily addressed to humanitarian actors and institutions. Some are addressed to host countries and to Palestinian political leaders. And there are struggles within Palestinian communities about how to live in and with aid—and also how to create a future without it that supports Palestinian political aims. Such contestations clearly occur not simply as considered judgments about strategy or identity but also as responses to institutional, material, and discursive opportunities and constraints. In the Palestinian case (and not only in the Palestinian case), humanitarianism has been an important source of both. As Palestinians debate strategy and articulate possibility (and impossibility), the political landscape continues to be shaped by the humanitarian condition.

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## ENDNOTES

1. Until 1967, the West Bank was part of the Jordan field, as it was annexed to Jordan in 1950. In 1967, when Israel occupied the West Bank (along with the Gaza Strip and the Golan Heights) it became a separate field. Jordan relinquished its claim to the territory in 1988 in the context of the first *intifada* [uprising] against Israeli occupation.
2. <http://www.fmreview.org/young-and-out-of-place/zetter-long.html> 2012—before Syria crisis—but there is every reason to think that this displacement will be long.
3. In general I see more value in exploring conditions of precarity than identifying a global class of “the precariat,” though the term has the virtue of emphasizing that there is something shared, not just in the experiences of precariousness, but in its structural conditions (Breman 2013). For additional discussion about how to describe current conditions, especially of labor, see Denning 2007 and 2010. Gabriel Gorgi argues that one effect of neoliberalism is to produce “a new awareness of precarity as a key horizon in the ways we think about and produce subjectivity” (2013: 71).
4. The UN Conciliation Commission for Palestine [UNCCP] was the body that was supposed to recognize and tabulate loss, but was never able to really operate.
5. This suspension marks a difference between the refugee category and other categories of persons that are denied political rights, such as women and African-Americans. The presumption about the latter groups was/is that they lack inherent political capacity: their lack of political status is seen to derive from their fundamental being. Refugees, on the other hand, are seen as past and future political actors who are being removed from politics in order to save them. And, of course, I recognize that these categories overlap: some refugees are also people who are viewed as essentially politically incapable.
6. Here Schaap refers to what he describes as “the opposition Arendt sets up between world-poor refugees and world-forming citizens” (Schaap 2011: 24). The reference is to Heidegger.
7. In Jordan Palestinians are refugees and citizens.
8. The right-wing Middle East Policy Forum, founded by Daniel Pipes, lists this definition change as one of its key policy aims: “Change the U.S. government's definition of a “Palestine refugee” in its dealings with UNRWA –Limit the designation “Palestine refugee” to individuals who actually fled Palestine in 1948-49, who do not have a nationality, and who do not live in the West Bank or Gaza.” (<http://www.meforum.org/employment.php>; Accessed 9 October 2015).
9. UNRWA, Box RE 66, file RE 500, part 3.
10. Ibid., letter from Reddaway to Mrs. Cattan, 1 June 1964.