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Refugee Camps in the Palestinian and Sahrawi National Liberation Movements: A Comparative Perspective

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REFUGEE CAMPS IN THE PALESTINIAN AND SAHRAWI NATIONAL LIBERATION MOVEMENTS: A COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

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Drawing on ethnographic field research, this analysis compares the evolution of refugee camps as incubators of political organization and repositories of collective memory for Palestinian refugees in Jordan and Sahrawi refugees of the Western Sahara. While recognizing the significant differences between the historical and geopolitical contexts of the two groups and their national movements (the PLO and Polisario, respectively), the author examines the Palestinian and Sahrawi projects of national consciousness formation and institution-building, concluding that Palestinian camps are “mapped” in relation to the past, while political organization in Sahrawi camps evidences a forward-looking vision.

TO WHAT EXTENT do ideological and political structures affect the positioning of refugee camps in national space and shape the politics of identity and memory? Does the symbolism of camps change following radical shifts in official national politics? Are subjective factors irrelevant in such circumstances? Comparing the evolution of political leaderships in two different settings—Palestinian and Sahrawi refugee camps—can shed light on these questions. Drawing on anthropological fieldwork conducted in Palestinian camps in Jordan (1995–2000 and 2007) and Sahrawi camps in Algeria (2005–2007),¹ this article examines camps as venues refracting the structural dynamics, political contexts, and nationalist ideologies and praxis of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and the Popular Front for the Liberation of al-Saqiat al-Hamra' and Rio de Oro (Polisario).² It proposes that the contexts within which these organizations evolved have led to two different prototypes of polities and leaderships in exile, enabling the Polisario—but not the PLO—to transform refugee camps

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into incubators of new social and political institutions transportable to national territory upon repatriation.³ Given the complexity of the subject matter, this article will limit its discussion to the pivotal historical, structural, and subjective factors most useful for explaining the different political trajectories of Palestinian and Sahrawi camps.

INITIAL COMPARISONS

Whereas the Palestinian issue is well known, a brief overview of the history of the Sahrawi movement provides context for the argument that follows. As the Spanish government prepared to abandon its protectorate of Western Sahara in November 1975, it secretly signed an agreement with Morocco and Mauritania aimed at establishing a tripartite administration of the territory. Morocco and Mauritania had competing claims to the Western Sahara, a region bordered on the north by Morocco, the northeast by Algeria, the south and southeast by Mauritania, and the west by the Atlantic Ocean. Just as Spain was preparing to withdraw, Morocco and Mauritania invaded the territory. Morocco took control of the northern two-thirds of Western Sahara, which it renamed its southern (or “Saharan”) provinces, while Mauritania seized control of the southern third.⁴ Meanwhile, the Polisario, established in 1973, won Algeria’s backing for its independence struggle and set up its headquarters in Sahrawi refugee camps located in an isolated region of the southwestern Algerian desert near the town of Tindouf. The camps are also home to the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR), the state-in-exile established by the Polisario in 1976.

After Mauritania withdrew from the Western Sahara in 1979, Morocco extended its control to the territory Mauritania had claimed. In the 1980s, Morocco built a 2,700-kilometer-long sand and earthen wall (or “berm”) that cuts diagonally through Western Sahara, extending from its northeast corner down to the southwest near the Mauritanian border. (See map.) The berm enables Morocco to control two-thirds of the areas richest in phosphate and minerals, as well as the Atlantic coast’s fishing industry.⁵ On the eastern side of the berm is what the Polisario calls the “liberated” or “free” zone. No country recognizes Morocco’s sovereignty over the Western Sahara, which remains on the United Nations’ list of non-self-governing territories. Hostilities between Morocco and the Polisario ended in 1991 with the establishment of the United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO)⁶ in accordance with settlement proposals accepted in 1988 by Morocco and the Polisario.

Both the PLO and the Polisario are Arab national liberation movements that, despite decades of struggle, have failed to fulfill their aspirations of self-determination long after most other national liberation struggles entered a postcolonial stage. It is worth noting that the Palestinian resistance inspired the Polisario, which drew parallels between the colonization of Western Sahara in the *maghreb* and Palestine in the *mashreq*.⁷ As Sahrawi refugees frequently pointed out to me, the resemblance between their flag and the Palestinian flag was intentional.

Map No. 3175, Rev. 1 UNITED NATIONS
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U.N. Department of Public Information
Cartographic Section

Though refugees and refugee camps have been at the center of both the Palestinian and Sahrawi national liberation movements, vast differences in demographic scale and distribution distinguish the two: The total number of Palestinian refugees is estimated at over 8 million scattered across the globe, most of them residents of the Arab world⁸; 4.6 million are registered with the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA),⁹ of whom 1.3 million languish in fifty-eight camps¹⁰ dispersed across three Arab countries and the occupied territories, usually in or near urban centers. The Sahrawi population is scant, perhaps totaling a million people. Approximately half of all native Western Saharans fled the military aggression in 1975–1976¹¹; fewer than a quarter million individuals are living in five camps concentrated near Tindouf. The

vast majority of the remaining population lives in Moroccan-occupied Western Sahara, Mauritania, and Spain (including the Canary Islands). A smaller number of Sahrawis live in the free zone of Western Sahara under Polisario control.¹²

While Palestinian refugees are entangled in the socioeconomic and political matrices of host societies and subject to discrimination and the strict control of state political apparatuses, or bear the brunt of Israeli military aggression, Sahrawi camps, geographically distant from Algerian population areas, freely pursue collective mobilization. These contrasts point up crucial differences in sponsorship. Although the PLO fostered relationships with a number of Arab regimes¹³ and has benefited from their intermittent and conditional support, most Arab states regarded the PLO as a threat to be contained rather than a movement to be supported. In stark contrast, the Polisario and SADR enjoy the unwavering support of the Algerian government, which has recognized SADR as a sovereign state-in-exile within the camps and in the area of Western Sahara under Polisario control.

Zionism's ultimate aim is to replace Palestine's indigenous inhabitants with Jewish settlers, whereas Morocco's goal is not to eliminate Sabrawis from the national space but rather to incorporate them into the Moroccan state.

Differences in the two national movements' histories and sponsorship have resulted in different camp leadership structures. The PLO functioned as fragmented and competing factions, not as a united front. Created in 1964, sixteen years after the Nakba, the PLO has been an umbrella organization encompassing various autonomous factions and ideological trends. Fatah, a "nonideological" Palestinian nationalist movement established in the late 1950s, took positions on neither the Right nor the Left. Outbidding by the various factions, such as Fatah, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), and the Popular Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PDFLP, later DFLP), continually undermined PLO unity. The Polisario, on the other hand, having been formed two years before the end of Spanish colonial rule, was immediately able to take the reins of leadership in the camps as a unified front. The Polisario remains the sole political formation and envisions a multiparty system operating within Western Sahara only *after* liberation.

In the early 1990s, both the PLO and the Polisario leaderships abandoned armed struggle in favor of political negotiations. However, pronounced differences in the international political contexts of the two movements have shaped efforts toward the resolution of each conflict. The Sahrawi issue is the subject of a 1991 UN settlement plan and the 1997 Houston accords brokered by special UN envoy James Baker¹⁴ and accepted by both Morocco and the Sahrawis. In addition, Sahrawis enjoy support among some Republican and Democratic members of the U.S. Congress, which has not been as pro-Moroccan as the executive branch.¹⁵ Despite significant concessions over the years, the Polisario has not deviated from its long-term goal but has held on to international legality: self-determination based on the various UN Security Council and General Assembly resolutions.

In contrast, the PLO's objectives, more vulnerable to realpolitik interventions, have been subject to dramatic metamorphoses and retreats: The initial goal of national liberation evolved into the explicit objective of a democratic secular state in all of Palestine, and later a "stepping-stone" mini-state in the West Bank and Gaza. Eventually, this mini-state became *the* ultimate national objective.¹⁶ The 1993 Oslo Accord failed to deliver on its promises; its two-state solution collapsed rapidly, mainly because it downplayed the 1948 war as the root cause of the conflict, thus circumventing demands for the refugees' right of return. In the Polisario's case, protracted exile is the result of Morocco's refusal to allow the implementation of the 1991 UN Security Council-mandated referendum to decide whether the Sahrawi people wish to integrate into the Moroccan state or pursue independence or autonomy.¹⁷ This underscores perhaps the most fundamental difference between the Palestinian and the Sahrawi cases: Zionism's ultimate aim is to *exclude* and ultimately replace Palestine's indigenous inhabitants with Jewish settlers through a complex apartheid system and ethnic cleansing, whereas Morocco's goal is not to eliminate Sahrawis from the national space but rather to *include* and incorporate them into the Moroccan state as its citizens, thereby removing the option of independence granted in other similar cases, such as in East Timor.

MAPPING CAMPS IN SPACE AND TIME

Unsurprisingly, given their different origins and circumstances, the Palestinian and Sahrawi leaderships "mapped" refugee camps onto the national narrative and resistance project in different ways. Sahrawis consider themselves a nation in exile, not refugees. They fashioned their camps as national spaces in which to nurture a future society and polity. Sahrawi collective memory was reproduced as a reservoir of shared consciousness about the wider contexts of the collective struggle and as a spur for change. In the Palestinian case, the past was a wound that did not heal, given the unrelenting and ongoing destruction of Arab Palestine. Political realities have often forced Palestinians into a defensive posture; refugees have waged a constant battle to preserve, remember, and reconstruct what had been (and continues to be) erased. Compared to the Polisario, the Palestinian leadership did not effectively harness the past as a catalyst for constructing a future society rooted in the present. Palestinian refugee camps became symbols of *fellahin* (peasants) turned fedayeen (freedom fighters).¹⁸ Although this framing of the camps' significance benefited a military resistance project, it did not nurture a view of the past that could be bridged to a forward-looking political project.

During the first few years, Sahrawi refugees struggled to survive in an unforgiving desert they call *lebmada*. Despite the tremendous challenges posed by the lack of infrastructure and basic services,¹⁹ the Polisario provided effective leadership by identifying three clear objectives: to support soldiers fighting at the front, to provide basic necessities for refugees, and to lay the foundations of

a new society. In contrast to the Sahrawi experience, Palestinian refugees seeking shelter in UNRWA camps in the early 1950s lacked a formalized political leadership. Although pan-Arabist ideologies of the period inspired hopes that Gamal Abdel Nasser, the charismatic Egyptian leader, would be their savior,²⁰ pan-Arab nationalism proved to be less enduring than emerging postcolonial nationalisms. In Jordan, for example, the Hashemite ruling family used repressive measures to squelch anticolonial or pro-Nasser demonstrations.²¹ The repercussions of state repression reverberated immediately in the refugee camps, as Tariq, a refugee who grew up in al-Husayn camp in the 1950s, recalled: "At the time, people supported Abdel Nasser. . . . Political events in the region were felt in the camps. There were curfews and there were soldiers outside and inside the camps."²²

The fact that the PLO did not emerge until the mid-1960s, almost two decades after the 1948 Nakba, meant it had to coexist with, negotiate with, and/or challenge existing institutions, primarily UNRWA. Refugees and UNRWA officials found themselves enmeshed in uneasy relationships with each other and with host states.²³ Viewing UNRWA's mission and mandate skeptically, refugees resisted plans to integrate them into host societies, at first assuming, and then later hoping, that they would return to their homes and lands in Palestine. UNRWA mapped out camps as humanitarian rather than political spaces and administered refugees' everyday lives to a profound extent: The organization issued ration cards, distributed tents, established schools and health centers, compiled statistical information on refugees, and provided employment, thereby fostering new social ties and hierarchies within the camps. Political mobilization was, from the outset, an informal and disorganized effort.

Refugees were not passive recipients in this process, however. Many appropriated or subverted UNRWA's programs to promote their interests.²⁴ Nonetheless, UNRWA's policies and programs consolidated its role as a welfare government. As Tariq, quoted earlier, explained:

When an UNRWA official knocked at someone's door, it was like the government had arrived. The role of UNRWA was basic—it substituted for a government . . . I don't know if you have heard the saying: "We only have God and the ration card" . . . If someone had a relative or knew someone who worked with UNRWA, it was akin to having *wasta* [connections].

Despite UNRWA's decisive role in shaping the refugees' social and economic universes, humanitarian aid was insufficient to sustain families. To supplement their rations in host societies, many refugees worked as seasonal laborers or in low-paying jobs outside the camps. Economic insecurity and the leadership vacuum, combined with political repression and alienation, reinforced informal personal relationships rooted in reciprocity, kin ties, and patronage links extending to multiple institutions. For example, having connections with Jordanian officials or UNRWA employees could improve one's chances of

obtaining better services, while former village networks and camp neighborhoods provided moral, social, and economic support.

MOBILIZATION AND INSTITUTION-BUILDING

Although Sahrawi refugees relied almost entirely on humanitarian assistance, the Polisario oversaw the distribution of aid by administering the camps through local committees even before massive humanitarian intervention began. This proactive stance preempted direct interference by regional or international agencies, which are required to go through various SADR departments before accessing the camps; even rations are distributed by neighborhood committees. Thus, SADR acted as a buffer between external actors and refugee-citizens, reinforcing Sahrawi political identity as opposed to humanitarian status as refugees. As a representative of a Spanish NGO told me during one of my visits, “*They* are the refugees, but they sometimes make us feel that *we* are.”²⁵

The Polisario’s success in mobilizing collective action stems from its beginnings as a movement to resist Spanish colonization on 10 May 1973. Polisario cadres coalesced as individuals, not as autonomous factions. Its founders shared similar backgrounds: nomadic childhoods followed by settlement in the south of Morocco (usually in extreme poverty) and, later, schooling through government grants.²⁶ By the time its second congress convened in 1974, the Polisario had adopted a short- and long-term “Program of National Action” (*barnamaj al-‘amal al-watani*) delineating its chief goal: national liberation and independence with the effective participation of the masses. The program emphasized democratic popular participation combined with indigenous cultural values as the ideological bases for forging their nation-state.²⁷ It opposed all forms of kinship loyalty, every form of exploitation, and called for women’s emancipation.²⁸ Over time, the Polisario/SADR elaborated its political system in which the General Congress represents the highest body and convenes every three years.

On 27 February 1976, the Polisario established SADR, drafted a constitution, and embarked on building state and civil institutions²⁹ that enabled it to administer camps as state provinces or *wilayas*, which are named after urban centers in Western Sahara: al-Ayun, Smara, al-Dakhla, Awsard, and a smaller camp named “27 February” to commemorate the date of SADR’s founding. Each *wilaya* is further divided into six *dairas* (districts), which in turn are divided into *bayys* (neighborhoods). Popular committees in each *daira* oversee education, health, food distribution, justice, and production/artisan projects. Each refugee over the age of sixteen joins one or more committee and regularly attends his or her *kbaliyya* (cell) meetings. Local committees and popular councils are represented at the regional and national levels.

The Polisario assumed and transformed many of the functions of the traditional bedouin camp (the *freeg*), which comprised the basic socioeconomic unit in Sahrawi society. The *freeg* consisted of a few *kbiyam* or tents (families)

who moved together and cooperated in providing food, shelter, education, and healthcare for their individual members. By taking on these functions, the Polisario generated a discourse of “progress” that discouraged tribal affiliations and reinforced a sense of national belonging through shared practices. As Muhammad, a Sahrawi refugee from al-Ayun camp, explains:

You will see how eloquently Sahrawi women, who were probably illiterate prior to the *intilaqa* [the exodus in 1975], discuss issues. Even in . . . the way they organize their ideas is an indication of great progress in Sahrawi society. . . . This is due to . . . the political and social mobilization by the Polisario.³⁰

Since most men were fighting at the front, women took primary responsibility for implementing programs, as Mariam explained: “Every woman belonged to a committee. . . . If there was a festival or national celebration, you would not find a woman in her tent. . . . We all participated . . . in preparing for the celebrations.”³¹ Needless to say, Sahrawi camps are not idyllic communities, and policies alone cannot bring about radical transformations or eradicate inequalities, yet SADR’s national program acted as a catalyst in significantly altering attitudes, education levels, and relationships.³² However, the national project inevitably produced tensions between the need to affirm a “national” past and the goal of creating a different future. Since tribal ideology conflicted with national belonging, the Polisario had to work with tribal leaders to underscore the significance of allegiance to the Sahrawi nation—first, in order to unify efforts in the anticolonial struggle, and second, to build a modern nation-state. According to the late Shaykh Buzaid, this process of mobilization was spearheaded by al-Wali Mustafa Sayyid, the revered founder and martyr of the Sahrawi revolution before the events of 1975:

Al-Wali exerted a great effort to consult with the nomadic tribes in the interior desert, including shaykhs and tribal leaders. He used to walk long distances in the desert by night to visit different nomadic encampments. The struggle began first and foremost in the desert [interior nomadic camps] before the village, and in the village before the city.³³

To harness collective will, the Polisario promulgated its ideology as based on indigenous culture, rather than on imported political or ideological frameworks.³⁴ In interviews, refugees often invoked the *freeg*, or the traditional *ait arba'in* (“assembly of forty,” a body that represented tribes equally, regardless of size or influence), as evidence that present democratic forms of political organization have origins in Sahrawi culture. In the view of Sahrawi refugees, SADR’s national mobilization mirrored the traditional assembly’s call for *hasra*, the name of the group that forms when the largest number of tribes assembles to fend off external enemies.³⁵ Similarly, women drew selectively

on the traditional autonomy of bedouin women to promote their rights in the present, such as flexible marriage and divorce rules.³⁶

Edward Said rightly observed that “what one remembers of the past and how one remembers it determines how one sees the future.”³⁷ Accordingly, rather than yearning to return to live among specific tribes, most Sahrawis generally expressed their main objective to be *dawlatna al-mustaqilla*, or “our independent state.” SADR succeeded in mapping the desert camps with “a new historical narrative.”³⁸ The “future society” became a tangible domain in which refugees could practice citizenship and concretely imagine and reshape their future. Because of the clarity of this political vision, Mahfud Ali Beiba, the head of the Sahrawi negotiating team in Manhasset, NY,³⁹ could conclude the fourth round of direct negotiations with Morocco in March 2008 by affirming that “[t]he Sahrawi delegation . . . had been able to explain in detail its vision on the organization and operation of the national institutions in the framework of a Sahrawi independent state that is democratic and oriented towards modernity.”⁴⁰

Education is key to institution-building and collective solidarities in both Palestinian and Sahrawi camps. SADR made education mandatory for males and females, thus promoting the movement’s nationalist ideals among a new generation. A history text assigned by SADR’s Ministry of Education to sixth-grade students,⁴¹ for example, introduces them to their nomadic culture, the history of colonialism, and the achievements of the Polisario. The book concludes with lessons learned, chiefly, that Sahrawis must rely on themselves, a message further emphasized by a Qur’anic verse: “God helps those who help themselves.”⁴² SADR’s socializing role does not end when boys and girls graduate from elementary schools; students are sent abroad, accompanied by adult guides (*musbrifin*), to continue their education. Together, groups of these students forge a substitute family that transcends tribal and kinship boundaries and consolidates Sahrawi national identity.

From the first years of their exile, Palestinian refugees were keen to educate their children to help them overcome their political dispossession and poverty. Whereas education was a *national* policy and a key component of a shared vision in the Sahrawi camps, the Palestinian refugees’ emphasis on education reflected the desire and hopes of *individual* families, and only informally intersected with the wider project of redeeming the homeland from occupation. National education was transmitted informally through oral transmission of family and village histories that enabled children to form strong connections to the lands their parents and grandparents were forced to leave. Thus, children like Mahmud yearned for a village they had never seen: “Of course, all of Palestine is my homeland, but I prefer to live in Zakariyya, the birthplace of my father. A person has a yearning for it.”⁴³ A refugee from al-Baqa’ camp used a metaphor drawn from rural culture to describe the impact of oral history in the camps: “The older generation had ploughed the field, which the PLO harvested in later years.”⁴⁴ Another source of learning about Palestine’s history and its land was UNRWA’s Palestinian teachers, many of whom gave

lessons on Palestine that went beyond (and even against) the directives of the formal curriculum provided by the host country. As Tariq recalled: "I remember in grade four there were posters in all classrooms that said: 'Do not forget Palestine'."

Notwithstanding the differences with SADR outlined earlier, there are important similarities between the Sahrawi and Palestinian refugee experiences. Similar to the Polisario, the PLO had also developed an infrastructure in the fields of economy, health, and social welfare, among others. It drafted the Palestinian National Covenant and formed the Palestinian National Council, and by the late 1960s it had emerged as both a national liberation movement and a quasi state. Many refugee households now depended not only on UNRWA and employment in host countries, but also on salaries, benefits, and social capital derived from the PLO. Having connections with PLO factions became just as important as maintaining connections with UNRWA. Abu Kamal, a refugee living in Jordan's Suf camp, recalled:

When I came to this camp, I brought my tent with me . . . but then it became ragged . . . so I went to UNRWA to ask for a replacement, but I couldn't get another tent. . . . It was chaos. . . . Those who were with the PLO or worked in UNRWA were able to get more than one tent. But since I was not with the PLO or anything else, I had to buy my own.⁴⁵

Omar summarized the PLO's influence in camps as follows:

The PLO was the real authority in the camp [in the period between 1969–1971], and they intervened in the distribution of the tents, administration, and so on. There were also military camps for girls and boys . . . we struggled for liberation. . . . The [Jordanian] state had authority without power and the resistance movement had power without authority.⁴⁶

The PLO's presence in the late sixties emboldened resistance against projects intended to reduce the refugee problem to a humanitarian matter, as reflected in a popular verse: *wal'u al-nar bil-khiyam, wirmu kroutat al-tamwin, la sulub wa la istislam, batta nbarrer falastin* ("Ignite the fire in the tents and throw away the ration-cards, no peace nor surrender, until we liberate Palestine"). It was a time when the poetics and politics of place coincided: the spatial, albeit imaginary, boundaries of the camps henceforth invoked a constellation of political meanings, primarily the right of return, now positioned at the core of the national narrative. The camp as icon of the nation became central to the Palestinian imaginary. In the 1990s, Samir, a refugee from al-Baqa' camp, stated that "We will pass on to our children not only what our parents told us about the oranges of Palestine, but also the memory of the camp as a symbol of Palestine."⁴⁷

However, the PLO's open presence in Jordan was short-lived. It was ousted following armed conflict with the Jordanian army in 1970–1971, a period known as Black September. Following these clashes, the Jordanian government imposed martial law, which remained in effect until 1989. Remaining cadres and political activists were forced underground. During those years, it was risky to identify oneself as Palestinian. Adnan, a Gazan refugee living in al-Baqa' camp, recalled that while sitting for his high school exams in the mid-1970s, he listed his citizenship as Palestinian because he did not possess a Jordanian passport. For this crime, he was summoned for interrogation and accused of instigating Jordanian-Palestinian discord, and warned that "here in Jordan, we are all Jordanians."⁴⁸ Martial law reinforced the image of camps as subversive spaces.⁴⁹

While Palestinians and Jordanians in Jordan were being imprisoned for publicly recognizing the PLO as the sole and legitimate representative of the Palestinian people, in reality, the PLO suffered from serious political and ideological discord among the factions. It is thus not surprising that it lacked a single, unifying vision for the future Palestinian state and society. Although some have argued that the immediate demands of the Palestinian struggle have always taken precedence over long-range and detailed objectives,⁵⁰ the absence of consensus on fundamental questions has deepened the national crisis. After the establishment of the Palestinian Authority, undemocratic structures, internal schisms over the necessity of armed struggle, and scuffles over the principles and laws that define citizenship⁵¹—all compounded by Israeli repression—have driven the Palestinian national movement to the brink of collapse.

It is true that the long Palestinian struggle is marked by periods of popular mobilization and unified leadership, most notably during the 1987 intifada, which evolved without PLO planning and mobilization, but even the most progressive factions avoided pressing too strongly on social issues fundamental to outlining a future social vision. Instead, issues of democracy, class, and gender were perceived as divisive, even by the Left (the impact of which was, in any case, limited). For example, gender practices in the DFLP (and in other factions) were viewed as destabilizing to Palestinian "traditions" and threatening to the privileged masculine and militant struggle.⁵²

Consequently, in the PLO's heyday, Palestinian camps emerged as national signifiers derived from a pronounced emphasis on armed struggle, that is, as bases for the fedayeen, complementing their reputation as repositories of Palestine's pre-1948 rural memory and ethos. Thus, in the absence of a vision and concrete programs designed to build a new society, social inequalities in camps were obscured and often masked as "tradition."

NEGOTIATION, INTIFADA, AND PERESTROIKA

By the close of the twentieth century, both the PLO and the Polisario had abandoned armed struggle, opting instead for negotiations to resolve their

respective conflicts. The shift from armed resistance to “peaceful” negotiations generated new ideological and political rifts within (as well as challenges to) the two leaderships. For Palestinians, the period between Black September in 1971 and Oslo in 1993 witnessed watershed events, most notably Israel’s 1982 invasion of Lebanon and the destruction of the PLO’s infrastructure. When all seemed lost, the first intifada (1987–1992) erupted in the West Bank and Gaza, and Islamist political organizations emerged. These events were articulated differently in various contexts. In Jordan, King Hussein announced Jordan’s administrative disengagement from the West Bank in 1988 and a year later lifted martial law and instituted policies of privatization and “Jordanization.” The latter referred to recruitment policies privileging Jordanian nationals in the public sector, thus heightening Palestinian-Jordanian tensions.⁵³

However, in the mid-1990s, it was the Oslo agreements that loomed as the central concern for refugees in Jordan. They were outraged when Yasir Arafat and his supporters, abruptly and without any consultation, abandoned armed struggle, marginalized the refugee issue, and relocated from exile to the West Bank and Gaza. Most Palestinian refugees I interviewed who originated in areas occupied during the 1948 war expressed feelings of abandonment and betrayal. They believed that the PLO leadership had sacrificed their right of return to their original homes and land for a shredded statelet in the West Bank and Gaza. These political shifts, which threatened to damage the meaning of camps as national signifiers, injected a troubling note of disorientation in the stable narratives of identity that had nourished a sense of collective belonging among refugees and exiles. The crisis revealed the stark contrast between the vividness of the past in Palestinian memory and the vagueness of the future. Opposition to Oslo was illustrated in Khalid’s comment that the PLO leadership “manipulated our sentiments and the ideals of our people in the camps. . . . They used us as fodder . . . because the leadership knew that we are the ones who are willing to die for our land.”⁵⁴

Refugees feared that the *mukbayyam* (camp)—long symbolic of their suffering as well as their political and legal rights—would be erased, and with it, any linkages between the camps and the memory and hope of return to 1948 villages of origin. As Hanan insisted:

You know, it is not that the camp is a substitute . . . for Palestine, but the word “camp” means *takhyim* [camping], which means that one day we will destroy the tents and return, we shall return. Can you imagine there are plans to erase the word “camp”?⁵⁵

The national symbolism of the camp had obscured disparities in wealth and opportunities between the camp refugees and the affluent. After Oslo, these emerged with stark clarity. Many, like Hani, a third-generation refugee, now emphasized the poverty of the camps:

I worked in the Orthodox Club in Amman for a while, but I couldn't stay there because the atmosphere was very difficult for me. . . . I was a gym instructor, but their economic conditions were quite different from mine [in al-Baqa']. For example, I used public transportation . . . while a young man of sixteen or seventeen years of age owned a fancy car. . . . In the club they were one hundred percent bourgeoisie . . . they identified me as different from the clothes I used to wear; the man guarding the gate would ask me where I was going. Can you imagine?⁵⁶

In 1991, a parallel process unfolded in the Western Sahara conflict after a cease-fire was declared. Refugees began packing their suitcases to leave *lebmada*, but as the years passed, hopes for a return dwindled to a flicker. Morocco obstructed the referendum, and since then, all negotiations, most recently those held in Manhasset, NY (16–18 March 2008), have come to naught.⁵⁷

In Western Sahara, an informal economy developed: Television sets, mobile phones, and secondhand vehicles began to appear, harbingers of what Sahrawis call, with a touch of irony, "perestroika."

SADR, which did not anticipate that the Sahrawi exile would last for more than three decades, had neither the resources to meet the needs of a growing population nor the ability to turn the scorched desert into a fertile meadow. Since the 1991 cease-fire, inequalities within the camps have sharpened, inciting criticism of the leadership. Concurrently, an informal economy has developed exponentially: television sets, mobile phones, and secondhand vehicles have begun to appear, harbingers of what Sahrawis call, with a touch of irony, "perestroika." Markets and consumption loom

as threats to collective mobilization and the ideals of the revolution. The war years took on the glow of a golden age, when communal sharing and equitable distribution guaranteed survival for all, and tellingly, when money itself was a rare commodity. SADR has responded to the rising tensions by relaxing some of the policies it had strictly imposed and by allowing the informal economy to grow and help ease the socioeconomic crisis. Sahrawi refugees still languish in the desert camps, with neither peace nor war in the horizon.

Meanwhile, a new, educated, and unemployed generation is growing restless; some call for the resumption of armed struggle, others seek to emigrate, while still others initiate small mercantile enterprises. Their elders describe them, with cynicism, as *jil al-infitah*, "the generation of openness." Al-Salik from Awsard camp succinctly describes a situation that resonates with recent Palestinian history:

The older, authentic generation [*al-jil al-ashl*] faced difficulties and discrimination under Spanish rule. . . . the generation of the revolution [*jil al-thawra*] . . . carried out the armed

struggle, which also involved many sacrifices. . . . We felt, what is the use of education without a homeland? As for the third generation, they also suffer, mainly from waiting; they are frustrated. But there is a factor that all generations agree upon, and that is the national cause. We all are ready to leave everything for our homeland.⁵⁸

According to Jacob Mundy, the transformations in the camps did not erode the national project, but rather fostered the creation of a “normal society”: markets, he opined, produce citizens no less than popular committees. Refugees who have focused on improving their lives in the camps are less likely to compromise politically.⁵⁹ Apart from the issue of collective political mobilization (to be distinguished from national belonging), Mundy’s proposition has parallels in the Palestinian case. Younger generations of refugees differentiate between their efforts to improve their livelihood and their political standing—unlike their elders, who refused even to renovate their shelters lest this be misunderstood as acquiescence to resettlement. Similarly, younger generations of Sahrawis are also seeking to improve their living conditions, while holding firmly to nationalist or radical political views.

A small trend within the Polisario calling itself “Khat Achahid” (the martyr’s path) has emerged recently; its followers are pushing for stricter adherence to revolutionary principles.⁶⁰ They accuse some leading members of the Polisario of corruption. The debate came to a head during the Twelfth Congress held in mid-December 2007 in Tifariti, where SADR exercises its sovereignty. Heated discussions revealed a diminishing consensus. However, similar to the effects of the first Palestinian intifada, the Sahrawi nonviolent mass uprising or intifada (the term they use) that erupted in May 2005 in the occupied territories of Western Sahara gave the Polisario and Sahrawi refugees a moral and political boost that reinforced links between the “inside” and “outside.” Morocco’s response to the Sahrawi demonstrations was brutal.⁶¹ In 2006, a Sahrawi youth in Madrid showed me an injury inflicted by the Moroccan police and described how young men risked imprisonment or death for daring to replace the Moroccan flag with SADR’s banner. Nonetheless, the challenge of reconciling the needs of a growing refugee population with collective political mobilization in the context of the current stalemate remains.

CONCLUSION

The comparisons and reflections offered in this article are not meant to minimize the PLO’s failings by attributing them solely to structural constraints, or to idealize the Polisario’s achievements in the Sahrawi camps. However, even taking into consideration the salient structural and historical differences between the two cases, it is difficult to dismiss the critical consequences resulting from the dissimilarities in leadership and vision, particularly concerning the positioning of refugee camps in the programs and praxis of the national

movement. The Polisario conceived of camps as preparatory social and political spaces in which to transform society today so as to achieve liberation and repatriation in the future. The Polisario sought popular participation and the consolidation of democratic structures, especially during the war years. This enables Sahrawi refugees today to place constraints on their leadership. However, it is difficult to predict whether current external pressures and internal fissures will produce splinter groups or revitalize revolutionary principles and collective solidarity.

Camps in the Palestinian national struggle occupied a different position: as sites for the mobilization of the armed struggle and the elaboration of an identity interwoven with symbols of the land, loss, and eventual return. Oslo unsettled the camps' symbolic, rhetorical, and political location and marginalized refugees in the political process. As Mamdouh Nofal noted, it was Arafat who

Democratic participation leads to debate, through which a clearer future vision emerges, answering fundamental questions: How do Palestinians begin building a national future in the present while taking into consideration the heterogeneous interests of Palestinian society?

decided the means of struggle, the structure of leadership, and the modes of operation in all domestic and foreign affairs.⁶² Arafat spoke *instead of* the Palestinians, not on their behalf. He made fundamental decisions pertaining to the future of the nation without consultation and controlled resources without accountability. This nondemocratic leadership style shackled energies and squandered human resources and political dividends, particularly those produced by the first Palestinian intifada. The concentration of power in Arafat's hands ultimately led to the disastrous Oslo agreements, planned clandestinely by an elite few while the first intifada was at its zenith. The second, or al-Aqsa, intifada of 2000

should have been a warning sign to Palestinian officials that negotiations were leading nowhere, and an opportunity to harness new energies to reevaluate strategies and buttress national unity.

Democratic participation leads to debate, through which a clearer future vision emerges, answering fundamental questions: What are Palestinians fighting *for*, and how do Palestinians begin building a national future in the present while taking into consideration the heterogeneous interests of Palestinian society? As Azmi Bishara proposed, resistance and liberation are two different concepts.⁶³ Palestinians have shown a remarkable ability to resist and endure, but liberation requires a leadership capable of formulating and implementing a national program for the post-liberation society.

Palestinian camps remain vital political and symbolic spaces in the struggle for national liberation. They are embodiments of the right to return to one's home and homeland. As such, camps are foci of a just struggle to counter settler-colonial projects. The 2007 events in Nahr al-Barid camp in Lebanon may portend dangerous times ahead, especially in light of Israel's long-enduring aggressive plans to resettle refugees in host countries.⁶⁴ The Palestinian leadership could open up new spaces of participation by rethinking refugee camps not only as bases for freedom fighters, or enclaves that reproduce historical

memory, but more crucially as a socio-spatial terrain in which popular memory can be harnessed effectively for collective, future-oriented political praxis, and as a transformational force to mold new subjects and new polities. The Polisario experience might illuminate how this may be done, just as the much longer and more complex Palestinian experience can elucidate aspects of the Sahrawi struggle.

NOTES

1. There are approximately 1.7 million refugees in Jordan registered with UNRWA; 329,150 of them live in ten UNRWA camps. Three other camps are administered by the Jordanian government. Most of my research was conducted in al-Baq'a and Marka camps. Al-Baq'a, located 20 kilometers northwest of Amman, has 90,575 refugees registered with UNRWA, while 44,198 refugees live in Marka, 10 kilometers northeast of the capital. I visited all other camps for shorter periods of time and conducted interviews in camps such as Suf, al-Husayn, and al-Zarqa. During a short research trip to Jordan in 2007 I conducted interviews in al-Baq'a, al-Zarqa, and Jarash camps. I also draw on the experience of having lived in the West Bank and Lebanon, during which time I conducted research or volunteered in camps. For details on refugee statistics and location of camps, see UNRWA's official website at www.un.org/unrwa/refugees. In Western Sahara, I conducted research in all five camps, which are located east of Tindouf, a small Algerian military town.

2. There are important contextual differences in the histories of the PLO's presence in camps in Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, and in Palestine under Israeli occupation. Regardless of the different consequences of the PLO's presence, in each case these were shaped by the organizational forms and ideological underpinnings of the PLO's factions and by the PLO's overall national politics and shifts in tactics and strategies. Moreover, Jordan is the host of the largest refugee population outside Palestine, and even after the PLO was ousted in 1971 its cadres continued to mobilize underground. Thus, Jordan is representative of factional ideologies and the larger historical trends and ruptures in Palestinian politics and strategies.

3. On a similar topic, see also Pablo San Martín, "Nationalism, Identity, and

Citizenship in the Western Sahara," *Journal of North African Studies* 10, nos. 3–4 (2005), pp. 565–92; Jacob A. Mundy, "Performing the Nation, Pre-figuring the State: The Western Sahara Refugees, Thirty Years Later," *Journal of Modern African Studies* 45, no. 2 (2007), p. 293.

4. Morocco and Mauritania invaded the Western Sahara in violation of the International Court of Justice's (ICJ) advisory opinion stating that neither Morocco nor Mauritania had any "legal ties of such a nature as might affect the application of General Assembly resolution 1514 (XV) . . . of the principle of self-determination through the free and genuine expression of the will of the peoples of the Territory."

5. See www.saharawiembassy.co.za/shame_wall.nt.

6. The name is a French acronym for *Mission des Nations Unies pour l'Organisation d'un Référendum au Sahara Occidental*.

7. Tony Hodges, *Western Sahara: The Roots of a Desert War* (Westport, CT: Lawrence Hill, 1983), p. 164.

8. In 2000, Badil Resource Centre for Palestinian Refugee and Residency Rights estimated the number at 8,454,000. See www.badil.org/Statistics/population/02.pdf.

9. Unlike the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), which assists refugees around the world and has a protection mandate, UNRWA, which began its operations in 1950, provides humanitarian assistance exclusively to Palestine's refugees and lacks an explicit protection mandate. UNRWA is also distinguished by the fact that the vast majority of its employees are Palestinians, many of them refugees, while Westerners comprise the majority of its executive strata.

10. Figures for 2008 are available at UNRWA's Web site,

www.un.org/unrwa/refugees/.

11. Mundy, "Performing the Nation," p. 278.

12. A 1974 Spanish census put the number at 76,425 Sahrawis. Today, census statistics are uneven and politically charged. In my interviews in 2005, estimates provided ranged between 180,000 and 250,000 refugees, this range is consistent with the literature on Western Sahara.

13. William B. Quandt, Fuad Jabber, and Ann Mosely Lesch, *The Politics of Palestinian Nationalism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974), pp. 96–98.

14. The Houston Agreement, signed by the Polisario and the Moroccan government, was supposed to lead to a referendum to be held in 1998 that would allow the people of Western Sahara to express their support for self-determination, possibly leading to full independence or integration within Morocco. The referendum did not take place.

15. See Yahia H. Zoubir and Karima Benabdallah-Gambier, "Western Sahara Deadlock," *Middle East Report Online*, no. 227 (Summer 2003), at: http://www.merip.org/mer/mer227/227_zoubir.html

16. See also Sabri Jiryis, "The Palestinian Position," *JPS* 24 (Summer 1977), pp. 150–58.

17. See Hakim Darbouche and Yahia H. Zoubir, "Conflicting International Policies and the Western Sahara Stalemate," *International Spectator* 43, no. 1 (2008), pp. 91–105.

18. This is illustrated in the title of Rosemary Sayigh's book *Palestinians: From Peasants to Revolutionaries* (London: Zed Press, 1979).

19. See James Firebrace, "The Sahrawi Refugees: Lessons and Prospects," in Richard Lawless and Laila Mohanan, eds., *War and Refugees: The Western Sahara Conflict* (London and New York: Pinter Publishers, 1987) pp. 167–85.

20. See Rashid Khalidi, *Palestinian Identity: The Construction of Modern National Consciousness* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), p. 182.

21. Joseph A. Massad, *Colonial Effects: The Making of National Identity in Jordan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), pp. 12–13.

22. Tariq, a refugee from al-Husayn camp, author interview, Amman, Jordan, 5 February 1999.

23. For a detailed account of Palestinians in Jordan, see Massad, *Colonial Effects*.

24. Based on interviews in camps and with UNRWA employees.

25. Maria, author interview, Rabouni, SADR, 19 February 2005. For an elaborate analysis and a comparative view on this topic, see Barbara Harrell-Bond, *Imposing Aid: Emergency Assistance to Refugees* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986).

26. Hodges, *Western Sahara*, p. 158.

27. See SADR, "Proclamation of the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic: SADR as a State," 27 February 1976, online at www.wsahara.net/sadr.html#anchor1001.

28. Hodges, *Western Sahara*, pp. 163–64.

29. I have often used SADR and the Polisario interchangeably in reference to those areas and functions where the two overlap.

30. Abdati, a Sahrawi refugee and Polisario/SADR official, author interview, al-Ayun camp, SADR, 18 February 2005.

31. Mariam, a Sahrawi committee member, author interview, al-Ayun camp, SADR, 18 December 2005.

32. For example, the increase in marriages across tribal boundaries, and the high education levels achieved. While over 95 percent of the population was illiterate in 1975, today the ratios are reversed.

33. Shaykh Buzaid, an oral historian, author interview, Tifariti, Western Sahara, 17 December 2005.

34. Mundy, "Performing the Nation," p. 290.

35. See Mustafa al-Kuttab and Muhammad Badi, *al-Niza' 'ala al-Sabra' al-Gharbiyya: Bayna baqq al-quwwa wa quwwat al-baqq* [The Conflict over Western Sahara: Between the Right of Power and the Power of Right] (Damascus: Dar al-Mukhtar, 1998), pp. 12–26.

36. Sahrawis look with disdain on societies that sanction physical or verbal abuse against women, and regard the respect with which they hold women as one of their distinguishing cultural characteristics.

37. Edward W. Said, *Reflections on Exile and Other Critical Essays* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), p. xxxv.

38. San Martin, "Nationalism, Identity, and Citizenship," p. 569.

39.

40. Union de Periodistas y Escritores Saharauis (UPES), "Polisario Regrets Moroccan Intransigence and Reiterates Will to Negotiate for Peace," 19 March 2008, available online at www.upes.org.

41. Only elementary classes are available in camp schools.

42. From the history textbook assigned to grade six (1993–1994), SADR, Ministry of Education.

43. Mahmud, author interview, al-Baqa' refugee camp, Jordan, 5 June 1995.

44. Samir, author interview, al-Baqa' camp, Jordan, 3 September 1995.

45. Abu Kamal, author interview, Suf camp, Amman, Jordan, 5 November 1998.

46. Omar, author interview, al-Baqa' camp, Jordan, 15 March 1996.

47. Samir, author interview, al-Baqa' camp, Jordan, 3 September 1995.

48. Adnan, author interview, al-Baqa' camp, Jordan, 17 March 1997.

49. According to Massad, the shelling of refugee camps during the armed clashes (1970–1971), indicated that the army looked on all Palestinians as an extension of the guerrilla fighters, and vice versa. Massad, *Colonial Effects*, p. 244.

50. For example, the late George Habash, secretary-general of the PFLP, said in an interview that the nature of the future state "doesn't seem to me to be in urgent need of definition. . . . We now have problems that are more important." Quandt, Jabber, and Lesch, *Politics of Palestinian Nationalism*, p. 102.

51. Nahda Shehada, *Justice without Drama: Enacting Family Law in Gaza City Shari'a Court* (The Hague: Shaker Publishing, 2005), pp. 26–28.

52. Frances S. Hasso, *Resistance, Repression, and Gender Politics in*

Occupied Palestine and Jordan (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 2005), pp. xiv–xvi.

53. Laurie Brand, "Palestinians and Jordanians: A Crisis of Identity," *JPS* 96 (Summer 1995), pp. 46–61; See also Curtis Ryan, "Reform Retreats Amidst Jordan's Political Storms," *Middle East Report Online*, at www.merip.org/mero/mero061005.html.

54. Khalid, author interview, al-Baqa' camp, Jordan, 19 November 1995.

55. Hanan, author interview, al-Baqa' camp, Jordan, 15 October 1996.

56. Hani, author interview, al-Baqa' camp, Jordan, 11 September 1995.

57. See Zoubir and Benabdallah-Gambier, "Western Saharan Deadlock."

58. Al-Salek, author interview, Awsard camp, SADR, 23 February 2005.

59. Mundy, "Performing the Nation," p. 276.

60. Mundy, "Performing the Nation," p. 293.

61. See Toby Shelley, *Endgame in Western Sahara: What Future for Africa's Last Colony?* (London and New York: Zed Books). See also Maria J. Stephan and Jacob Mundy, "A Battlefield Transformed: From Guerilla Resistance to Mass Nonviolent Struggle in the Western Sahara," online at www.spsrasd.info/sps-e100806.html.

62. Mamdouh Nofal, "Yasir Arafat, the Political Player: A Mixed Legacy," *JPS* 138 (Winter 2006), p. 23.

63. Azmi Bishara, "*Siyasat al-muwajaba mu'akkada . . . al-barb mumkina*" [The Policy of Confrontation Is Certain . . . War is Possible], *Arabs* 48, online at www.arabs48.com.

64. Since 1948, Israel has developed numerous schemes to "dissolve" refugees through resettlement and integration, especially in Arab countries. For an excellent discussion of these schemes, see Nur Masalha, *The Politics of Denial: Israel and the Palestinian Refugee Problem* (London: Pluto Press, 2003), especially chapter 3.