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According to UNRWA (United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East), Neirab Camp “suffers from the most abysmal living conditions of all the Palestine refugees camps in Syria” (UNRWA 2007, 4). Situated about 13km south-east of Syria’s northern city of Aleppo, Neirab originally consisted of 94 zinc-covered barracks that were used to house allied troops during World War II (UNRWA 2003, 7). In the aftermath of the 1948 Arab–Israeli war, Neirab was turned into a refugee camp to accommodate some of the Palestinian refugees who had ended up in Syria. Over time, and as the population grew, some refugees moved out of the barracks and built their own houses nearby, within the limits of the land allotted by the Syrian government for the establishment of the camp.

In 2000, Neirab became the target of the Neirab Rehabilitation Project,¹ a development project sponsored by UNRWA and funded by international donors, most prominent among them, the governments of Canada, Switzerland, the United States, and the United Arab Emirates. UNRWA adopted a “participatory” approach with regard to the project, organizing regular community meetings to discuss the project’s planning and implementation with Palestinian refugees living in Neirab, and recruiting some of these refugees as volunteers to help out with the project’s implementation. A major aspect of the Neirab Rehabilitation Project consists of plans to improve the infrastructure of Neirab by destroying the zinc-covered former World War II army barracks that were at the origin of Neirab and rebuilding that part of the camp.

The Neirab Rehabilitation Project, including plans to rebuild Neirab’s barracks, proved to be a sensitive issue among Neirab’s inhabitants, setting off suspicions about UNRWA’s real intentions in promoting socio-economic development in the camp and generating discussions about how far UNRWA should go in making changes to the camp. There were lengthy debates among Palestinian residents of Neirab at UNRWA-organized community meetings about whether UNRWA should simply renovate existing shelters in the barracks or do away entirely.

¹ The Palestinian refugee camp of Ein el Tal was also a target of the Neirab Rehabilitation Project although I do not discuss it in this piece.
with the barracks and rebuild the area from scratch. A particularly sensitive issue with regard to these debates was UNRWA’s proposal to replace the barracks with apartment buildings, a proposal that had some Neirab residents worried that if that were the case Neirab would no longer look like “a camp.”

In this piece, I argue that the debates surrounding UNRWA plans to rebuild Neirab’s barracks point, on the one hand, to the continued relevance of the landscape of the camp to the sense of identity of Palestinian refugees living in camps; on the other hand, these debates reveal the existence of competing understandings among refugees about the meaning of the camp as a refugee space. These competing understandings transcend the notion of the camp as a physical space, relying instead on more abstract or flexible conceptions of what makes Neirab a Palestinian refugee camp. I show that those who attempted to disarticulate refugee identity from the physical landscape of the camp were contesting the notion of the camp as a space of suffering and victimhood, a notion that continues to hold sway among Palestinians living in camps. These contestations, when analyzed within a broader context, seem to point to a process through which an increasing number of Palestinian refugees living in camps are departing from an assumed link between refugeehood and material suffering.

The Barracks as Witness

In October 2010, while in Lebanon for a conference, I took a side trip to neighboring Syria. I spent five days in the Aleppo area where the Palestinian refugee camp of Neirab is located. Some years earlier from 2005 to 2006, I had conducted fieldwork in Neirab, the site of the ongoing Neirab Rehabilitation Project. On the last evening of my October 2010 visit, I met up in Aleppo with Mona, Ibrahim, and Mahmoud, three acquaintances from Neirab Camp, in their late thirties, late twenties and early twenties, respectively. All three had been involved as volunteers with the Neirab Rehabilitation Project during the project’s early stages. As we sat in one of the many outdoor cafés facing the Aleppo Citadel, the conversation turned to the project’s latest phase during which UNRWA had begun implementing its plan to rebuild the area of the camp where the barracks are located. Commenting on the barracks, several of which had already been reduced to rubble, Mona suddenly asserted that “if the barracks stayed, it would be better.” Referring to them as “a witness to the Nakba,” she explained that the barracks “help us remember our cause (qadiyatna), the presence of Palestinians in the camp, our life of poverty, our martyrs.” She ended by pointing out that “when the [World Trade Center] towers fell, the United States erected a memorial; we need to have our barracks.”

2 I have changed the names of the people I interviewed to protect their identity.
Whether or not such a comparison is warranted, by linking the Nakba to 9/11, Mona was trying to underscore the importance that people attribute to memorializing events in their history that they perceive as particularly traumatic. As Mona made clear, the barracks are a testament to the traumatic events of 1948, during which around 700,000 Palestinians lost their homes, livelihoods, and possessions and became refugees (Morris 2004). With the barracks gone what would be left to testify to the loss, desolation, and years of hardship Palestinians had endured since their forced displacement, especially if these barracks were replaced with modern apartment buildings? In order to understand the real and symbolic role played by the barracks in testifying to Palestinian suffering, it bears revisiting the events that led to the existence of Neirab Camp.

The approximately four thousand Palestinians who ended up in Neirab Camp in the aftermath of the 1948 war, came from towns and villages in northern Palestine and had initially fled to Lebanon, ending up in the port city of Tyre (Sur in Arabic). There, local authorities put them on a train normally used for transporting cattle along with other Palestinian refugees (UNRWA 2003). Refugees were gradually dropped off at various locations within Lebanon and Syria. Several of them died during the journey. Neirab Camp’s future inhabitants disembarked in northern Syria in the Aleppo area and were then taken by Syrian authorities to the zinc-covered barracks left over from World War II.

One of Neirab’s older and well-respected residents, Abu Hosam, who was involved in the Neirab Rehabilitation Project as an intermediary between UNRWA and the Neirab community, was able to give me a first-hand account of how Neirab Camp came into being. Abu Hosam is from the Palestinian village of Jesh, a place that is “very famous for its figs, the most delicious figs in the world.” In 1948, when he was just nine years old, he and his family fled the village in a bid to find shelter from Israeli air raids:

People left their houses to neighboring fields in order to avoid bombs. After sunset some artillery began against the houses and villages. We spent that night in the fields and we thought that, especially my mother, thought that our leaving was only temporary so she didn’t take anything of the furniture or blankets except for one blanket to cover us.

Within a few days, Jesh fell to Israeli forces who then occupied it causing some of its inhabitants to decide to continue their flight. Abu Hosam and his family crossed into Lebanon and eventually ended up in the port city of Tyre where Lebanese authorities made them board “a large cargo train:”
We boarded the train and we began our long journey knowing nothing about our destination. The train began to stop in some cities. It stopped in Beirut. Some families got off; we don’t know how… Others in Homs in Syria, in Hama, we don’t know how… Until we arrived in Aleppo City at the main station. There, a large pick-up truck stopped in front of each wagon and we boarded these trucks to Neirab Camp. In Neirab Camp we were sheltered in the barracks which each accommodated 16 families.

In order to accommodate newly arrived refugees, each one of Neirab’s zinc-covered barracks was divided into housing units initially separated by sheets. Each family was housed in one of these units, regardless of family size (UNRWA 2003). While telling his story, Abu Hosam recalled with a chuckle instances of individuals rolling over into a neighboring unit while sleeping at night. Funny occurrences aside, the barracks were “draughty and squalid to the extreme” and newly arrived refugees were exposed to the freezing winter and to insect and rodent infestations (Azzam 2005; UNRWA 2003, 2007, 7).

According to Abu Hosam, for many years, Neirab’s refugees used public toilets and baths. Women, however, bathed inside the barracks using large basins. In the mid-fifties, UNRWA erected concrete walls between the housing units in the barracks, and built corridors to separate every barrack into two halves, each half consisting of a row of rooms with doors opening to the outside. UNRWA also put wooden ceilings under the zinc roofs to stem the effect of extreme winter and summer temperatures. By the 1970s, refugees themselves had started making changes to their housing. Those who had the means to, moved out of their room in the barracks and built new accommodations for themselves on surrounding land donated by the Syrian government. There were no strict criteria as to how the space was to be subdivided, so people appropriated whatever space they could afford to build on, a situation that contributed to giving Neirab Camp its maze-like and irregular character.

Most of those who stayed in the barracks were able to enlarge their one-room dwelling by appropriating the space between stretches of barracks to build tiny kitchens as well as showers and bathrooms. If the space was too small to accommodate a shower, some people would bathe in the kitchen area, using the kitchen drains to evacuate the water (this situation continued to exist in some of the barrack housing at the time of my fieldwork in 2005). Finally, a few of the more affluent barrack inhabitants, bought additional rooms within the barracks from people who were moving out, enabling them to enlarge their dwellings and, sometimes, even build an additional story.³

At the beginning of the Neirab Rehabilitation Project in 2000, fifty two years after Palestinian refugees had moved into them, the barracks still existed and continued to provide shelter for

³ Most of this information was collected from conversations with Abu Hosam, one of the first inhabitants of Neirab Camp.
some 6000 Palestinian refugees out of a total population of 18,000 (UNRWA 2003). While insect and rodent infestations seemed to no longer be a problem, barrack inhabitants continued to experience flooding and leaking and extreme summer and winter temperatures in their housing. Additionally, residents complained about the overcrowding, the lack of sunlight and ventilation, and the humidity that left holes and cracks in their walls. Overcrowding is an issue that affects Neirab Camp as a whole: finite space, coupled with demographic increase, has resulted in a cramped camp, with a maze of narrow alleys and hardly any public space.

Despite space constraints, Neirab is bustling with activity. Close to the area occupied by the barracks is “Shar’a al-Souq” a commercial street where camp inhabitants buy their daily supplies of meet, fruits, and vegetables. Shar’a al-Souq, as well as the main streets that border the official limits of the camp, are lined with stores selling everything from pharmaceutical products to shoes and jewelry. Along those streets are also a few shawarma (skewered beef and chicken sandwiches), roasted chicken, and falafel stands. The walls of the camp are filled with posters and images of Palestinian political parties, political activists, prisoners, and martyrs fallen for the Palestinian cause. About half of the men in Neirab have jobs involving some type of skilled or unskilled manual work such as construction, blacksmithing or carpentry; about 16 percent work as teachers (UNRWA and TANGO 2006). About 30 percent of the women in Neirab are employed, the majority working as teachers (UNRWA and TANGO 2006).

It was a member of the Neirab community working for the General Authority for Palestinian Arab Refugees (GAPAR), the Syrian government body that oversees Palestinian refugee camps, who first brought the harsh living conditions of the barracks to UNRWA’s attention in the 1990s.4 During my fieldwork, I also heard criticism about conditions in the barracks from Palestinians inside and outside Neirab. During an interview with Younes, a Neirab resident in his early twenties and Neirab Rehabilitation Project volunteer, he compared the barracks to “coffins” arguing that their residents lived “a life of death” (hayat al-mawt). The current Palestinian director of GAPAR made a similar observation at a conference organized by UNRWA in October 2010 to discuss the agency’s new developmental approach in Palestinian refugee camps.5 He also compared the barracks to “coffins” asserting that barracks residents never saw the sun (he was presumably alluding to the effects of cramped living conditions coupled with irregular building extensions on top of existing barracks).

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4 This was noted on two occasions during conversations with UNRWA employees involved in the Neirab Rehabilitation Project.

5 The Conference was titled, “From Relief and Works to Human Development: UNRWA Sixty Years Later” and was held at the Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs, American University of Beirut (October 8–9, 2010).
During interviews with residents of the Neirab barracks they talked about how “in the summer it’s like the house is on fire,” or how they wished they could “open a window to breath.” “Just wait for winter; come visit us in the winter and see the suffering we go through” Mohamad, a middle-aged father of three, told me. Why then did UNRWA plans to do away with the barracks and proposal to replace them with apartment buildings which would do much to alleviate the overcrowding and help solve problems of sunlight, ventilation, and humidity, prove to be controversial? The answer lies primarily in Palestinian refugees’ refusal to forget the suffering of the past. In his work comparing memories of partition in India and Palestine, Jonathan Greenberg notes that “to remember the traumatic past is, at least to some extent, to experience the suffering caused by the original wound” (Greenberg 2005, 93). Thus he argues that “partition’s contested borders serve as an ongoing reminder of loss and pain, humiliation and failure, experienced more than a half century ago” (Greenberg 2005, 93). In the same vein, it can be said that Neirab’s dilapidated barracks and the hardship associated with them serve as a reminder of the displacement and dispossession Palestinian refugees experienced more than half a century ago.

Randa Farah notes that zinc-covered barracks were a defining feature of many early Palestinian camps:

These *numar al-zinco*, or the zinc housing units, symbolize the refugee experience in Palestinian culture. What holds the zinco sheets in place are mainly stones and old car tires. The ‘zinco’ appears in many if not most life histories: The ‘sound of rain’ in the winter as it hit the metal, leakage through cracks and crevices and unbearable scathing heat in the summer. These romanticized images are reproduced when describing ‘innocent’ childhood memories, where despite the unbearable cold and heat, their lives had more meaning and the relations of people in the camp were closer [Farah 1999, 193].

Abu Hosam certainly captured the ambiguous way in which some camp residents remember life in the barracks when recalling his life as an early resident of Neirab Camp. In an article that was published in the Neirab Rehabilitation Project newsletter, Abu Hosam recalled the harsh winters in the barrack during which “the rain froze before it reached the ground to form candles of ice hanging down on the edge of the zinc sheets” and how “some children and old people died from the severe cold.” At the same time Abu Hosam noted that childhood doesn’t know pain, but always hope. So as a child, I didn’t think of life as the young and old did. What concerned me at the time was that I had to find a place to play, which was available around the barracks. The most common games at that time were marbles, football and leap-frog… (Azzam 2005).

During my fieldwork in Syria, I noticed that despite the hardship encountered by refugees living in the barracks, most of them were deeply attached to their lives in Neirab, praising most of all
the camp’s strong social interconnectedness which worked as a safety net and contributed to giving them as sense of community and belonging. The first phase of the Neirab Rehabilitation Project entailed moving 300 families out of the Neirab barracks to UNRWA-built houses in the neighboring Palestinian refugee camp of Ein el Tal. UNRWA was soon to find out that convincing refugees to move from their dingy one to two room zinc-covered barracks to brand new concrete houses with yards would be an arduous task. A 2003 UNRWA survey showed that only 21 percent of refugees living in the barracks were initially interested in moving to brand new houses in Ein el Tal (UNRWA 2003). Refugees who were reluctant to move out of the barracks often praised their strong social ties to their neighbors and family, the feeling of security they felt in their surroundings, and the knowledge that they could depend on neighbors in times of need (Gabiam 2005). Neirab Camp’s crowded and cramped barracks paradoxically contributed to creating an atmosphere that encouraged these valuable social assets (Also see Chakaki 2006). Finally, while both camp residents and outsiders often used harsh language to describe conditions in the barracks, I found out during my fieldwork that the barracks were nevertheless cheerful places where neighbors were constantly mingling with each other.

In addition to symbolizing the hardship of camp life, the zinc-covered barracks came to symbolize the temporariness of Palestinian refugees’ stay in these camps. This explains why in the early years of exile it was not unusual for refugees to refuse “to use anything but the zinc roofs, since they believed they would return and anything more durable would look like they acquiesced to re-settlement” (Farah 1999, 195). The impending destruction of the barracks as a result of the Neirab Rehabilitation Project, brought to the forefront yet another role that the barracks have assumed: witness to Palestinian refugees’ painful past, a past whose traces they embody. Neirab’s barracks were erected during World War II, around the time that Palestinians became refugees; as wartime military barracks, they were built to serve as temporary shelters. Despite their temporary function, they bear the traces of a refugee return delayed time and time again and their cracks, holes, uneven floors, and draughty zinc roofs testify to the hardship refugees have had to face in exile.

The barracks speak to the lived, sensory, non-signifiable, aspect of Palestinian refugees’ collective memory (Nora 1989; Tugal 2007). It is only when the crumbling barracks of Neirab Camp became threatened with disappearance that their importance as an embodiment of Palestinian suffering and as a witness to the Palestinian history of forced exile became a matter of public consciousness. Most refugees in Neirab would agree that living conditions in the barracks needed to be improved. However, as the barracks became threatened with disappearance, refugees had to contend with the fact that along with keys, flags, land deeds, cemeteries, monuments, photos and artistic representations, zinc-covered barracks are part of the material landscape of Palestinian memory (Feldman 2008; Khalili 2005). In this sense, the impending destruction of the barracks forced Palestinian refugees in Neirab to reevaluate the significance of the camp’s landscape to Palestinian refugee identity and political claims.
Despite the political role of the barracks as a witness to Palestinian suffering, it would seem that a growing number of Palestinian refugees are questioning the notion that harsh living conditions are a necessary sacrifice to Palestinian refugees’ resolve not to forget the past. Mona’s comments that the barracks should not have been destroyed during our get-together at the Aleppo citadel, set off a debate between herself, Mahmoud and Ibrahim, with the latter two downplaying the role of the physical structure of the camp as a witness to the Nakba and trying to emphasize other ways of keeping alive the memory of Palestinian displacement and dispossession.

Responding to Mona, Mahmoud argued that “what is important is that that this area (Neirab) should be called ‘Neirab Camp.’” For Mahmoud, the name “camp” irrespective of whether it is made up of “buildings, barracks, or high buildings, refers to the fact that we are still refugees, we have our rights, and the most important right is the right of return.” “The name camp means our stay is temporary,” he concluded.

“Leave one barrack to be a witness to the Nakba” Mona retorted. “The barracks are gone. There is nothing left to show how people used to live.” At this point, Ibrahim joined the conversation and countered Mona’s claim by arguing that “the biggest witness to the Nakba is resolution 194 which protects the right of return… Barracks are not the only witness [to the Nakba], international law is a witness, the presence of UNRWA is a witness.”

Agreeing with Ibrahim, Mahmoud then asked, “How long should people have to live in barracks?” “It is not difficult to be Palestinian; man even in agony, [living] in bad conditions can love life” he continued. Here, Mahmoud was criticizing the notion that material suffering builds political consciousness and encourages political resistance, the idea being that those who do not have much to lose materially, and thus do not ‘enjoy’ life anyway will be more inclined toward political resistance. This idea continues to be a potent one among Palestinian refugees in Ein el Tal and Neirab, and a potent one in terms of how Palestinian refugees in general conceive of life in the camps (Agier 2008; Parminter 1994, Farah 1999; Khalili 2005).

Turning to Mona, Mahmoud asked her if she thought children would be negatively affected by growing up in “modern houses.”

“No… They won’t forget,” replied Mona. She was pointing to the argument that was circulating among refugees in Neirab that refugees would “forget” about Palestine and about the right of return once they started living the comfortable lives promised by UNRWA’s Neirab Rehabilitation Project. Mona who apparently did not agree with this view explained she wanted at least one barrack to remain “so that people from outside see how we live, witness our suffering.”

8
Conclusion

On the one hand, the debate that took place among Mona, Mahmoud, and Ibrahim the day of my departure from Aleppo is a testament to the continued relevance of the physical space of the refugee camp as signifier of Palestinian refugee identity and political claims. On the other hand, this debate reflects competing understandings among Palestinian refugees about what makes the camp a meaningful space. As the years have passed with the refugee issue remaining unresolved and the camps having become de facto permanent spaces, it has become more tenuous for Palestinian refugees to resist changes to the landscape of their camps in the name of preserving refugees’ history of forced displacement, their visibility, and their political claims. One way for Palestinian refugees to reconcile changes to the landscape of their camps with their political claims is to interpret the space of the camp in a more flexible and abstract manner, by emphasizing the affective and temporal boundaries of refugee identity and de-linking refugees’ material conditions from their refugee identity. Mahmoud and Ibrahim’s statements certainly point in that direction.

Recent scholarship also points to examples of Palestinian refugees de-linking their material conditions from their refugee identity: in her research based on fieldwork in the Palestinian refugee camp of Shatila, Diana Allan notes that younger Palestinian refugees are increasingly resisting an understanding of the refugee experience that focuses solely on the Nakba and the traces it has left in the present. Allan argues that these refugees are concerned primarily about their future in Lebanon and overcoming their “everyday experiences of suffering linked to poverty and social and political exclusion” (Allan 2007, 274). They are part of the growing number of Palestinian refugees living in camps that differentiate between their current living conditions and the imperative not to forget the past. Randa Farah, in her research in Palestinian refugee camps in Jordan, points out that contrary to their parents and grandparents, “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” (Farah 2009, 89). Farah notes that it has become much more common for Palestinian refugees, especially younger ones, to make drastic improvements to their shelters in the camps. Similarly, Jalal Al-Husseini argues that “[Palestinian] refugees no longer see the sustainable improvement of their living conditions as unalterably incompatible with the right of return” (Al-Husseini 2010, 17).

It is not only the younger generations of refugees who are making the distinction between material conditions and the resolve not to forget the past even if they perhaps are more likely to do so (Allan 2007; Farah 1999). Even those who belong to the first generation of refugees, people like Abu Hosam, who grew up in Palestine and experienced the Nakba firsthand, have distanced themselves from the notion that material suffering is central to refugee identity and
memory. Abu Hosam, now in his seventies, considers himself “one of the Palestinians who always thinks about Palestine or for whom going back is the main goal.” Referring to his childhood in Jesh, he says in the Neirab Rehabilitation Project newsletter that he cannot “forget past times when I used to go to the field with my parents and play with my cousins on the soft brownish soil under the big green olive trees” (Azzam 2005); at the same time, he believes that it is important for refugees to aspire to a better future within their current environment. For Abu Hosam, the Neirab Rehabilitation Project is about helping refugees in Neirab acquire skills that will “enable them to walk through life without any dependence on the other” and to “think freely about the future.” With regard to the infrastructural component of the project, Abu Hosam hopes that families benefitting from these changes “will be happy to see their children live in decent houses which they lacked for more than 55 years,” later adding that “living in good conditions does not mean forgetting the homeland.”
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