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# UNRWA: Through the Eyes of its Refugee Employees

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# UNRWA: THROUGH THE EYES OF ITS REFUGEE EMPLOYEES IN JORDAN

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*The article argues that the absence of Palestinian political leadership and institutions following al-Nakba in 1948, led the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) to take on an exaggerated role that mirrored those of a welfare government-in-exile. The Agency created the matrix that organized daily life in refugee camps, a process facilitated by its Palestinian and refugee employees.<sup>1</sup> Local staff holds a paradoxical position: (i) as Palestinians who share with their beneficiaries a collective history, and (ii) as UNRWA employees who exercise less power and authority compared to international staff. The latter generally sit at the apex and the executive branch of the bureaucracy, while local employees, with few exceptions, represent the rank and file who implement policies and programmes. The large number of Palestinian employees obscures UNRWA's identity as principally funded and maintained by Western States. Yet, UNRWA neither promotes nor contains Palestinian nationalism, but like all other institutions it is a contested space, which is reshaped by larger political and social transformations in the region.*

In the camp at first people did not even untie all their bundles of clothes, they had them knotted together and they remained so for a while thinking they will soon return to Palestine . . . but with time they started to unpack their belongings bit by bit.<sup>2</sup>

## 1. Introduction

On 4 February 2009, a number of statements pertaining to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) were publicized in the international media. The Agency reported that on the previous day blankets and food parcels were confiscated from a distribution store

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<sup>1</sup> In this article I use the term Palestinian and refugee employee to mean the same thing, unless specified otherwise. Not all refugees are camp-dwellers, and not all Palestinians are registered with UNRWA, yet the vast majority are refugees in the broader sense of the term, that is exiled from Palestine and/or forcibly denationalized and made stateless. I am very grateful for the generosity and trust extended to me by Palestinian refugees and UNRWA staff in Jordan. I also would like to extend my gratitude for the financial and institutional support provided by *Centre d'Etudes et de Recherches sur le Moyen-Orient Contemporain* (CERMOC), especially by Dr. Riccardo Bocco, director of CERMOC in the mid-1990s. I am also grateful for the financial support provided by the University of Toronto, and by the Canadian International Development Agency in Canada (CIDA) during my first year of research.

<sup>2</sup> Jaber, author interview, al-Baq'a camp, Jordan, 15 Nov. 1995.

at Beach Camp in Gaza.<sup>3</sup> In responding to the accusation, a Hamas official interviewed by Al-Jazeera Arabic news channel, blamed UNRWA for distributing aid packages only to organizations opposed to Hamas, stating that the Agency should abide by its humanitarian mission, and should not be used to “promote a certain political agenda”. Miles away from the events in Gaza, the American–Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee (ADC) published an urgent call on its website asking its supporters to act quickly to oppose United States House Congressional resolution 29, which questioned US financial support for UNRWA, alleging it supports “terror organizations”.<sup>4</sup>

The aforementioned stances in support or against UNRWA are not new or surprising. Lacking an explicit protection mandate, UNRWA was established in the late 1940s to provide humanitarian aid exclusively to Palestine’s refugees,<sup>5</sup> but since its inception it has been unable to extricate itself from the realities on the ground, despite its attempts to maintain political neutrality and work within the boundaries of its humanitarian mandate. UNRWA – according to its mandate – is to continue providing assistance to refugees until a final political solution is reached. But a peaceful resolution to the conflict seems as distant as ever. When armed conflict erupts, UNRWA deals with the humanitarian crises, but is also frequently compelled to respond to assaults on its personnel, vehicles or installations, which draws it into the highly charged political arena. In January 2009, for example, Chris Gunness, UNRWA’s spokesperson in Gaza accused Israel of bombing UNRWA’s al-Fakhoura school.<sup>6</sup> Such criticisms trigger the Israeli charges that UNRWA turns a blind eye on “terrorist activities”,<sup>7</sup> a blanket accusation that hides deeper concerns. As an institution, UNRWA represents the collective plight of the 1948 refugees and symbolizes their rights in international law. As a United Nations’ responsibility, they remain a haunting reminder to the international community of the causes of their flight, and the political and legal rights associated with mass expulsion.

Consequently, UNRWA, much like a disputed territory, has been fraught with contradictions and ambiguities resulting from its multi-stranded connections involving Western powers, donors, Arab States, the refugees, the Palestinian national movement, Israel, other international organizations, and so forth. Depending on the context, actors and institutions linked to UNRWA collude

<sup>3</sup> UNRWA, “UNRWA Condemns Confiscation of Gaza Aid and Demands its Immediate Return”, Press Release, East Jerusalem, available at: [www.un.org/unrwa/news/releases/pr-2009/jer\\_4feb09.html](http://www.un.org/unrwa/news/releases/pr-2009/jer_4feb09.html) (last visited 4 Feb. 2009).

<sup>4</sup> American–Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee, “URGENT: Act Now To Defend UNRWA In Gaza Relief Agency Comes Under Attack in Congress”, available at: <http://capwiz.com/adc/issues/alert/?alertid=12585311> (last visited 4 Feb. 2009).

<sup>5</sup> For a comprehensive analysis of the status of Palestinian refugees in international law and UNRWA, see L. Takkenberg, *The Status of Palestinian Refugees in International Law*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1998.

<sup>6</sup> UNRWA Refugee Stories, “Attacks Against the UN in Gaza Must be Investigated”, available at: [www.un.org/unrwa/refugees/stories/2009/attacks\\_un\\_in\\_gaza\\_jan09.html](http://www.un.org/unrwa/refugees/stories/2009/attacks_un_in_gaza_jan09.html) (last visited 8 Feb 2009).

<sup>7</sup> See also Jordan Times, “Israel demands changes to UNRWA”, *Jordan Times*, 27 June 2002, FOFONET Archives, available at: <http://lists.mcgill.ca/scripts/wa.exe?A2=ind0206d&L=fofonet&P=2984> (last visited 8 Feb. 2009).

or collide over its mandate, politics, policies, regulations, entitlements, and its identity.

The Palestinian refugees receiving humanitarian aid and services are similarly not an isolated community, but are intricately enmeshed in host societies, and their experiences have been shaped by international and State policies that determined their legal and political status. Broadly speaking, the encounters between UNRWA and the Palestinian refugees involve the UN Security Council, an institution, which “sits at the pinnacle of multilateral power”,<sup>8</sup> underpinned with a paternalistic humanitarianism, and subjected to various political interests. On their part, the refugees appropriated the Agency’s space to promote their socio-economic needs and collective aspirations. Moreover, the relationship between refugees and UNRWA is influenced by the trials and tribulations of the Palestinian and Arab national struggles.

One of the features that distinguishes UNRWA from many other international humanitarian organizations, however, is the fact that the vast majority of its employees are local Palestinians and refugees. They are the glue that binds refugees to the organization and they blur the boundary between benefactor and beneficiary. This article focuses on the local employees and their ambiguous, overlapping or divergent roles and ideologies as refracting larger transformations, contradictions, and processes. In discussing this relationship, I draw upon the experiences and views of three employees,<sup>9</sup> who I interviewed while conducting anthropological research in Jordan (1995–2001), and had the opportunity to interview two of them again in 2007 while on a short field visit.

The article pivots on two main interrelated propositions: first, that the absence of a unifying Palestinian political institution and leadership between *al-Nakba* (catastrophe) in 1948 and the mid-1960s led UNRWA to take on an exaggerated role that mirrored those of a welfare government-in-exile. It was the primary institution that developed the matrix that organized daily life in refugee camps, and established structures and institutions convenient to carry out its humanitarian mandate. Second, its role and image as a welfare government – albeit lacking in real territorial sovereignty, or political and legal authority – was facilitated by its Palestinian and refugee employees, who “palestinianized” the Agency, granting it a national ethos.

The Palestinian identity of employees and staff, many of whom were camp-dwelling refugees implementing programmes in the camps, contributed to the ambiguity of UNRWA’s identity and origins as established, funded, and maintained by powerful Western States. This was enhanced by the invisibility and seeming distance of the “foreigners” who represent the executive branch in

<sup>8</sup> Adapted from the Statement by UNRWA Commissioner-General, Karen Abu Zayd, UN Security Council Closed Consultations Session, New York, 27 Jan. 2009, available at: [www.un.org/unrwa/news/statements/2009/SecurityCouncil\\_27jan09.html](http://www.un.org/unrwa/news/statements/2009/SecurityCouncil_27jan09.html) (last visited 8 Feb. 2009).

<sup>9</sup> The research involved anthropological methods of research, including participant observation, interviews and the recording of numerous oral histories of refugees and refugee employees over several years. During this period of research, I also participated in a CERMOC research project on UNRWA entitled UNRWA: A History Within History, directed by Riccardo Bocco.

the agency. Local employees occupied different positions and variously experienced the inequalities inherent within its structure. The experiences of local employees are not immune to the shifting political scene, and this article will discuss some of the transformations ensuing the rise of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) in the mid-1960s, and the Oslo agreements in the early 1990s.

## 2. Camps and UNRWA in the Jordanian Context

Palestinian refugees and refugee camps are the direct bi-products of the “ethnic cleansing”<sup>10</sup> of the Palestinian in 1948, known as *al-Nakba* or the Catastrophe. The Nakba resulted in the destruction and depopulation of hundreds of villages and Arab urban neighborhoods. The consensus among historians is that between 750,000 – 900,000 Palestinians were expelled as a direct result of military attacks by the Haganah, the predecessor of the Israeli Defense Forces. Some Palestinians fled out of fear, especially following the massacre in the village of Deir Yassin in April 1948. Refugee camps, marginal and unequal spaces, are therefore striated by the traumatic history, and the larger struggle for repatriation and national independence. They are also marked by dominant institutions which conceive camps as convenient instruments to manage and contain an excess and potentially destabilizing refugee population.<sup>11</sup> Conceptualized space in Lefebvre’s view is a representation embedded with ideologies, power, and knowledge;<sup>12</sup> humanitarian organizations have the power to label, organize, and classify populations, a process with real transformative consequences.<sup>13</sup> But refugees are not passive victims, and they variously appropriate, renegotiate, or subvert humanitarian classifications and practices, and challenge the intentions and interests of more powerful actors.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>10</sup> “Ethnic cleansing” is the more accurate and contemporary term used by social scientists and scholars to describe the forced expulsion of Palestinians from their homeland. The term distinguishes the Zionist project as a special kind of colonialism that did not aim at exploiting the indigenous population as cheap labour, but, rather, the purpose was to expel them. The depopulation or uprooting of the indigenous population went hand in hand with the destruction of their villages and landmarks attesting to their historical presence. Based on extensive research using Israeli state and military archives, as well as oral histories of survivors, Ilan Pappé, Chair of the Department of History at the University of Exeter, UK and former history professor at Haifa University, documented the planned and systemic expulsion of the Palestinians, mainly by the Haganah (the predecessor of the Israel Defense Forces), with the purpose of “clearing” the land for Jewish settlement. Many other Palestinian and Israeli scholars and experts, most notably those known as the “New Israeli Historians”, have also attested to the 1948 ethnic cleansing of Palestine in their work. In most cases, this involved military operations, as well as psychological warfare. In the writings of Zionist leaders such as Vladimir Jabotinsky, Joseph Weitz, and Ben Gurion, the term “transfer” was the term used and for which purpose “Transfer committees” were organized. For a detailed account, see I. Pappé, *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine*, Oxford, Oneworld, 2006, and N. Masalha, *The Politics of Denial: Israel and the Palestinian Refugee Problem*, London, Pluto Press, 2003.

<sup>11</sup> P. Marfleet, *Refugees in a Global Era*, New York, Palgrave-MacMillan, 2006, 200.

<sup>12</sup> A. Merrifield, “Henri Lefebvre: A socialist in space”, in M. Crang and N. Thrift (eds.), *Thinking Space*, London and New York, Routledge, 2000, 174.

<sup>13</sup> On this topic see R. Zetter, “Labeling refugees: Forming and transforming a bureaucratic identity”, *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 4(1), 1991.

<sup>14</sup> Derek D. Summerfield, “Sociocultural dimensions of war, conflict and displacement”, in A. Ager (ed.), *Refugees: Perspectives on the Experience of Forced Migration*, New York, Pinter, 1999, 111–35.

Moreover, camps are not bounded spaces; as Massey observed, the particular mix of social relations which give shape to the uniqueness of any place is not confined within the place itself, but stretches far beyond. Nonetheless, actors attempt to fix identities and boundaries, a process that aims at stabilizing the meaning of particular “envelopes of space-time”.<sup>15</sup> Such is the case with Palestinian refugee camps, which are continuously reproduced by the web of local, regional, and global relationships. Yet, camps have legal borders, which were drawn when they were first erected, but the boundaries have remained fixed, despite the dramatic increase of the population. In addition, the inhabitants of camps perceive their boundaries as enclosing a way of life or a habitus, and a place that symbolizes their political and legal rights and status. In contrast, UNRWA approaches camps as humanitarian spaces, instruments to facilitate and manage its bureaucratic functions. As for host states, the meaning they attach to camps, and the way they treat refugees is diverse, depending on the policies of the State and the historical context.<sup>16</sup>

UNRWA is one of the largest and longest-standing humanitarian organizations, which was established on 8 December 1949 shortly after the Palestinian *Nakba*. Due to Israel’s repeated rejection of the refugees’ right of return as called for in UN General Assembly resolution 194 (III), UNRWA’s mandate has been regularly renewed. It has continued to provide refugees with basic services in the areas of education, health, relief and social services. Currently, it provides assistance to over 4.6 million registered Palestine refugees in the Middle East.<sup>17</sup> Jordan is the host of the largest refugee population outside Mandatory Palestine,<sup>18</sup> where UNRWA operates ten camps accommodating 329,150 registered refugees, or 16 per cent of the 1.7 million registered refugees in the country.<sup>19</sup>

It is ironic that the international community (through the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)) is promoting repatriation as the privileged durable solution for refugees worldwide,<sup>20</sup> but has stood impotent in facilitating the repatriation of Palestinian refugees. For the past six decades, Western powers did little to pressure Israel to abide by international law. It is not that the UN and the Western world were unaware from the very beginning

<sup>15</sup> D. Massey, *Space, Place, and Gender*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1994, 5.

<sup>16</sup> The arguments in this paper apply to Jordan specifically, although there might be aspects that are shared in other fields where UNRWA operates, namely: Lebanon, Syria, West Bank, and Gaza.

<sup>17</sup> This refers to the refugees registered with the Agency, there are many Palestinians who opted not to register, or who did not fulfill UNRWA’s operational definition of a Palestine “refugee”.

<sup>18</sup> The term “Mandatory Palestine” refers to Palestine during the period after the First World War until 1947, when it was Mandate territory under the League of Nations with the United Kingdom as the mandatory power.

<sup>19</sup> UNRWA, “Jordan Refugee Camp Profiles”, available at: [www.un.org/unrwa/refugees/jordan.html](http://www.un.org/unrwa/refugees/jordan.html) (last visited 9 Feb. 2009).

<sup>20</sup> B. S. Chimni, “The geopolitics of refugee studies: A view from the South”, *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 11(4), 1998, 363.

that the refugees aspired to return; for example, as early as October 1950, an interim UNRWA report stated:

It is, however, a fact that the refugee, individually and collectively, is tired of his present condition. Above all, he wishes to return to his former home and means of livelihood . . . He is resentful of the fact that he is forced to live away from his former home and that he has received no compensation for his losses . . . He considers the United Nations mainly responsible for his plight.<sup>21</sup>

When UNRWA was first established, refugees were apprehensive of the dubious, if undeclared, role it was initially assigned to play, mainly, as a mechanism to facilitate their integration or resettlement (as opposed to repatriation) through large-scale economic projects. Plans such as the Johnston Plan for the Development of the Jordan Valley were conceived as simultaneously advantageous to the integration of Palestinian refugees and to local governments.<sup>22</sup> These projects, however, were met with resistance, such as the protest against an UNRWA-administered census in 1950, which refugees feared was a measure intended to lead to integration. An UNRWA publication reported that: “in some refugee camps in Jordan the census led to rowdy public protest, with the result that it was suspended before completion”.<sup>23</sup> After 1958, all large-scale projects were abandoned and most of UNRWA’s budget was redirected to other programmes, especially to the field of education. Schiff correctly observed that a huge and powerful humanitarian bureaucracy failed to mute refugee voices or to make them complacent.<sup>24</sup>

When UNRWA began its work in May 1950, refugees were bereft of national leadership or a formal political institution to represent them as a collective body. Therefore, the most significant agreement was forged between the Agency and the Jordanian Government, which furnished the legal framework within which it could then freely operate. On occasion, UNRWA informally consulted with refugees on practical matters, usually with camp leaders, many of them former village heads. For example, during the census it undertook in 1950, it resorted to the *mukhtars* (village heads) and used their oral testimony to identify a legitimate “Palestine refugee”.<sup>25</sup>

The relationship between the Jordanian State and the refugees was generally marked by distrust and fear. The tensions had roots in secret agreements forged between King Abdullah I and the Zionist leaders before 1948, wherein the Hashemite ruler promised not to oppose the emergence of a Jewish State, in

<sup>21</sup> UNRWA, *UNRWA: A Brief History 1950–1982*, Vienna, United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East, 1986.

<sup>22</sup> A. Tonini, “The donor countries and UNRWA’s relief and development policies, 1950–1967”, in R. Bocco (ed.), *UNRWA: A History within History: Humanitarian Aid and Development*, Proceedings of the 9–11 Oct. 1998 Workshop, Amman, Jordan, CERMOC, 1998, 16–17.

<sup>23</sup> UNRWA, “UNRWA: A brief history 1950–1982”, *op. cit.* 65.

<sup>24</sup> B. Schiff, *Refugees Unto the Third Generation: UN Aid to Palestinians*, New York, Syracuse University Press, 1995, 5.

<sup>25</sup> O. Al-Merridi, author interview, UNRWA Headquarters, Amman, Jordan, Jan. 1998.

return for the West Bank.<sup>26</sup> The rifts were exacerbated when Palestinians joined native Jordanians in their anti-colonial and pan-Arab struggles in the 1950s.<sup>27</sup> The Jordanian State moved quickly to contain the widespread protests that gripped the street, and in the late 1950s, with the support of the British and Americans, it set in motion a reign of political repression which lasted for the next three decades.<sup>28</sup> The repressive political climate permeated camps, and the refugees I interviewed remember curfews, laws that prohibited political organization, and the presence of soldiers and policemen. In contrast, relations between Palestinians and the host Jordanian population were intricately interwoven and centuries old, through close trade relations that linked many towns on both sides of the Jordan River.<sup>29</sup> In fact, tensions between those who identify themselves as Jordanians and Palestinians did not emerge until the events of Black September in the early seventies;<sup>30</sup> but even then, such temporary hostilities were based along political divisions and not national affiliations.

Although there were some disagreements between UNRWA and host governments which revolved around the scope, legality, and authority of each, for the most part they coexisted peacefully. In any case, UNRWA needed the consent of the host State to operate within its territory. While it acted as an operational agency with some measure of administrative autonomy, in reality, its reputation and clout among refugees were greater than its actual power: UNRWA had no territorial authority, no legislative power and no jurisdiction over the refugees. According to Article IV of the Basic Government/Agency Agreement of the year 1951, the Jordanian State had the responsibility for providing campsites for Palestinian refugees, which are considered part of Jordanian territory where Jordanian laws apply.<sup>31</sup>

The Jordanian State kept a close eye on the refugees, and instated Camp Services Committees in each camp, the members of which are appointed by the Department of Palestinian Affairs (DPA), which today falls under the Jordanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. It is interesting to note here that while Jordan hosts the largest number of refugees outside Palestine, and no less than thirteen refugee camps – ten of them operated by UNRWA, camps do not appear on Jordanian official maps. This is meant to emphasize the refugees' Jordanian citizenship<sup>32</sup> and to erase the identity of camps as terrains demarcated for another national group. Although passports and citizenship rights have been granted to most refugees in Jordan since the fifties with the exception of refugees from Gaza,

<sup>26</sup> A. Shlaim, "Israel and the Arab coalition in 1948", in E.L. Rogan and A. Shlaim (eds.), *The War for Palestine: Rewriting the History of 1948*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2001, 84.

<sup>27</sup> See R. Khalidi, *Palestinian Identity: The Construction of Modern National Consciousness*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1997, 182.

<sup>28</sup> J.A. Massad, *Colonial Effects: The Making of National Identity in Jordan*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2001, 12–13.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> Black September refers to the armed conflict between the Palestinian Resistance Movement (PRM) and the Jordanian army in 1970–71, which resulted in the expulsion of the PRM from Jordan.

<sup>31</sup> UNRWA, "UNRWA: A brief history 1950–1982", *op. cit.* 29–30.

<sup>32</sup> The refugees from Gaza are the exception; they do not have Jordanian citizenship and encounter discrimination in many areas, such as in employment, education, and travel.



this did not annul their status under UNRWA's mandate, or their sense of belonging to Palestine. Unlike other refugee cases, the Palestinian refugees in Jordan are simultaneously *citizens of a State* and refugees who belong to a *stateless nation*. This means that possessing a passport or citizenship rights in other countries, does not annul their legal and political rights enshrined in international law, namely, to return and to self-determination.

The absence of an effective Palestinian political body that could mobilize and represent refugees as a collective national group, combined with repressive state policies impelled UNRWA to take a unique and visible role in which it assumed many of the functions of a welfare government. This role was not limited to the provision of public services and subsidized programmes; UNRWA also acted as an employer and hired refugees in various positions. Many of the employees lived in the camps, giving refugees a sense that it was "theirs", and obscuring the nature of the organization as an international or external body. For all intents and purposes, UNRWA appeared as a local institution which pervaded their spaces.

When the PLO emerged in the late 1960s, it did not replace or displace UNRWA, but developed into a "quasi-state" with its own institutions. With few exceptions, there were no hostilities between these two large organizations and their relationship was characterized by mutual accommodation. Although refugees as beneficiaries supported or belonged to certain factions within the PLO, refugee employees were prohibited from politicizing their humanitarian tasks. Nonetheless, this did not result in muting their voices, political identities, or national belonging, as long as such opinions and beliefs did not bear on their professional functions or contravene UNRWA's regulations and mandate. For a while, the PLO overshadowed or competed with UNRWA, but its golden age in Jordan did not last long.

UNRWA's Headquarters were relocated to Vienna during the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in the early 1980s, although they were moved back to Gaza in 1996. The war was catastrophic: over 20,000 people were killed and thousands more were injured and/or displaced, the PLO's infrastructure was destroyed and its cadres were literally shipped out of Lebanon. But UNRWA remained as the primary organization with the experience and the mandate to deal with the humanitarian disaster created by the Israeli high-tech war machine. It therefore mobilized for a massive emergency campaign and relief programme; in fact, for the most impoverished among Palestinian refugees in Lebanon, it was practically the only institution to which they could turn for assistance.

UNRWA's centrality for refugees was further enhanced when the PLO signed the Oslo agreements in the early 1990s. These agreements alienated most refugees from the PLO leadership, who they regarded as obsequious and treacherous for having abandoned their cause.<sup>33</sup> UNRWA was henceforth seen as the refugee "representative" not only because it offered much needed

<sup>33</sup> For further analysis on how refugees in Jordan responded to the Oslo agreements, see R. Farah, "Popular memory and reconstructions of Palestinian identity", in R. Bocco, B. Destremau, J. Hannover (eds.),

humanitarian aid programmes, but more significantly because it stood as a symbol for their legal and political rights.

### 3. The Welfare Government

When we fled no one supported us  
 Oh God! we were defeated and we were called “refugees”  
 When they distributed flour everyone was hungry  
 Oh God, they are all traitors  
 they stole the refugees’ flour<sup>34</sup>

Mirroring functions carried out by a welfare-state, UNRWA issued each Palestinian who fulfilled the requirements of a “refugee”, with an identification card, known as *kart al-mu’an* (the ration card) or *al-watheeqa* (document). The *watheeqa* entitled each refugee family to receive rations, and a shelter, popularly known as *numra* (a number), or *wehdeh* (unit). The Agency also established schools and health clinics, compiled statistical information on refugee families, and employed refugees to implement its programmes, thereby fostering new social ties and hierarchies in the camps. Although refugees were not passive victims in this process, nonetheless, the overall impact of UNRWA’s actions and policies was to consolidate the camp as a humanitarian space, and its image as that of a welfare government.

Nader’s experiences shed light on the harshness of life in camps during the early period, exemplified by the popular verse quoted above. Nader’s family originated in al-Lydd, a Palestinian town that was emptied of its Arab inhabitants by Zionist armed militias. As a result, Nader’s extended family was dispossessed of its means of livelihood and forced to seek shelter elsewhere. The family moved around from one place to another, and finally settled in one of the four refugee camps that were set up in Jordan. Nader was born three years after *al-Nakba* and was raised in a refugee camp in Amman, the capital of Jordan. Despite insurmountable difficulties and poverty, he managed to acquire a university degree which helped him acquire a job with UNRWA. When I interviewed him in Amman in the 1990s and in 2007, he had moved out of the camps and had been promoted to an important management position. This is how he recalled the 1950s:

When an UNRWA official knocked at someone’s door, it was like the government had arrived. The role of UNRWA was basic – it substituted

*Palestine, Palestiniens. Territoire national, espaces communautaires*, Amman and Beirut, CERMOC, 1996, 259–298.

P. Hayner, “Fifteen Truth Commissions – 1974 to 1994: A comparative study”, in N. J. Kritz (ed.), *Transitional Justice: How Emerging Democracies Reckon with Former Regimes*, vol. 1, Washington, United States Institute of Peace Press, 1995, 229.

<sup>34</sup> A verse translated by the author, which was popular among refugees in the early 1950s, describing their dire situation and the feeling of abandonment by the world. Nader, who grew up in camps in Jordan shared the verse with me in Nov. 2007.

for a government . . . I don't know if you have heard the saying: 'We only have God and the [UNRWA] Ration Card!' . . . If someone had a relative or knew someone who worked with UNRWA, it was akin to having *wasta* or high-level connections in a government.<sup>35</sup>

To supplement UNRWA rations and services, many refugees worked as seasonal agricultural laborers, in construction, or in low-paying jobs in the service sectors. Some initiated their own enterprises and opened shops in the camp markets. A few of these entrepreneurial merchants sold UNRWA rations to accumulate a small amount of capital. This remarkable effort by refugees to pull themselves out of poverty, counters commonly held assumptions that humanitarian aid results in "dependency syndrome".<sup>36</sup> However, as mentioned earlier, the combined effect of economic insecurity, the leadership vacuum, and political repression, reinforced informal personal ties rooted in reciprocity, kin relationships, and links of patronage that included older family and village kin, as well as new connections with UNRWA employees, and with the host State and society.<sup>37</sup>

Having connections to an UNRWA employee was of immediate value for impoverished families, as it could improve someone's chances of receiving favours, such as quicker and better services. Similarly, former village networks and camp neighborhoods provided moral, social, and economic support. For example, those who worked as seasonal agricultural workers for local landlords often depended on the good will and generosity of the employers, while neighbours helped one another in preparing food, watching over children, the elderly, or the sick, and helping one another in renovating or expanding their shelters. Relationships with Jordanian Government officials were also useful, although in the camps, these were less common and seemed more complicated and distant.

To envision a future beyond mere survival, refugees exerted extraordinary efforts to ensure that their children acquired an education. This spontaneous strategy converged with UNRWA's emphasis on education and skills training, towards which it allocated the lion's share of its budget. However, neither UNRWA nor the refugees imagined that the "refugee problem" would be prolonged, and in time, the establishment of clinics, schools, and training centers signaled UNRWA was there to stay for more than a short period. The passage of time buttressed and extended the linkages between refugees and UNRWA, and entrenched the latter in Palestinian society.

Nader's memories of the camp he knew in the 1950s reveal that the priority for refugees during that period was to eke out a livelihood and secure an education. He remembers his childhood as consumed by daily chores, such as lining up for hours to receive rations, walking long distances to fetch water, or carrying

<sup>35</sup> Nader, a refugee and UNRWA official, author interview, Amman, Jordan, 5 Feb. 1999.

<sup>36</sup> For a good critique of the "dependency syndrome" generated by humanitarian agencies, see G. Kibreab, "Myth of dependency among camp refugees in Somalia 1979–1989", *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 6(4), 1993, 327–49.

<sup>37</sup> R. Farah, "Refugee camps in the Palestinian and Sahrawi National Liberation Movements: A comparative perspective", *Journal of Palestine Studies*, XXXVIII(2), 2008, 6.

dough to the bakery. There was no room for “childhood”, as he noted, and entertainment was limited to family gatherings, during which time he listened to stories about the exodus, life in Palestine, or folktales:

The best thing, or one of the few positive things that I remember about my childhood, is that my father – when he had time – used to tell us about Palestine. How they worked, lived and how happy they were then. This narrative grew in us daily until Palestine was deeply etched in our minds.<sup>38</sup>

Life was indeed wretched in those early years, when poverty was exacerbated by the trauma resulting from displacement, the loss of homeland and familiar social networks. As a child, he lived in an overcrowded camp, where refugees had to share common water taps and septic latrines. The tents or shabby barracks did not always prevent the rain from seeping through holes, or protect them from the winter cold or summer heat. Nader also remembered the burden placed upon him to deliver his family from poverty, as he recalled: “I was told daily before I slept: ‘you see this (miserable) life, you must go to university, you will study, you will work, and you will pull us out of these conditions’”.<sup>39</sup>

In the classroom of over seventy students, Nader was taught by UNRWA teachers who were Palestinian refugees like himself. In these recollections, Jordanians are still invisible, even though he was aware of their existence. But Nader’s childhood camp was a Palestinian space managed by UNRWA, the boundaries of which coincided with those of his whole universe. It was not until he graduated from UNRWA schools that he came in contact with an outside world, as he remembers:

We used to think our small world was the whole world . . . In UNRWA schools, we commemorated Palestinian events and occasions . . . Whether at home or school, we heard about Palestine and that it was a shame to be far from our country . . . The qualitative leap came about when I went to secondary school, it was near the house much closer than the UNRWA school - but it was much further in other ways . . . In secondary school it was the first time I met Jordanians . . . it was as if I had moved to another world, another culture, and learned other names . . . We had lived as if the world in the camp and UNRWA schools engulfed the whole world, there was no other.<sup>40</sup>

Unlike Nader, Abu Basil was much older and did not come from an urban center, but from a village near Hebron. When I interviewed Abu Basil in the mid-1990s, he was living in al-Baq’a refugee camp in Jordan, one of the six camps operated by UNRWA that were established to shelter those uprooted during and consequent to the 1967 war. He was in his 70s and had already retired, having worked with the Agency for over two decades. During *al-Nakba*, he was among the more than 750,000 Palestinians who were forced into exile.

<sup>38</sup> Nader, a refugee and UNRWA official, author interview, Amman, Jordan, 5 Feb. 1999.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

Thereupon, he had to seek refuge in Ain al-Sultan camp in Jericho, West Bank, where he was eventually hired by UNRWA. During the 1967 war, along with some 400,000 Palestinians, half of them refugees like himself, he had to flee Israeli bombing yet again, and crossed the bridge into Jordan.

UNRWA was an essential institution that subsidized Abu Basil's livelihood needs and those of his family. It provided him with a stable income and enabled him to save a small amount to lease a piece of land upon his retirement. His wife and later his children contributed their share to the household by working in various jobs. Multiplying and diversifying the sources of income was a strategy adopted by refugee families to meet their daily and growing household needs. In the following, Abu Basil recalls the early years and provides his assessment of UNRWA's role:

In 1948 they kicked us out and we went to Hebron and from Hebron to Jericho and from Jericho to al-Karameh. In Jericho I worked with UNRWA as a cook and it so happened that I stayed with them for 24 years that is from 1960 to 1984 . . . I came here in 1967 . . . We used to cook for about 8,000 children . . . Life was better then . . . Look here, UNRWA was created for the vulnerable to feed and clothe him and provide him with medical care.<sup>41</sup>

Abu Basil's view that UNRWA caters specifically to the weak is understandable, since he was destitute upon his expulsion and did not have alternative resources. But even Abu Basil, as we shall see later, had contradictory and paradoxical opinions of UNRWA, views shared by most refugees I interviewed who regarded it as concurrently good and bad, guilty and innocent, critical and unimportant, and so forth. Nader had described the Janus-faced stance as a "love-hate" relationship.

Majida belongs to Nader's generation. She is a Palestinian woman in her forties, who like her colleague, has a university degree. She had been working with UNRWA for over a decade when I interviewed her, and had been promoted to a management position. Majida's family is from the West Bank. She lived with her husband for a while in another Arab country, where she encountered discrimination based on her Palestinian nationality. Unlike Nader, however, Majida never lived in refugee camps and does not have childhood memories of tents, or of having to line up for rations. Yet, she considers herself a refugee, defining it as a state of generic exile, characterized by discrimination and a feeling of *ghurba*, a term which connotes or evokes the notions of alienation, yearning, and estrangement. Quoting Edward Said, she opined, as a Palestinian, wherever she goes she will be the "other":

Before I came to Jordan many years ago, I was living in (an Arab country). When we came here . . . I felt I was returning from *al-Ghurba* (exile) closer to home . . . I used to think how wonderful it must be for people who do not

<sup>41</sup> Abu Basil, author interview, al-Baq'a refugee camp, Jordan, Jan. 1996.

have to leave their homeland, we were always second class citizens . . . There are always events we encounter which remind us we are Palestinian.<sup>42</sup>

Majida perceives UNRWA, the refugees, and the Palestinians as inextricably linked. Her mother and aunt used to teach in UNRWA schools and it was a name that, as a child, was imprinted in her memory: “I remember my aunt used to take me with her sometimes . . . I remember seeing young girls in school all lined up . . . I used to feel they were close to me”.<sup>43</sup> For Majida, UNRWA is a space upon which multiple identities are mapped, including a Palestinian space carved by its Palestinian employees, who granted the Agency a benign image and created within it a familiar environment.

#### 4. UNRWA employees

##### 4.1. *Paradoxical voices*

The Palestinian employees, most of them refugees and/or camp-dwellers, constitute approximately 99 per cent of UNRWA’s staff. Teachers, nurses, social workers, cleaning and maintenance staff, technicians, management and administrative staff acted as a common denominator or the mediators between UNRWA and refugees. They translated and implemented UNRWA’s regulations and delivered its programmes. To the extent that they were constrained by UNRWA’s policies and mandate, they often skirted around the rules, or stretched them to accommodate the refugees’ needs, or initiated and/or supported local programmes seen as beneficial to the collective. In representing their experiences, they spoke with a dual voice, switching between “us” the Palestinians or the refugees and “it” (the Agency), often exemplified by “them” – its international staff.

The refugee employees are not a homogeneous group: for example, there are differences in experiences between the “*mukhayyamjiyyeh*” (camp-dwellers) who were compelled to rely on humanitarian aid, and the more affluent refugees and Palestinians who had their independent means to survive and therefore never lived in camps. However, it is important to underscore that the boundaries between camp and non-camp refugees are porous, and the socio-economic status of refugees who live around camps are equivalent to, and sometimes worse than those living inside the camps. Moreover, many of the employees I interviewed, such as Nader, had grown up in camps but eventually moved out, although they maintain links and exchange visits with relatives and friends, or shop in camp markets. There are also generational differences: first-generation refugees were mostly illiterate and thus confined to low-level jobs, while their children, those who made the educational leap, were able to acquire higher positions within UNRWA.

<sup>42</sup> Majida, author interview, Amman, Jordan, July 1999.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

During the early years, a position with UNRWA was highly coveted. It was only in the late 1960s and 1970s that a job in the Gulf Countries was deemed as an equal or a better opportunity. The oil boom attracted large numbers of second generation refugees who had graduated from various educational institutions and training centres, many of them run by UNRWA. Prior to that, employment opportunities in the Agency were highly prized, providing higher wages for equivalent jobs in the Jordanian public sector. This was still true when I began my research, where for example, a government teacher in Jordan received an average of 130 Jordanian Dinars (JD), while an UNRWA teacher received approximately 250 JD. In addition to financial security, refugee employees acquired social capital, and assumed the role of patrons, much like government officials, as Nader (quoted earlier) remembers:

When UNRWA distributed second hand clothes, the sack used to contain different items, shirts, etc. and we lined up, but whatever you received you had to take, you couldn't choose . . . but through contacts with UNRWA, you could probably get what you wanted. UNRWA employees had substantial authority.<sup>44</sup>

The direct and concrete interaction between employees and refugees in camps, in schools, clinics, registration offices, etc. bestowed upon the native employees a local and native authority in matters related to everyday life, sometimes extending beyond their jurisdiction. They were approached to repair or renovate family shelters, to ease access to services, to solve family disputes, to act as mediators promoting someone for a job at UNRWA, to facilitate a registration problem, or to overlook a violation or eligibility requirement. Refugees I interviewed noted that employees were even deemed ideal marriage partners, because they would guarantee economic security.

The boundaries between the local employees and UNRWA were variously experienced and articulated by Nader, Majida, and Abu Basil. In recounting his experiences, Nader, for example, was able to shift easily from his childhood experiences as a refugee, to those of the official employee who had come to grips with the “official line”. In fact, he was among the most eloquent in expressing his experiences. Nader was a master at traversing the fine but clear line that separated his refugee background and history as a “beneficiary”, and his role as an UNRWA official. Abu Basil’s experience was different. Until his retirement, he remained closer to the lower end of UNRWA’s organizational hierarchy, where the boundaries seemed more ambiguous, especially because, for the most part, his work did not require him to leave the camps. Abu Basil sometimes conflated “we” the employees and “we” the refugees, at other times he clearly distinguished between the two. As for Majida, the higher her position, the greater seemed her isolation from the refugees. Climbing up UNRWA’s

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<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

hierarchy did not increase her decision-making powers, at least not those that could bring about meaningful changes:

The strange thing . . . is that the higher my position, the more I feel disempowered, I feel I want to do something to change things but I cannot, I do not have decision making powers . . . having a 'high position' . . . it is nothing . . . especially nowadays . . . now I feel distanced from the field . . . when you are with people on the ground, you feel the appreciation and a sense of accomplishment, but the higher my position, the lesser is my influence.<sup>45</sup>

The above examples show that the lower the rank one occupies in UNRWA's hierarchy, the more porous are the boundaries between refugees and refugee-employees. While higher positions distanced Majida from the refugees, these posts did not translate into authority that could change policies or macro-strategies. Her decision-making powers were not equivalent to those enjoyed by the international staff, which constitutes less than 200 employees.

#### *4.2. Humanitarianism and nationalism*

Local employees benefit from the Agency as a source of livelihood. However, the Agency also gains from employees who regard their jobs as vehicles to serve a national cause, because it can rely on the "dedicated" staff. In many of the interviews, Palestinian employees described their devotion to their job functions at UNRWA as a commitment to the refugees and by implication the Palestinian cause. Rather than presenting humanitarian services as an "UNRWA" effort, local employees point out the fact that the actual work on the ground is done by Palestinians who are responsible for daily operations. Older employees in particular fused together the two ideals and ideologies: humanitarianism and nationalism. Interviews revealed a universal consensus among refugees that in the past, UNRWA's employees, especially the teachers were "different", meaning they had imbued their work at UNRWA with a sense of responsibility to the nation at large. Nader recalled: "our teachers used to tell us in school, that it would not be surprising if one of us might become another Salah al-Din [Saladin] who will liberate Palestine". Such lessons in nationalism and in Palestinian history went beyond what was required in the Jordanian curriculum, and in fact contravened UNRWA and State regulations; but this is another example attesting to the failure of UNRWA to mute the political dimension of refugee histories or to generate complacency.

Rather than dwelling on camp life, or invoking images of original villages, employees who came from economically privileged families, expressed their national sentiments in different ways. They generally emphasized their individual trajectories as exiles, but expressed a sense of loss and homelessness which they shared with all Palestinians, including camp-dwellers. However their

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<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*



nationalist ideology is often romanticized, and they tend to idealize camp-dwelling refugees as symbols of Palestine's "authentic" history and collective memory. Generally, many of the older employees conferred upon their humanitarian work a nationalist purpose, or cloaked their nationalism with a quality that verges on charity. Majida stated that her job at UNRWA was the "fulfillment of her dream" to serve the Palestinian cause:

Consequently, I feel there is a special link between UNRWA and the refugee question, I feel it is our history. Working with UNRWA provided me with the ability to provide a service to the cause... It was my biggest dream to contribute to this cause.<sup>46</sup>

Nader, who grew up in camps, also regarded his job as a fulfillment of a dream, but one that satisfied his academic, professional, and economic aspirations. Helping the refugees at large represented only one of the positive aspects of his job, not its main purpose. Indeed, his job provided a sense of continuity, since as a "beneficiary" he was familiar with UNRWA's camps, registration systems, schools, and the other services it offered. Abu Basil's experiences and perceptions more clearly expose the contradictions that afflict UNRWA regarding its role, influence, and purpose. In the following, he described UNRWA as of critical importance for the poor, and exonerated it from any political agendas:

However, these days there are people who do not want UNRWA... it is because they are rich. Nobody wants UNRWA except the weak... Some people say UNRWA is destructive, it distracts us from our (national) cause and pats our heads, but what does UNRWA have to do with this? You can do whatever you want!<sup>47</sup>

But since all articulations occur in a specific context of place and time, Abu Basil assessed the Agency quite differently when thinking of the present and future. This is not surprising for the interviews were conducted in the 1990s, after the Oslo agreements, when UNRWA was cutting back on services, giving rise to criticism among refugees:

UNRWA has become less important... The restaurants closed altogether, they said, no need for them because the refugees have become rich... Now we pay for the electricity and water... The UNRWA didn't do anything for us, they put us up in zinc barracks. When the wind blew the zinc blew off too. Is this a life? It was not UNRWA's help, but people themselves scrambled from here and there to build their houses.<sup>48</sup>

A job at UNRWA was an opportunity for Abu Basil to overcome his poverty. He was illiterate, however, and did not have skills which he could use to climb UNRWA's ladder. Consequently, he did not regard his job as a "dream" to

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>47</sup> Abu Basil, author interview, al-Baq'a refugee camp, Jordan, Jan. 1996.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

satisfy an ideological, academic, or professional aspiration, but as a means to meet his basic livelihood needs.

Within the Agency, the employees have created a sense of ownership and familiarity, but only within the boundaries that separates them from the international staff or *al-ajaneb* – the “foreigners”, a term they use when talking about the non-Arab staff, connoting a national divide. International employees, who occupy the higher and executive ranks, with some exceptions, are regarded with suspicion and resentment. They are usually Americans or Europeans who enjoy power and privilege denied to the local staff, such as higher salaries. Majida explained the distinctions in ways reminiscent of a classical colonial structure and relationships:

Regarding the relationship between international and local staff... in practice there is a huge gap in terms of financial and decision making powers... local staff always need ‘approval’ from the international staff... A local staff might be more qualified and knowledgeable, but that does not matter, you are always a ‘local’ and they are ‘international’, even though we all work in one organization which is part of the UN system. The UN upholds human rights and equality, etc., but this is not implemented here.<sup>49</sup>

In light of the above, it is clear that to understand UNRWA one must take an analytical view that takes into account the political influences on it from above and below, its humanitarian bureaucratic structure and power, and its status as a agency catering exclusively to Palestinian refugees. The prolonged interfacing and the overlapping spaces between refugees, local employees, and UNRWA, led Nader to describe himself as a perfect example of a “UNRWA product”. Embedded in his representations was a discourse of “progress”, whereby a dispossessed Palestinian is classified as a “refugee” – a universal bureaucratic label – who is then transformed into a “productive” person through skills training and programmes geared towards “sustainable development”.

However, Nader also had a strong sense of belonging and attachment to the Palestinian homeland, ingrained in him through his real life experiences, and through story-telling and oral transmission, where the homeland and return stand as the antithesis of exile. Indeed, it was neither *al-Nakba*, nor UNRWA and its camps that created Palestinian nationalism; rather, its early beginnings may be traced to the Ottoman period. But it took shape and sharper focus during the period of the British Mandate in Palestine (1917–47) and the expansion of Zionist Jewish settlement. Similarly, UNRWA’s camps did not encourage irredentism, rather, refugees subverted or appropriated the humanitarian labels, such as “camp” or “refugee” and recast them as political symbols. This was especially the case when the PLO was established in the mid-1960s, providing the structures that harnessed the scattered and spontaneous resistance of refugees. The PLO offered Palestinians a unifying reference of identity that expressed the

<sup>49</sup> Majida, author interview, Amman, Jordan, July 1999.

collective will for national liberation; and giving the struggle regional legitimacy and representational power. The relationships between UNRWA and refugees were reshaped by this historical development.

## 5. UNRWA, the PLO and the aftermath of Oslo

The PLO emerged as a broad umbrella organization encompassing various autonomous factions and ideological trends. Although the PLO leadership and factions fostered relationships with a number of Arab regimes, in general, they were regarded as a threat to be contained, lest they unsettle the *status quo*. But at the popular level, the PLO acquired widespread support and popularity after *al-Karameh* battle in 1968,<sup>50</sup> during which camps in Jordan became bases for militant and revolutionary activity. In addition, the PLO developed an infrastructure, drafted its own National Covenant, and emerged concurrently as a national liberation movement and a quasi-state, whose institutions grew alongside those of UNRWA and the host State. But the realities on the ground compelled UNRWA and the PLO to cross and sometimes to transgress into the other's terrain. By sheer necessity and lack of alternatives, the PLO, which due to historical circumstances launched its struggle from outside national territory, used sites and installations where UNRWA also operated for political mobilization.<sup>51</sup> It is important to emphasize here, that the boundaries between the PLO and the refugees were porous: many of the cadres of the PLO were refugees and/or camp-dwellers. For the refugees, as a liberation movement, the PLO granted them dignity and a collective political voice; but as a quasi-state, PLO patronage became just as important as having connections with UNRWA, useful to guarantee a job, education, or to receive financial and material support.

The PLO's presence emboldened refugees to shake off the humanitarian labels and to speak out publicly against the reduction of a political history to a humanitarian case. While Nader had explained how, in the 1950s, refugees believed they "only had God and UNRWA's ration card"; in the late 1960s, refugees shared popular verses that called for burning the ration cards.<sup>52</sup> These transformations coincided with the opening of Gulf markets. Refugees, many of them graduates of UNRWA's training centers, as well as a number of UNRWA employees, now turned their attention to the Gulf, seeking job opportunities in countries like Saudi Arabia or Kuwait. These combined factors, which generated a spirit of political confidence and improved economic conditions, detracted from UNRWA's clout and status, although they did not abolish its significance. For example, Gulf remittances could help a family renovate its shelter, or to buy

<sup>50</sup> In February–March 1968, a battle between the Israeli army on the one hand and the PRM and the Jordanian army on the other was deemed a Palestinian moral and political victory, if not a military success.

<sup>51</sup> For an elaborate discussion on PLO/UNRWA relationships, see J. Al-Husseini, "Political dimensions of relief and development activities in the context of the PLO–Refugees–UNRWA relations", in R. Bocco (ed.), *UNRWA: A History within History: Humanitarian Aid and Development*, Proceedings of the 9–11 Oct. 1998 Workshop, Amman, Jordan, CERMOC, 1998, 24–33.

<sup>52</sup> One example provided by Nader was "Ignite the fire in the tents and throw away the ration-cards, no peace or surrender, until we liberate Palestine".

a refrigerator and a television set, but in most cases, remittances were not sufficient to enable a family to rent or buy a house outside the camps. In addition, many families did not have children in the Gulf and thus continued to rely significantly – if not completely – on UNRWA's assistance programmes.

But the open presence of the PLO in Jordan did not last long. It was ousted during the armed conflict between its factions and the Jordanian army in 1970–1, and forced to regroup in Lebanon, while the remaining cadres in Jordan went underground. Although martial law was imposed, the PLO's popularity endured until Israel destroyed its infrastructure in 1982. The military operation in Lebanon compelled UNRWA to launch massive emergency campaigns to deal with the enormous destruction and displacement, making it again a critical institution for the containment of the disastrous effects of military campaigns. In 1987, the first Palestinian uprising or *Intifada* was ignited in the Occupied Territories, and signaled the growth of new political movements that began to challenge the PLO's hegemony, primarily, the Islamic Resistance Movement (Hamas). The PLO's already weakened condition was exacerbated, when in 1993, it signed with Israel the Declaration of Principles (DoP), representing a radical shift in official national politics, and the beginning of a schism in national consensus.

The DoP and subsequent agreements, generally known as the Oslo “peace” process, angered 1948-refugees, mainly because the US–Israeli framework that underpinned these agreements, was not anchored in international law; it neglected the UN General Assembly resolution 194 (III), which called for the refugees' right of return. Equally unsettling for refugees and local employees was the fact that shortly after the signing of the DoP, the Commissioner General at the time, announced that in light of the “peace process”, UNRWA would be preparing to dissolve itself within a 5-year period.<sup>53</sup> Concurrently, UNRWA headquarters were relocated from Vienna to Gaza, which Palestinian negotiators naively hoped at the time, would constitute part of the future Palestinian statelet. For employees, these developments confirmed that radical changes were about to unfold. The political turbulence was compounded by the Agency's decision to make available funding for a Peace Implementation Programme (PIP) aimed at helping the Palestinian Authority in building infrastructure.<sup>54</sup> The Palestinian Authority, the political entity formed in the Occupied Territories following the signing of the Oslo agreements, did not have the status of a sovereign state, although at the time, many Palestinians had hopes that it represented the embryo of a future independent state.

<sup>53</sup> In the Introduction of the Report by the Commissioner General of UNRWA to the General Assembly, A/49/13, 21 Sept. 1994, he stated: “With the establishment of the Palestinian Authority in the Gaza Strip and the Jericho area and the anticipated extension of self-rule to the rest of the West Bank, UNRWA entered a new era in its relationship with the Palestinian people. Thenceforth, in addition to maintaining the services that it had provided for over 40 years, the Agency would soon begin a process of preparing for the eventual hand-over of its installations, services, and programmes to the Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.”

<sup>54</sup> The PIP was launched in Oct. 1993. See, General Assembly Official Records, Fifty-fifth session, Supplement No. 13 (A/55/13), UN Doc. A/55/13, Oct. 1993.

The PIP was another, perhaps less direct, slip which entangled UNRWA in the political sphere. UNRWA's public support of the Oslo political negotiations, and the steps it took to help the Palestinian Authority build "State" institutions, prior to the resolution of the refugee problem, may be interpreted as a case where UNRWA harnessed its humanitarian mandate for political purposes.<sup>55</sup> In addition to the political repercussions, Nader explained that the news about the dissolution of the Agency generated great anxiety among refugees, but also among employees of his generation, who were neither young enough to start from scratch, nor close to retirement age. Indeed, a transfer of UNRWA employees to other public sector and Jordanian government jobs would not be an easy move, at least for the majority of employees. In addition to the difficulties in finding equivalent jobs in the Jordanian public sector, it would be another culture shock, perhaps akin to the shock Nader felt as a child when he moved from his UNRWA school to a Jordanian secondary school. It would be abandoning the familiar Palestinian environment that had been created within UNRWA after so many decades.

The Oslo negotiations, however, collapsed rather rapidly, abating fears of an imminent dissolution of UNRWA, which carried on its "business as usual". But the PLO's fortunes did not survive as well in the new institutional arrangements. With an infrastructure already hit hard during the Israeli war on Lebanon, Oslo disabled the PLO and voided it of authority and political effectiveness. This mainly happened by fragmenting Palestinian national institutions, and channeling the resources and political focus to the "inside" – the Palestinian areas under the Palestinian Authority, at the expense of the "outside", meaning, the refugees living in Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria. This induced a pessimistic political mood, especially among refugees living in exile. As a result, UNRWA survived as a uniquely positioned institution that symbolized the unresolved political fate of the 1948-refugees: their right of return, which was ignored and *de facto* annulled by the principles that governed the Oslo agreements.

It was during this unsettling period (1994–9) that I conducted my first research project. The employees of UNRWA I interviewed were still feeling nervous and spoke of fundamental changes. Majida explained how the Oslo agreements threatened the right of return, and negatively affected the sense of collective mission and national purpose among employees. She also observed that even international staff and UNRWA itself became less autonomous and lost the clout they once had:

In the past, the staff depicted a stronger interest in what was going on. Now you feel a lack of enthusiasm . . . there is a feeling that we have little control over the political processes . . . In the past, we believed we could change things, now we don't . . . There is more political control of UNRWA by larger powers . . . we feel it as employees and so do the refugees . . . what

<sup>55</sup> See also R. Farah, "The marginalization of Palestinian refugees", in N. Steiner, M. Gibney, and G. Loescher (eds.), *Problems of Protection: The UNHCR, Refugees and Human Rights*, New York and London, Routledge, 2003, 155–174.

bothers me is that many people are forgetting UNRWA's mandate . . . but the political trends are moving too rapidly . . . one hears statements regarding refugee integration, and people discuss 'socio-economic conditions' ignoring the political dimension of the refugee problem . . . the role of UNRWA has become marginalized and belittled . . . In the past we had a Director who was strong and took decisive action . . . Now if you want to move a chair from here to there, you must get the approval from higher authorities.<sup>56</sup>

But Majida affirmed that the national struggle will survive, as long as the refugees are recognized as such – that is – as “refugees”:

I used to feel there is one Palestinian identity, Oslo shredded and fragmented our people . . . but the presence of refugees is a guarantee for the continued existence of the Palestinian struggle. Their cause is mine too . . . the oppression is on all Palestinians; when there is hope, it is hope for all.<sup>57</sup>

## 6. An “in-between” model?

In the context of the broader humanitarian regime, it is possible to suggest that UNRWA's relationship with the Palestine refugees varies from the classical model, where an authoritarian administration made up of international staff patronizes refugees, treats them as helpless and ignorant victims, and grants them little control over the management of their camps and their lives. The relationship also does not fall under the more democratic and egalitarian model, first encountered by Barbara Harrell-Bond during her research in the Sahrawi camps in the mid 1980s. In the Sahrawi case, Harrell-Bond found a successful model where the humanitarian regime was unable to treat refugees as powerless and unequal victims.<sup>58</sup> In these camps, where I have also been conducting research in the past few years, the Polisario, the Spanish acronym for the Sahrawi national liberation front, administers the camps through popular committees. Sahrawi refugees take charge of their lives, camp organization, and the distribution of aid. In this model, the Polisario has the support of Algeria, the host State, which allows it to function as a sovereign state within camp boundaries. This enables the Polisario to act as a buffer against the direct intervention and hegemony of international aid institutions. All humanitarian organizations have to “check in” first with the various Sahrawi governmental departments, where decisions and approvals are made. This arrangement prevents the depoliticization of Sahrawi identity. Consequently, Sahrawis living in camps regard themselves foremost as citizens of their state-in-exile and not as “refugees”. More

<sup>56</sup> Majida, author interview, Amman, Jordan, July 1999.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>58</sup> B.E. Harrell-Bond, “The experience of refugees as recipients of aid”, in A. Ager (ed.), *Refugees: Perspectives on the Experience of Forced Migration*, London and New York, Pinter, 1999, 157.

impressive is the fact that “camps” are named and administered as *wilayas* or provinces of a nation-state on a stretch of territory that is temporarily “borrowed” from the host State, that is, until Sahrawis are repatriated to Western Sahara.

On the surface, UNRWA may be classified as an in-between model: it appears as a benign, familiar, and national institution, a reputation it has partially acquired due to the fact that it hired local staff to carry most of its operations. This strategy blunted its sharper edges and obscured the role and influences of powerful states and actors, which ultimately control the Agency’s direction and general policies. The refugee employees are compatriots with their beneficiaries, which rendered ambiguous the inequalities inherent in this relationship. Unlike the Sahrawi case, the refugees and Palestinian local staff working for UNRWA are “employees” who receive salaries from the agency and are obliged to adhere to its rules and regulations. This is quite a different model from the Sahrawi popular committees in camps, where refugees are volunteers accountable to their own state-in-exile and not to the humanitarian agencies. However, this does not mean that Palestinian refugee employees are helpless, rather they are political and historical agents: they negotiate and appropriate UNRWA’s spaces and programmes albeit within the constraints and structural givens.

Undoubtedly, the success of the Sahrawi model hinged to a large extent on the fact that the Polisario was formed prior to the 1975 war that led to the displacement of the Sahrawi refugees. In contrast, in the Palestinian case it took some 15 years before the PLO emerged. During this period, the relationships between refugees and UNRWA, and with the wider society had been firmly entrenched, to a large measure in ways that reflected UNRWA’s bureaucratic model and mandate. In turn, refugees incorporated the services and assistance provided by UNRWA within their livelihood strategies, wherein schools, clinics, and shelters provided only the basic necessities, and they sought other means to subsidize their livelihood. The PLO did not take over the management of camps from UNRWA, and the two institutions generally, with some exceptions, accommodated each other’s constraints, mandates, and political interests. In fact, the PLO reinforced and mirrored relations of patronage that characterized UNRWA–refugee relationships.

## 7. Conclusion

The unique links between refugees and UNRWA fluctuated according to: the country where UNRWA operated, the historical context, and the political climate. It emerged as a large, flexible, and ambiguous bureaucracy, features that might have enabled it to survive for over 60 decades amidst turmoil and political transformations. As we have seen, its existence has neither promoted nor contained the Palestinian national struggle, rather, Palestinians engage variously with UNRWA and its institutions, as well as those of Arab host States. In this context, the experiences and representations of UNRWA employees illuminate important

aspects of this relationship and its transformation over time. These are evident in the examples chosen for this article, which are indicative of the experiences and views of many other employees I interviewed. Inasmuch as the local employees had a prevalent and visible presence on the ground, they ultimately distanced and blurred the political influences on UNRWA by Western States, and the inequalities that underpin the relationship between the Agency and refugees at large. In this relationship, refugees have no voice or control over the Agency, which makes decisions on their behalf, including halting aid, or closing down programmes if it deems such decisions necessary.

Although UNRWA's role and political purpose was suspect, in the first few years, refugees, who lacked a political representative body to voice their political aspirations to return, engaged with UNRWA as their welfare government. When the PLO emerged, a period during which the Gulf markets became attractive destinations for employment, refugees acquired political and economic confidence and UNRWA seemed less vital to their survival. But it was the Oslo agreements that engendered a national crisis and a schism between the Palestinian Authority and the vast majority of refugees. This catapulted UNRWA again to center stage, whereby it regained its significance, not only as a welfare government, but as a space through which refugees could indirectly negotiate their political and legal rights, ignored and breached in the Oslo agreements.