Palestinian Refugee Camps in the Palestinian Territory: Territory of Exception and Locus of Resistance

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The camps are both the emblem of the social condition created by the coupling of war with humanitarian action, the site where it is constructed in the most elaborate manner, as a life kept at a distance from the ordinary social and political world, and the experimentation of the large-scale segregations that are being established on a planetary scale.

—M. Agier, “Between War and City: Towards an Urban Anthropology of Refugee Camps”

Palestinian nationalist discourse used to rely on two main pillars: al-Nakba and the right of return of refugees. To maintain the strength of this discourse, Palestinian nationalists took the camp as the primary unit used to maintain Palestinian identity in Arab host countries. However, using the camp setting to reinforce nationalism is not unique to the Palestinian case. Burundian refugees in camps in Tanzania cultivated their Hutu nationalism, while those who dwell in the towns identified themselves as “out of the group.”

For humanitarian organizations, the camp remains the most suitable spatial configuration for the control and surveillance of refugees. It is, in fact, an imposed form, because refugees themselves generally resist their confinement to such a space. According to statistics from the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, in 2002 only 38 percent of the world’s refugees were camp dwellers, while 20 percent were urban-zone dwellers. When it comes to the Palestinian case, the average rate of refugees inside camps is fairly significant at 29 percent, but in Gaza and in Lebanon, these rates hold great significance, because the percentage registered with the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) rise to around 50 percent (See Table 1). Palestinian refugees (about 5.3 million worldwide) constitute approximately 17 percent of the total number of refugees in the world.
For sixty years, the space of the refugee camps in the Palestinian Territory was treated as a space of exception and an experimental laboratory for control and surveillance. This state of exception was not promulgated by any one sovereign. Many actors involved in the different modes of governance have been contributing to the suspension of law in this space under the cover of laws and regulations themselves. These actors involved in the politics of space are mainly the Israeli authorities, the Palestinian National Authority (PNA) and, to a lesser degree, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), in addition to different local political commissars.

What is the effect on the socioeconomic situation of the inhabitants as well as on the political and national identities of dwelling in such camps? Many studies that I have conducted in the past concerning the Palestinian diaspora demonstrate a substantial difference in terms of socioeconomic status, living conditions, and identity formation between those who are camp dwellers and those who are urban city dwellers. This essay develops this notion further. I begin by presenting a comparative overview of the living conditions of Palestinian camp dwellers. I then
argue that there are major differences between closed and open refugee camps and that the camp setting as a closed space is not a “natural” setting, but rather has its raison d’être in disciplinary power, control, and surveillance and in deploying the state of exception. Contrary to those who consider the absence of refugee camps as a determining factor in diluting the refugees’ national identity with that of the host country, I argue that the relationship between national identity and residential setting is very weak. The camps create a new, much more urban identity, rather than a national one.

While UN Security Council resolutions, human rights law, and international law, including the United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, have acknowledged or provided a legitimacy for the refugees’ claims and rights of return or integration, Israel and the host countries have not respected these rights. In addition to that, the demographic expansion and structural changes that have taken place in the camps since their establishment have brought them ever closer to being slum areas and underdeveloped urban sprawls.

This study is based on several years of fieldwork, including interviews with the populations of the Palestinian refugee camps and those who govern the camps, not only in the Occupied Palestinian Territories but also in Lebanon, Syria, and Jordan. Modes of governance were one of the foci for the interviews.

**PALESTINIANS IN CAMPS: CLOSED VERSUS OPEN SPACE**

Can space be a major factor in shaping the living conditions of a population? I will argue that, with regard to the creation of endemic poverty in some Palestinian refugee communities, two chief factors contribute to this condition: being confined in slums in urban areas, and, consequently, being discriminated against in the labor market.

Although Palestinian refugee camp dwellers by and large enjoy adequate health and education services thanks to UNRWA, they are disfavored and overlooked in the socioeconomic plans of the host countries. While differences between camp dwellers and refugee urban dwellers (off-camp dwellers) in Syria and to a lesser extent in Jordan are minimal, the gap between camp and off-camp dwellers in Lebanon and in the Occupied Territories is enormous. This can be explained by the fact that the camps in Jordan and Syria constitute, by and large, open spaces regulated by the host state, while in the Palestinian territories and Lebanon, they are set in closed spaces.

I define “open space” as both urban and societal. Open urban space is regulated by the host country to look like any residential low-income neighborhood, allowing it to be connected to the surrounding cities and villages. From the societal
point of view, camp dwellers are relatively integrated socially and economically into the surrounding neighborhood and labor market. A “closed space” does not meet at least one of these conditions. Camps organized as closed spaces constitute either urban enclaves or satellites located at the urban periphery, all lacking in green spaces, with poor access to surrounding neighborhoods and to the labor market and with poor housing.

Previous studies of refugee camps have shown correlations between the relative poverty rates of Palestinian refugees and the poverty rates among the respective local populations in different localities. Two related factors are worth noting in this context: discrimination against Palestinian refugees in the labor market and the type of residential area where they live. As one can clearly see from Table 2, it is only in both Lebanon and the Occupied Palestinian Territories (mainly the West Bank) that the poverty rate is higher compared with the local population, despite the fact that in the Occupied Palestinian Territories there is no institutional discrimination in the labor market. This discrimination certainly plays a partial role in the poverty rate noticed in Lebanon. Therefore, the factor contributing to the production of a high poverty rate shared by refugees in Lebanon and the Occupied Palestinian Territories is the feature of closed space. This demonstrates how salient such a space is, in regard to not only refugees’ living conditions, but also to their urban identity and their relationship to Palestinian nationalism, as we will see later. It should be mentioned, though, that this analysis by country does not in any manner suggest homogeneity inside each respective country, mostly because of the location of the camps. Some camps are located in an urban context, while other camps are situated at the urban periphery, and a number of them are isolated camps in a rural setting. The differences between these camps are sometimes huge.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>COUNTRY/REGION</th>
<th>DISCRIMINATION IN THE LABOR MARKET</th>
<th>TYPE OF CAMP</th>
<th>RATE OF POVERTY COMPARED WITH THE LOCAL RATE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Egypt</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No camps</td>
<td>Similar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Syria</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Open space</td>
<td>Similar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jordan</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Open space</td>
<td>Similar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gaza Strip</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Semiclosed space</td>
<td>Slightly higher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>West Bank</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Closed space</td>
<td>Higher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lebanon</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Closed space</td>
<td>Higher</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Relations between poverty rate, type of camp, and discrimination in the labor market.
According to various surveys in Jordan and Syria by the Norwegian Institute for Applied Social Science (Fafo), the living conditions of Palestinian refugees outside the camps is not much different from that of the general population in the host country. The situation of refugees living in camps, however, is worse than that of those living off camp, and this is true in every host country. But even so, the camp populations do not all face the same rate of poverty and deteriorating living conditions, nor do they constitute the main poverty problem of the host countries. Only in Lebanon do all indicators surveyed by Fafo show that living conditions in the camps are worse than in any off-camp area.

In 1982, in the Palestinian territories, UNRWA ceased distribution of food rations to all registered refugees and began to focus instead on those refugees most in need, the special hardship cases (SHCs). These cases represented about 6 percent of the total registered Palestinian refugees in 2000. Proportionately, Lebanon has the highest percentage of SHCs (about 11 percent of the Palestine refugees in Lebanon benefit from the SHC program), while Jordan has the lowest percentage (about 3 percent). The rate of SHCs in the West Bank is 7.8 percent. This difference is explained by the fact that the level of socioeconomic integration of refugees in Jordan is highest, while in Lebanon it is the lowest of UNRWA’s areas of operation.

Even though education levels are generally good, thanks to UNRWA, in Lebanon, 60 percent of Palestinian youth aged eighteen to twenty-nine do not finish their basic education. In the Occupied Palestinian Territories, girls tend to drop out of high school before graduation due to early marriages and, as a consequence, illiteracy rates for females are higher than the rates for males. The incompatibility between the relatively high level of education and the low socioeconomic status of camp dwellers arises from the fact that people whose economic status has improved usually leave the camps for the cities, where work is more readily available.

Over 54 percent of homes in refugee camps in the Occupied Palestinian Territories lack proper sanitary installations for drinking water. Yet the most serious sanitary problem concerns the density of population inside the camp: 30 to 40 percent of the homes have a density of three to eleven people or more, causing huge environmental problems. The buildings are often heaped in narrow alleys with no natural light, exposed to hazardous building materials, inadequate temperature control, and poor ventilation.

The situation of the refugee camps and the poverty rate in both Lebanon and the Occupied Palestinian Territories thus is very distinct from the situation in other camps. At least in Lebanon, the difference is attributed not only to the spatial marginalization of the camps, but also to institutional discrimination in the labor market. In addition, there are other factors that play a less significant role in this
distinctive poverty rate, such as class-selective migration patterns. As already mentioned, in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, people often leave the camp once their financial situation permits them to do so. This does not hinder some people from choosing to stay in the camp, because it is the place where they weave their social networks, but when the crowdedness takes its toll, people tend to leave. According to a Shaml survey (see below), two-thirds of the camp dwellers would be willing to move out of the camp if their financial situation improved.

CAMPS IN THE OCCUPIED PALESTINIAN TERRITORIES

Contrary to the ideologically driven claims of two Israeli anthropologists, Emanuel Marx and Yoram Ben-Porath, who perceived the Palestinian refugee camps as a normal urban space undergoing a process of assimilation into the syntax of the city, the camp is an entity that carries with it the weight of the history of the Palestinian exodus and resistance, and it is very difficult to pretend that it is just another normal space. Let us scrutinize the urban situation of camps in the Occupied Palestinian Territories.

According to UNRWA, in 2006, 664,104 of the 1,587,920 Palestinian refugees in the Occupied Palestinian Territories lived in camps: 26.4 percent of the refugees in the West Bank and 49 percent of the refugees in Gaza (see Table 1). Camps have better health and educational services, but higher unemployment than urban and rural areas (21.5 percent in camps, compared with 17.2 percent and 16 percent respectively in urban and rural areas). Many shelters in the camps are unhealthy and unsafe. Poor construction of the barracks means scorching temperatures during the summer and freezing conditions during the winter. Water seeps through leaks and holes in the roofs, and the shelters become infested with rodents and insects.

This situation was confirmed by the survey conducted by the Palestinian Diaspora and Refugee Center, Shaml, among Palestinian refugees. This survey illustrates how the camp dwellers feel about the urban problems in their life. According to this survey, two-thirds of camp dwellers felt that their home was too small for their families, half felt that the camps do not meet their basic needs, and 57 percent stated that the camps lacked proper health conditions. Moreover, poverty in the camps is more structural, because camp dwellers lack even that small piece of land that allows other Palestinian families to grow vegetables for private consumption. The Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics also provided valuable data regarding this issue. Relatively more camp dwellers work for the Palestinian National Authority where the salary is very modest, and fewer work for international organizations other than UNRWA. Approximately a third of camp dwellers and villagers work in the private sector, as opposed to 46.6 percent among city dwellers.
Society in the Occupied Palestinian Territories is highly fragmented. Its fragmentation reflects its naturally fragmented geography, the traditional division between villages and city dwellers, the dissection of Palestine into the West Bank and Gaza as a result of the 1948 War, and further forced fragmentations introduced by the occupation regime. But it is also a result of the reproduction of differences between refugees and local residents and between those who returned to the territories after the Oslo Accords and all the rest. Culturally and socially, refugees in the territories are relatively well integrated into society when they live off camp, but much less so when they live inside the camps. When one looks at lifestyles and class membership, the evidence is clear. For instance, 40 percent of the refugees living off-camp have at least one family member married to a nonrefugee, as opposed to 20 percent of camp dwellers.17

In the Occupied Palestinian Territories, the camps have become a symbol of territorial illegitimacy due to two processes, one imposed from above and one that has developed from below. Imposed from above, the general fragmentation of Palestinian space that the Israeli military has forcefully created and that the regime of movement control has imposed have made living conditions in the camps even harsher.18 Today, to be able to live safely in a West Bank camp, you must recognize the camp borders and armored vehicles, and you must learn to live with barbed wire, gates blocking the roads, and infinite waiting periods at checkpoints. Since the construction of the Separation Wall, the case of the Shufat camp in Jerusalem has constituted a very flagrant example. While the camp dwellers have Jerusalem IDs, they are separated from the vital spaces of job markets, services, and socialization inside Jerusalem. The fragmentation of space, the regime of movement control, and the Separation Wall intensify the domino effect caused by longstanding processes of bio-politics, colonization, and ethnic cleansing that the colonized Palestinian people have resisted. However, the refugee camps are not the only camps in the Occupied Territories nowadays. The closure of the Gaza Strip, the construction of more and less temporary barriers, and the drawing of borders throughout the West Bank create other camps of all sorts, closing off Palestinian villages and cities and “protected” enclaves for settlers.19 Barbed wire and surveillance form a unique colonial device of the spatial application of ruling power. The refugee camps have now become symbols of territorial illegitimacy, a fact arising from the sovereign proclamation of a state of exception.

The Palestinian National Authority’s position toward this issue is very complex. While the PNA has developed some projects for the camps, the camps are still conceived as enclaves under the responsibility of the international community and in particular the United Nations Relief and Works Agency. In fact, the PNA reinforced the division of space into refugee and nonrefugee areas by excluding...
the camps from urban or infrastructural projects. For instance, the recent committee that supervises the work on the master plan for three municipalities, Bireh, Ramallah, and Bitonia, ended up without any representative of the three refugee camps located in the area. Thus, the question is not how many projects the PNA has executed in these camps, but the fact that these camps are considered even by the PNA as spaces of exception without agency. The representatives on such committees are elected by the residents who live in the area for which the master plan is designed, and hence this particular plan will reflect the power relations between the three towns without giving a voice to the refugees. This lack of representation is consistent with the fact that in general, camp dwellers in the West Bank do not vote and are not represented in the Palestinian political bodies.

In processes that have operated from below, the refugee camp has emerged as a heterotopic place in the Foucauldian sense of this term, an area disconnected from the social and urban tissues in the neighboring areas. But this heterotopic place is not characterized merely by its isolation from its surroundings, but rather by different spatial urban rules projected into the same spatial unit, for instance, being excepted from regulation by the urban municipality, but regulated by informal negotiations between neighbors. These different formations coexist without either of them being derived from or reduced to the other. They constitute a space of tension revolving around deviation, marginality, and contradiction: a space of total control in which acts of resistance and transgression nevertheless take place. The disconnection of the refugee camps from their environment has happened gradually and was accelerated by local elections from which the refugee camps’ dwellers have been excluded. Having the significance of a gray zone of ambivalence, neither completely internal nor entirely external to the society at large (or both internal and external at the same time), these closed spaces are extraterritorial, not truly belonging to the place, subsisting “in,” but not being part “of” the space that they physically occupy.

This ambivalence and delegitimization has an effect on the social identity and self-identification of the refugee-camp dwellers. Local camp identity becomes a decisive factor in producing both local and national identity. Thus, although the Shaml survey found that a vast majority of camp dwellers were proud of their camp identity, some, notably those in the Shufat camp, hid from their colleagues the fact that they lived in the camp. Any minor social dispute between city people and camp dwellers quickly escalates, as in the clashes between people in Kalandia camp and Ramallah during 2001 and 2002. Many years of double marginalization from the Israeli military authorities, on the one hand, and from the PNA and local Palestinian authorities, on the other, has made these areas resemble many slums that sprawl around the world—the suburbs of Paris, for instance. Thus, one cannot
understand the problems of refugee camps unless one studies them as urban sites.

Finally, the camp dwellers deeply sense their marginality and wish to transform their camps into something better. According to the 2003 survey by the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research (PSR), half of the refugees surveyed would not mind being settled outside their camps and would accept radical improvement of their camp. In particular, 87 percent wanted to vote in municipal elections (when the camp is inside the city—and three-quarters wanted to do so when it was outside), and about half favored enlarging the camp inside the city limits.

**CAMPS AS BIO-POLITICAL SPACE**

The bio-power exercised by humanitarian organizations has created categories for those in need with the effect of depoliticizing them. Refugees are transformed into bodies to be fed and sheltered while being deprived of their political existence. Humanitarian law used to refer to “protected people,” but current humanitarian practices focus mainly on “victims” or, at times, “survivors” in order to sound more positive. By classifying people as victims, the basis of humanitarian action is shifted from rights to welfare. In disaster areas—the space of exception—values of generosity and pragmatism obscure any references to the rights and responsibilities of the people concerned (refugees, humanitarian organizations, international community, etc.) that would endow them with their own agency.

However, throughout the years, the activities of refugee organizations (the list is long: the Nansen Bureau for Russian and Armenian Refugees in 1921; the High Commission for Refugees from Germany in 1936; the Intergovernmental Committee for Refugees in 1938; the International Refugee Organization of the United Nations in 1946; UNRWA in 1950; and up to the present, the UN High Commission for Refugees since 1951) have been limited according to their statutes to “humanitarian and social” issues while excluding political issues. With refugees often stripped of their political existence and identities and reduced to their status as individuals in need of shelter and food, as bare life, the entire refugee question has been transferred to the hands of the police and military forces, on the one hand, and to apolitical service organizations such as UNRWA, on the other.

When reconsidering the emergence of the urban identity of the camp, it becomes clear that the identity and political status of camp dwellers are related to the very nature of the camp and to its segregation and isolation as a distinct and enclosed spatial unit. Refugees who are not camp dwellers tend quickly to establish good relationships with their host society and to escape the status of “victims.” As a closed space, the camp forms the conditions that facilitate the use of bio-politics by the host countries and by UNRWA, because refugees are
gathered in a centralized and controlled place where they can be under constant surveillance. This “care, cure, and control” system has transformed refugee camps into disciplinary spaces. In the pretext of facilitating the provision of services, the camp is conceived as the only workable possible form of space, as if outside the camps, the distribution of food and other services to the refugees would have become almost impossible. In the Palestinian context, however, the problem does not lie only with the spatial nature of the camp, but also with the mandate of UNRWA, the main provider of services in the camp.

UNRWA, which was created in 1950 as a refugee organization specifically dedicated to the Palestinian refugees was established as a service provider. Its UN mandate included neither de jure protection of refugees nor their return to their homes. Despite its very strict mandate, in the past fifteen years, there have been cases in which the organization acted beyond the letter of the mandate, for example, when it provided “passive protection” for Palestinian refugees during the first intifada. Since a donors’ meeting in Geneva in 2004, the organization has started linking service provision to advocacy, and recently, a rights-based approach to its humanitarian mandate has been emerging. One can notice relatively strong language used in UNRWA publications to attract the attention of the international community to the continuous plight of Palestinian refugees. However, taking into account housing, children’s and women’s rights, and other rights does not mean that the right of return has become part of UNRWA’s advocacy strategy. In spite of the importance of UNRWA publications for mobilizing the international community, the very concept of refugees as an artifact of victimization discourse obstructs the possibility of resistance that seeks to advance their return and statehood. The United States and some of UNRWA’s European donors consider that if UNRWA goes in the direction of looking for a durable solution such as settlement and return, it will undergo a dangerous politicization, although UNHCR’s case has shown that being involved in the search for durable solutions does not conflict with an essentially humanitarian mandate. As the new UNRWA discourse appeared, Karen Koning AbuZayd, commissioner-general, subtly revealed the tension between what is political and what is humanitarian in her statement at the Host and Donors Meeting held in Amman on December 11, 2006:

I refer to the issues surrounding the tension that frequently appears between the preoccupations of States on the one hand, and humanitarian questions on the other. This tension is manifested in a variety of ways. One of its most striking manifestations is the contrast between the readiness of states to fund emergency responses, compared to their failure to address the questions of international law and politics that cause these emergencies. That tension is clear in the way in which the urgency
to resolve underlying questions of justice and peace for Palestinians is somehow divorced from the challenge of providing for their human needs.

We believe that these tensions and contradictions can—and should—be avoided, particularly in the Palestinian arena where political, security, humanitarian, development and refugee issues are often virtually indistinguishable. The issues are too tightly interwoven to allow the luxury of a fragmented approach. An approach in which security and political questions are deemed to supersede or override humanitarian and protection issues is unrealistic and simply not sustainable. . . .

These questions recall an important aspect of UNRWA's evolving role. I am referring to our role as a global advocate for the care and protection of Palestine refugees. This role is implicit in our mandate and in our identity as an Agency that ultimately derives its authority from the General Assembly and the Charter of the United Nations. . . .

We do not assume this role lightly. We are fully aware that the legitimacy of our advocacy role rests on remaining within the boundaries of our humanitarian mandate. We are cognizant of the fact that the boundaries that separate the humanitarian from the political are indistinct at best, but nevertheless real. We have no illusions about how high the costs would be if we were to stray too far, and we have no desire whatsoever to jeopardize the international credibility we have worked so hard to create and maintain. That would be a price we are not prepared to pay. 29

While UNRWA has played a very important role in empowering Palestinian refugees by providing education, health services, and sometimes employment, this has not been sufficient to get the Palestinians beyond the threshold of poverty and isolation and to allow their integration into the host society. Due to its mandate, UNRWA has been unable to seize the opportunity and promote some changes in the situation of the Palestinian refugees. The recent involvement of UNRWA in the reconstruction of the Jenin refugee camp after its partial destruction by the Israeli occupation army in 2001 is revealing in this sense. Instead of alleviating the crowdedness of the camps by returning some refugees to their place of origin (a third of the Jenin's refugees come from the village of Zaraan, located some 17 kilometers west of the city), UNRWA pursued only two options: rebuilding the camp while respecting its boundaries or asking the Jenin municipality to allocate a piece of land to allow its expansion.

Maintaining the camps as temporary space has as one major consequence: the further marginalization of the refugee population. Furthermore, since the 1950s, one of its indirect consequences has been emigration, not only to the Gulf area, but also to North America. 30 The result of maintaining refugees in camps so as to keep them operational in the political struggle and ready for the refugees' return was relocating the refugees farther from their place of origin and keeping them in
a state of double alienation: both from their place of origin and from the urban and social domains in the host country’s society.

This double alienation is related not only to spatial suspension, but also to temporal suspension. These refugee camps, characterized by what the French anthropologist Michel Agier calls “frozen transience,” are an ongoing, lasting state of temporariness. As in the prisons and “hyperghettos” scrutinized by Loïc Wacquant, camp dwellers “learn to live, or rather survive, in the here-and-now, bathed in the concentrate of violence and hopelessness brewing within its walls.”

CLOSED CAMPS AS A SPACE OF EXCEPTION

Unlike the camps in Syria and Jordan, which function as open spaces, the closed camps in the West Bank are spaces of exception. They are subjected to bio-power and the use of the state of exception put into play by different actors, including the Israeli ruling apparatuses, the PLO, and UNRWA, among other emerging actors, who act as different sovereigns over the camp. Some surveys and many studies have been undertaken by Israel to provide demographic information on the camp dwellers for the purposes of surveillance and disciplinary power. This is a peculiar kind of bio-politics, not one that is concerned to maximize the health and wealth of the population, but quite the opposite, to establish a delicate balance in which both the well-being of the population and especially the extent of the physical terrain on which it exists are minimized without being eliminated altogether. The sovereign, according to the German philosopher Carl Schmitt, is the one who proclaims the state of exception. He is not characterized by the order that he institutes through the constitution, but by the suspension of that order. The politics of exception has been bluntly or subtly exercised against these urban places since the establishment of these camps. But how exactly has this occurred?

A politics of exception has been exercised against these urban places on two levels: by instituting exceptions to the law and by abandoning any effort at urban planning. While the PNA and the Israeli authorities generally have exercised their presence in the Occupied Palestinian Territories by the rule of law, they have abandoned the camps and allowed them to become spaces devoid of laws and regulations. The urbanization process then takes on a wild nature stemming from the absence of planning policies and, in particular, the nonenforcement of construction laws. Everyone builds as he or she sees fit, and the result is hundreds of illegal buildings spreading in all directions. This process of urbanization in the unregulated camps has resulted in a large amount of the population suffering from poverty in the slum areas surrounding the cities.
In this situation, nothing is legally defined. Everything is suspended, but upheld without written documents concerning this suspension. Most of the camps in the Occupied Territories have been under the jurisdiction of the PNA since the Oslo Accords. This authority created a local committee in each camp. However, the camps are actually governed by a web of complex power structures composed of the local committee, notables, family linkages, political factions, imams, PLO popular organizations (workers, women, engineers, etc.), different NGOs, women’s program centers (WPCs), community rehabilitation centers (CRCs), youth activities centers (YACs), and UNRWA directors. These camp leaders have imposed measures that are changing as the balance of power between these different groups changes. Nowadays, the leading actor is the local committee. At times, family linkages are very important, as is the case of Dir Ammar, where committee membership is always determined by the number of families. Each extended family has to be represented on the committee. However, whether family-based or factionally based, the committee is often considered illegitimate, not only because it is nominated by the PNA or by the political factions, but also because there are rivalries and conflicts between groups or subdivisions belonging to the same political parties.

The interviews we conducted in different camps showed how camp populations have lived with the disarray caused by this state of exception. According to an old woman refugee expressing her anger: “Who can I complain to when my neighbor builds a second and third floor without leaving any proper space for my apartment?” Many interviewees used the word “chaos” to describe the situation in the camps.

What seems to be chaos is regulated by an internal mode of governance which is not based on the absence of law, but on the exclusion by the sovereign(s) of the population from the space where the law is supposed to operate: “Camps are under the UNRWA,” declared one camp dweller in the Al-Amari camp in the vicinity of Ramallah, while for others, it is the PNA that exercises governance. Few consider the local committee as the sovereign in camp. The camp dwellers are excluded from the sphere of the city while at the same time included in it with respect to security arrangements and taxation. This flexible use of law and its suspension justifies the use of the space of exception as a way to understand the relationship between the space of the camps and the space of the cities. At times, however, the situation comes closer to a state of a void, filled in a very ad hoc way as the result of the architecture of the power structure. The presumed sovereign suspends the laws in the camp area to make it a quasi-lawless area and to bring it to the point that it becomes hardly controllable, while local actors will compete as putative sovereigns in order to rule the camp. In many cases, as my fieldwork suggests, they create a
state of void due to the unresolved conflicts between the competing factions and the destructive nature of their competition.

The state of exception, according to Giorgio Agamben, is the suspension of law by one sovereign. However, in the case of the Palestinian refugee camps, we have a tapestry of multiple partial sovereignties: a quasi-real sovereign such as the PNA, but also phantom sovereigns such as UNRWA, in addition to a web of actors who contribute to the state of exception and the suspension of laws.

And UNRWA is indeed a phantom sovereign. What is important, Michel Foucault reminds us, is not the power that stems from the exercise of sovereignty, but rather the effects of power that a governmental technology generates. While UNRWA was not intended to govern the camps, nor does it pretend to do so, many camp dwellers nevertheless ascribed to it the status of a sovereign. Many among the camp dwellers we interviewed consider UNRWA responsible for the disorder in the camps. UNRWA calls its representatives in the camps “camp directors,” a title definitely carrying symbolic violence—the violence of occupying a ruling position without acting accordingly. This confusion is not due to any cognitive disorder on the part of the refugees, but rather stems from the historical role played by UNRWA directors in not merely providing services, but also in administering and coordinating many aspects of the refugees’ lives. By substituting for an absent sovereign and by exercising governmental functions designed for and addressed to camps dwellers only, UNRWA too actually constitutes the camp as a zone of exception and reproduces the territorial illegitimacy that characterizes the camps.

However, this state of exception is exercised not only by the sovereign, but also by the actors themselves. Agamben fails to account for the agency of the actors resisting the “total institution” of the camp. He conceives the camp as a paradigmatic place of modernity and modern politics, using concentration camps such as the Nazi camps as an emblematic example. Agamben conceives the camp as a zone of indistinction between the public and the private, fact and norm, law and life, where inmates are nothing but submissive subjects who follow myriad orders and regulations into which the sovereign decision on the exception is disseminated. However, the Palestinian refugee camps are places of resistance and transgression, where agency does not express itself only in the actions of resistance, but also in the use of the same mode of power: the state of exception.

Discursively, many actors, often the political commissars of these camps and what I call the “local sovereigns,” insist on the exceptional status of the camps while refusing to submit them not only to the Israeli power, but also to the local Palestinian municipality and the urban sphere of Palestinian society, if only by evading tax collection or by failing to pay water and electricity fees. The same power strategy is used by these political commissars to keep their authoritative
power without any sort of election. This refusal comes from the need to maintain a status quo in which the majority of the camps’ popular committees are nominated by the various Palestinian factions. The creation and maintenance of this status quo is a political process in which the camp population is not represented and many are alienated by it. Many interviews that we conducted in refugee camps in the West Bank and Lebanon show the growth of a pervasive, often angry disillusionment with any kind of politics, either secular or mainstream religious, especially with the onset of factional strife in Gaza and the destruction of Nahr al-Bared in northern Lebanon.

Ever since the arrival of the PNA, the police have not been able to penetrate the camps without negotiating with the powerful actors who decide whether to cooperate or not, case by case. The camp population resort to imams and local notables, as well as to local security leaders, in any quarrels or problems before going to the police. While such conflict-resolution methods have been rather successful throughout the Israeli occupation, refugee camps no longer enjoy harmonious communitarian structures headed by local notables (mukhtars). Since the end of the 1970s, we have witnessed the emergence of a new elite whose legitimacy is based on the Palestinian national struggle. This situation was changed after the launching of the Oslo process, because participation in this struggle alone is no longer sufficient for someone to become a power broker.

Many stories that we have collected show the problem of this multiplicity of actors governing the camp. In Amari, a camp in the vicinity of Ramallah, for example, when an internal conflict over sexual harassment ended in violence, at first, an imam intervened, and then the matter was taken up by the local committee. Sandi Hilal, in her work on the Dehisha camp, has demonstrated the complexity involved in resolving problems of land ownership between this camp’s two neighboring villages, Doha and Artas. Five people have already been killed in fighting associated with this conflict.

**CONCLUSION**

The space of the camps has five principal functions: as a place of habitat, as an economic space, as a space of memory and identity affirmation, as a space for exercising power, and as a place of military resistance. These functions render the camp a laboratory of Palestinian society and of a Palestinian state in the making, but also an experimental laboratory for control and surveillance and a technical model of repression developed by its sovereigns’ know-how, a technology implemented and deployed in other parts of the world that do not “behave” properly. We live in a world where enclaving undesirable, risky groups and confining them to spaces...
of exception is seen as the very condition for the “free” circulation of “civilized” people in the global archipelago. In addition to that, in case this enclave becomes dangerous, it can be destroyed. The destruction of the Jenin camp by Israeli forces in 2001 projects the image of Agamben’s concept of homo sacer. Camps, such as the Jenin camp, have become “sacred” spaces in that they are spaces where the inhabitants can be “eliminated” by anyone without being punished through internal or external mechanisms and without even proper attention from the Palestinian public sphere. However, the refugee camps have also become a laboratory for resisting both the Israeli occupation and the unpopular power of the Palestinian National Authority. Actually, the camps, which, compared with the cities, benefited little from “the peace process,” were invested politically by Hamas and the Islamic Jihad organizations.

The most extreme situation can be found in Lebanon, where the refugee camps are also closed. According to the French anthropologist Bernard Rougier, Lebanese refugee camps have emerged as a sort of laboratory or microcosm for the vast range of thought relating to politicized Islamism. However, the question with regard to the refugee camps in general is not the emergence of a new Islamist ideology such as al-Qaida’s, but the advent of a new mode of action. My interviews with the Syrian Palestinian refugee camp dwellers who have gone to fight with al-Qaida in Iraq show clearly that they are fighting against the American project in the region, and not against Western values. In the Palestinian territories, the ideology developed is a nationalistic Islamist one in the form of Hamas and the Islamic Jihad organization.

The portrait I have drawn here, though seemingly dark and threatening, does not concern all the refugee camps in Lebanon and the Occupied Territories to the same degree. The different functions that the camps serve have created a Palestinian sociospatial dynamics based on three aspects: territorial permanence (a place of stability and continuity), communitarian space (a place of ongoing social interactions), and a space of contact and conflict with the surrounding communities. However, few camps are economically integrated with their surrounding areas, and they are largely disconnected from the urban fabric. Contrary to many researchers who conflate economic integration of the camps with urban and social integration, the difference is huge. The camps are not different in this respect from ghettos and other enclaves that have been traditionally integrated with their cities economically, but not socially.

While looking at the refugee camps as extreme cases located on the legal edge, as existing in some times and places in a state of exception and in others as a state of void, I have applied a distinction between open and closed camps. The closed camps are zones of exception, albeit under different modalities ordered by various
types of phantom like sovereignties—national, international, and local. Where Palestinian refugees are constituted as bare life and subjected to extreme legal conditions, by revolting and resisting these conditions, they express their agency and transgress the role assigned to them by their oppressors and the many sovereigns that oppression has made possible.

The dominant Palestinian and humanitarian organizations’ imaginary discourses have narrated the conflict in terms of human suffering and victimhood. Portraying closed camps as museums of suffering has enabled such narratives. Moreover, these spaces are considered the primary units for constructing and reproducing the refugees’ identity as Palestinians. As a result, the camp as a quasi-political entity has been investigated by social scientists, journalists, and experts and has been shown to reproduce the structure of pre-1948 Palestinian society, including the reproduction of the place of origin inside the camps, as if Lobieh, Safad, and so on could be reproduced in the Jalazon or Nahr al-Bared camps. This ethnicization of the refugees’ history overlooks the importance of the economic, social, and cultural relationships with the host countries, relationships to which very few ethnographic studies paid adequate attention.

The image of the refugee in the Arab region is confined to those who dwell in miserable camps, and not necessarily extended to those who have been uprooted and dwell outside their country and region. The assumption in popular thought and within the scholarly community has been that the more miserable the camp, the less likely it is that people would want to settle in the host countries and would ultimately insist on returning to their homes in Palestine. The discourse of misery revolves around stagnation, control, and the silencing of camp dwellers. Yet, the relationship between Palestinian national identity and belonging and the type of residential area is very loose. There is no relationship between place of residence and taking a clear political position in favor of insisting on the right of return.

The right-of-return movement has emerged in Europe and North America, rather than in the Arab world. One needs not be a member of a closed refugee camp to advocate the right of return and the maintenance of a Palestinian identity. Contrary to the popular belief that the camp nurtures the Palestinian national identity, however, the camps, where radical national movements mingle with religious conservatism, have produced a new rebellious urban identity, rather than a national one.

Many scholars, in the name of supporting the Palestinian national movement, are unaware of the form of totalitarian nationalism being cultivated in the camps. To echo Philipp Misselwitz, the lyric image of the camp as an iconic symbol of struggle should not hide the fact that this same weapon has been used for internal
fighting and to challenge the authority of the PNA and its conception of the project of national liberation.\footnote{49}

New, emerging discourses, such as those of Khaled Hroub and Oraib Rantawi, argue that the “right of return,” as a key political demand, should not contradict the “right to survive.”\footnote{50} They allude to a form of camp nationalism based on an abstract discourse of the right of return that is threatening the survival of the Palestinian national movement and even the Palestinians as a nation.

We must rethink the refugee camp as a space of radicalism. There is a real need to empower camp dwellers by giving them the right to access and use their neighboring cities and by radically improving the urban conditions of their space. This will not be possible without connecting the camps to the urban tissue of the neighboring cities and creating a transparent mode of governance based on local elections.

I am not advocating a tabula rasa approach, but rather the rehabilitation of the refugee camps and their design as an urban space. This rehabilitation should be carried out not only with reference to the camps’ political and social status, but also with regard to their becoming part of the city, and not an oppositional element in relation to it, as in the Yarmok refugee camp in Damascus or the Al-Wihdat camp in Amman.\footnote{51} An urban master plan based on rehabilitation should take into account the physical, socioeconomic, and cultural fabric of the concerned spaces. A bottom-up participatory approach should be used to outline the differentiated needs of the Palestinian refugee population: women, men, children, the working class, the middle class, and so on.\footnote{52} A solution grounded in the right of choice (between return and settling in the host country, in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, or in other countries), and close cooperation (not competition) between the PNA, UNRWA, and the local committees would take the first steps toward alleviating the problems of the refugees. Alleviation would form the basis for empowering the refugees as transnational subjects.

Some efforts to bring this about and to include the camps in the state’s urban infrastructure are being made in Jordan and to a lesser extent in Syria, but nothing has yet been initiated by the Lebanese government and the PNA. These authorities should recognize the transnational and flexible nature of the identity and citizenship of the refugee community.\footnote{53} There is no opposition between rehabilitation of a place where refugees live and the ardent desire of some of them to return to their land or to the homes of their parents. A refugee is able to place himself or herself in a succession or a superposition of many temporalities or spaces of reference. This is why improving the refugee camps cannot be interpreted as an attempt made by UNRWA to undermine the right of return, even though some political commissars (like some leaders of popular committees) oppose by populist agitation the camp-improvement initiatives.
Throughout the debate of whether or not to maintain the status quo in the refugee camps, the individual Palestinian is invisible. The political insistence of the status quo is in fact a mirror image of the humanitarian organizations’ deployment of bio-political practices that depoliticize Palestinian lives. On both ends of the spectrum of refugee discourse, the Palestinians are mere figures: demographic artifacts and a transient political mass waiting for return. Between the humanitarian discourse in the zones of emergency, on the one hand, and the status-quo discourse on the other, the rights-based approach for the Palestinians as individuals and collectives, as refugees, as citizen-refugees with civil and economic rights, as well as bearers of what Henri Lefebvre called “the right to the city,” is lost.

NOTES

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1 Al-Nakba is the Palestinian catastrophe of 1948.

2 According to Lisa Malkki: “In contrast [to the nationalists in the camps], the town refugees had not constructed such a categorically distinct, collective identity. Rather than defining themselves collectively as ‘the Hutu refugees,’ they tended to seek ways of assimilating and of manipulating multiple identities—identities derived or ‘borrowed’ from the social context of the township. The town refugees were not essentially ‘Hutu’ or ‘refugees’ or ‘Tanzanians’ or ‘Burundians’ but rather just ‘broad persons.’ . . . They were created, rhizomatic identities—changing and situational rather than essential and moral. . . . In the process of managing these ‘rootless’ identities in township life, they were creating not a heroized national identity but a lively cosmopolitanism.” Lisa Malkki, “Speechless Emissaries: Refugees, Humanitarianism, and Dehistoricization,” in Karen Fog Olwig and Kirsten Hastrup (eds.), Sitting Culture: The Shifting Anthropological Object (London: Routledge, 1997), pp. 67–68.


5 In Syria and Jordan, refugees enjoyed access to free education, relatively egalitarian job opportunities, and easily crossed national borders for work abroad.


7 Of course, what I am describing here is true on one level, but not on another. It holds when comparing the camp populations in Jordan and Palestinian territory with the country average. However, in both places, there are large population groups with even much poorer living

8 M. Arneberg, *Conditions among Palestinian Refugees and Displaced in Jordan*, Fafo Report 237 (Oslo: Fafo, 1997). Actually, the difference in living conditions of the Palestinian refugees between those who are camp dwellers and those who live off camp is more important than what is mentioned in the Fafo surveys. I am basing my estimation here on my anthropological observations, as well as on statistics from the Syrian and Palestinian Central Bureaus of Statistics. Fafo usually conducted its surveys in the refugee camps or at Palestinian gathering sites. However, Palestinian refugees also live in cities, where they integrate with the local population. Thus, it is usually very hard to identify them.


10 Those who benefit from the SCHs are the “most disadvantaged and vulnerable refugees, such as women whose husbands have died or whose husbands have divorced or abandoned them, the elderly, the chronically ill, refugees with disabilities, or the very young.” UNRWA provides these groups with direct material and financial assistance. See http://www.un.org/unrwa/programmes/rss/specialhardship.html (last accessed September 5, 2008).


13 All the following statistics are drawn from the 1997 census, unless mentioned otherwise. Hussein al-Rimmawi and Hana Bukhari, *Population Characteristics of the Population Refugee Camps*, Analytical Report Series no. 3 (Ramallah: Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics 2002) (in Arabic). No reliable survey has been conducted since.

14 As a team leader, I conducted this survey between January and October 2003. Five-hundred and sixty open questionnaires were completed by refugees and nonrefugees living in the camps and outside them.

15 Camp-dwelling Palestinian National Authority workers amounted to 27.4 percent of those employed, compared with 9.5 percent and 12.8 percent in urban and rural areas, respectively.


17 These figures are according to a survey by the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research (PSR). The survey was conducted between January 16 and February 5, 2003, targeting 1,498 Palestinian refugee households distributed among 150 localities in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

19 Ariella Azoulay and Adi Ophir, “The Ruling Apparatus of Control in the Occupied Territo-
ries,” a paper presented at the Politics of Humanitarianism Conference, the Van Leer Insti-
21 Events that the author witnessed at the time. See also Peter Lagerquist, “Ramallah Day,”
org/?view=2378 (last accessed September 5, 2008).
22 On Foucault’s concept of bio-power, see Michel Foucault, The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1: An
23 See, for instance, Erika Feller, Volker Turk, and Frances Nicholson (eds.), Refugee Protection
in International Law: UNHCR’s Global Consultations on International Protection (Cambridge:
Cambridge University Press and UNHCR, 2003).
www.egs.edu/faculty/agamben/agamben-we-refugees.html (last accessed September 5,
2008).
25 It is interesting to note that as an academic discipline, “refugee studies” is mainly conceived
as a study of the humanitarian condition of refugees that usually ignores their political con-
dition. As Mallki has noted, “refugee studies” has uncritically imported its main theoretical
ideas, often on an ad hoc basis, from other scholarly domains, especially development stud-
ies. Mallki, “Speechless Emissaries,” p. 599. The discipline has often been functionalist, and
the questions it studies are shaped by the international organizations that fund it, while
issues such as protection are still very loosely articulated with respect to refugees’ political
rights. A similar critique has been expressed by scholars such as Guglielmo Verdirame and
Barbara Harrell-Bond, Michel Agier, and Fabienne Le Houérou, among others, writing about
the practices of the UNHCR concerning their management of the refugee flow. See Guglielmo
Verdirame and Barbara Harrell-Bond, Rights In Exile: Janus-Faced Humanitarianism, Studies
in Forced Migration, vol. 17 (New York: Berghahn Books, 2005); Agier, “Between War and
City”; and Fabienne Le Houérou, Migrants forcés éthiopiens et érythréens en Égypte et au
26 Elia Zureik, “Theoretical and Methodological Considerations for the Study of Palestinian
Society:” Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East 23, nos. 1–2 (2003):
p. 156, Julie Peteet, Landscape of Hope and Despair: Place and Identity in Palestinian Refugee
27 As a sign of this positive change in the discourse of the UNRWA, see, for example, the
presentations of Lex Takkenberg and Anders Fange at the International Conference orga-
nized by Al-Quds University in Jerusalem, The Palestinian Refugees: Conditions and Recent
Developments, on November 25 and 26, 2006. For UNRWA’s mission statement, see www.
unrwa.org.
28 Lex Takkenberg, “The Search for Durable Solutions for Palestinian Refugees: A Role for
UNRWA?” in Eyal Benvenisti, Chaim Gans and Sari Hanafi (eds.), Israel and the Palestinian
Refugees (Berlin: Springer, 2007).
September 5, 2008).
30 Sari Hanafi, Entre deux mondes: Les hommes d’affaires palestiniens de la diaspora et la con-
struction de l’entité palestinienne (Le Caire: CEDEJ, 1997).


The social structures of the camps are very diverse. In the Jalazon camp near Ramallah, for example, there is a tribal structure, because the camp is divided into quarters, each inhabited by refugees from a specific village, while in the Balata camp in Nablus, the old notables are not important, and a new elite has emerged from the strong presence of Palestinian political factions.

In many camps, the social role of NGOs is much more important than that of the political factions. However, some of these NGOs are connected to different political factions. Interviewees reported a climate of mistrust against the NGOs. Sari Hanafi and Linda Tabar, *The Emergence of a Palestinian Globalized Elite: Donors, International Organizations and Local NGOs* (Ramallah: Muwatin and Institute of Jerusalem Studies, 2005).

Beginning in the early 1950s and until 1987, UNRWA set up women’s training centers that provided courses in sewing, health education, and nutrition or home economics. Since 1987, the women’s program centers have included legal literacy programs and legal advice bureaus, which provide awareness training and advice on a wide variety of legal and civic matters. In 2005, the program was able to respond to the needs of 18,000 women of different ages.

There are over 6,700 people who are being assisted through the CRCs. The activities at the CRCs include programs devised to respond to the needs of the visually impaired, classes for children with cerebral palsy, classes for the mentally disabled, and the provision of occupational therapy, medical diagnosis and evaluation, and speech therapy.

Youth activities centers have offered sport and recreational facilities, adult education, leadership training, civic awareness, and community action programs to thousands of participants since 1959. In 2006, The YACs offered services to more than 12,000 youth. All CRCs and YACs are financially self-supporting; eight of the seventy-one WPCs are financially self-supporting, fifty-four have reached partial financial sustainability, and only nine centers are still totally dependent on UNRWA’s support.


On this point, see Yehouda Shenhav and Yael Berda, “The Colonial Foundations of the State of Exception: Juxtaposing the Israeli Occupation of Palestinian Territories with Colonial Bureaucratic History,” in this volume.


I am referring here to the discussion in the workshop organized by the Department of Palestinian Refugee Affaires (one of the departments of the PLO) in Ramallah in which many members of local committees opposed the idea that municipal urban regulations should be applied to the camp space.

Information based on fieldwork conducted in the late 1990s.

Interview with Sandi Hilal, January 2006.


Interview with Philip Misselwitz, June 2007.


Concerning the rehabilitation of the refugee camp in Syria, the example of the Neirab camp is very compelling. I am referring to UNRWA Neirab Rehabilitation Project: Project Briefing, March 2003 (unpublished document).

One should salute the impetus that UNRWA currently has to improve the camp situation in all their areas of intervention. Housing & Camp Improvement Unit Concept Paper—Executive Summary (unpublished document from UNRWA). The UNRWA project led by the German architect Philipp Misselwitz regarding the rehabilitation of the refugee camps also deserves praise.

