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When “Humanitarianism” Becomes “Development”: The Politics of International Aid in Syria's Palestinian Refugee Camps

Nell Gabiam

Iowa State University, ngabiam@iastate.edu

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Abstract

In recent years, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) has attempted to go beyond its role as a provider of relief and basic services in Palestinian refugee camps and emphasize its role as a development agency. In this article, I focus on the Neirab Rehabilitation Project, an UNRWA-sponsored development project taking place in the Palestinian refugee camps of Ein el Tal and Neirab in northern Syria. I argue that UNRWA's role as a relief-centered humanitarian organization highlights the everyday suffering of Palestinian refugees, suffering that has become embedded in refugees' political claims. I show that UNRWA's emphasis on “development” in the refugee camps is forcing Palestinian refugees in Ein el Tal and Neirab to reassess the political narrative through which they have understood their relationship with UNRWA.

Keywords

Humanitarianism, Development, UNRWA, Palestine, Refugee camps

Disciplines

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Comments

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Nell Gabiam

ABSTRACT In recent years, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) has attempted to go beyond its role as a provider of relief and basic services in Palestinian refugee camps and emphasize its role as a development agency. In this article, I focus on the Neirab Rehabilitation Project, an UNRWA-sponsored development project taking place in the Palestinian refugee camps of Ein el Tal and Neirab in northern Syria. I argue that UNRWA’s role as a relief-centered humanitarian organization highlights the everyday suffering of Palestinian refugees, suffering that has become embedded in refugees’ political claims. I show that UNRWA’s emphasis on “development” in the refugee camps is forcing Palestinian refugees in Ein el Tal and Neirab to reassess the political narrative through which they have understood their relationship with UNRWA. [*humanitarianism, development, UNRWA, Palestine, refugee camps*]

RESUME Depuis quelques années, l’UNRWA, (Office de secours et de travaux des Nations Unies pour les réfugiés de Palestine dans le Proche-Orient) s’efforce d’aller au delà de son rôle de fournisseur d’aide et services de première nécessité dans les camps de réfugiés palestiniens et de mettre l’accent sur son rôle en tant qu’agence de développement. A travers l’étude du Projet de Rehabilitation de Neirab (« Neirab Rehabilitation Project »), pour lequel l’UNRWA intervient dans deux camps du Nord de la Syrie (Ein el Tal et Neirab), cet article vise à montrer ce processus de transformation. Alors que le rôle de l’UNRWA en tant qu’organisation humanitaire dédiée au secours met en lumière la souffrance quotidienne des réfugiés palestiniens, une souffrance qui a été pleinement intégrée dans leurs revendications politiques, l’accent mis récemment sur le «développement» dans les camps force les réfugiés de Ein el Tal et Neirab à reconsidérer le discours politique à travers lequel ils avaient défini leur relation avec l’UNRWA.

In the summer of 2009, I returned to Ein el Tal and Neirab, two Palestinian refugee camps in Northern Syria, where I had conducted fieldwork some three years earlier. Ein el Tal and Neirab have, since 2000, become the target of the Neirab Rehabilitation Project, a UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East–sponsored sustainable development project (hereafter, UNRWA). My first stop was Ein el Tal, where the initial phase of the project had recently been completed. This initial phase entailed moving 300 Palestinian families from former World War II army barracks located in Neirab Camp to brand new UNRWA-built houses in the neighboring Palestinian refugee

camp of Ein el Tal. As I was walking through Ein el Tal’s barren hilly area where the new UNRWA-built houses are located, a giant mural on the side of one of the houses, strategically looking down on the rest of the camp, caught my attention (see Figure 1). Among the more striking scenes painted on the mural were a group of fleeing refugees, a Palestinian woman dressed in traditional garb desperately hugging an olive tree, a giant hand holding what appears to be a land deed with the words *not for sale* stamped on it, the Dome of the Rock mosque in Jerusalem, and a young girl wearing a red headband with the word *Palestine* written on it, holding a stone in her raised fist. At the top right-hand



FIGURE 1. Mural in Ein el Tal. (Photo taken by author)

corner of the mural, accompanied by an awkwardly worded English translation, were the following words in giant Arabic letters: *al-‘awda haqq . . . la-‘awda ‘anh* [Return is a right . . . It cannot be forsaken] (translation by author).

The mural, which was painted by a Palestinian artist living in Ein el Tal in May of 2009, roughly nine years after the official start of the Neirab Rehabilitation Project, reflects the local sense of anxiety that has accompanied the implementation of the project. It attests to the controversial nature of UNRWA’s recent attempt to emphasize “development” in Palestinian refugee camps. I argue that UNRWA’s recent emphasis on development has been controversial with Palestinian refugees for the following reason: Palestinian refugees—who, as a collective, have always insisted on their right of return to their Palestinian homes (Al Husseini and Bocco 2010; Schiff 1995)—have come to conceive of the relief-centered humanitarian aid provided by UNRWA as a right, as proof of international responsibility for their predicament, and as a reminder that the international community has yet to find a political solution to this predicament.¹ UNRWA’s discourse of development, based on the notions of encouraging refugees “to become self reliant” and ending “refugee dependence on assistance” (UNRWA 2005:12), destabilizes such a narrative and, from the perspective of Palestinian refugees in Ein el Tal and Neirab, threatens to create a situation where “development” becomes an alternative to solving the refugee issue through a political process.

The point of this article is not to imply that “development” is depoliticizing while humanitarian aid is not; neither is it to argue for an oppositional relationship between Palestinian refugees and “development.” Rather, it is to show that

UNRWA’s relief-centered humanitarianism speaks to the sense of victimhood of Palestinian refugees and that the suffering associated with this sense of victimhood has become embedded in Palestinian refugees’ political claims concerning the right of return. In contrast, UNRWA-sponsored “development,” the purported goal of which is to overcome Palestinian refugees’ material suffering, unsettles the political narrative through which Palestinian refugees have interpreted their relationship with UNRWA and forces refugees to reconfigure themselves as political subjects in terms of their relationship with the agency. As I will show in this article, an important aspect of understanding the evolving dynamics of UNRWA–refugee relations is the fact that the great majority of Palestinian UNRWA employees are themselves Palestinian refugees.

The arguments I make in this article have broader implications in terms of scholarly attempts to understand the relationship between suffering and politics. UNRWA’s embrace of “development” is happening at a time when suffering has become an important arena for making political claims (Benbassa 2010; Brown 1995; Fassin 2002; Ticktin 2006). UNRWA’s attempted shift toward development as its main approach to assisting Palestinian refugees and the reactions of Palestinian refugees to this shift present an opportunity to reflect on whether group-based political claims can be articulated in ways that transcend the suffering that engendered these claims in the first place.

I would like to clarify from the outset that when I talk about Palestinian insistence on the right of return, I am pointing to a transgenerational discourse articulated by the great majority of Palestinian refugees with whom I interacted during my fieldwork in Syria. This discourse insists that

Palestinian refugees should have the right to return to their Palestinian homes (see Al Hussein and Bocco 2010 and Dumper 2007, both of whom make a similar argument about Palestinian refugees in general). To what extent Palestinian refugees would actually choose to return to their former homes if given the possibility is a separate issue that goes beyond the scope of the arguments I am making in this article.

Most of the ethnographic evidence presented in this article is the result of fieldwork conducted from the spring of 2004 to the spring of 2006 in the Palestinian refugee camps of Ein el Tal, Neirab, and Yarmouk, all located in Syria. During much of that time, I was involved in UNRWA activities on a volunteer basis. From the fall of 2004 to the middle of the spring of 2005, I taught in UNRWA’s conversational English program for UNRWA employees (Palestinians for the most part) at the agency’s headquarters in Damascus. From the spring of 2005 to the spring of 2006, I worked as an UNRWA volunteer in connection with the Neirab Rehabilitation Project taking place in Ein el Tal and Neirab. I assisted the Neirab Rehabilitation Project team as an Arabic-to-English translator during informal meetings with Palestinian refugees in Neirab and Ein el Tal and served as a note taker during UNRWA-organized community meetings and focus group discussions (these discussions involved groups of adult men, adult women, boys, and girls). In the fall of 2005, I participated in an UNRWA-sponsored study of living conditions in Neirab Camp’s barracks, which consisted of a questionnaire and formal interviews with 24 families living in the barracks. These activities, which enabled me to engage in a considerable amount of participant-observation, were supplemented by approximately 30 formal interviews with Palestinians of varying age, occupation, and gender living in Ein el Tal, Neirab, and Yarmouk.² I also conducted about a dozen formal interviews with UNRWA staff (both foreign and Palestinian) directly involved in the Neirab Rehabilitation Project and interviewed two Syrian government representatives involved in the project (who in this case were themselves Palestinian refugees).

PALESTINIAN REFUGEES IN SYRIA

During the 1948 Arab–Israeli War, roughly 700 thousand Palestinian Arabs fled their homes or (in a few cases) were expelled through direct Israeli orders.³ They were actively prevented from returning to their homes by Israeli authorities once hostilities had subsided.⁴ In this sense, “it may fairly be said that all 700,000 or so [Palestinian Arabs] who ended up as refugees were compulsorily displaced or expelled” (Morris 2004:589). Since then, the Israeli government has opposed the collective return of these refugees and their descendents to their original homes (Morris 2004).

Of the Palestinians who became refugees, approximately 90–100 thousand ended up in Syria (Kodmani-Darwish 1997; Takkenberg 1998). The Syrian government has had a relatively welcoming approach toward Palestinian refugees (Kodmani-Darwish 1997).⁵ On January 25, 1949, the Syrian government created the Bureau for Palestinian

Arab Refugees, which later became known as the General Authority for Palestinian Arab Refugees (GAPAR). GAPAR is the main Syrian government body that engages with Palestinian refugees, and it maintains an active presence in Palestinian refugee camps. In 1956, the Syrian government adopted Law No. 260, which states:

Palestinians residing in Syria as of the date of the publication of this law are to be considered as originally Syrian in all things covered by the law and legally valid regulations connected with the right to employment, commerce, and national service, while preserving their original nationality. [Brand 1988:623]⁶

Despite extending the great majority of Syrian civil rights to Palestinian refugees through Law No. 260, the Syrian government officially opposes the permanent resettlement of Palestinian refugees on its territory, insisting that the only acceptable solution for these refugees is return. In fact, the Syrian government vetoed an earlier UNRWA proposal in the 1990s to rebuild the area where Neirab’s barracks are located, fearing that supporting such a project would give the impression that it considered the presence of Palestinian refugees on its soil to be permanent (see Misselwitz and Hanafi 2010). However, the Syrian government changed course in 2000 and has even become a participant in the Neirab Rehabilitation Project, donating land adjacent to Ein el Tal Camp for the construction of new houses for families moving out of Neirab’s barracks, extending electricity and water services to the new housing and building a sewage system in Ein el Tal Camp.

The Syrian government’s policy change can be attributed, at least in part, to repeated UNRWA efforts to get the Syrian government’s endorsement for the Neirab Rehabilitation Project as well as the fact that, in the late 1990s, GAPAR acquired a new director (himself a Palestinian refugee) who, contrary to his predecessor (also a Palestinian refugee), became sympathetic to UNRWA’s proposal. GAPAR’s new (and current) director played a crucial role in convincing the Syrian government’s upper echelons to endorse the project. According to a UNRWA employee who was involved with the early phase of the Neirab Rehabilitation Project, GAPAR’s current director was able to get the support of Syrian authorities by successfully convincing them that camp improvement initiatives did not have to prejudice the Palestinian right of return or be tantamount to settlement.⁷ A speech given by GAPAR’s current director, a boisterous middle-aged man, in November of 2005 in Neirab Camp gives some insight into the director’s way of reconciling “development” in the host country with the goal of refugee return. Addressing a crowd made up of refugees from Ein el Tal and Neirab, he pointed to the harsh living conditions encountered in Neirab’s zinc-covered barracks. He reminded the crowd that GAPAR had turned down “20 million Euros” of foreign-aid money in 1994 that would have gone into improving living conditions in Neirab. “Why does every improvement in our life have to be considered settlement?” he asked. “Would we [GAPAR] agree with the project if it were about settlement?” As for the right of

return, “It is untouchable. It is something that you own and that will be passed on from generation to generation.” He ended his speech by saying, “We [Palestinian refugees] will not be able to return without first developing ourselves so that we can be resilient. This is how we understand [the Neirab Rehabilitation Project]. It does not compromise the right of return” (field notes, November 8, 2005).

According to UNRWA statistics, only a third of Palestinian refugees in Syria live in camps (UNRWA 2011). However, the issue is more complex given that Palestinian refugees who did not initially move to areas that were officially delimited as UNRWA-administered camps were encouraged by the Syrian government to live in areas set aside for them. In practice, UNRWA recognizes these areas as camps (albeit unofficial ones) and provides services to them but does not include them in its statistical information about Palestinian camp populations. For instance, UNRWA considers Ein el Tal to be an unofficial camp. Ein el Tal Camp was established by the Syrian government in 1962 to accommodate Palestinian refugees renting housing in various parts of Aleppo, Syria’s second largest city, situated in the north of the country. If the camp is understood primarily as a physically circumscribed ethnonational community of people who claim refugee status then one can argue that the majority (about two thirds) of registered Palestinian refugees in Syria live in camps.

UNRWA AND PALESTINIAN REFUGEES

Before the establishment of UNRWA, Palestinian refugees were under the mandate of the United Nations Conciliation Commission for Palestine (UNCCP), which was created in December of 1948 and consists of the governments of the United States, France, and Turkey.⁸ Having recognized the right of Palestinian refugees to return to their homes and receive compensation for their lost or damaged property through the adoption of Resolution 194 (United Nations 1948), the United Nations expected the UNCCP to engage in political mediation that would end the Israeli–Palestinian conflict and result in a solution for displaced Palestinian refugees.⁹ Today, UN Resolution 194 has become a cornerstone of Palestinian refugee advocacy for return. The right of return of individuals who have been displaced from their normal place of residence is a right that is also recognized in customary international law, the four Geneva conventions, and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Dumper 2007; Takkenberg 1998).

UNRWA was established in December of 1949 to focus on emergency relief assistance to Palestinian refugees and to initiate a “programme of public works” while the UNCCP continued to mediate Israeli–Palestinian peace negotiations (Dumper 2007; Schiff 1995:20). The “public works” initiative included small-scale projects such as road building, tree planting, and economic assistance for refugees to set up small businesses as well as large-scale regional water development projects (Schiff 1995).¹⁰ Although this was never officially acknowledged by UNRWA, the goal of the “public works” initiative was to bring about the resettlement of refugees

in their host country through economic development as an alternative to return (Schiff 1995). The program failed and was abandoned in the late 1950s because of resistance from Palestinian refugees and Arab host states who suspected that the program’s economic development schemes were being planned as an alternative to refugee repatriation (Schiff 1995). UNRWA went back to focusing on its emergency relief efforts (consisting in providing refugees with food, shelter, clothing, and basic health care) and strengthening its education program (Takkenberg 2010). In the 1990s, UNRWA attempted again—this time successfully—to target the long-term economic welfare of Palestinian refugees by instituting a microfinance program (Takkenberg 2010). UNRWA also introduced shelter rehabilitation, water, and sanitation projects in Palestinian refugee camps around that time (Takkenberg 2010). “Development,” then, is not entirely new to UNRWA; it is part of a fraught history between the agency and Palestinian refugees. What is different today is UNRWA’s open embrace of “development” as an ideology and UNRWA’s attempt to frame its relationship with Palestinian refugees through this ideology.

It is important to note that UNCCP’s activities came to a standstill in the mid-1950s because it was unable to mediate a political resolution to the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. In addition to being charged explicitly with implementing paragraph 11 of Resolution 194, which recognizes the right of return of Palestinian refugees, the UNCCP had a protection mandate toward Palestinian refugees (Kagan 2010). With the cessation of the UNCCP’s activities, Palestinian refugees came under the sole assistance of UNRWA, which was only given a relief and welfare mandate.

Since the 1980s, protection duties have been progressively added to UNRWA’s mandate (Kagan 2010; Schiff 1995), and in recent years UNRWA has played an “increasingly visible role as a global advocate for the protection of Palestinian refugees” (Kagan 2010:518).¹¹ Although UNRWA now considers “promoting durable solutions” as part of its protection duties, it limits itself to calling for “a just resolution to the refugee question, and especially a strong refugee representation in the peace process” (Kagan 2010:521). Refugee law scholar Michael Kagan argues that “despite the gradual growth of UNRWA’s protection mandate, a widely held agreement seems to be that UNRWA can do relatively little to actually solve the Palestinian refugee problem, because it is not part of the political apparatus that seeks an end to the Israeli–Palestinian conflict” (2010:521).

From an international perspective, Palestinian refugees have been largely marginalized by various political attempts to solve the Israeli–Palestinian conflict (Dumper 2007). By the time the Oslo peace process was acknowledged as a failure in the late 1990s, many Palestinian refugees felt the refugee issue had been sidestepped in the various peace processes and resented the fact that concessions were being made on their behalf without their active participation in peace talks (Dumper 2007). Additionally, Palestinian refugees have been weakened politically with the creation of the Palestinian National Authority (PNA), which only

represents Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza. Since the 1993 Oslo Accords, the PNA has been the main Palestinian counterpart in Israeli–Palestinian peace talks as opposed to the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), which represents all Palestinians. The considerable weakening of the PLO has meant that “the direct channel of political representation for Palestinian refugees in Lebanon, Jordan, Syria, and in the diaspora has in effect withered” (Dumper 2007:65). The current period, then, is one in which Palestinian refugees have very little political clout in terms of influencing the actors directly involved in attempts to find a political solution to the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, including the refugee issue.

Although not necessarily expecting UNRWA to solve the refugee issue, Palestinian refugees are invested in the agency’s continuation because it gives them visibility as refugees and serves as a reminder that the international community has yet to resolve their situation (see Al Hussein and Bocco 2010). Palestinian refugees have a complex and contradictory relationship with UNRWA, which translates into a mixture of distrust, dissatisfaction, and attachment toward the agency (see Schiff 1995). Although UNRWA’s elision of the political roots of the Palestinian refugee issue has always been a source of tension between the agency and refugees (Schiff 1995), research conducted in 2006 shows that, despite their criticisms, Palestinian refugees are almost unanimously attached to the continuation of UNRWA (Nabulsi 2006).

While conducting fieldwork in Ein el Tal and Neirab, I found that the majority of Palestinian refugees I talked to highlighted UNRWA’s importance as a provider of social services. However, some felt the agency should be more supportive politically, an opinion that often meant that UNRWA should play an active role in defending the right of return of Palestinian refugees. When I asked Samah, who is from Neirab Camp and runs the UNRWA-sponsored Women’s Program Center in the camp, what she thought UNRWA’s role should be with regard to Palestinian refugees, she answered:

UNRWA is the main service provider [for Palestinian refugees] . . . Honestly, it should offer more services than it does right now, because, honestly, it is decreasing services. For example, it should expand its services in clinics: more doctors, more education and health services; [UNRWA should] provide scholarships to study abroad, secure work opportunities [for refugees]. . . . Also it should have a political role. It should campaign and pressure the United Nations about the right of return of refugees. [UNRWA’s] role is reduced to a social and humanitarian one. [interview, December 30, 2005]¹²

Although UNRWA is the most prominent organization involved in providing social services to Palestinian refugees living in camps, it is not the only one. In Palestinian refugee camps, political parties play a major role in running charities and overseeing social programs. In Ein el Tal Camp, community-based charities are run by political parties such as Hamas, Fatah, and the Islamic Jihad (UNRWA and TANGO 2005). Neirab has a kindergarten for low-income families

linked to the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP). Some of the Palestinian political parties sponsor youth groups. They sometimes have women’s committees that are more or less active. Neirab Camp is also home to the Palestinian Charitable Organization (*al-Jam'iyya al-Khayriyya al-Filastiniyya*), which is run by a board consisting of Palestinian representatives of the ruling Syrian Ba‘th party as well as representatives of various Palestinian political parties and by independent members (UNRWA and TANGO 2005).¹³

Thus, on the one hand, Palestinian political parties whose rhetoric emphasizes Palestinian resistance, liberation, and return play an important role in local attempts to provide social services to camp dwellers. On the other hand, UNRWA officially subscribes to a separation between politics and the services it provides. In a recent speech, UNRWA Commissioner General Filippo Grandi argued that UNRWA’s mission does not extend to “matters in the political realm.” He explained that UNRWA does not have the power to “bring about Palestinian unity and the contiguity of the West Bank and Gaza; an end to the occupation; a negotiated conclusion of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict; the establishment of a viable State of Palestine; and the realization of a just and lasting solution to refugees’ plight” (Grandi 2010).

The following example, based on fieldwork conducted in 2004 in the urban Palestinian refugee camp of Yarmouk, illustrates the incompatibility of UNRWA’s self-understanding as an apolitical organization and the political ideology that permeates local Palestinian efforts to address social vulnerability in the camps. One morning in August of 2004, I met with a young foreign Damascus-based UNRWA employee who was interested in promoting activities for youth in the camps where he worked and establishing spaces for cooperation between locally run organizations in the camps and UNRWA. He had offered me the opportunity to accompany him to a meeting with the members of the Yarmouk Youth Center, a youth center based in Yarmouk, an “unofficial” camp that was established by the Syrian government in the 1950s.¹⁴ The Yarmouk Youth Center is linked to one of the many political parties based in Yarmouk Camp.

When we arrived, a group of young Palestinian men and women in their late teens and early twenties were in the middle of a workshop with European youth as part of an exchange program sponsored by a Belgian NGO. Palestinian refugees from other camps in Syria as well as camps in Lebanon were also participating in the exchange. Taking a break from their activities, members of the Yarmouk Youth Center and some of their European and Palestinian guests sat in a circle with us, and the UNRWA employee proceeded to ask them how UNRWA could help them with their social activities. The conversation quickly turned into a list of grievances against UNRWA. Palestinian participants felt that UNRWA services had declined in the camps in the Damascus and Aleppo areas. One participant complained that UNRWA schools were overcrowded, limiting students’ ability to learn basic skills such as reading. Another lamented the fact that UNRWA had stopped distributing free school supplies such as notebooks

and pencils. He also complained that Palestinian refugees were not allowed to bring up topics relating to Palestinian nationalism in UNRWA classrooms. A participant who was visiting from one of the refugee camps in Lebanon criticized UNRWA for not covering surgery costs for refugees and for not doing enough to improve the infrastructure of various camps. Finally, a participant complained that UNRWA was under the influence of the U.S. government (which happens to be UNRWA's biggest donor).

The UNRWA employee tried to address every complaint. With regard to restrictions on Palestinian nationalism in UNRWA classrooms and undue U.S. influence on UNRWA, he simply replied in English that UNRWA is "a humanitarian organization that does not interfere [in] politics." To this, the Palestinian participant who had complained about U.S. influence on the agency replied in Arabic, "but the United States interferes in everything!" [*bas Amrika bti-dakhal bi-kill shi '!*], drawing laughs from the rest of the group (field notes, September 8, 2004).

It is difficult for UNRWA, which operates under the presumption of apoliticalness, to establish strong relationships with grassroots Palestinian organizations and refugees in general because the latter do not operate under the assumption that the humanitarian and the political are two separate spheres. A few months after my visit to the Yarmouk Youth Center, the same UNRWA employee and I became involved in the planning of an UNRWA and UNDP-sponsored (UN Development Programme) celebration of International Volunteer Day. The two-day celebration ended with a fair featuring local and international organizations involved in a variety of social issues as well as the cultural centers of several countries promoting their social activities. UNRWA and UNDP officials supervising the planning of the International Volunteer Day celebration were worried that the Yarmouk Youth Center, which was participating in the event, might use the celebration to focus attention on political grievances in connection with the Israeli–Palestinian conflict or the right of return. They therefore made it clear to the center that they did not want any political messages in its display.

The time to set up for the International Volunteer Day fair eventually came. The youth center's display consisted of Palestinian embroidery, pictures drawn by children attending the center's programs, and posters. Among the posters was a bright red one advertizing the center's volunteer-taught classes for camp children, a theme that fit perfectly with the goals of the UN volunteer-day fair. However, in the middle of the bright red poster was the image of a Palestinian fighter wearing a *keffiyeh* (traditional Arab head-dress that has become a Palestinian national symbol) along with the word *Intifada* in big capital letters. The poster immediately attracted the attention of a high-ranking Palestinian UNRWA employee, who demanded that the center take it down while he inspected the rest of the display. The center complied but managed to keep other posters in its display. One poster featured a giant grey wall with unfamiliar writing on it. I later found out that the slogan carved across the wall in big black capital letters was Dutch for "take down the wall"

(*sloop de muur*), a reference to the Israeli-built barrier along the Occupied Territories (field notes, January 4, 2005).

The foreign UNRWA employee who had introduced me to the Yarmouk Youth Center was furious. He felt that the leaders of the youth center had been offered an excellent chance to work with UNRWA, which would have provided them with opportunities to strengthen their center, but they had wasted this opportunity by using the International Volunteer Day fair as a political platform. He was very disappointed in the center and vowed never to work with its members again.

The views of the leaders of the Yarmouk Youth Center were more nuanced. Although they were frustrated with UNRWA's censorship of their display, Ibrahim, one of the center's leaders, made sure I understood that "UNRWA is not our enemy" (field notes, January 4, 2005). According to Ibrahim, the center did not necessarily see the agency as working against it, but UNRWA definitely had a different strategy with regard to helping Palestinian refugees, and working too closely with UNRWA could be harmful to the center's interests.

One factor that helps make sense of the mixed feelings displayed by the youth center's leaders is the fact that roughly 99 percent of UNRWA employees are themselves Palestinian refugees (Farah 2010). Thus, there is a significant overlap between UNRWA and the refugees for whom it was created. It is important to note however that foreigners—usually Westerners—hold the reigns of power in the agency, as they fill UNRWA's top leadership positions. In his 1995 study on UNRWA, political scientist Benjamin Schiff notes that "the internationals are supposed to maintain the agency's political neutrality, uphold management standards, and intervene with the host/occupying governments (in ways Palestinians, subject to local laws and political constraints, could not) when necessary" (1995:148). He also notes that "the leading local staff had to tread carefully between commitments to the Palestinians and loyalties and duties to UNRWA" (Schiff 1995:145). On the one hand, Palestinian UNRWA employees can be seen as intermediaries who make the agency's supposedly apolitical policies more palatable to Palestinian refugees, as in the case of the Palestinian employee who demanded that the Yarmouk Youth Center take down one of its posters. On the other hand, Palestinian UNRWA employees can also be seen as inserting the agency's programs in narratives that accommodate Palestinian nationalism and political claims. For example, referring to UNRWA schools in Jordan (the majority of UNRWA teachers are Palestinian), anthropologist Randa Farah notes that lessons in Palestinian nationalism and history "went beyond what was required in the Jordanian curriculum, and in fact contravened UNRWA and State regulations," which attested to "the failure of UNRWA to mute the political dimension of refugee histories or to generate complacency" (2010:403).

With regard to the Neirab Rehabilitation Project, UNRWA's Palestinian employees played a useful role in garnering community support for the project. However,

contrary to their foreign counterparts, it was not unusual for Palestinian UNRWA employees to go beyond the technocratic language of the project and openly acknowledge Palestinian political claims when addressing local concerns. This will become clearer in subsequent sections. To understand the controversies surrounding the Neirab Rehabilitation Project, it is necessary to first understand the significance of relief-centered humanitarianism to the relationship between UNRWA and Palestinian refugees. It is to this topic that I now turn.

HUMANITARIAN AID AS A RIGHT

In Syria, only six percent of refugees continue to receive humanitarian aid in the form of rations and other direct handouts (Takkenberg 2010), but many of the refugees I interacted with were critical about the progressive cuts in UNRWA rations. Even refugees who do not need rations or other handouts from UNRWA often deplore UNRWA’s cuts. Bilal, a construction worker in Ein el Tal Camp who was probably in his mid-thirties, opposed UNRWA’s cuts, explaining that “we never took flour. My father was a government employee, and government employees don’t take flour. But I defend the distribution of flour so that we remain refugees” (interview, June 21, 2005).

In her analysis of humanitarian practices in Gaza in the aftermath of the 1948 war, anthropologist Ilana Feldman argues that rations, which from the perspective of humanitarian agencies were a response to the extreme poverty of Palestinian refugees following the loss of their homes and livelihoods, paradoxically played a central role in the emergence of the refugee as a political figure in Palestinian discourse. Rations functioned not simply as a tool of humanitarian aid but also as proof of the loss of one’s home and, consequently, as proof of one’s identity as a refugee. This would create a situation in which “Palestinians quickly came to see this aid, not as charity, but as a right: a reflection of international responsibility for their condition” (Feldman 2007a:144).

Many of today’s human rights documents acknowledge human rights as a question of responsibilities (on the part of individuals, states, or international bodies) as well as individual—and sometimes group—entitlements (Donnelly 2003; Hastrup 2001). This includes the responsibility of states “to provide certain (civil, political, economic, and cultural) goods, services and opportunities” to individuals under their jurisdiction (Donnelly 2003:36). Arguing that UNRWA has taken on many of the functions attributed to the governments of states, scholars have characterized UNRWA as a surrogate or quasi state for Palestinian refugees, a “welfare government in exile” (Al Hussein and Bocco 2010; Farah 2010:391). However, the right to aid that is claimed by Palestinian refugees does not derive primarily from their relationship to UNRWA as a surrogate state or from the content of global human rights instruments. This right cannot be reduced to a question of responsibility to provide particular services to individuals who need them;

rather, Palestinian refugees conceptualize their right to aid as a question of historical responsibility and accountability on the part of the international community.

Anthropologists have argued that rights cannot simply be treated as a by-product of Western modernity or Western colonization (Subramanian 2009; Wilson 1997). Thus, Ajantha Subramanian points out that “rights claims are embedded in dense histories of struggle and, in this sense, are not distinct from other cultural expressions of relationality and obligation” (2009:21). Palestinian refugees’ conception of UNRWA aid as a right does not emanate directly from international human rights law but, rather, is grounded in a larger sense of historical injustice. From the perspective of Palestinian refugees, not only did the United Nations, through its partition plan, set in motion the events that led to their forced displacement and dispossession, but it also failed to remedy this situation by ensuring their return once hostilities had subsided (see Peteet 2005). According to this perspective, UNRWA’s responsibility to attend to the welfare of refugees is a question of historical and political accountability, the price the United Nations must pay for its failure to find a solution to the Palestinian refugee issue. One way that Palestinian refugees conceive of this failure is to point to the United Nations’ inability to implement Resolution 194, which aimed to solve the refugee question. In this sense, UNRWA has also become a symbol of international legal responsibility for finding a solution to the forced displacement of Palestinian refugees. Rations and other handouts and the health clinics and schools the agency operates have become, for refugees, the material embodiment of UNRWA’s responsibility to assist refugees until their situation is resolved politically.

Thus, there is a way in which the return claims of Palestinian refugees have become embedded in their everyday suffering. The following example illustrates the way the everyday hardship that the Neirab Rehabilitation Projects seeks to end paradoxically operates as a political ally in Palestinian refugees’ resolve not to forget the past. One morning in December of 2005, I accompanied an assistant to the Neirab Rehabilitation Project who wanted to meet with newly arrived families from the Neirab barracks and see how they were adjusting to their new life in Ein el Tal. The newly arrived inhabitants were happy to now be living in spacious houses with yards but had many complaints with regard to the infrastructure work, which was significantly behind schedule. Because of delays in providing all of the new houses with water, a truck had been hired to deliver water daily to the houses not yet connected to the water network. According to the new residents, the truck came at most twice a week, forcing some of them to go to neighbors’ houses for showers. There was also no system of trash collection set in place for the new housing, causing trash to accumulate and resulting in health problems for the new residents. Finally, in the process of extending the sewage system to the new houses, sewage water had mixed with the tap water, again compromising the newcomers’ health. The new residents

were clearly upset at having to face these problems when the main reason for moving to the new housing was to escape the harsh and unhealthy living conditions of the Neirab barracks. However, one young man, after explaining that he had to go to his neighbor's home to bathe his children, added, "Maybe it's better this way, that we are still suffering. Maybe this way we won't forget Palestine" (field notes, December 23, 2005). The young father's words are indicative of how ongoing rupture becomes a way of remembering the original moment of rupture located in the past (Mehta and Chatterji 2001; Sa'di and Abu-Lughod 2007). His words also point to the tension between the desire to overcome the traumatic past and at the same time hold on to it in the name of redress.

The significance of suffering to the lives and experiences of Palestinian refugees cannot simply be reduced to a question of political instrumentality. Suffering also has existential dimensions and, in the Palestinian case, is meaningful to refugees' sense of identity and history. However, it is important to note the political dimensions of suffering in the case of Palestinian refugees, because given their current lack of political clout and their political marginalization in various international attempts at resolving the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, suffering seems to be the main channel through which refugees can make their claims visible to the international community.

Scholars have argued that with the emergence of a global humanitarian regime in the 20th century, moral imperatives connected to the effort of saving lives or alleviating suffering tend to become a substitute for political action (Fassin 2002; Morris 2008a; Ticktin 2006). With regard to the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, anthropologist Lori Allen (2009) argues that the display through visual media of suffering, bloodied, and mangled Palestinian bodies has become a means for Palestinians in the Occupied Territories to communicate their humanity and the justice of their cause to the outside world. For their part, Dider Fassin and Richard Rechtman (2009) note that although Palestinian refugees in the Occupied Territories have adequate local medical services, they solicit the presence of humanitarian organizations such as Médecins Sans Frontières (Doctors without Borders, MSF) because they value the role that such organizations play as witnesses of their plight under Israeli occupation.

Similarly, given that in the current world order the refugee is primarily recognizable in terms of material and bodily distress (Arendt 1973; Malkki 1996), UNRWA's minimalist relief-centered humanitarianism highlights the refugee status of Palestinian refugees and thus keeps open the issue of return. The Neirab Rehabilitation Project, which is concerned with the long-term well-being of Palestinian refugees in Ein el Tal and Neirab and with making drastic changes to Ein el Tal and Neirab's infrastructure, raises for refugees the issue of how to remain visible as victims of forced displacement. In the next section, I take a closer look at the Neirab Rehabilitation Project and the political implications of UNRWA's growing emphasis on "development."

THE NEIRAB REHABILITATION PROJECT

In June of 2004, UNRWA and the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) convened an international conference featuring 67 countries and 34 intergovernmental organizations in Geneva, Switzerland, to address UNRWA's ongoing funding crisis and devise new strategies for improving the lives of Palestinian refugees (UNRWA 2004). Shortly after the 2004 Geneva conference, UNRWA finalized a "Medium Term Plan," which had been the subject of review and discussion at the conference. This Medium Term Plan was presented in 2005 as UNRWA's effort "to restore the living conditions of Palestine refugees to acceptable international standards and set them on the road to self reliance and sustainable human development" (UNRWA 2005:2). After the 2004 Geneva Conference, the Neirab Rehabilitation Project, which was initially limited to improving housing conditions in Neirab's barracks, officially became a comprehensive "development" project focusing on infrastructural as well as socioeconomic conditions in both Ein el Tal and Neirab camps. The Neirab Rehabilitation Project also became a pilot for UNRWA's implementation of its new Infrastructure and Camp Improvement Program, which was institutionalized in 2006 (Al Hussein 2010).

As others have pointed out, no objective definition of the term *humanitarianism* exists, and humanitarianism's boundaries have historically been fluid (Calhoun 2008; Feldman 2007b). In the 1990s, humanitarianism went through significant transformations, and the issue of where to draw the boundaries of humanitarian action has become the subject of intense debate (Barnett and Weiss 2008; Chandler 2001; Kennedy 2004; Rieff 2002; Terry 2002). Since the late 1980s, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) definition of *humanitarianism*—predicated on "the impartial, independent, and neutral provision of relief to those in immediate need because of conflict and natural disasters"—has ceased to be the industry standard (Barnett and Weiss 2008:5). Humanitarianism can now be understood to include a whole range of activities including development, human rights, democracy promotion, gender equality, peace building, and even military intervention (Barnett and Weiss 2008; Calhoun 2008; Chandler 2001).

Within the aid industry, however, humanitarian aid is distinguished from development aid (Fearon 2008). Humanitarian aid, on the one hand, tends to be associated with the attempt to alleviate suffering and save lives within the context of an "emergency" situation that typically emanates from natural or manmade disasters or from the use of organized violence (Calhoun 2008; Fearon 2008). Development aid, on the other hand, is generally associated with improving the normal state of affairs (Fearon 2008).

In the last decade, UN humanitarian agencies such as UNRWA and UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) have placed increased emphasis on "development" as an important aspect of assistance to refugees living in protracted situations (with respect to UNHCR, see Crisp 2003;

Meyer 2006; UNHCR 2003). Thus, UNRWA’s recent emphasis on development can be understood as part of a broader shift within the United Nations (see Misselwitz and Hanafi 2010) and as part of a broader global shift characterized by the expansion of the field of humanitarianism.

As argued by anthropologist Jim Ferguson, *development* relies on two meanings that are often conflated: on the one hand, development means a process of transition “toward a modern, capitalist, industrial economy—‘modernization,’ ‘capitalist development,’ ‘the development of the forces of production’ etc.” (1994:15). On the other hand, it can be understood as any form of intervention aiming to improve quality of life and alleviate poverty. Additionally, critics of development have pointed to development’s roots in Western modernity, which can be understood in terms of a universalist and unilinear vision of progress informed by technological and scientific advancement and predicated on a radical break with the past (Cowan and Shenton 1996; Crush 1995; Escobar 1995; Koselleck 2004).

When interacting with refugees, the project team avoided talking about development in broad terms as the modernization of the camps, because such an understanding was more amenable to the rumor that the goal of the project was a way of solving the refugee issue economically. Indeed, in the early days of the Neirab Rehabilitation Project, one of the negative rumors making the rounds in Ein el Tal was that UNRWA’s emphasis on development was a sign that the agency saw the future well-being of Palestinians as firmly grounded in Syria; that the project was really a “settlement project” (*mashru’ tawtin*) and that development was a way for the international community to make the camps—and by extension the Palestinian refugee issue—disappear. Another rumor circulating in Ein el Tal and Neirab was that the Neirab Rehabilitation Project’s Western donors were supporting the project because they believed that Palestinian refugees would forget about the right of return once they started leading comfortable lives.

The following interaction with a young Palestinian doctor from Ein el Tal who was adamantly opposed to the Neirab Rehabilitation Project illustrates some of the resistance that UNRWA was facing in the spring of 2005. As we stood in the yard of his house, he pointed to the new yellow hilltop houses where some 30 families from the Neirab barracks had already moved and asked me, “Do you know what we call it? ‘The settlement’ (*al-mustawtana*). Stop anybody walking toward the hilltop and ask him, ‘Where are you going?’ He will answer, ‘To the settlement.’” He pointed to the fact that two of the main donors to the project were the United States and Canada, two countries with close ties to the Israeli government. In his opinion, the project was a plan skillfully designed by Israel’s allies to ease people’s hardships so that they would stop thinking about return. “For sure, the children who will grow up in the new houses will forget,” he insisted (field notes, May 23, 2005).

To counter settlement rumors, UNRWA officials downplayed infrastructural improvements, arguing that the main goal of the project was to provide Palestinians in Ein el

Tal and Neirab with “portable” skills that they could take with them anywhere. As we sat in her office at UNRWA’s Damascus headquarters one morning in April of 2006, the British head of the social development component of the Neirab Rehabilitation Project explained UNRWA’s approach to development: “If I constantly give you something, you’re always going to need me to give you something. If I build your skills and your own resources and capacities, that’s something that always stays with you.” Thus, the British UNRWA employee explained UNRWA’s development strategy in individual and moral terms as a process through which Palestinian refugees would acquire valuable skills that would empower them to be self-reliant and to make the best of any environment.

Despite emphasizing that the ultimate goal of the Neirab Rehabilitation Project was to empower refugees by helping them acquire valuable portable skills rather than thoroughly modernizing the landscape of the camps, UNRWA employees had to choose their words carefully when discussing the Neirab Rehabilitation Project with community members, even those who ostensibly supported the project. In the spring of 2005, during a training of about 30 local Palestinian volunteers who were of varying ages and included six women, Rana, an UNRWA project assistant in her mid-twenties who is half-Palestinian, was abruptly interrupted by one of the volunteers as she went over the project’s sustainable-development approach in Arabic. She had been explaining that, among other benefits, the project would provide people in the community with skills that would stay with them “forever” (*lil-abad*) when a young man asked, “Why forever?” Rana, who right away understood that the word *forever* and its implication of permanence had disturbed the volunteer, clarified that the goal of the project was not to create a better life for Palestinians so they would stay (in Syria). They would be able to take the skills and empowerment they would receive through the project with them, she said, presumably alluding to return. “And do you think that once you return, your problems will be over? This project will empower you to deal [with them],” she added (field notes, April 26, 2005).

Later, I had a conversation with UNRWA’s Aleppo “area officer,” a Palestinian refugee from Neirab Camp, a few months before he went into retirement. When I mentioned the rumors that the Neirab Rehabilitation Project was conceived by the international community as an alternative to return, he replied that the project was “about improving and developing housing conditions and is not connected to settlement in any way.” Subscribing to a modernist and universalist understanding of “development,” he further argued that development was actually useful to the realization of return:

When the skills and experience and empowerment and training improve the person, he can move them from one place to another. He can move them to Palestine with him when refugees return. Should he stay here and remain a backwards person? When he finally gets to return to Palestine, he will find the rest of the world 400 years ahead! [interview with author, September 1, 2005]

The notion that development was amenable and even useful to Palestinian political claims had been used by GAPAR's Palestinian director to rally local support for the Neirab Rehabilitation Project. This notion was further echoed by Atif, a 19-year-old Palestinian welder from Neirab who worked as a volunteer on the Neirab Rehabilitation Project and was a member of the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP). As we sat in a café in Aleppo, he dismissed settlement rumors and explained that he supports development

because this gives us the ability to support our issues, our projects, from a nationalist and political perspective. Let us start with the housing situation: if I get married and I have seven children . . . maybe I am preparing something political that serves our cause (*qadiyatna*). If the household becomes bigger, the ability to work on this project (*mawdu'*) is restrained, but if I have a bigger house, I can set aside a room for this project. So [my goal] has a greater ability to be achieved. [interview, November 7, 2005]

CONCLUSION

Palestinian refugees living in camps have a history of resisting long-term "improvement" projects targeting their camps. These projects have usually been funded by foreign donors and have fallen "within the parameters of Western and international aid agencies" (Al Hussein 2010; Dumper 2007; Feldman 2008; Peteet 2005:67; Schiff 1995). Refugee resistance has been because of fears that these projects were being undertaken as an alternative to return or that supporting these projects would signal refugee openness to permanent resettlement as the main solution to their situation. At times, as in the case of UNRWA's regional economic development schemes in the 1950s, these fears have been well founded. However, according to Jalal Al Hussein, the fact that Palestinian refugees have ultimately allowed UNRWA's recent Infrastructure and Camp Improvement Program to proceed in camps such as Neirab, Nahr el Bared (Lebanon), and Jenin (West Bank) is a sign that "the refugees no longer see the sustainable improvement of their living conditions as unalterably incompatible with the right of return" (2010:17). Al Hussein nevertheless recognizes "persisting fears among camp residents that UNRWA's developmental designs conceal dubious political motivations—namely the silent burying of the right of return" (2010:18).

This continuing tension that refugees face between "a genuine desire for sustainable improvement in their living conditions" (Al Hussein 2010:20) and fears that such sustainable improvements might come at the expense of their political claims was clearly noticeable during my latest visit to Ein el Tal in October of 2010. Wisam, who used to live in the Neirab barracks and was part of the first group of 30 families to move to newly built UNRWA houses in Ein el Tal in 2003, took me through the process that had led to the painting of the mural in 2009. As we sat in the living room of his new two-bedroom house with his wife, daughter-in-law, and some neighbors who were visiting, Wisam explained that residents of the newly built UNRWA houses had gotten together and commissioned a well-known

artist in the camp to paint the mural. Once the mural was finished, the families invited Syrian government representatives (GAPAR employees) and UNRWA representative to its unveiling ceremony. According to Wisam, the mural was a message directed at the project's international donors:

[The Neirab Rehabilitation Project] is an improvement project (*mashru' tahsin*). The Europeans (the donors) call it an improvement project, but they think that maybe the Palestinians will forget. They (the donors) gave [the Palestinians] big houses; maybe in ten, twenty years, the Palestinians will forget the right of return. We say "no": These houses don't replace the right of return. The right of return [as stated in UN] Resolution 194 is a personal right (*haqq shakhsi*). No one can take it away. [interview, October 6, 2010]

Wisam, who apparently played an active role in the creation of the mural, has been and continues to be a strong supporter of the Neirab Rehabilitation Project: "I am with development, improvement (*tatwir, tahsin*)," he told me, adding that "this is a human right (*haqq insani*)." What he is against, as are the vast majority of Palestinians in Ein el Tal and Neirab, is development censoring or compromising Palestinian political claims.

Palestinian refugees have been able to reinsert the depoliticized humanitarian relief provided by UNRWA over the years into a political narrative that views this aid as the symbol of continued international responsibility for finding a satisfactory political solution to their predicament. UNRWA's growing emphasis on development articulated around notions such as "self-reliance" and ending refugees' "dependence" on assistance contradicts this narrative. Furthermore, the return claims of Palestinian refugees have paradoxically become embedded in the material suffering that UNRWA-sponsored development seeks to eradicate.

There is an emerging narrative among Palestinian refugees actively involved in the Neirab Rehabilitation Project, either as UNRWA employees, project volunteers, or Syrian government representatives, that is attempting to reconcile "development" in the camps with Palestinian advocacy for the right of return. This narrative conceives of material suffering as an obstacle to refugees pursuing their political goals. It concurrently reinterprets "development" not as the end goal of the Neirab Rehabilitation Project but as a means to personal and collective empowerment that can be harnessed toward the goal of return. Whether this narrative will take hold across Ein el Tal and Neirab or across the larger refugee community living in camps remains to be seen. The mural in Ein el Tal, however, is an indication of Palestinian refugees' continued insistence on inserting their political claims within the dehistoricizing and depoliticizing discourse of international aid.

Nell Gabiam *Departments of Anthropology and Political Science, Iowa State University, Ames, IA 50011; ngabiam@iastate.edu; http://www.anthr.iastate.edu/faculty-and-staff/faculty-staff-directory/gabiam/*

NOTES

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1. When I talk about UNRWA’s relief-centered services, I use the word *relief* in the broad sense of “public assistance.”
2. Formal interviews carried out with Ein el Tal and Neirab residents involved mostly individuals who worked with the Neirab Rehabilitation Project as volunteers.
3. These numbers are based on estimates from the United Nations Economic Survey Mission (see Takkenberg 1998) as well as estimates from historian Benny Morris (2004). With regard to referring to these events as “the first Arab–Israeli war,” Morris points out that violence and “escalation towards full-scale civil war” began in December of 1947, involving armed Palestinian Arab groups and Jewish paramilitary groups such as the Haganah, Irgun, and Stern Gang and prompting an initial wave of “Arab exodus” (estimated to be in the tens of thousands and largely restricted to other parts of Palestine) during the period of December of 1947 to March of 1948 (Morris 2004:65).
4. Historian Benny Morris notes that conquered Arab villages were often razed to the ground; in the case of towns and villages that were depopulated of Arabs but not destroyed, the government installed newly arrived Jewish immigrants in the emptied houses; Arab-owned fields were also destroyed or taken over by Israeli authorities, and new settlements were started on Arab-owned land; finally, Palestinians who attempted to “infiltrate” their former towns or villages were “routinely rounded up and expelled” (Morris 2004:589).
5. The Syrian government’s accommodating approach toward Palestinian refugees can be explained by two main factors: first, Palestinian refugees in Syria have never constituted more than three to four percent of the population and, contrary to Jordan and Lebanon, were not seen as a threat to Syrian employment or natural resources (Al Hussein and Bocco 2010; Kodmani-Darwish 1997; Takkenberg 1998). Second, Palestine was historically a part of the Ottoman-controlled territory of

- “Bilad el Sham” (“Greater Syria,” i.e., the lands of Damascus) in Arabic (Seale 1988). A reunited Bilad el Sham in the wake of colonial amputation was central to the Syrian national imaginary in the decades following Syrian independence in 1946 (Talhami 2001).
6. In practice, Law No. 260 means that Palestinian refugees have the same rights as Syrians, except for the right to own agricultural land, own more than one house, or vote in Syrian national elections (Takkenberg 1998).
 7. Personal communication with UNRWA official (March 15, 2011).
 8. The UNCCP has never been formally abolished.
 9. Paragraph 11 of Resolution 194 issued by the UN General Assembly on December 11, 1948, “resolves that the refugees wishing to return to their homes and live at peace with their neighbours should be permitted to do so at the earliest practicable date, and that compensations should be paid for the property of those choosing not to return and for loss of or damage to property which, under principles of international law or in equity, should be made good by the Governments or authorities responsible” (United Nations 1948).
 10. Although in 1950, the office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) was created to assist all refugees, Palestinian refugees were not absorbed into it. This was primarily because of strong opposition from a number of Arab states at the 1951 Geneva Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees who feared that the prospect of Palestinian refugees’ return to their homes would be undermined if Palestinian refugees were subsumed under UNHCR’s mandate along with other categories of refugees (Takkenberg 1998).
 11. According to UNRWA consultant Nicholas Morris, UNRWA’s protection activities now include promoting a just and durable solution, promoting refugee-respecting policies by host governments or occupying powers, delivering services in a rights-respecting manner, and integrating protection approaches in all aspects of programming (Morris 2008b).
 12. I have changed the names of all the individuals I interviewed to protect their identities.
 13. *Ba’th* means “resurrection” in English.
 14. I have changed the name of the youth center to protect its identity.

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