

The Merging of Times: Palestinian Refugee Identity Within the West Bank

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“Two rockets have just flown over us,” says Mahmoud with a battered voice over the phone. “Things are about to get really ugly, Andrea.” His joyful and energetic personality was no longer there; not today. I had never heard him that way.

It is Friday November 16th, 2012 – the third day of the latest hostilities between Hamas and Israel. Two rockets launched from Gaza have just landed near Gush Etzion, one of the biggest illegal Israeli settlements within the West Bank. An unprecedented event in history, as Hamas rockets have never achieved such a range. Flying over 80km, it presents an alarming reality for Israel: half of the country is now within missile reach.

Less than four months ago, I would have been there with Mahmoud in Deheisha refugee camp, watching the rockets fly over our heads and waiting for the sound of the explosion as they landed. Located in the outskirts of Bethlehem – and just a few minutes away from Gush Etzion – Deheisha became my home over the summer. I volunteered in one of its refugee-run community centers, called Al-Feniq, which advocates for Palestinian refugees’ human, civil and political rights.¹ There, I worked on translations, webpage development, and grant proposals, but most importantly conducted a series of interviews for a future film compilation with members of the camp in their early 20s regarding what their lives are like. It is in Al-Feniq that I met Mahmoud, also a volunteer and a refugee himself who took me under his wing all summer. But today, as I talk to him over the phone, I am sitting outside of my residence dorm in a sunny but cold winter morning on the other side of the world, in Waltham, Massachusetts.

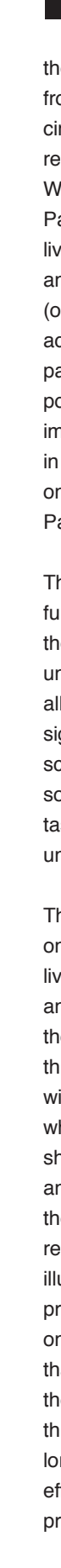
“Clashes have already started throughout all of the West Bank, and Bethlehem is being cracked down as we speak,” says Mahmoud. I cringe....

He points out that even if the West Bank is momentarily contained, it will just be a matter of time until the uprising starts again. But as Mahmoud and the rest of my Palestinian friends take to the streets

to face rubber bullets and tear gas from the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF), my close Israeli friends at the predominantly Jewish American college I attend are being drafted back into the army. Their friends and siblings are already on the field, and sirens are going off in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem for the first time in over two decades. Their families will remain near bomb shelters, and the possibility of having to evacuate their cities to take refuge in the north of Israel is not far-fetched.

Between rockets falling in Tel Aviv and bloody clashes in the streets of Bethlehem, I am caught in between. Not being Jewish, Muslim, Israeli or Palestinian, but rather a 21-year-old young woman from the Dominican Republic, I am the epitome of the outsider. But precisely because of it I am granted the privilege of having access and strong ties to both sides – a privilege that now has me unexpectedly being torn apart by two worlds, trapped in parallel and seemingly opposite realities whose future is actually intrinsically and inseparably bound.²

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict has been one of the most prolonged, unstable and impacting conflicts of modern times. Having great regional and international repercussions, it has been under the spotlight of world politics for numerous decades and continues to be today. While both Israeli and Palestinian narratives of



the conflict have received wide attention from the international media, the lives, circumstances and claims of Palestinian refugees have received considerably less. With 7 million out of the 9.3 million total Palestinian population being refugees living throughout Lebanon, Syria, Jordan and the Occupied Palestinian Territories (oPt),³ they are an indispensable third actor to take into account. Without their participation, all possibilities of a viable political solution to the conflict remain impossible.⁴ Achieving sustainable peace in the region will depend to a large extent on the manner in which the issue of Palestinian refugees is addressed.

Though utterly important in order to fully grasp the profound complexities of the conflict and thus attain a thorough understanding of it, taking into account all existing narratives of the conflict is a significant feat that lies beyond the limited scope of this paper. Nevertheless, doing so is undeniably a crucial and imperative task that has been and must continue to be undertaken elsewhere in great depth.

This essay will explicitly try to shed light on only *one* of the multiple versions of the lived truth as subjectively experienced and interpreted by one of its many actors, those whom I lived with and learned from this summer: Palestinian refugees living within the West Bank. Who are they and what are some of the components that shape their identity? In an attempt to answer these questions, I will present the story of three Palestinian refugees as recounted through their perspectives, each illustrating how the effects of their past, present and prospective future merge as one in forging their identity. I will argue that refugees within the West Bank derive their sense of self from a simultaneously three-dimensional time in which the longing for the return to their past, the efforts to cope with the hardships of the present and their attempts to establish

the groundwork for the betterment of their future circumstances comprise some of the most important elements of their identity.

Tamer, a teenage falafel vender from Balata refugee camp, will show us how refugee identity is specifically constructed around the “right of return” and the fundamental role that memory and oral history play within it. Intisar, mother of six in Arroub refugee camp, will tell us the numerous ways in which their present circumstances of being positioned against both the Israeli military occupation and non-refugee Palestinian society shape refugee subject formation. Lastly, Mahmoud, from Deheisha refugee camp, will show us that for refugees, advocating for a better future is in itself a form of resistance.

Historical Framework of Palestinian Refugees

The following account of historical events, as well as those that will be presented throughout the rest of this paper, will *only* comprise the ones that are *specifically* concerned with and ultimately constitute the Palestinian refugee narrative – as it was recounted to me and as I was exposed to throughout my stay with refugees over the summer.

May 14th, 1948. For Israel its date of birth, the fulfillment of a dream as a Jewish state. For Palestinians the *Nakba* – the Catastrophe – the start of a life in exile. The 1948 Arab-Israeli War had “consequences and impacts [that] go beyond the geographical limit of the area and the historical time in which it occurred.”⁵ Throughout the war and immediately after the establishment of the state of Israel, 750,000 Palestinians were either forced to leave or fled from their homes at the sight of neighboring villages being attacked.⁶ In its aftermath, around 418 Palestinian villages from the total 600

that fell under Israeli control had been destroyed.⁷ While most of these villages no longer exist, some others remained standing and were resettled with Jewish immigrants arriving in the newborn Israeli state in the wake of the Holocaust.

The 1948 Palestinian mass exodus resulted in the creation of 58 refugee camps spread across Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Gaza and the West Bank.⁸ These enclaves of land, rented by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), were originally conceived to offer a temporary shelter of fabric tents for these fleeing refugees. Sixty-four years later, all 58 camps still exist – sheltering more than 1.4 million Palestinian refugees who still await their return to their land.⁹

Despite being in exile for decades, refugees have largely not been assimilated into the populations of their host countries. Up to this day, some of these governments only grant Palestinian refugees a temporary status within their territory with no civil or political rights, that confines them to the boundaries of the camp.¹⁰ This has contributed to the formation of Palestinian refugee identity as a distinct, unified group that exists outside of the societies they live in.

Refugees living in camps do not fall under the authority of their host countries, but rather under the jurisdiction of UNRWA, which supplies them with basic needs. Today, these camps have become jungles of concrete buildings characterized by critical overpopulation and by severe conditions of impoverishment despite UNRWA’s efforts.¹¹ They are subject to conditions of “low employment, poverty, fragile health systems and high infant mortality,” characteristics that are not unique to Palestinian refugees but are rather shared by numerous other refugee situations across the world.¹²

Though being a highly debated and contested subject, one of the many academic arguments suggests that five unique elements of the Palestinian case set them apart from other refugee cases around the world:¹³ (1) *Its significant longevity.* Created in 1948, the Palestinian refugee situation is a multigenerational one that constitutes the “longest running refugee case in the world.” (2) *Its demography.* With a total of 7 million Palestinian refugees – constituting three quarters of the total Palestinian population – they are the “largest refugee and displaced persons population in the world.” (3) *Complexity of legal status.* Palestinian refugees are registered under UNRWA, the only *ad hoc* organization that specifically exists to provide services to a single population, instead of falling under the umbrella of the UN High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) like all other cases. Because only 5 million of all refugees are registered under UNRWA, the proper definition of a Palestinian refugee is greatly disputed. (4) *Nature of displacement.* Unlike the majority of cases where safety or political settlements are the central issues standing between refugees’ ability to return to their original homes, Palestinians refugees are denied return by Israel based “upon religion and ethnicity.” (5) *Lack of sovereignty.* “Repatriation” of refugees becomes an unfitting term, as Palestinians no longer have jurisdiction over the territory they claim – it is now a state that belongs to others.¹⁴

In the particular case of the segment of Palestinian refugees this essay is concerned with – those living inside the West Bank – it must be kept in mind that apart from their condition as refugees they are also subject to, next to the non-refugee populations in both West Bank and Gaza, a life under Israeli military occupation ever since Israel’s victory in the 1967 Six-Day War. It is with the above stated framework in mind that this essay will analyze

Palestinian refugee identity within the West Bank by specifically looking at the influences exerted by conceptions of their past, present and future.

Tamer, Balata Refugee Camp “The Role of the Living Past”

Holding On to the Right of Return

“This is not our home, you know?” says a young boy in front of me.¹⁵

His wide dark eyes look at me with a strong assertiveness uncharacteristic of his age. Bony bodied, with thick hair and ragged clothes, he does not seem to be more than 13 years old. Yet he speaks to me with the self-confidence of an adult.

“We will return,” he affirms, matter-of-factly.

Following the establishment of Israel and the 1948 War, the UN General Assembly approved Resolution 194 which stated that all refugees that wished to “return to their homes and live at peace with their neighbors were permitted to do so at the earliest practicable date”¹⁶ or would otherwise receive compensation for their property if they chose not to return.¹⁷ The claim to the right of return is further based on the recognition that a state cannot “legally expel a population under its control, and that those who are expelled have a right to reverse this illegal act and return to their homeland.”¹⁸

“*Inta min we’en?* Where are you from?” I ask, with the little Arabic that I have learned so far.

“I am from Lydda, near Jaffa,” answers the boy as he prepares a falafel for me. “Pickles?”

“*Lah*, no thank you,” I reply.


In a matter of a few months, 600,000 Jews succeeded in overpowering an Arab population twice its size and taking possession of their land.¹⁹ Despite pressure from the UN, Israel’s commitment to this new demographic status of Jewish majority that resulted from the mass exodus of Palestinians “took the form of firm opposition to the return of the refugees.”²⁰ For Israel, allowing three quarters of a million refugees to return to their homes presented an existential impasse: the end of Israel explicitly conceived as a Jewish state.

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“I am from Lydda, near Jaffa,” answers the boy as he prepares a falafel for me. “Pickles?”

Sixty-four years later, the Right of Return remains denied. Generations of Palestinian refugees and their descendants continue to claim it year after year.²¹ Instead of fading away as new generations branch out, refugees’ “refusal to be marginalized and absorbed into the region reflects a nationalism that has deepened and consolidated despite fragmentation and exile.”²² Their resolute determination to hold on to the Right of Return has become the very cornerstone of Palestinian refugee identity.

“How much do I owe you?” I ask Tamer as he hands me a sizable falafel dripping with *tahini* sauce while he oversees his family’s falafel stand in the main street of Balata refugee camp.



“Two shekels,” he answers. *50 cents of a dollar.* A stark contrast to the 16 shekel falafel I ate in Tel Aviv last week. Handing him the small silver coin, I sit on one of the two chairs available. Tamer proceeds to sit next to me; I smile.

Located outside the Palestinian city of Nablus, Balata was created in 1950 to shelter 6,000 Palestinians from 60 different villages in now proper-Israel. It is one of the 19 refugee camps that are located within the West Bank, significantly outranking all of them in population, but also in human density. UNRWA reports having 24,000 registered refugees living in a space of 0.25 square kilometers, one of the highest population densities in the world.²³ According to local residents, however, the real population of the camp is around 30,000 refugees.²⁴

“But you were born here, right?” I ask.

“Yes, and so were my parents. I’ve never really been outside of the camp. Come, I’ll show you around,” he says enthusiastically, appointing himself my personal tour guide.

Tamer’s conception of the world is confined to the parameters of the camp. What used to be an ensemble of UNRWA tents in the early 1950’s is now a chaotic ocean of run-down concrete buildings tightly built and glommed onto one another – characteristics resembling an overcrowded urban slum. Tamer takes me through the narrow winding alleys of Balata that measure less than half a meter wide, sometimes even as narrow as shoulder width. There is no ventilation, no light, almost no air to breathe. High walls of three-floor buildings built centimeters from each other only let you see thin strips of the sky above. As the population of Balata increased, refugees have had to build upward as they are not allowed to construct outside of the originally allocated 0.25 square kilometers.

I wonder what it must have been like for Tamer to grow up in this constricted and overpopulated environment. While children back home in the Dominican Republic grow up playing *bitilla* – a simplified version of baseball – in parks or parking lots, children inside Balata have no open place to play in. The dirty and suffocating alleys of the camp are the only place they have to *be*.

Decades of living solely within the camp and new generations like Tamer never having lived anywhere other than inside its boundaries, stand in direct contradiction to the conception of a refugee camp as a transitory place of residence. Nevertheless, authors argue that the internalization of the Right of Return within refugee identity and the consequent perception of their situation as being fundamentally temporary serve a crucial function: the promise of one day going back to a life of farming and physical freedom make the camp’s harsh living conditions more possible to endure.²⁵

“It’s Tuesday. Aren’t you supposed to be at school, Tamer?” I ask.

Forty percent of Balata’s total population is under 14 years of age, and 61 percent is under 24. Only four UNRWA schools – two for boys, two for girls – supply the entire camp with limited education up to 8th grade.²⁶ Despite UNRWA’s efforts, educational conditions in the camp are still precarious. Schools are forced to run in two shifts, with classrooms hosting over 50 children at a time.

“My dad needed me to work today,” he says.

The small falafel stand is the only means of subsistence for Tamer’s household of eight. But owning a falafel stand already is an advantaged position within Balata refugee camp, where a quarter of the population is officially unemployed – not including women and children.²⁷ The

rate of household poverty stands at 49.7 percent and those living under extreme poverty is at 30.8 percent, considered a conservative statistic by locals.²⁸ Most families have to resort to living meagerly from vegetable and fruit mini-markets that they open in their own living rooms.

Refugee camps are markedly the poorest communities within the West Bank.²⁹ But despite this reality, refugees remain living in the camps instead of assimilating into the non-refugee Palestinian society which – albeit living under Israeli military occupation – generally enjoys a higher standard of living. This possibility of assimilation does not exist for many of their counterparts in neighboring Arab countries. This is greatly due, on the one hand, to the inability to afford a life outside the camp. On the other hand, and perhaps most importantly, many refugees choose to live within the camp out of ideological principle and conviction: the camp is an essential component of what defines them as refugees.


“Tamer, how come you consider yourself a refugee if you live inside Palestine, in the West Bank?” I ask.

“Palestine is all of historical Palestine. Abbas is trying to kill Palestine with his UN bid for statehood.”³⁰ he replies.

“So you are against the two-state solution?” I probe.

Before coming to the West Bank this summer, it had seemed to me that the idea of achieving two states – an Israeli one living side by side with a Palestinian one – was the universally accepted solution to solve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. My encounter with refugees proved otherwise.

“Of course! Having two states would mean giving up on our homes and all the land that the Jews took away from us.” he says.



Refugees are by principle opposed to the idea of an independent Palestinian state consisting of the West Bank and Gaza as delimited by the 1967 borders, if the price to pay for it entails renouncing to their Right of Return. For them, Palestine should be a single unified territory, what it once used to be during the British mandate before the UN partition plan of 1947 and the founding of the state of Israel.³¹ They see the initial displacement of the *Nakba* as a mass humanitarian injustice that resulted in the establishment of a foreign state upon their land. But even if Israel was originally ‘artificially’ created, the reality in place today determines that its existence as a sovereign state cannot be contested.³² The only possible resolution for an Israel conceived as a Jewish state that is existentially unwilling to absorb the Palestinians in exile seems to be the creation of two states. But for the 7 million refugees living in the oPt and neighboring Arab countries that adamantly hold on to their right of return, this is also a stark impossibility. Taking into account that refugees make up 70 percent of the entire Palestinian population,³³ can a two-state solution even be viably implemented?

The Claiming Force of Memory

“Tamer, so it was your grandparents who first came to Balata?” I ask, intrigued.

“Yes, I’m a third generation refugee,” he says. “The only one alive who has seen our home in Lydda is my grandmother, who just turned 80. She still has the keys to our house.”

Having the key to her childhood house in Lydda is not an unusual story. It is common among Palestinian refugees who had to abandon their homes at the outbreak of the 1948 war: a symbol that they will one day return. But Lydda as Tamer’s grandmother remembers it no longer exists. It was one of the Palestinian villages that was taken

over during the *Nakba*, and is now an Israeli city renamed “Lod” located to the southeast of Tel Aviv.³⁴

“My grandmother always tells us the stories of how she grew up playing at the beach. I wonder if the sea is really like she says it is.”

The fact that Tamer considers Lydda to be his home – despite never having lived there or even seen it – is the product of the strong connections he has developed towards that land grounded on the stories told by his grandmother; stories with the power to create binding emotional ties that allow Tamer to nevertheless draw fish swimming in the sea. The sum of these narratives constitutes Palestinian refugees’ symbolically constructed shared identity. Collective memory as considered by academics “needs not reflect truth; instead, it portrays a truth that is functional for a group’s ongoing existence.”³⁵ These authors argue that “the social reality of the present explains the past,” and that collective memory is therefore self-fulfilling, biased, selective and appropriately distorted.³⁶ In this sense, scholars state that memories reminiscent of a better past life actually serve as a coping mechanism for Palestinian refugees to bear the privations of life in exile within the austere conditions of the camp.³⁷

Through their recurrent telling and the added impact of their collectivization, these memories have become “fossilized” over time to become a central component of refugee consciousness that functions through continued affirmation.³⁸ Tamer’s identity as a refugee is built on a firmly established culture of oral shared history that is passed down from generation to generation.³⁹ It stems from the constant recreation of a wholesome life that once belonged to them, and a determination to never give up the right to return to it.

But the transmission of identity through memory and oral history is not only proper to Palestinian refugees. It fits into a broader scheme perpetuated by populations subject to exile or forced migration all throughout history, where retrospection is the central axis around which identity is forged, seeking to “anchor the present in the past.”⁴⁰


“My grandmother always tells us the stories of how she grew up playing at the beach. I wonder if the sea is really like she says it is.”

This common feature of life in exile is one that I happen to be familiar with: I, myself, was also born into one of these families. My grandparents, initially supporters of the Cuban Revolution like most Cubans at the time, later had to flee their country with my father and uncles into political exile after Fidel Castro installed a regime of terror. None of them has been able to go back to Cuba since. They were forced to leave their entire lives behind, never again to see their friends and family.

Just like Tamer’s grandmother.

“But after living in Balata for more than six decades, wouldn’t you and your family consider that this is now your home?” I ask, confused, remembering my own family’s past as they ended up taking refuge in the Dominican Republic – the country that we now consider our home.

“No. We might have lived here all our lives, but this will never be our true home... We cannot be wronged forever. The injustice committed against us will eventually



be redressed; we will return,” he says emphatically.

For my grandmother, even after more than four decades living in exile and raising her kids and grandchildren in the Dominican Republic, home will always be Cuba. The nostalgic pain in my grandmother’s eyes reminiscing about a life that could have been but never was, is the same that I now see in the eyes of the older generation of refugees that I met this summer. The dreams of being able to return one day are the timeless curse that will always haunt the minds and hearts of those who were forced to leave.⁴¹

Though Tamer and I both share a family story of exile, there is a crucial difference between us: my generation, unlike his, did not grow up holding on to Cuban identity and the dream of one day going back. We were able to assimilate into Dominican society, and today call it our country. For Tamer, however, this has not been possible. Refugees are discriminated against within non-refugee Palestinian society in the West Bank, a subject that I will be discussing later, and their shared identity of inherited memories and an oral history unites them as an indivisible family distinct from and in opposition to other non-refugee Palestinians who did not endure the specific consequences of the exodus.

“*Stan’na*, wait for me here,” Tamer says at one point, while disappearing through the narrow alleys.

In front of me, graffiti on the wall reads “No peace without return to our homes.” But the long-lost homes of these refugees no longer exist. Their villages effaced from the map, Hebrew-named cities and synagogues stand now in their place. Hundreds of Jewish families have lived in them for over half a century, birthing three generations that now also call it ‘home.’

“We will never give up our right of return,” say the walls. *But a return to where?* I ask myself.

Intisar, Arroub Refugee Camp “The Present as a Chisel”

Subject Formation vis-à-vis Israeli Occupation

“*Inti bid’di shai?* Would you like some tea?” asks Intisar.⁴² Not waiting for an answer, she pours mint tea into two small glass cups.

In her late 50s, Intisar is wearing a beautiful long black *thob* adorned with handmade, vivid-red traditional Palestinian embroidery designs, and a perfectly matching *hijab*. I wonder how she manages to resist the overwhelming summer heat while still looking impeccably elegant.

I look at Intisar and notice her deep wrinkles as they map themselves out over her face. I catch her eyes in a brief glimpse, their darkness and lost look revealing without words that she has not had an easy life. We are sitting in a very small room in Intisar’s house, maybe big enough for three. The walls are filled with banners and posters of three political prisoners; it reminds me of a mausoleum. But these are not just any prisoners – they are Intisar’s children. She points at a set of abstract paintings hanging from the front wall.

“It is the artwork that they have sent me from prison,” she says melancholically, a weak half-smile trying to appear on her face. “Beautiful, aren’t they?”

Mother of six, Intisar lives in a refugee camp called Arroub, right on the highway that connects Jerusalem with Hebron.


Ever since 1967, refugees within the West Bank, like non-refugee Palestinians, are subject to a life under Israeli military occupation characterized by movement restrictions, checkpoints, confiscation of land, and military raids.

“They arrested the three of them, all within the same day. Fatima was recently released, but my two eldest sons, Yusuf and Malik, are still in jail,” she explains.

They were arrested under administrative detention, the common Israeli military practice of preemptively detaining Palestinians – particularly young males – without any charges and without a trial for an indefinite period of time. Yusuf and Malik are among the 4,600 Palestinian political prisoners currently incarcerated in Israeli jails; Intisar, merely one of thousands of grieving mothers.⁴³

Refugee camps across the West Bank are specifically targeted by regular IDF military raids; during my stay in one over the summer, they averaged from two to four times a week. Nightly arrests and incursions of soldiers into the camps are a routine part of refugee life. Interestingly, it is precisely in this interaction with, as well as in opposition to, Israeli authority that refugee identity is to a large extent formed. All development and maintenance of identity “requires the existence of another, different and competing alter ego.”⁴⁴ The concept of binarism – the idea of two extreme opposites – inherently plays a central role in every process of subject formation. That is, identity construction revolves around the image of the “Other,” in contrast to which the subject is able to define itself according to what it is not.

In the case of camp-dwellers within the West Bank, the encounter with Israel is an integral part of who they consider themselves to be. If Israeli soldiers who break into the camp are perceived as



perpetrators of injustice, oppression and humiliation, then Palestinian refugees in turn conceive themselves as morally superior, heroic and selfless in their willingness to sacrifice their lives by confronting the soldiers during the night raids in the name of justice, seeing it as an honorable act of protecting their community.

“Both of my sons are part of the hunger strike,” says Intisar, this time suggesting a sense of pride in what she is saying.

What Intisar is referring to is a movement that has recently taken place across Israeli prisons, where Palestinian political prisoners are undertaking a mass hunger strike demanding better treatment and living conditions within the jails.⁴⁵ In the formation of refugee identity, the process of self-definition through binaries creates an inversion of values. The endurance of suffering and abuse now becomes an act of heroism, a source of pride through which to acquire a “sense of moral righteousness from self-sacrifice,”⁴⁶ – not only for the individual, but also for his/her entire family. It is an elevation of social status within the camp.

This logic, however, is not only relevant to political prisoners. It is applied to the endurance of any kind of abuse perpetrated by the “Other,” in this case the occupying Israeli, and in particular to the act of contesting it. Those who seem to have internalized this the most have been the *shebab*, the male youth of the camp.⁴⁷

“Neighbors on the highway call us to let us know the soldiers are on their way, and the entire camp then expects them prepared,” explains Intisar while sipping from her cup of tea.

“How so?” I ask, intrigued.

“Every time the soldiers come in, the *shebab*, the youth, fill up the alleys of the camp in order to throw stones at them and often end up facing tear gas in response,” she explains.

The *shebab* in Palestinian refugee camps have taken upon their shoulders the responsibility to defend their camp. By throwing stones at the soldiers and at times even making homemade Molotov cocktails to retaliate against soldiers’ bullets, they take on the task to slow down the soldiers as much as they can in order to give those they came to arrest enough time to either hide or escape.⁴⁸

“I prohibited my children from being in these clashes, but I knew they still did it behind my back,” says Intisar.

Unlike what many interpretations might suggest, throwing rocks and fabricating homemade Molotov cocktails within the camp are not acts of gratuitous violence. From my interactions with young refugees over the summer, I gathered that for them these acts were not only a form of contestation and self-defense, but also a source from which to derive dignity in the midst of repression. Moreover, failure to act is perceived within camp culture as a “betrayal of one’s ideals, loved ones, and country” – an automatic stripping away of one’s manhood.⁴⁹

But most importantly, through these acts refugees are able to actively reassert a crucial aspect of their identity. The enduring of violence as a group and especially the act of contesting it unites the camp with indivisible bonds, becoming a fortified family where everyone defends and protects one another.⁵⁰ Though contestation to military raids is an assertion of collective heroism and shared experience, it also encapsulates a competitive individual element. The more “bravely” young boys contest

Israeli authority, the higher status and respectability they achieve within the *shebab*.⁵¹ As one scholar describes it, beyond “the beatings, arrests, and injuries with a bullet (...) emerge[s] a cool, hip experience among the group. (...) Engaging in these activities and narrating the engagements [is] a source of prestige. The Israeli army [becomes] the game in town. (...) Tackling them is the way to define oneself within the group.”⁵²


Intisar grabs the kettle and pours more tea. “The younger kids who can’t go out to the streets in the confrontations set out early the next morning to find as many rubber bullets as they can, and to bet with one another what kind of machine guns the soldiers were using according to the sound of the gunshots,” she says, almost with a laugh.

How different my childhood was....

But the youth of the camp are not the only ones shaped by the recurrent encounters with Israeli authority. The role of women has also been considerably impacted.

“We mothers have to live perpetually on the edge of our nerves, not knowing if our boys will be the ones arrested next. Every time I heard the soldiers were coming, I would wake up my children and have them be properly dressed and with shoes in case the soldiers came for them, because they won’t let them take anything with them. And a year and a half ago, they finally came for my boys.”

Intisar’s husband died several years ago, and Yusuf and Malik became the breadwinners of the family. Since their incarceration, however, Intisar has had to open up a small grocery store in her living room, and sews traditional Palestinian clothing to sell to tourists in Hebron in order to keep her household afloat.



Military raids within the camps have significantly altered the traditional family structure of its inhabitants, and, women's construction of identity inside it as well. With husbands and sons in jail, many Palestinian women in refugee camps have had to step up into becoming the economic heads of their families, an unknown or sometimes uncomfortable position, coming from the normally accustomed domestic role they used to fulfill.⁵³

Moreover, to a large extent women have had to also assume the role of communal caregivers and protectors by taking care of the injured.

"If somebody in the camp is wounded, we cannot take him to the nearest hospital. That would entail revealing his identity to the authorities. They would immediately arrest him for being subversive," she explains.

Women, as the designated go-to nurses in the camp, have had to learn basic medical techniques like suturing, bandaging, and preventing wounds from getting infected.

"But why would it be unsafe, if they're sent to Palestinian hospitals?" I ask, her statement seeming counterintuitive.

"You can never know who might turn them in..." she replies, her eyes locking with mine.

Non-Refugees as the other "Other"

Intisar is hinting at the social and political division that exists between Palestinian refugee and non-refugee populations within the West Bank. Some academics argue that the origins of this division lie in refugees' landlessness. That is, the uprooting refugees underwent during the *Nakba* deprived them of "their social status, both in their own eyes and in those

of neighboring populations, including non-refugee Palestinians."⁵⁴ Though my natural assumption had been that all Palestinians living in the West Bank shared the same "Palestinianness," the inferior status attributed to refugees sets them apart from the larger society as a distinct marginalized group. This social status is not only assigned to individuals, but to entire families, who cannot be "divorced from their refugee heritage."⁵⁵ The fact that they also happen to be the poorest segment of the population further reinforces this notion by adding a socio-economic dimension to this hierarchy.

"They are not like us," reaffirms Intisar.

Systematic discrimination based on alleged inferiority has led refugees to contest it by also defining themselves as a group apart.⁵⁶ In their eyes, they constitute a much stronger and more dignified group whose history of struggle entitles them to embody the real meaning of "Palestinianhood," unlike non-refugees who have not experienced the adversities refugees have. Refugee identity is once again, as it happens vis-a-vis Israeli authority, constituted not only in contrast to non-refugee Palestinian society, but also through an inversion of the table of values. Enduring suffering in their condition of poverty, but most importantly through the experience of mass exodus not lived by non-refugees, becomes for them the repository of collective dignity and the source of a superior national consciousness.


"Abbas and his people are puppets of the Israeli government, always doing as they are told and betraying their country. Who are they to give off our land?" asks Intisar.

Refugees are the first ones to contest the legitimacy of the Palestinian Authority (PA) and mobilize against their pursuit of a two

state solution, whether it is done through negotiations with Israel or through a UN bid for statehood: refugees understand that the PA destroys their right of return by confining "refugee rights to what Israel [is] willing to concede."⁵⁷ Because refugees are the ones who have the most at stake in any settlement, they are known to be the most politically active segment of the population within the West Bank.⁵⁸ This has led the PA to also carry out police raids throughout refugee camps in an attempt to mute any inner dissidence or disruption that might jeopardize the fragile negotiations it manages to have with Israel. These factors have at times produced an element of mutual resentment between both refugee and non-refugee populations.

But despite being excluded by non-refugee society and confronted by the PA, refugees' widespread and organized political involvement has led them, in times of crisis, to spearhead the Palestinian resistance movement as a whole. To a large extent, both the First and Second Intifadas were initially fueled by and made possible due to the uprising and revolts that emerged from refugee camps. Because of their respected leadership in these times of crisis, refugees have been able to exert great political pressure on the PA.⁵⁹ As outspoken and crucial political players, they have gained the entitlement to "representation in national institutions, settlement negotiations and in future Palestinian polity,"⁶⁰ thus becoming subject to an intricate mixture of simultaneous marginalization and indispensability.

I breathe in deeply and take the last sip of my sugared mint tea, contemplating the bizarre atmosphere of the small mausoleum-like room. I realize while conversing with Intisar the extent to which the circumstances of refugees' present reality – be it with regard to the IDF, the



PA or life in the camp – have succeeded in markedly chiseling their identity in many told and untold ways.

Mahmoud, Deheisha Refugee Camp

“Agency on the Road to a Better Future”

Counterbalancing Uncertainty

“Life under occupation, especially inside the camp, is really hard, Andrea,” says Mahmoud, looking me straight in the eyes. “And in the face of continuous repression, one can react in three ways: you can either become psychologically traumatized for life, you can join an armed struggle or an extremist group, or you can choose to devote your life to improving those of your people.”⁶¹

He pauses and smiles. I let his words sink in.

“We’ve chosen the third option,” he says, referring to both his personal life and to Al-Feniq, the community advocacy center where I volunteered this summer. Short and fit, with a neatly groomed beard and black rectangular glasses that give him an intellectual aura, Mahmoud is a 24-year-old Palestinian refugee living in Deheisha camp. We are sitting on a bench overlooking Al-Feniq’s playground, the only recreational space available for its 13,000 inhabitants who live in a restrained allocated area of 0.3 square kilometers.⁶²

“It is the reason why Al-Feniq was created,” he continues. “My parents’ generation wanted to keep us away from the streets – away from the rubber bullets and tear gas. They wanted to spare their children from living the same life they did, of being either jailed or killed.”

“Has it worked?” I ask.

“Look around. What do you see?”

A group of a dozen 10-year-olds is playing in the swings and slides in front of us. The walls of the playground are covered in colorful murals, all painted by the children in Al-Feniq’s summer camp. Next to the playground is a big conference room, where a mosaic workshop for teenagers is taking place. A small but well-kept garden on its side offers a refreshing green area in contrast to the clogged greyness of the whole camp. Al-Feniq has also created an ongoing project of small-scale greenhouses placed on rooftops across Deheisha that currently grow fruits and vegetables.

Founded in 2000, Al-Feniq is a refugee-run organization that provides the residents of the camp with a wide range of opportunities that they would otherwise not have access to. It has its own theater group and performance stage, the only women’s gymnasium in the area, offers language courses, film and photography workshops, meditation classes, monthly political debates, and an extensive library freely accessible to all residents, to mention only a few of its numerous programs.

“The only time that I have been outside of Palestine was through Al-Feniq,” he says. “And seeing the world from the outside completely changed my life and the way I perceive things now.”

Mahmoud is referring to the cultural exchange programs that Al-Feniq organizes with partner organizations abroad. Next week, their theater group will be going to France to perform a play written by one of its members that raises awareness about Palestinian refugees. They perform regularly within the camp, using popular theater as a vehicle to transmit educational messages, like anti-drug campaigns and children’s rights.

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Al-Feniq is one of the multiple examples of the extensive self-organization that takes place inside the refugee community. The implementation of these grassroots projects within the camps by their own inhabitants is an active reclaiming of agency and authorship over their future – otherwise essentially uncertain. But these projects also serve as a response to the patronizing or savior-like discourse of international NGOs that often try to dictate the parameters of what refugees “need” or how they should live their lives.

“Who knows our reality and our needs better than us?” Mahmoud asks rhetorically.

Addressing their needs by themselves offers refugees a sense of self-assertion that weighs against the image and conception of a refugee living in perpetual



I gathered from numerous conversations and interviews throughout my stay in Deheisha that regardless of the practical and political feasibility of their dream, continuing to label themselves as refugees after 64 years in exile is a way of asserting that no matter the levels of repression or the adversities they are subject to, they will not cease to exist.

helplessness and dispossession. It is a way of counteracting the status of inferiority that is attributed to them by non-refugee Palestinian society, a powerful mechanism of empowerment. But though these efforts build refugee identity in one way, they also contradict it. Refugees have to grapple with the challenge of trying to improve the living conditions of the camp without altering its “exceptionality.” These grassroots organizations are sometimes accused of contributing to the “normalization” of the camps’ circumstances, a feat that would eventually work against their own interests. Their community work undermines the level of urgency that is constitutive of refugee camps, precisely one of the key pieces of political leverage in demanding refugees’ right of return. Why implement durable solutions or invest in large-scale infrastructure when a camp is supposed to

be a temporary place of residence? If the camp becomes a place with good living conditions, what would differentiate it from a normal city?⁶³ Can it be called a camp at all? This would mean the assimilation of refugees into their host societies – the very relinquishment of who they define themselves to be.

The Pursuit of Wholeness

In the views of refugees, “the camp is the national symbol of the Palestinian struggle and is a source of pride.”⁶⁴ Al-Feniq stands as an example of how Palestinian refugees embody the concept of *sumud* – steadfastness – the determination to persevere no matter the severity of the hardships that must be endured. The self-organization that takes place within the camps is a form of micro-resistance that lives the “national” in ways that the political leadership that claims to represent them does not⁶⁵ – a way of constructing an alternative conception of the nation.

“We will never give up,” says Mahmoud with the same certainty that I find written on walls across the camps.

I gathered from numerous conversations and interviews throughout my stay in Deheisha that regardless of the practical and political feasibility of their dream, continuing to label themselves as refugees after 64 years in exile is a way of asserting that no matter the levels of repression or the adversities they are subject to, they will not cease to exist.

“Mahmoud, if you were given the right of return today, would you go back to your grandparents’ village?” I ask.

“Honestly, I don’t know what I would do. Maybe. Maybe not. But I want to be able to have the *option* to choose. That the

world recognizes that we were wronged; that justice cannot forever be postponed.”

Taking into account the drastic rate of population increase of Palestinian refugees, it seems that their unresolved situation – and particularly the region’s ability to handle it – cannot be sustained indefinitely.⁶⁶ While it is true that for Israel the right of return is beyond any possible discussion, Mahmoud’s assertion is also true: the refugee problem will not disappear.

On this highly contested subject, some academics argue that refugees’ demand for redress is a matter of *acknowledging* the right to return – regardless of whether the intention to exercise that right exists or not.⁶⁷ They suggest that the idea of “fair peace” in the eyes of the wronged “can only be based on the healing of past wounds.”⁶⁸

As stated by Michael Dumper, “the status of being a refugee, of being displaced and of being in exile is experienced as a transitional phase, a place in waiting, *of being incomplete*, (...) reaffirmed by every checkpoint and every encounter with officialdom” so that it is only by finding a way of righting what was wronged that they can “achieve wholeness as individuals and as a people. (...) What comes across as intransigence is in fact a very personal need for completeness.”⁶⁶

Sitting on the elevated hill of Al-Feniq’s playground, I contemplate Deheisha spread before my eyes.

“Our revenge will be the smiles of our children,” says Mahmoud.

But I see the children already smiling every day.

Conclusion

It is Wednesday November 21, 2012 – the eighth day of the latest deadly hostilities between Hamas and Israel. A bomb has just exploded on a bus in central Tel Aviv for the first time since 2006. Hamas rockets and hostilities have killed six Israelis, and around-the-clock Israeli airstrikes in Gaza have claimed the lives of 170 Palestinians. The conflict remains as alive as ever.

After working all summer with Palestinian refugees within the West Bank and living in a camp, the lives of Tamer, Intisar and Mahmoud are for me the most indicative of the different ways in which components of their past, present and future merge as one to influence the formation of their collective identity. Their past remains alive through their firm determination to hold on to the right of return and through the molding force of memories as retold throughout generations. Grappling with the circumstances of the present influences their subject formation by the encounter with, and the opposition to, both Israeli authority and non-refugee Palestinian society, creating a distinct identity that separates refugees as a unified subgroup with a due political relevance of their own. In addition, self-organization and active agency to improve the camp is one of the many ways in which refugees reclaim a say over their uncertain future.

This essay has only taken into account one of the many lived versions of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that has impacted world politics for decades, that of a crucial third party: Palestinian refugees. The lived experiences of all other players within the conflict must categorically be further analyzed and understood before any prospects for sustainable peace can arise.

Notes

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3. Michael Dumper. "Introduction". In M. Dumper (Ed.), *Palestinian Refugee Repatriation: Global Perspectives*. New York, NY: Routledge. (2006). p. 6.
4. Michael Dumper. *The Future for Palestinian Refugees: Toward Equity and Peace*. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner. (2007). p. 1.
5. Saleh Abdel Jawad. "The Arab and Palestinian Narratives of the 1948 War". Rotberg, 72.
6. The exact number is disputed. Numbers vary from 520,000 by Israeli officials to 1 million by Arab officials. UNRWA estimates 800,000; cf. Benny Morris. *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem Revisited*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press. (2004). p. 602.
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8. "Palestine Refugees". UNRWA. Web 26 Nov. 2012. <<http://www.unrwa.org/etemplate.php?id=86>>.
9. Ibid.
10. Robert Bowker. *Palestinian Refugees: Mythology, Identity and the Search for Peace*. London, UK: Lynne Rienner. (2003). p. 72-75
11. Ibid, p. 73.
12. Dumper (2007), 5.
13. Ibid, 5.
14. Ibid, 5-8.
15. The identities and recognizable characteristics of the Palestinian refugees in this essay have been altered for the sake of their safety.
16. "Resolutions adopted by the General Assembly in its 3rd Session". Resolution 194 (III), 11 December 1948. United Nations General Assembly. Web. 26 Nov. 2012. <<http://www.un.org/documents/ga/res/3/ares3.htm>>.
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20. Shlaim, 54.
21. "Refugee and International Displaced Persons". BADIL – Resource Center for Palestinian Residency and Refugee Rights. Web. 26 Nov. 2012. <<http://www.badil.org/en/refugee-a-idp-rights>>.
22. Dumper (2007), 1.
23. "Balata Refugee Camp". UNRWA. Web. 26 Nov. 2012. <<http://www.unrwa.org/etemplate.php?id=109>>.
24. Journal Entry – Personal Interview, June 20th, 2012.
25. Rotberg, 3. Also, Dumper, 4
26. "Balata Refugee Camp Profile, West Bank". United Nations, Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, oPt. Web. 26 Nov. 2012. <http://www.ochaopt.org/documents/opt_campprof_unrwa_balata_nov_2008.pdf>

27. Unemployment rate is officially 25% by ILO definition, but locals say that this does not include women and children; cf. Ibid.
28. Ibid.
29. Dumper (2006), 4-5.
30. Mahmoud Abbas, President of the Palestinian National Authority, January 2005 – Present.
31. Journal Entry – Personal Interview, Jun. 28, 2012
32. Benvenisti et all, 151.
33. Dumper (2007), 1.
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36. Ibid.
37. Ibid.
38. Ibid, 150.
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49. Hafez, 34.
50. Ibid, 48.
51. Ibid, 56.
52. Ibid, 59.
53. Journal Entry – Personal interview, July 6th, 2012.
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63. Hanafi, 88.
64. Bowker, 68.
65. Hanafi, 58.
66. Dumper (2007), 77
67. Author’s empashis. Bowker, 98.
68. Benvenisti et all, 132-133
69. Dumper (2007), 5