

The Humanitarian Condition: Palestinian Refugees and the Politics of Living

In 1948 approximately 750,000 Palestinians were displaced from their homes, going both to neighboring countries such as Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon and to the parts of Mandate Palestine that became the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. Today, there are five million refugees registered with the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA), the agency charged with providing assistance to Palestinians across the Middle East. What it is to be a Palestinian refugee is shaped by a political geography of displacement, by dynamics within this dispersed community, and by humanitarian action. The Palestinian refugee community constitutes one of the largest and longest-lasting refugee populations in the world. The causes of both its creation and its longevity are subjects of tremendous political contention—and neither of these questions is my subject here. Rather, I explore the dynamics of long-term humanitarianism, looking particularly at the politics of living within a humanitarian space.

I draw on research in the UNRWA archives in Amman, Jordan, and on ethnographic fieldwork I have been conducting in a refugee camp in Jordan, populated by a group of Palestinians with a particular history of double displacement. This research in the Jerash camp is part of a larger project for which I am working across the area of UNRWA operations—Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, West Bank, and Gaza—to explore the effects of more than sixty years of living in a humanitarian order on Palestinian community and political life. Part of what I seek to understand is what happens as humanitarianism moves from crisis response to a condition of life. Humanitarian *practice* clearly shifts from disaster relief—provision of food, clothing, emergency shelter—to efforts that look more like social service work and development projects. How are people and communities shaped by this transformation and by living, long-term, in a humanitarian condition? It should be noted that while the length of the Palestinian refugee experience is unusual, “protracted refugees” (people living for extended periods of time without being either resettled or returned home) constitute a large, and growing, segment of the global refugee population.¹

The anthropological literature on humanitarianism, to which I have contributed, and much of it in conversation with Giorgio Agamben’s arguments about “bare life,” has highlighted the limits and ethical constraints of humanitarian action.² This research has explored the ways humanitarianism can reduce the people it seeks to help to “mere” victims—objects of compassion, but restricted in their capacity to act as full subjects in their own right.³ It has illuminated the hierarchies that are built into a project made up of helpers and victims, one in which some can choose to make

sacrifices to assist the helpless while other people are themselves sacrificed in other people's wars and conflicts.⁴ The anthropological exploration of the depoliticizing effects of humanitarianism intersects with policy-oriented debates about whether humanitarian agencies should take political positions in their work, or whether they should remain neutral, impartial, and nonpolitical in their missions.⁵ The focus on how humanitarianism constrains and disables has illuminated crucial dynamics of a field that is generally valorized as "doing good," but these constraints are not all that needs to be understood about humanitarian effects. In looking at a long-term humanitarian condition, I examine what happens within such a humanitarian order. I ask: what forms of action are enabled by humanitarian materials and practices? What kinds of relationships are produced by humanitarian categories and procedures? What are the lifeworlds that take shape within the humanitarian space and through the humanitarian condition?

The Politics of Living in the Humanitarian Space

In order to think about the politics of living within humanitarianism, it is necessary to say a bit more about what humanitarianism is. Humanitarian action responds to a variety of circumstances. I focus here on assistance to persons made refugees by political conflict, but this is only one of many situations that can generate this response: others include natural disasters, industrial catastrophe, and varieties of suffering at home. Humanitarianism is also several things at once. It is an arena of legal regulation meant to protect civilians and refugees, including the body of international humanitarian law (the laws of war); refugee conventions such as the 1951 and 1967 conventions on the status of refugees; and institutions such as the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, which are meant to enact these legal protections.⁶ Palestinians have always had a distinct place within this regulatory field and have never been a generic subject of humanitarian attention. That is, even as postwar refugee law has moved toward developing a universal or generic category of "refugee" (an always incomplete process), Palestinians have always been addressed as a specific refugee population—served by UNRWA and not the UNHCR, excluded from the 1951 convention—but the regulatory conditions are similar.⁷ This legal arena describes humanitarian *obligations*.

Humanitarianism is also a discursive field, in which images of suffering and other emotional tugs circulate and motivate donation to charities and claims for exceptions to ordinary procedures.⁸ In this field humanitarian *compassion* predominates. It is also a form of *practice*: the delivery of emergency aid—food, shelter, medicine—in the face of disaster or conflict, the provision of social services over periods of extended displacement, and increasingly the deployment of a diverse range of interventions such as psycho-social services and micro-credit projects.⁹ This practice involves both obligation and compassion, often highlighting the extent to which they are in tension. My focus here is primarily on humanitarian practice, though these aspects are not entirely separable.

Even as some humanitarian actors claim a limited mandate, responding to "life in crisis" rather than a full social order, humanitarian effects are broad.¹⁰ Whether embracing a goal of social change or insisting on a narrow mission, humanitarian

work is biopolitical in practice: concerned with the welfare of populations, developing techniques for tracking and managing caloric intake, health indicators, educational attainment, and social well-being. It is also biopolitical in the sense not just of “fostering life” but disallowing it “to the point of death.”¹¹ Certainly the laws of war that form the heart of international humanitarian law are as much about regulating death as promoting life. Hassan Jabareen suggests that for noncombatants IHL includes no right to life, but rather the right to a “proportional death.”¹² Humanitarian action in the aftermath of conflict also has this characteristic. Humanitarian work, especially that guided by international refugee conventions, or in the Palestinian case by the particular UN definition of a Palestine refugee, involves the repeated division of populations into those who have access to assistance and those who do not. Such divisions are similar to what Vinh-Kim Nguyen identifies as “triage” in the distribution of AIDS therapies.¹³ This calculus of life is part of what Didier Fassin describes as a politics of “life as such”: a politics that crucially involves ascribing values to “life as such and to lives concretely.” This is a politics of what he calls “bio-inequalities.”¹⁴

What I am interested in opening up here is an exploration of the ways that people living in humanitarianism act within—and in response to—this biopolitical field. That is, not just the “politics of life” but the “politics of living.”¹⁵ In distinguishing the politics of living from the politics of life, I signal that I give attention not just to the humanitarian operation as such but to the dynamics of being (surviving, claiming, acting) within it. In the larger project I also investigate the calculative work of humanitarian agencies, the ethical and political dilemmas of being a humanitarian actor, and the procedural requirements of aid delivery.¹⁶ Understanding how the humanitarian apparatus engages bodies and subjects, the politics of life, is certainly crucial for understanding humanitarian effects. So too—and this has been given somewhat less attention in the humanitarianism literature—is comprehending what people do within the humanitarian space: the politics of living. If the politics of life is aimed in part at the fixing of value, attention to the politics of living highlights the contestations over such calculations within recipient communities that are central to the humanitarian experience.

As with many things, the analytic distinction between these two aspects of humanitarian effect does not mean that they are ever disentangled in practice. In the Palestinian case, for instance, many people are both aid recipients and aid providers. The humanitarian apparatus directly influences how people live with and within it. Through its work of naming—naming refugees, nonrefugees, victims, etc.—humanitarianism helps define political actors, though these are often political actors without a clear political status. It delimits a discursive space of claim-making, shaping a field of “humanitarian rights” based in obligation and compassion. Especially in conditions of long-term displacement, humanitarianism also shapes the course of people’s lives and therefore their relationships and communities.

Political Claims and Existential Values

Politics poses a problem for both humanitarian actors and aid recipients. To advance a political cause or sometimes even to offer a political evaluation can mean risking

one's status as a proper humanitarian subject. And yet politics is also part of nearly every humanitarian situation. This general phenomenon has particular inflections in the Palestinian case. Because of the ongoing and often heated regional conflicts in which the Palestinian refugee problem is embedded, the political import of aid to Palestinians is a subject of frequent debate and may be harder to forget than in some other cases (though it should also be noted that this political attention has not rendered aid programs to Palestinians immune from the technocratic, depoliticizing tendencies that often accompany both relief and development).¹⁷ UNRWA has been criticized from all sides: for sustaining a Palestinian refugee identity that some wish would go away, for not offering sufficient protection to Palestinians to ensure their rights and resolution of their situation. Palestinian refugees, those engaged in the politics of living in humanitarianism, are acutely aware of the political import of both their lives and the assistance provided to them. My focus here is on this politics of living, but the fact that refugees act within a wider, highly charged, often extremely complicated political environment should be remembered.

I should also say that in exploring politics in the humanitarian condition, I am interested here in noninstitutionalized, everyday forms of political life: small-scale efforts at making claims and seeking to make a change in the conditions of one's existence.¹⁸ There is no doubt that in the Palestinian context political movements and formal organizations have had important interactions with humanitarianism. Both the PLO and Hamas—at the moment the two main institutional actors on the Palestinian political scene—negotiate with humanitarian agencies, discourses, and law, as well as engage in humanitarian work themselves. Understanding these formal institutions cannot, however, provide an adequate account of either the range of Palestinian politics or of the impact of humanitarianism on Palestinian community.

In looking at politics in the humanitarian field, I focus on two features of political expression: rights claims and existential conditions. Both are part of what I have described as the politics of living. People make rights claims that are based in the conditions of their lives and are about the possibilities for those lives. As an existential matter, Palestinian life itself can operate as a political fact and can define a political community.

There are several registers to the rights claims that have emerged in the humanitarian domain. In contexts where there is limited opportunity to push states for political rights, Palestinian refugees have used the language of “humanitarian rights” to argue for changes. At the same time, the humanitarian apparatus itself, particularly UNRWA, often becomes a site for the articulation of national, political demands. In focusing on rights claims there may be a danger of appearing to conflate such claim-making with politics. I would underscore, therefore, that claiming rights is only one way of making political demands. It has been used centrally by Palestinians in a variety of settings, including in Jordan, and therefore demands attention.

In regard to existential questions, Palestinians have long given political valence to the mundane qualities of everyday life. *Sumud* (steadfastness)—staying put in the face of Israeli occupation—has been an explicit part of resistance to Israeli dominance over the West Bank and Gaza.¹⁹ Even outside the territory of historic Palestine, the political value of simply being (being Palestinian, claiming Palestinianness) has been a vital

part of a sixty-year-old struggle for recognition of individual and national loss.²⁰ There is also a calculus of life in these efforts to gain recognition for Palestinian existence. Inevitably, certain spaces of existence, certain ways of living, are accorded greater value—greater biogitimacy, to use Fassin’s term—in the existential struggle for Palestinian community. The humanitarian apparatus—its material features, its discursive conditions, its categorical imperatives—is one key forum in which, and through which, these contests occur. Before turning to the particular experiences of people living in the Jerash refugee camp, I briefly describe the trajectory of the humanitarian apparatus since 1948.

Conditions of Displacement: Living as a Palestinian Refugee

In the immediate aftermath of the *nakba* (catastrophe, the Palestinian term for 1948) the United Nations commissioned private organizations to deliver UN assistance in the various places where Palestinians took refuge. As time went on and no resolution was forthcoming, the UN established UNRWA to manage humanitarian assistance, and to work on refugee resettlement, across the Middle East. The camps are the geographic center of this assistance regime, but it should be noted that not more than about one half of refugees ever lived in camps (now closer to a third) and that UNRWA assistance is not limited to camp dwellers; as a practical matter, though, living in a camp makes it easier to get access to services. Hence those living in camps tend to be the most fully “inside” the humanitarian order.²¹ When UNRWA was first established it was a total institution, providing rations, clothing, shelter, education, healthcare, and some job training to registered Palestinians. Over the years the range of services the agency provides have been significantly reduced. I should note that UNRWA has never been the only organization providing assistance to Palestinians—though some places have denser humanitarian fields than others—but I focus on the Agency, partly for simplicity’s sake and partly because it is the most significant actor in this field.

Access to UNRWA services has been regulated by administrative procedures that defined which people were eligible for registration on the refugee rolls, procedures which are complicated and which have changed over the years. The heart of the system is the definition of a Palestine refugee. UNRWA’s basic definition is a person “whose normal residence was Palestine for a minimum of two years preceding the outbreak of the conflict in 1948 and who, as a result of this conflict, has lost both his home and means of livelihood.”²² This definition is an operational rather than a legal one, developed precisely to identify those persons eligible for UNRWA services. In practice this definition has been further refined to make a distinction between a “Palestine refugee” in general and a “Palestine refugee eligible for assistance.” There have been many twists and turns in this definition, but here I want to highlight that there were multiple categories of refugees (and also of nonrefugees) from the earliest years after the *nakba*. Each of these lines of distinction was debated and contested by both UNRWA personnel and refugees. The archival record is filled with often anguished accounts of people’s passage from one category to another (as there was often a disconnect between UNRWA’s methods of determining eligibility for aid and people’s felt need).

Changes in the category of Palestine refugee and in its material significance have continued over the years. One of the biggest material changes was the end of comprehensive rations services in 1982. After this point only those deemed “special hardship cases” received such support, and only in limited amounts. In Jordan this aid amounts to a cash subsidy of roughly \$10 per person every three months and a quarterly distribution of foodstuffs worth about the same. From this time onward UNRWA registration gave refugees access to schooling, healthcare, and recognition, but for the vast majority no longer other significant material support. There have also been other programmatic changes over the years. Initial attempts to develop large-scale “works” projects that might have provided settlement solutions for refugees were fairly quickly abandoned in the face of both political opposition and limited resources. In recent years smaller-scale development projects, relying heavily on volunteer labor by refugees themselves, have become a regular part of UNRWA practice. In tune with the broader humanitarian world, UNRWA has pursued things like human rights education and micro-finance projects. Key to understand is that humanitarianism over the long term is not the same humanitarianism all the time.

Double Displacement: Being Ex-Gazan in Jordan

To see how humanitarian effects play out, I turn now to look at the experiences of a particular population of Palestinian refugees living within this changing humanitarian order. I focus on a group of people who have been twice displaced: refugees to Gaza in 1948 and then displaced to Jordan in 1967. There are ex-Gazans (as they are sometimes called) living throughout Jordan, with significant concentrations in East Amman and some near Aqaba. There are around 132,000 registered with UNRWA. One of the ten refugee camps in Jordan—the Jerash camp, also known as Gaza camp—is populated entirely by Gazans. UNRWA puts the camp’s population at around 24,000.²³ I have been conducting research in this camp since July 2008, doing oral history interviews with camp residents, visiting camp institutions and service centers, and spending time in people’s homes.

Gaza camp sits about fifteen minutes outside the city of Jerash, the latter famous for its Roman ruins. The camp, which occupies 750 square meters, is a crowded collection of concrete buildings. Many of the homes still have corrugated metal or asbestos roofs. Open sewers run through the streets, most of which are more accurately described as narrow paths. Most of the services in the camp are provided by UNRWA. There are two school buildings: one for the boys and one for the girls, each of which runs on two shifts. There is a small medical clinic where camp residents receive basic medical care, the camp administrator’s office, and a complex that houses the Women’s Committee office, an associated daycare, and an EU-funded Community Development Office. The nearby town borders right on the camp, in some parts nearly indistinguishable from it. Like many other places of long-term displacement, Jerash is a camp in the humanitarian *condition*, not in the midst of humanitarian crisis.

Most Palestinians living in Jordan have Jordanian citizenship, whether they came to the “East Bank” in 1948 or in 1967, when the Israelis occupied the West Bank.²⁴ Because the Gazans came from Egyptian-controlled territory, rather than the Jordanian-annexed West Bank, they do not have citizenship. Since their arrival in

Jordan they have had a tenuous legal status.²⁵ Most have permanent residency and two-year passports, but except for a small number, citizenship is unavailable.²⁶ As noncitizens Gazans do not have the crucially important national identity number. The national number (*raqam watani*) gives access to health insurance, local tuition at public universities, government jobs, and property rights. With no national number, ex-Gazans are denied all these things.

In addition to this exclusion from Jordanian citizenship, camp residents have multiple relationships to UNRWA's categorizations. The majority are refugees (*laji'iin*) who were registered with UNRWA in Gaza. A portion are native Gazans, most of whom are recognized only as displaced (*nazihiiin*). These two administrative categories—refugee and displaced—distinguish people according to the events of 1948 and 1967. The UNRWA definition of a Palestinian refugee refers to the former. Those people who were displaced first in 1967 are not counted as refugees but have been granted some assistance by UNRWA since then (there are many people in Jordan from the West Bank who fall into this category).²⁷ The UN General Assembly has repeatedly affirmed that the Agency should “provide humanitarian assistance, as far as practicable, on an emergency basis, and as a temporary measure, to persons in the area who are currently displaced and in serious need of continued assistance as a result of the June 1967 and subsequent hostilities.”²⁸ Services to *nazihiiin* are, it could be said, the “humanitarian exception” within the humanitarian apparatus.

In contrast to places like the West Bank and Lebanon—which are overflowing with NGOs and humanitarian organizations—for the most part Jordan has a fairly sparse humanitarian landscape (though it has the largest number of Palestinian refugees), and the Gaza camp is no exception. As is the case everywhere, UNRWA is the major actor. Other, smaller-scale humanitarian organizations in the camp include a medical clinic (MAP); an EU-funded community development office run by UNRWA but distinct from their usual programming; local *zakat* (Islamic charity) committees; and the Islamic Center (a Muslim Brotherhood–supported center with branches throughout Jordan). So there are organizations working in the camp, but it is not what could be called institutionally dense. To look at what people do with and in humanitarianism in the space of this particular camp and from this distinctive subject position, I consider both how humanitarian discourse and categories structure claim-making and how the humanitarian condition unfolds over time, affecting people throughout their lives and across generations.

Claiming “Humanitarian Rights”

Because of ex-Gazans' legal, social, and economic vulnerability, their capacity to make claims of the government is severely limited, distinctly more so than Jordanian citizens, whose opportunities for political expression are also limited. And yet they do make claims, of the government and of UNRWA. Both the language and structure of humanitarianism are crucial in how they do so. The language of humanitarianism can provide a somewhat safer framework for making demands, even if those demands are for civil rights. Despite their clear exclusion from citizenship in Jordan, ex-Gazans sometimes enact the role of citizens to claim some of these rights, working along the lines of what Jacques Rancière describes as claiming “rights that they had not.”²⁹ They

also call attention to ways in which they are in practice denied rights that they see as granted to them, rights to assistance, based in international obligation to this community.

In Rancière's formulation—and he takes the position of women in relation to the French Revolution as his example—political action entails acting “as subjects that did not have the rights they had and had the rights that they had not.”³⁰ In the French context this meant that women called attention to the ways that they were denied rights granted in the Declaration of Rights and by taking public action—and by sometimes being sentenced to death for such action—they enacted [had] rights that were not accorded to them. Rancière argues that it is in the making of rights claims, not just the having or not-having of certain rights, that politics lies. It is through claim-making, he suggests, that people can produce “dissensus,” a dispute, a calling into question of the given order of things. And it is this that he sees as acting politically. And refugees in Gaza camp do, I think, stage scenes of dissensus. How they do so, and what claims they make, is shaped in important ways by the humanitarian condition, their long-term displacement and many years of living with a changing assistance regime. Unlike the case that Rancière uses as his example—a dramatic moment of political upheaval that created opportunity for further claim-making—ex-Gazans' identification of both rights they had and rights they had not has unfolded over considerable time and is articulated in response to an enduring condition.

In July 2008 I attended a meeting at the camp's Community Development Office, organized by UNRWA staff, between the Camp Committee, made up of prominent residents (*mukhtars* [village leaders], school principals, etc.), and a politician from the area. As noncitizens, camp residents do not have the right to vote in Jordanian elections, but the meeting proceeded very much as a constituent services meeting. Participants identified what they saw as the most crucial issues facing ex-Gazans in Jordan, and the politician assured them of his concern and desire to be of assistance. The concerns expressed at the meeting echoed those I have heard from other camp residents in the course of my research. A meeting such as this is one site, one moment, in a broader landscape of claim-making. It serves as an example of the ways in which ex-Gazans make claims, not as definitive in its own right. The language of claim-making in this context highlights the ways that the humanitarian pair of obligation and compassion—and the tension that exists between them—shapes political life within the humanitarian space.

The politician prefaced his comments by noting that King Abdullah saw the right of return as the most important issue for these refugees, but that he was also concerned about the improvement of living conditions. So the political question of rights and compassionate concern for the population were linked from the outset. Much of what the Jordanian government provides for people in the camp is indeed through the mechanism of royal charity, often in the form of dispensations from the royal court, known as *makruma*, to pay for medical care or occasionally higher education. The reference to the right of return indicates the relevance of the concept of *tawteen* (resettlement) to the ex-Gazan question, suggesting that granting these people expanded rights in Jordan would amount to *tawteen* and would therefore undermine Palestinian political claims. *Tawteen* raises both problems of time—a recognition that with the

passage of more than sixty years and the impending loss of the generation that knew Palestine, the possibilities of return grow ever more remote—and problems of space—the political question of what relationship refugees should have to their host countries, which often simultaneously offer and withhold the possibility of ever being home to Palestinians. *Tawteen* is a prominent part of the discourse around Palestinian status in Lebanon, where few have citizenship, but it generally plays a smaller role in Jordan, where nearly all Palestinians are citizens and have, in fact, settled. That ex-Gazans lack this citizenship makes their political exclusion part of a different (but obviously related) problem with the political future of Palestine.

Camp residents did not challenge the stated importance of the right of return, nor did they couch their demands as a request for political rights. As one *mukhtar* put it, “Gazans need a solution from the human perspective.” They should be granted “civil rights as refugees.” Over and over again people said that they needed full civil rights and a “national number.” The absence of the national number is a problem that could only become a problem over time. That is, it is a problem of the condition of forty years of refugeedom in Jordan, rather than of the immediate crisis of displacement. It highlights the ways that ex-Gazans are (permanently?) out of place in Jordan. As Abu Hassan, a school principal, said, “Living without a national number is living on the margins.” He then went on to describe some of the consequences of this marginality.³¹ Because Gazans have generally not been allowed to own property, they often enter into agreements with Jordanians to purchase land on their behalf. As Abu Hassan told the politician, just the day before the meeting a man who held title to the property of approximately a hundred people in the camp had died. What will happen, Abu Hassan asked? The man’s heirs might, out of compassion, recognize the claims of these ex-Gazans, but they were under no legal obligation to do so.³²

The claim for a national number was a request for the rights that Jordanians have (whether Palestinian Jordanians or East Bank Jordanians). In this meeting ex-Gazans also situated themselves within a landscape of foreignness, and among other Arab populations, in Jordan. Why, they asked, should Iraqis get rights that they don’t have? Why were they, who have lived in the country for more than forty years, treated like Egyptian laborers that “came yesterday”?³³ This introduction of a comparison not with Jordanians but other more recent “foreigners”—and particularly Iraqi foreigners who are subjects of humanitarian concern—helped locate Gazan claims in the realm of the humanitarian, underscoring their insistence that they were not asking for citizenship, even as they made demands for what are in fact civic rights. This comparison also suggested that within the humanitarian realm ex-Gazans should have a privileged position, as Palestinians and because of their long residence in the country. It further suggests that even as their problem was in part one of time, this fact of their long displacement gives them a particular claim on the state.

Despite their legal vulnerability and social marginality, camp residents who participated in this meeting stated their positions strongly and often in sharp tones: they acted liked aggrieved citizens. At the same time, throughout the meeting everyone insisted that they were not making *political* claims but rather *civil rights* or *humanitarian rights* claims. Disavowal of politics is a useful political strategy in a context not only of vulnerability but also of heavy surveillance.³⁴ Even as politics was disavowed,

the claims made in this meeting seem a clear instance of ex-Gazans acting like citizens to claim civic-citizenship rights, which they are denied. To a great extent it is the humanitarian frame that makes this possible. Considerable research has shown the ways that humanitarianism can limit people's actions. But humanitarianism can also provide both a discursive framework and an institutional structure (recall that this meeting took place in the CDO, basically under UNRWA auspices) within which and from which people can make claims that extend beyond the humanitarian realm.

Humanitarianism as a Right

If the camp meeting highlights people using humanitarian language to speak beyond it, people's relationships to UNRWA often foreground what they see as a denial of rights within the humanitarian arena. That is, people argue that the humanitarian obligations of the international community to Palestinians are not being adequately met. Here too the longevity of their condition influences the kind of obligations they highlight. In evaluating UNRWA, people express a range of opinions, reflecting the contention around this institution. Some people say that the very existence of UNRWA is part of an effort to undermine a political solution to the Palestinian problem. As one person said to me, "UNRWA has a strategy that it follows. In the beginning—this is my opinion—UNRWA . . . used to give to the people too generously . . . to encourage people to leave their homeland. And unfortunately people ran after these things—some of them."

For some people, a small minority to be sure, this concern about the political effects of humanitarian relief led to refusal to participate in it. Jamal, whose family are Bedouin from the Beersheba region who went to Gaza in 1948 and Jordan in 1967, told me that his grandfather had refused UNRWA registration in Gaza because "he did not want to be a refugee." As a consequence of this decision Jamal's entire family remains unregistered. They are considered *nazihin* (displaced) in Jordan, rather than *laj'in* (refugees). I heard similar stories of registration refusal, including refusals to be transferred from the Gaza relief rolls to the Jordan rolls, from others in the camp. Such stories confirm that, although I am focusing on the humanitarian condition rather than humanitarian crisis, it is not only from the relative stability of longer-term humanitarianism that people make use of its tools to try to exert some influence over their lives. The moment of displacement, when much is out of one's control, also creates opportunities for people to make some choices about their position. Refusing registration is one such choice.

Other people insist that UNRWA's existence is an acknowledgment of Palestinian political claims and of the responsibility of the international community to address them. As an ex-Gazan who is also an UNRWA employee put it: "UNRWA does not represent a humanitarian service given to refugees. The services given to us are our right. Our problem is created by the international community and they are responsible for solving it. UNRWA has a political dimension, rather than a humanitarian one." These debates about UNRWA and humanitarianism have been ongoing since the first years after 1948. Putting humanitarianism in question is a key part of Palestinian politics, part of the staging of "scenes of dissensus" through which Palestinians have addressed the international community, host countries, and one another.³⁵

These conflicting attitudes about UNRWA, and the suspicion that sometimes swirls around the agency, are evident in people's reactions to recent cuts in UNRWA services. UNRWA's budget is severely strained. It has always been tight, but the effects of the global financial crisis of the past few years have hit the Agency hard. I was in Jordan in December 2009 right after some cuts in services had been enacted, and they were a subject of much discussion. In interviews in the field office in Amman people in charge of various program areas described the difficult decisions they were forced to make and how unhappy they were about the situation. In the Jerash camp, one of the fields where these decisions were being implemented, people were skeptical of the claim that the service cutback was a simple matter of international economics. Many were convinced that these decisions were strategic, and possibly part of a move toward shutting down the agency, ending crucial services, and failing to meet international obligations.³⁶

It is not only in their overall assessment of the Agency that people use the language of rights; such language is also central to how people express specific personal frustrations. To offer one example, Maisa, a woman who, like many in the camp, has been disappointed in her attempts to find employment, described her anger with UNRWA:

It is supposed to give us our rights. We are demanding our rights. It was established as a humanitarian institution to help the refugees. But it does not help the refugees with anything . . . The basis is the human. When you want to help—you help a human build himself and live. If they are not giving us the right to work and the right to the opportunities that are supposed to be ours . . . Really, I get really upset when I think that those who have a national number and those who have Jordanian citizenship have all the opportunities and I do not have any. The only opportunity was UNRWA and it was taken away from me.

Maisa's central complaint was that UNRWA does not designate work opportunities specifically for Gazans who, unlike other Palestinian refugees in Jordan, cannot compete for government or many private sector jobs.³⁷ Although from one perspective such a designation could be seen as an exceptional accommodation (a result of humanitarian compassion), camp residents argue instead that it should be seen as part of their rights (connected to humanitarian obligation). In making claims of UNRWA, then, ex-Gazans claim the denial-in-practice of rights they see as accorded to them.³⁸

Humanitarian Generations: The Politics of Living as a Refugee

I have described ways humanitarianism becomes a space for, and shapes, rights talk and claim-making. But this is not its only effect. Humanitarianism also enacts a politics of living and shapes life experience over time and across space. With all its constraints, it provides tools for living: not just surviving but living in its variety of senses. Humanitarianism can provide both a narrative frame for life stories—shaping a sense of self—and a mechanism for making a calculus of these lives—shaping political subjectivity. It offers one means through which value is attached to certain choices, certain ways of living.

To look at how the lives of Palestinian refugees have been marked by humanitarianism, and by transformations in humanitarian practice, I turn here to the course of

one person's, one family's, life. Fayrouz, born in Gaza camp in 1969, narrates her life through a humanitarian lens, with each milestone described in relation to changing relief practices. Her story reflects the intimate calculus of life in relation to humanitarian practice. It shows how humanitarian effects are often worked out in relations between parents and children, husband and wife, with neighbors. It is frequently in these daily spaces that values—the vocabulary of national politics, ideas about community, who fits where, what it is and will be to be Palestinian—are worked out.

Fayrouz was born at home and told me how much her mother hoped that the tents they lived in for the first few years would be replaced by more permanent structures before her birth: “She was pregnant with me when they started building the barracks [in this case simple cement block structures with corrugated roofing]. She was praying to God that she would not give birth in the tent. She was embarrassed to have me in the tent . . . They finished the barracks and I was born in the barracks.” As a young child Fayrouz went to a church-sponsored nursery school where UNRWA distributed milk and food to the children each day, in response to widespread malnourishment in the camp. As she remembered, “They taught us songs about Palestine because the immigration or expulsion was recent . . . that was 5 years after the expulsion. We were soaked in patriotism and our songs were all patriotic . . . I remember it was a nice phase for me, the kindergarten phase. I loved it.”

The next thing Fayrouz recalled was receiving aid packages (*bugga*) filled with “foreign” clothing. She described how excited they were to have leather shoes, in contrast to the plastic shoes they had been wearing before. She also indicated the dissonance that sometimes went along with getting clothes designed for different styles and sensibilities. Her mother, while accepting the clothes, was a bit wary about them: “She used to say, we do not know what sort of diseases these foreigners had. So she boiled them.” She also often felt it necessary to rework the clothes: “My mother has taste. For example, if she found [a dress] revealing or something she would take it to the tailor to fix it . . . she would add pieces because she would be embarrassed to wear it. Sometimes when the design was too much we would laugh. She would tear it up and make cloth for dusting. But also the colors . . . what would she say: ‘Eeh, those foreigners do not wear anything but this flashy yellow. They are yellow themselves.’” Each of these responses asserts the value of Palestinian taste and life, in this case not expressed as a claim for a specific outcome but as an existential fact. Neither the condition of need nor the aid relationship dissolved the sense of value (here experienced in aesthetic terms) attached to being Palestinian.

Making do—with other people's cast-offs, with limited resources—is characteristic of the refugee experience and loomed large in Fayrouz's account. She described how there was no piped water in the camp and everyone had to bring water from central faucets. She remembered the system her mother imposed to make sure that the family had enough water: “It was forbidden to eat before filling up two buckets of water first in exchange for the food. This way she would guarantee that she has the water . . . And if you do not bring water, you will stay without food, until you bring it. This was because of the harshness of life. It is not that mom was tough—she needed the water because she had kids.” These stories highlight the ways that people take action with humanitarian artifacts, not just to make claims but to make a life, a family, and

a community. Fayrouz's mother, Im Khaled, also told me stories about negotiating with UNRWA workers to provide particular supplies at their distributions, about collecting stones to build a wall around their barracks house to make a family space, about conflicts between people over access to resources. She saw these struggles as being about survival, but always more than that as well—claims for resources were community claims.

Reflecting on her adult life, her marriage and family, Fayrouz described her connection to the space of the camp. She and her family lived for seven years in Amman because her husband was working there. They moved back to the camp when his father got sick. Fayrouz described the disconnect she sometimes felt with her neighbors in Amman because they had not shared her life experiences. As she put it, "Sometimes I would say something to my neighbors, when I invited them over for coffee. I wanted to say something in particular and I felt that these women are not going to understand me, they're not going to understand what I want to say." It should be noted that these women were also Palestinian, but not camp residents with the same intimate relationship with humanitarian work. For Fayrouz, the experience of living the "refugee life"—the rations, the water, the *buggaj*—not only shaped her sense of self, it shaped where she felt at home in the world. As difficult as her life has been, and as much as she longs for a political resolution for Palestinian refugees, and a civil rights transformation for ex-Gazans in Jordan, she is most at ease in the social network of the camp.

Even as Fayrouz longed for the camp in the years when she lived away, her children, who were young in Amman, "reject the camp life." As she told me,

They reject that they should keep feeling that they live in a camp as if they were third-, fourth-, or fifth-degree human beings. They want to feel different. Many times they would come back and say, 'Change this house for us.' Enough with the *zinco* [corrugated roofing], enough with I don't know what. They are fed up . . . We were not fed up like that, although our situation was more difficult. But we did not complain.

While Fayrouz felt out of place in Amman, for her children Amman had provided an opportunity to live a less marked life:

My son says our life in Amman was better. At least no one knows we are Gazans. No one knows that we are from the Gaza camp. They deal with us as though we were like them: people. You do not feel any difference at all. When do you feel discrimination? When you confront government institutions. This is when you feel discriminated against. But the social life, they feel that they live in a house like the houses where other people live . . . So they say, no, take us back to Amman. I do not know how much they can bear because I can see until now that they cannot take the life of refugees.

Fayrouz worries about her children: she wants them to be happy, to feel comfortable, to have opportunity. But at the same time she worries about them politically: she worries about what sort of Palestinians they will be. She is concerned about what relation they, and others of their generation, will have to Palestine. She sees a

difference between her two oldest boys. Of the eldest, she said, “If he gets full rights [in Jordan], I am sure he will forget everything called Palestine. But my second, if he gets all the rights in this country, he will still demand Palestine. I do not know why, although both were raised up the same way, I do not know why this one has this mentality and the other has another mentality.” Fayrouz’s account of differences in her family—generational and otherwise—reflects the patterns I found in talking to people from multiple generations within the camp.

There is no doubt that in the Palestinian case the personal is the political: what it is to be a good Palestinian political subject is intimately connected with what sort of person one is. How the politics of particular life choices is understood is both highly contested and often divided along generational lines. Debates about the consequences of changes in conditions in the camps, or of moving out of those camps, are widespread across the Palestinian diaspora.³⁹ In Jerash camp, those of a generation older than Fayrouz might argue that any life that was settled-in in Jordan was a betrayal of the Palestinian cause. For instance, one person told me that his father objected to his buying a car, or anything substantial, because they should live their life in readiness to return. Needless to say, the son did not share this view. Fayrouz did not reject a connection with Jordan, but she worried that her children’s inability to handle the “life of refugees” may mean a loss of connection to Palestine.

Fayrouz thought about her own life in relation to key features of the humanitarian apparatus, as well as changes in it. She identified most strongly with others who were as fully inside this apparatus as herself. Her children, on the other hand, saw Amman as an opportunity to live apart from the apparatus, to be free in some sense from its categories. It is important to note that what it means to be “inside” humanitarianism is different for Fayrouz’s children from how it was for her. There are no more *buggaj*. Everyone has piped water in their homes. Almost no one receives any rations anymore. So the refugee life that Fayrouz’s children experience is marked more by *distinction* than by *assistance*. Even if they lived outside the camp, though, as they grow into adulthood—and have to confront their categorical location more directly—they would likely discover that they too are defined by where they fit: in Jordan, in the Palestinian community, in the humanitarian apparatus.

Conclusion

Just as humanitarianism is multiple things at once, so too is the politics of living in the humanitarian condition. Humanitarian categories provide people with a ground from which to act and to make claims—and sometimes create an opportunity for refusal. Humanitarian language can shape these claims, producing a confluence of discourses of obligation and compassion, of need and right. To highlight the longevity of this condition, I offer a further example, drawn not from my fieldwork but from the archives. In a 1961 petition to the director of UNRWA, a group of refugees in Jordan underscored two requests as their most urgent. The first of these was water. As the petition put it, “This is a basic necessity. For the last few years we have been enduring much suffering for the lack of water at the camp, particularly in the summer . . . We therefore ask you to comply with this request of ours as soon as possible.” The second urgent request was “that you should inform the United Nations that we

will never be able to forget our dear homeland, no matter how long we shall have to endure this miserable condition. We shall not accept any substitute for our homeland, nor relinquish it for any bribe.”⁴⁰ Need and right, personal survival and national liberation were identified here as equal demands.

If humanitarianism becomes a space for making claims, its changing practices also structure people’s lives and their relations with one another. Along with the question of territory (who belongs where, who left where, who is denied access to where), the humanitarian apparatus—the mechanisms of an aid regime that influence life possibilities, the bureaucratic categories that give differential access to services, the material artifacts of assistance that shape daily life—is a key way that people define themselves, their community, and their relationship with other Palestinians. Even as a relationship to an extensive humanitarian apparatus is one of the central things shared by Palestinians across the different spaces of displacement, people are differently involved with it. And, of course, it itself has changed significantly over time. Everything Palestinians have experienced since 1948 not only binds people together but also differentiates, and sometimes distances, them from one other. Some people get aid and others don’t, some have citizenship and others don’t, some live in camps and others don’t. Each of these lines of distinction (and many others) shapes the politics of living with humanitarianism.

The politics of living does not simply create an opportunity for multiple perspectives, demands, and values to coexist. Rather, it illuminates and structures a range of contestations over precisely these questions. Each claim for a particular right is also a determination about which rights are the most essential. Each decision about how to live (in displacement, in community) is an articulation of the value of certain ways of living, and often the devaluation of others. Such contestations clearly occur not simply as considered judgments about strategy or identity but also as responses to institutional, material, and discursive opportunities and constraints. As I have argued, in the Palestinian case (and not only in the Palestinian case) humanitarianism has been an important source of both constraint and opportunity. As Palestinians debate strategy and articulate possibility (and impossibility) in the midst of widespread change across the Middle East, the political landscape continues to be shaped by the humanitarian condition.

NOTES

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1. See <http://www.unhcr.org/4a1d43986.html> (accessed February 5, 2012).
2. Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1998).
3. Ilana Feldman, “Gaza’s Humanitarianism Problem,” *Journal of Palestine Studies* 38, no. 3 (2009): 22–37; Liisa Malkki, “Refugee and Exile: From ‘Refugee Studies’ to the National Order of Things,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 24 (1995): 495–523; Miriam Ticktin, “Where Ethics and

Politics Meet: The Violence of Humanitarianism in France,” *American Ethnologist* 33, no. 1 (2006): 33–49.

4. Didier Fassin, “Inequality of Lives, Hierarchies of Humanity: Moral Commitments and Ethical Dilemmas of Humanitarianism,” in *Government and Humanity*, ed. Ilana Feldman and Miriam Ticktin (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2010), 238–55; Peter Redfield, “Sacrifice, Triage and Global Humanitarianism,” in *Humanitarianism in Question: Politics, Power, Ethics*, ed. Thomas Weiss and Michael Barnett (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2008), 196–214.

5. Michael Barnett, *Empire of Humanity: A History of Humanitarianism* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2011); David Rieff, *A Bed for the Night: Humanitarianism in Crisis* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2002); Hugo Slim, “Dissolving the Difference between Humanitarianism and Development: The Mixing of a Rights-Based Solution,” *Development in Practice* 10, nos. 3/4 (2000): 491–94.

6. Pablo Antonio Fernández-Sánchez, “The Interplay Between International Humanitarian Law and Refugee Law,” *Journal of International Humanitarian Legal Studies* 1, no. 2 (2010): 329–81; James C. Hathaway, *The Rights of Refugees under International Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

7. Ilana Feldman, “Difficult Distinctions: Refugee Law, Humanitarian Practice, and Political Identification in Gaza,” *Cultural Anthropology* 22, no. 1 (2007): 129–69; Lex Takkenberg, *The Status of Palestinian Refugees in International Law* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998).

8. Thomas Laqueur, “Bodies, Details, and the Humanitarian Narrative,” in *The New Cultural History*, ed. Lynn Hunt (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 176–204; Richard Wilson and Richard D. Brown, *Humanitarianism and Suffering: The Mobilization of Empathy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

9. Didier Fassin and Richard Rechtman, *The Empire of Trauma: An Inquiry into the Condition of Victimhood* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2009); Vanessa Pupavac, “Psychosocial Interventions and the Demoralization of Humanitarianism,” *Journal of Biosocial Science* 36, no. 4 (2004): 491–504; Ananya Roy, *Poverty Capital: Microfinance and the Making of Development* (London: Routledge, 2010).

10. Peter Redfield, “Doctors, Borders, and Life in Crisis,” *Cultural Anthropology* 20, no. 3 (2005): 328–61; Feldman, “Difficult Distinctions.”

11. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1, *An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage, 1978), 138.

12. Hassan Jabareen, “The Discursive and Spatial Performativities of Law” (paper presented at Geographies of Aid Intervention in Palestine, Birzeit University, West Bank, September 27, 2010).

13. Vinh-Kim Nguyen, *The Republic of Therapy: Triage and Sovereignty in West Africa’s Time of AIDS* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2010).

14. Didier Fassin, “Another Politics of Life is Possible,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 26, no. 5 (2009): 49.

15. I thank Marnie Thomson, the graduate student respondent to my paper at the University of Colorado, for pushing me to highlight the importance of this distinction in my argument.

16. Feldman, “Difficult Distinctions”; Feldman, “The Quaker Way: Ethical Labor and Humanitarian Relief,” *American Ethnologist* 34, no. 4 (2007): 689–705; Feldman, “Mercy Trains and Ration Rolls: Between Government and Humanitarianism in Gaza,” in *Interpreting Welfare*

and Relief in the Middle East, ed. Inger Marie Okkenhaug and Nefissa Naguib (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 175–94.

17. James Ferguson, *The Anti-Politics Machine: “Development,” Depoliticization, and Bureaucratic Power in Lesotho* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

18. This focus on the small-scale doesn’t exactly fit the mood in the Middle East right now, where recent events across the Arab world have brought spectacular, mass-movement politics back into the arena of possibility. It has been a long time since “revolution” seemed a real option to people. As exciting as these developments are, a great deal (probably the majority) of political expression happens in the everyday and at the level of the small-scale, even among an exceptionally politicized and historically highly organized population like the Palestinians.

19. Raja Shehadeh, *The Third Way: A Journal of Life in the West Bank* (New York: Quartet Books, 1982); Salim Tamari, “The Palestinian Movement in Transition: Historical Reversals and the Uprising,” *Journal of Palestine Studies* 20, no. 2 (1991): 57–70.

20. Helena Lindholm Schulz and Juliane Hammer, *The Palestinian Diaspora: Formation of Identities and Politics of Homeland* (London: Routledge, 2003).

21. For a discussion of how distinctions between camp and town refugee living impact refugee narratives and identities, see Malkki, “Refugee and Exile.”

22. UNRWA, *Annual Report of the Director, A/2717*, June 30, 1954.

23. See <http://www.unrwa.org/etemplate.php?id=131> (accessed February 5, 2012).

24. The West Bank was annexed to Jordan in 1950, and Palestinians living in Jordanian territory were granted citizenship in 1949, with a further amendment to the law in 1954. Joseph Massad, *Colonial Effects: The Making of National Identity in Jordan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 39. Those Palestinians who stayed in the West Bank after 1967 eventually lost Jordanian citizenship, as Jordan recognized the West Bank as Palestinian territory.

25. Oroub El Abed, “Immobile Palestinians: Ongoing Plight of Gazans in Jordan,” *Forced Migration Review* 26 (August 2006): 17–18.

26. Some wealthy Gazans have acquired Jordanian citizenship (worldwide, wealth operates as a path to status). Another path to citizenship is through marriage. If a Gazan woman marries a Jordanian man she can acquire citizenship, which would be passed down to her children. The reverse is not true.

27. Lance Bartholomeusz, “The Mandate of UNRWA at Sixty,” *Refugee Survey Quarterly* 28, nos. 2/3 (2010): 452–74.

28. UN General Assembly, A/RES/63/92, “Persons Displaced as a Result of the June 1967 and Subsequent Hostilities” (2008).

29. Jacques Rancière, “Who Is the Subject of the Rights of Man?” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 103, nos. 2/3 (2004): 304.

30. Ibid.

31. All names are pseudonyms.

32. At various points exceptions to this policy have been made. When I was in Jordan in December 2009, people told me that regulations had been changed to permit Gazans to purchase up to a dunam of land. They also told me that similar things had been done in the past, but that the regulations had always been changed back. Indeed, the next time I was there, in summer 2010, the policy had been put on hold.

33. Large numbers of Iraqis came to Jordan after the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq and the subsequent violence in the country. Their capacity to access government services has been a subject

of contention, but after some initial resistance the government has made schooling and medical care available to this population. Large numbers of Egyptians come to Jordan for work. According to a 2010 report, 100,000 of 338,000 lacked proper residency or work permits. Hani Hazaimeh, "Over 100,000 Egyptians Living, Working in Kingdom Illegally," *Jordan Times*, July 28, 2010.

34. The same tropes were heard in Lebanon when parliament debated, and ultimately passed, a bill to give Palestinians in Lebanon some expanded rights. The PLO ambassador to Lebanon described them as "purely humanitarian rights relating to daily life, with no relation to politics." Ma'an News Agency, June 21, 2010. This change in the law has not been implemented.

35. Michael Barnett and Thomas Weiss, *Humanitarianism in Question: Politics, Power, Ethics* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2008).

36. Even though the cutback in services *may* not represent a strategic decision by UNRWA officials, the budget is provided by donations from mainly Western countries, so levels of contribution do have political valence.

37. The focus on employment opportunities in almost everyone's descriptions of what they need and deserve suggests that the notion of a culture of dependency which is often identified in both humanitarian and welfare conditions does not adequately describe people's responses to living in need over the long term.

38. Rancière, "Who Is the Subject of the Rights of Man?"

39. Nell Gabiam, "In Order Not to Forget: Dignity and Development in Syria's Palestinian Refugee Camps" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, Berkeley, 2008).

40. UNRWA Archives, box RE 66, file RE 500, part 1, unsigned petition to Director, 1961.