Shu'fat Camp: Life On The Edge For Jerusalem Refugees

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In Shu'fat Camp, the only Palestinian refugee camp located inside the municipal borders of Israeli occupied East Jerusalem, the inhabitants must face their future both as refugees and as Arab Jerusalemites. They must tackle all the emotional and material problems of being refugees while struggling like all other Arab inhabitants of

the city to lead a normal life in the face of Israeli policies. Residents resist the policies of house demolition, ID card confiscation, and property expropriation in many ways. They continue their tradition of having large families, and they build homes despite the danger of demolition. Just as Israelis hurry to create facts on the ground by building and filling settlements, the Palestinians of Shu'fat hurry to create their own facts on the ground, furiously building to beat the bulldozers. They also resist Israeli efforts to transfer them to the West Bank simply by refusing to leave the camp despite its worsening living conditions. Since 1996 Israel has instituted a policy of ID card confiscation in East Jerusalem that revokes the residency rights of Palestinians who cannot prove that Jerusalem is their "center of life." To avoid losing their permanent residency status, Shu'fat Camp residents have ceased moving to the West Bank in search of more space to build homes and a cheaper cost of living. Not only have those living in the camp chosen to stay since 1996, but also thousands of refugees and non-refugees outside the camp have moved back. While this influx has foiled Israeli transfer efforts, it has also meant that the camp now suffers from severe overcrowding.

Indeed so crowded has the camp become that many residents unable to find space to build inside have turned to the land along the perimeter of the camp, despite the fact that Israel has reserved all the land there for the future expansion of the nearby Jewish settlement of Pisgat Ze'ev. In the area at the edge of Shu'fat Camp, a kind of no man's land in East Jerusalem, Palestinians are building on the foundations of demolished homes. And the business-minded are picking up a bit of much-needed cash by renting out spare rooms and flats to new residents from outside the camp, particularly those who cannot afford the high rents and high taxes in Shu'fat or Beit Hanina or who cannot find space inside the camp. These residents of Jerusalem are in a precarious situation, living in illegal dwellings in an area that is a prime target for Israeli house demolitions. Indeed the rate of demolition here is one of the highest in Palestine. On the hill overlooking the tidy Jewish settlement of Pisgat Ze'ev (population 30,000), Arabs build surreptitiously and in haste, hoping against hope to create their own contrary facts on the ground.

One refugee living on that hill is Yayha Abu Sharif, who moved from al-Bireh four years ago in order to maintain his Jerusalem ID. In al-Bireh, Yahya enjoyed fresh air and space for his children to play, but he had no choice but to move back to Jerusalem. And he did not want to move to the camp because "No one wants his kid to grow up in the camp." He explained to me the extraordinary circumstances of building on the hill. The strategy is to get the four walls and the ceiling up as soon as possible, the ceiling being the most important because the more ceilings the Israeli military helicopters spot from above, the better for the Palestinian builder. For the inspection authorities prioritize demolitions according to number of ceilings; the more ceilings they see, the more trouble it is for them to carry out demolitions. If they see a few isolated ceilings, they will send the demolition crews to that area first. So people build

where they can and prefer built-up to open areas. Neighbors join together to determine when to build and to participate in the building itself. Community cooperation is necessary for survival. And relatives are an important part of the community, providing comfort and support in difficult times. Yahya tells me that in 1967 there were only a few houses here. Now the area is a patchwork of rust-red earth, cement foundations in ruin, dwellings in various stages of construction and exposed water and sewer lines. Messy and neglected, the hill appears in sharp contrast to the Israeli settlement of Pisgat Ze'ev across the valley, with its columns of white houses marching imperiously across the hilltops.

Residents prefer to build during Saturdays and Jewish holidays since the building surveying crews have the same schedule as the demolition crews. Working at night is safer than during the day. And the permit for building, $3,000 and non-refundable, offers no protection from demolition. On the contrary, it is often the permit holder's homes that are destroyed first, the military authorities having been alerted to the applicant's plans to build. "Why waste $3,000 that you can spend on construction materials," says Yahya. Begin on Thursday or Friday evening with the walls and the ceiling, and finish in a few weeks. Yahya's house, nicer than most here, was built in one month. And happily after four years, it is still standing. I am impressed with the efforts of the Abu Sharif family to create an environment of normalcy for their three children. Samer, one of Yahya's young sons, has a pet bird who lives on the tiny patio outside the front door of the house. And potted and hanging plants survive where there is room. In typical Palestinian manner Yahya, whose university degree in business administration is from Algeria, has put priority on the education of the children, each of them attending private schools in Jerusalem. So Samer and Maher and Luna spend the day in the classroom—a place of benefit, progress, and hope—then return home, where the problem of Palestine is literally at their doorstep.

Manal, Yahya's neighbor, lives with her husband and five children in an impossible location. With the best view of Pisgat Ze'ev, her house is a cinder-block shack surrounded by muddy earth and puddles of stagnant sewer water. The problem is that she doesn't have the money to repair her sewer system, having run out of cash during the building process. This is a common problem, according to Yayha. Flashing perfectly polished red nails, Manal jestures to the houses above on the hill, "sewage from two hundred homes ends up here"—in the puddle a few inches from where we're standing. Her children, still smiling, play a game of jumping over the pool of waste by the front door. The idea is to not fall in. It is hard to stand the stench for ten minutes, and I cannot imagine what it is like to live here. The wall surrounding Manal's house, presumably built to drain rain away from the house, is wet, and not with rainwater. Outraged, I ask repeatedly, "who is responsible for this?" The fact is that each house is responsible for its own plumbing, the area not receiving infrastructure assistance from the Jerusalem Municipality or from the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) either. Building

problems are worsened because exposed pipes, whether for water or sewage, are frequently run over and broken by trucks coming in to assist in the building or to assist in the demolitions. Certainly the fact that Yahya and Manal are here at all is testimony to the Palestinian will to survive.

Perhaps the greatest display of that will is seen in the lives of the refugees of Shu'fat Camp, a place most Israelis and even those living in Jerusalem are ignorant of. To reach the camp from the West Bank without a Jerusalem ID you have to take one of the green-plated West Bank taxis on a long detour around the al-Ram checkpoint and then along the 'Anata road, which eventually drops you off in the camp. If you have a Jerusalem ID or hold a foreign passport you can get to the camp from the main road connecting Ramallah to Jerusalem, Nablus Road. Near the camp there are signs for Beit Hanina, Shu'fat, and of course the settlements, but no sign for Shu'fat Camp. You have to follow a circuitous route through buildings indicative of occupation—an Israeli military installation not quite out of use, and a veterinary hospital with signs in Hebrew, Arabic, and English. You must then pass through a short tunnel and across a main highway leading into Jerusalem. When you spot the Israeli soldiers on the left side of the street, at their makeshift roadblock for checking Arab taxis and other vehicles, you know you are close to the camp. Finally the Shu'fat Girls' School emerges from a small mountain of earth and rubble, surrounded with barbed wire. Everything inside the barbed wire fences is "the camp." And turquoise UNRWA signs with white writing inform you that you're there.

The walk from Yahya's house to the border of the camp takes only a few minutes. The spot where the paved road, the main road of Shu'fat Camp, begins, marks the border. The main road is too narrow for two cars to pass each other, and is crammed with shops, homes, and cars parked practically inside shop entrances for lack of space. The dust from all the building going on and the building materials lying about confirm Shu'fat Camp's state of permanent construction. Normally shops fill the ground floor of buildings, with flats and businesses occupying floors one through six or seven. Overcrowding is so severe that people are building over alleys in the spaces between buildings. The camp neighborhoods remain grouped by their original villages, ensuring that pre-1948 community and culture are not forgotten. In the office of Jamal Awad, UNRWA Camp Services Officer, refugees are welcome to bring neighborhood concerns up for discussion. Several listen in while I hear some camp history from Jamal.

The circumstances for the establishment of Shu'fat Camp distinguish it from other camps. In 1965 the Jordanian government decided, for reasons that are still unclear, to transfer Arab refugees squatting in Jewish property in the Jewish Quarter to the area of the camp. Then in 1967 at the beginning of the June War, Jordan gave the 250 dunum plot of land to UNRWA as space for Palestinians in flight from the Israeli army, at that time ransacking Jerusalem villages, the Jewish Quarter of the Old City, and al-Muasker Camp. All the refugees who came to the camp were being displaced for a second time, having originally come from

such 1948 towns as Lod, Beer Sheeva, Ramle, and Haifa and from areas around Hebron that had been subject to Israeli attack. In 1967, the refugee population of Shu'fat Camp was 3,300. Today the population is almost 25,000—due to both high fertility rates and the return of many residents since 1996 as a result of Israel's new residency policy. And unlike other camps in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, few people leave. There are thousands of non-refugees living in Shu'fat Camp. So all of these Palestinians live on that same plot that the Jordanian government gave to UNRWA, still 25 dunums. Israel has never allowed the borders of the camp to be expanded. The result is that living conditions are overcrowded. Moreover, Shu'fat Camp has been under threat of relocation practically since its beginning—the land being prime for the expansion and connection of three surrounding settlements, Pisgat Ze'ev, Ma'ale Adumim, and Neve Yakov. Many of the refugees have been offered bribes in cash to leave by agents working for Israeli settler groups. But they refuse, firm in their faith to remain where they are—holding on to the dream of Palestine, Jerusalem, and the memory of homes left behind in the wake of war.

The fate of Shu'fat refugees, like that of all the Palestinian refugees, is uncertain. The subject of the right of return expressed in UN Resolution 194 is an emotional one. When I asked Jamal his opinion on the matter (as a refugee and as an UNRWA representative), he says sharply, "I don't know anything about that," and changes the subject. It seems the Palestinian Authority can do little to help Shu'fat Camp, since under Oslo they have no jurisdiction within the city. As well, UNRWA is currently undergoing a budget crisis, its long-term deficit having now reached $60 million. After Oslo, UNRWA was not eligible for any of the financial assistance that the Territories benefited from. And as part of the accords, UNRWA is meant to be phased out so that the camps can become integrated into the Palestinian state, its borders and governance still unknown. In its current state, it is difficult for UNRWA to compete for funding with other international aid agencies, like the International Red Cross or the United Nations High Commission for Refugees. Consequently, it has had to sharply curtail its spending. According to Oxfam there has been a 26 percent drop in UNRWA's annual spending per refugee over the last seven years: from $96 in 1991 to $71 in 1998.

And so in circumstances of political and financial crisis, UNRWA struggles to meet the demands of Shu'fat Camp's population. Shu'fat suffers from many problems found in the inner city—poverty, drug use, lack of playgrounds for children, and over-crowding and its consequences. Lack of privacy and inadequate insulation for sound in buildings mean that neighbors can hear each other's most private business. One young refugee told me that he often goes to his Aunt's village in the afternoons to take a nap. People do what they can to find relief. In the short free time that there is, people watching is a favorite activity. In the evenings the men of the camp bring chairs outside to sit and exchange the day's news, smoke, and drink coffee. A walk along the main street means parading in front of them, as they sit with their chairs

leaned back against front doors and walls, amidst traffic, honking horns, and dust. Watching TV is another favorite leisure activity, "especially since the new satellite channels became available four years ago," one refugee relates to me. There is little cultural life here. UNRWA runs a women's and youth center in the camp, but the refugees I spoke with do not frequent it. Refugee life primarily consists of work and family; anything else, such as taking a trip outside the camp, is a luxury.

A feeling of isolation hangs over the camp. Indeed the barbed wire is but one barrier separating the camp from what lies on the other side of the fencing. Shu'fat refugees are in a kind of a prison. Refugee relations with the townships of Shu'fat, Beit Hanina, and 'Anata are apparently "good," but when I ask about recent joint cooperation, none can think of any. "Now it's not like it was during the intifada," I am told. During the intifada "everyone helped each other," all differences were put aside for the greater Palestinian cause. One example of this unifying cooperation was when 'Anata residents brought the refugees food and water during a period of closure. Contributing to the feeling of isolation is the fact that people don't seem to leave the camp except when necessary. Work is often the only reason to leave the camp, and after work, people tend to family and household. For this reason, there is a divide, both psychologically as well as physically, between the camp and the rest of Palestine. Nor has the arrival of the Palestinian National Authority (PNA) changed this sense of isolation. Under the Oslo accords the PNA has no jurisdiction in Jerusalem. While the refugees have an emotional attachment to the idea of a Palestinian state in the abstract, they have no daily encounter with the new Palestinian governing authorities. Often in the course of my interviews people express the fear that a peace agreement concerning Jerusalem will only mean local "autonomy" for Palestinians in the form of freedom to collect their own garbage and the like. As far as they can see, that is all that peace has brought to Palestinians in the West Bank. What they would like to see is the PNA to gain control over more important matters associated with national independence—such as controlling borders and issuing visas, for example.

So the Shu'fat refugees remain under the supervision of UNRWA, which does its best to provide the basics. There is a new girls' school, funded by the Saudi government, which opened its doors on 1 August of this year. The school is built of white stone and painted with purple trim. It is noticeable from the road both because of its height and the fact that it looks so much nicer than the other buildings around it. The Shu'fat Girls' School is deservedly a source of pride for the camp and for UNRWA. The school provides lessons for 900 students from first through ninth grades—in Arabic, English, math, science, social studies, religion, and physical education. And significantly, it will mean that the day's lessons can be taught in one shift instead of two—the norm for UNRWA schools all over the West Bank, the Gaza Strip, and before now, Jerusalem. The school suggests the importance Palestinians attach to education. This year, as in the past, the largest chunk of UNRWA's budget goes to education.

Ms. Raja, the principal, is ecstatic about the opening of the school—as are others I talk to in the street nearby. Ms. Raja tells me that now there are twenty-eight teachers whereas there used to be only fourteen. And life for the girls will be positive, with respect to education at least, until they must leave after ninth grade, when they are likely to run into problems matriculating into Jerusalem schools for lack of a permit. Education is another part of life that Palestinians need permits for, another opportunity for Israel to discriminate.

While the Shu'fat Girls' School is a bright spot in the camp, the health clinic unfortunately is not. UNRWA's health clinic simply cannot meet the demands of the swelling population. There is only one doctor, a general practitioner, to serve 25,000 people. And there is only one dentist, who comes twice weekly. The clinic's hours are from 7:30am to 2:15pm, a sadly insufficient amount of time for attending to all the patients. And the queue for business forms long before opening hours. The doctor is not from the camp. Under stress, he answers defensively when I ask him how he can possibly manage with so little staff. "We cope," he says. I feel guilty about taking five minutes of his time, and hurry to finish the interview. The most common health problems here are due to poor living conditions—"lifestyle problems," upper respiratory problems, especially in children and the elderly, and parasites from dirty water.

Indeed Shu'fat Camp's water story demonstrates both the Jerusalem Municipality's abandonment of its Arab inhabitants and the refugees remarkable perseverance.[1] Water, so scarce in this part of the world, has been a resource long fought over in the Arab-Israeli conflict. And as with land, the Palestinians are most often the losers. So the Shu'fat refugees' victory in gaining back their water rights from the Jerusalem Municipality takes on a symbolic significance. Since 1967 the Jerusalem Municipality had always provided the camp with its water supply. The bill for the water was paid by the Israeli Civil Administration, the governing authority in the West Bank, out of taxes collected from the Occupied Territories. In 1989, however, at the height of the intifada, a tax boycott in the West Bank spurred the Civil Administration to look for ways to cut costs. It therefore decided that Shu'fat Camp should no longer be its responsibility, arguing that the camp was in Jerusalem and therefore not in the Civil Administration's charge, which encompassed only the West Bank and Gaza Strip. No longer receiving payment from the Civil Administration, the Municipality announced that henceforth residents of the camp would have to pay for the water themselves. When residents ignored the order, the municipality simply cut off the camp's water. The Municipality thought that using force would get results, that the refugees would give in and finally pay their taxes. The Municipality was mistaken, however. After several days without water and still no word from the camp, the authorities decided to investigate. It was

[1] The following account of the struggle for water rights in Shu'fat is based on the account by Amir Cheshin, Bill Hutman, and Avi Melamed in their recent book *Separate and Unequal: The Inside Story of Israeli Rule in East Jerusalem* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), pp. 130-34.

discovered that a group of young refugees had successfully re-hooked the camp lines to the main water line. And so the Municipality cut off the water a second time from a point farther down the road from the camp, and again the refugees hooked-up the camp's lines in the middle of the night. The third time the Municipality was at its most destructive, tearing-up pipes leading into the camp. And the third time the refugees were victorious, breaking a hole in the national line and queuing-up with buckets to bring the water home. Finally City officials realized that they had been beat, and allowed the camp to be re-hooked to the main water line. The refugees' courage and patience triumphed over the Municipality.

After having lost so much of Palestine, the Shu'fat refugees are resolute about never giving up their rights in Jerusalem. Jerusalem is at the core of the refugees' identity and indeed every Palestinian's identity. One afternoon in Shu'fat, I sat with Bassam, Iyyad, and Yahya to discuss the place of Jerusalem in their lives. Bassam, a 42 year-old education teacher at al-Umma college in al-Ram, tells me Jerusalem is "special," that the Jerusalem ID gives them the privilege of free movement about the country, something the Palestinians of the West Bank and Gaza Strip don't have. Freedom of movement is highly sought after because it means being able to work in Israel, where salaries are generally higher than in the West Bank. Best friends Iyyad, 27, and Yahya, 20, work as cleaners at Hebrew University in Jerusalem, bringing home 1,800 NIS a month. Many young refugee men in their twenties and thirties work as laborers in Israel. While they would prefer working in Palestinian areas for political reasons, salaries there are too low to attract them. And because of lack of educational opportunity, many are limited to blue-collar work. Both of them feel that wage labor in Israel is necessary for them to feed their families.

Iyyad and Yahya remind me that in staying put in the city they are doing their small part in helping to realize the national goal of "al-Quds" as the capital of a Palestinian state. All the refugees I spoke with said they would stay in Shu'fat if unable to return to their original land. Tragically, returning to one's original land becomes less and less likely every day. Bassam feels, "We want to return to our original villages, but politics is bigger than all of us." And so he is not going anywhere, after deciding against moving to Ramallah, a much more comfortable place than Shu'fat. For his part, Bassam has little hope that Jerusalem will one day be the capital of Palestine. Iyyad agrees, adding that, instead, Abu Dis will likely be the capital of their state, itself yet to be realized.

Most men of Iyyad's and Yayha's age have been politically active in the struggle to liberate Palestine, and these two are no exception. But they feel that today's politics have compromised their cause and brought little improvement to daily life in the camp. Understandably, there is much disillusionment. The small changes that have come under Barak—a symbolic hand-over of territory and the release of prisoners near the end of their terms—are the result of international pressure. Iyyad and Yayha are hesitant to trust Barak's promises. Netanyahu did not make any

promises, so he had none to break. "I did not give and he did not give," says Yahya. During the intifada, Palestinians were united behind Arafat. Now most people feel let down by Israel's leadership and also their own. "No one cares about politics today," says Iyyad.

During the intifada, Fateh was the most popular party in Shu'fat. But with the Oslo accords that followed, "the goals of the past forty years were forgotten," Iyyad tells me bitterly. In 1989, the philosophy of Fateh that he grew up with, believed in, and lived by shifted to one of appeasing the West, explains the father of three who was in 'Anata prison for one and a half years. At the age of fifteen, Iyyad the "Fateh soldier" was imprisoned, like all the others, for "throwing stones, hanging the Palestinian flag, wrapping his head in a kaffiyeh, and spray-painting the wall with graffiti." Iyyad's prison sentence will haunt him for the rest of his life. Every time he is stopped by an Israeli soldier, as he was just yesterday, he is forced to account his history, to justify his identity.

Currently Yahya doesn't support any of the Palestinian political parties. Tired of all the talkers, he is only interested in doers. In the past, Yahya supported Fateh and then Hamas, the other popular party here. Yahya believes the future is about individual choices; it seems doubtful, however, that he and his best friend will have many. It is likely that they will continue to labor for 1,800 NIS a month as cleaners in the University. Both of their fathers' worked in maintenance, also at Hebrew University. Their story epitomizes the lack of progress in employment in Palestinian refugee life from one generation to the next. And then I ask Iyyad what the future holds for his two daughters, who have been running in and out of the blue-jeans shop where we were interviewing, asking their dad for bubble-gum money. He replies with some bitterness, "what do you want me to say, that one will be a doctor and the other a professor?" I'm silenced, and he continues, "I'll wait till they're sixteen or seventeen until marrying them [off]." And so the girls cherish their time as girls, now privileged, allowed to run and play and blow bubbles in the space of the men, the public space of Shu'fat's main street, the space of the foreign journalist. When they reach the age of marriage, they will lose these moments of freedom. In the evenings, the time of day when I did most of my interviewing, women of the camp are usually indoors, in their exclusive women's space—caring for children and visiting with family and friends.

I ask Iyyad and Yahya what they would change, if they could change one thing about their lives. Yahya would like to visit a green place with fresh air and space to move about—"maybe inside Israel," he says, "where I wouldn't be living like a sardine." And Iyyad has wanted to visit America since the age of sixteen, emphasizing that he'd like to go only because Palestine is not free. For if Palestine were free, he would have "hope to leave the camp."

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