

Linking the Four Data Sources on Palestinian Refugees

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Irrespective of how the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians is resolved, the fact remains that around one-half, if not more, of the estimated nine million Palestinians worldwide consist of refugees. The majority of the refugees – around four million people – are registered with the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA). The remaining, as many as one million people, including refugees of the 1967 war and others who were expelled in 1948 but who did not register with the agency, do not appear in UNRWA's registry.

While UNRWA is the main depository of data on registered Palestinian refugees, it is not the only such source. A sister UN organization, the United Nations Conciliation Commission for Palestine (UNCCP), possesses in its archives extensive data on confiscated Palestinian refugee property. The archives of the International Red Cross (IRC) Geneva and Bern, and the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) offices in Philadelphia contain valuable information about Palestinian refugees that predate UNRWA's establishment in 1950.

In an effort to preserve a major segment of Palestinian history for national and research purposes, and to make data available to Palestinian negotiators during final status talks about the Middle East conflict between Israel and the Palestinians, the Institute of Jerusalem Studies (IJS) undertook four years ago to assess the feasibility of digitizing available archival data stored in paper form. With grants given to IJS by the Swiss Development

Editor's Note:

In homage to Elia Zureik, *JQ* is republishing (with minor stylistic changes) the introduction of the book *Reinterpreting the Historical Record: The Uses of Palestinian Refugee Archives for Social Science Research and Policy Analysis*, which he co-authored with Salim Tamari in late 2000 (Institute for Palestine Studies, 2001). The book can be purchased from the IPS website.

Corporation (SDC), the Swedish government, and the Ford Foundation, efforts were undertaken to visit UNRWA offices where the archives are located, send researchers to examine the archives of the IRC and of the AFSC, and hold a workshop to discuss the findings. As well, IJS contracted a multimedia specialist to prepare a pilot study to estimate the cost and ways to electronically link various aspects of the UNRWA archival system including text and graphics. With a grant from the Canadian International Development Agency, the Cairo office, IJS was able to secure in 1999 a second estimate from a vendor regarding digitization of all UNRWA archives, and to undertake publication of the main findings of the field work in the present monograph format.

UNRWA's Role

UNRWA is the successor to the short-lived United Nations Relief for Palestine Refugees (UNRPR), which was established on 11 December 1948 by United Nations General Assembly Resolution 194 (III), and existed from January 1949 to May 1950. The purpose of the UNRPR and its successor UNRWA is to alleviate the hardships faced by the close to three-quarters of a million Palestinians who became refugees in 1948 and their descendants. For more than half a century the refugees, now in their fourth generation, have been prevented by Israel from returning to their homes.

UNRWA, which is the longest serving refugee organization dedicated to one specific group, has been caring for Palestinian refugees through thick and thin, in a region that has seen five major wars in 1948, 1956, 1967, 1973, and 1982, as well as numerous other internal upheavals, including two major Palestinian uprisings against Israeli occupation in 1987 and 2000. Throughout this entire period, UNRWA strove to maintain a functioning organizational and bureaucratic structure spanning the locations of refugee camps in five fields of operations in the West Bank, Gaza, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria. Until 1995, UNRWA's administrative headquarters were located in Vienna, after which they were moved to Gaza.

Like any other organization of its size, employing in excess of twenty thousand people consisting of doctors, teachers, and administrative staff, UNRWA has become a depository of vital information akin to census data chronicling the genealogy of Palestinian refugee life from the time of their dispersal up to the present. The purpose of this monograph is to describe the scope and nature of information stored on Palestinian refugees, with a view to recommending ways to improve access to and storage of millions of documents that, if not properly transferred to electronic medium soon, are bound to decay and become degraded thus rendering their future use in doubt.

As a start, in 1996 the two editors prepared Phase I of the feasibility report on the conditions of the UNRWA archives in Amman, Gaza, and West Bank. The report is reproduced in this monograph and details the structure of UNRWA's archives. The

archives consist of: the original family documents deposited by the refugees with the agency; basic “family fact sheets” containing interviews carried out by the agency with the refugees in 1948; a socioeconomic database containing information about families classified as hardship cases; basic information about individual refugees; administrative records of the agency; health and education records which extend back to no more than five years; and the audiovisual holdings that contain still pictures, films, slides, videos, posters, and maps.

Two years later, in 1998, Phase II of the UNRWA fieldwork commenced to complement the 1996 UNRWA site visits. Two researchers, Bassem Sirhan and Suleiman Jaber, were contracted to prepare reports on the UNRWA archives in Beirut and Damascus, which serve as headquarters for UNRWA’s fields of operation in Lebanon and Syria. These three reports provide the most thorough description of UNRWA’s archival structure.

International Red Cross and American Friends Service Committee

Prior to the arrival of UNRWA on the scene, and immediately after the 1948 war, the IRC conducted the first systematic registration and provided emergency services to the refugees in the West Bank, Lebanon, and Syria, while the AFSC did the same for the refugees in Gaza. Both organizations compiled data on Palestinian refugees at the time, all of which was turned over to UNRWA when it was established in 1950. The archives of both organizations were visited by two researchers, who were commissioned by the editors: Jalal Al Hussein went to Geneva and Berne, and Julie Peteet to Philadelphia. Their reports are reproduced in the monograph.

United Nations Conciliation Commission for Palestine

Finally, in order to round up our survey of sources on historical data pertaining to Palestinian refugees, we have commissioned two papers on the archives of the UNCCP in New York. The UNCCP was established by the United Nations General Assembly Resolution 194 (III), the same resolution that governs the UNRWA mandate. The UNCCP was instructed by the UN to facilitate the repatriation of the refugees, their resettlement, rehabilitation, and economic compensation. Implicit in this mandate was the need to carry out valuation of refugee property. For over a decade, between 1951 and 1964, the UNCCP undertook to document the extent of Palestinian property losses, and come up with a value figure for this property. In the process, the organization produced close to half a million documents. Recently, efforts were made to digitize the paper documents as part of the UN efforts at modernizing its records. One paper in the monograph, by Michael Fischbach, outlines the usefulness of the UNCCP archives for reaching current estimates of Palestinian property losses, and the other paper, by Adnan Abdul Raziq, assesses the state of digitization carried out by the UN, and traces some of the outstanding limitations and pitfalls that exist in the UNCCP archives and possible avenues for their rectification.

The Monograph's Themes

The monograph presents the proceedings of the workshop, which was held on 10–11 June 1998, and, as pointed out above, contains additional papers commissioned by the editors in order to fill gaps that became apparent as a result of deliberations during the workshop. The workshop was attended by UNRWA staff, researchers from the Centre d'études de recherches sur le Moyen-Orient contemporain (CERMOC) in Amman, a representative from the Palestine Central Bureau of Statistics, technical experts, and funders of the workshop.

There are two overriding themes to this monograph. One, to describe in detail the organizational structure and the practices that evolved over more than half century to monitor, administer, and provide essential services to a refugee population that numbers in excess of four million people and is scattered in different geographical areas. Second, to provide the reader with a sense of how this information, all of which practically exists in archival format, could be preserved as an integral part of Palestinian history, and eventually utilized to carry out policy-related research and academic analysis.

The first organized attempts made at assisting Palestinian refugees immediately after the 1948 Nakba were undertaken by the AFSC and the ICRC. In the closing months of 1948, the AFSC was asked by the United Nations to offer assistance to the two hundred thousand Palestinian refugees who ended up in Gaza after their expulsion and flight from their homes and villages. Julie Peteet surveys the archives of the AFSC in Philadelphia, starting with January 1949, when the AFSC established field offices in Gaza, to May 1950, when the AFSC handed over its refugee files to the newly established UNRWA. The organization of the archives is meticulous. The AFSC kept detailed records on the administration of Palestinian refugees, and reflections and impressions of the AFSC's relief workers at the time. In addition to the statistical data which was turned over to the UNRWA and is not available in Philadelphia, the archives contain a wealth of qualitative information which captures the operation of the largest refugee NGO at the time in an environment where the local population in Gaza numbering around eighty thousand was ill-equipped and overwhelmed to handle a flood of two hundred thousand refugees. For researchers, the administrative material is useful in highlighting the process of organizational decision-making under highly stressful conditions. However, not surprisingly, Peteet did see the archives as a useful source for learning about the refugee experience. She describes the archives as a classic example of object construction. She remarks that "refugee voices are completely absent from these archives," and goes on to say that "for those interested in the construction of the refugee as an object of intervention and management, these documents are exceedingly enlightening."

Parallel to the AFSC activities, the ICRC offices were set up in December 1948 in Amman, Beirut, and various parts of Palestine. On behalf of the UNRPR, the ICRC provided medical and relief assistance to Palestinian refugees until May 1950, when their services were transferred to UNRWA. In preparing the chapter on the ICRC

archives, Jalal Al Hussein visited the ICRC offices in Geneva in 1998. When the ICRC terminated its refugee assistance operation in 1950, it shipped only one-tenth of its estimated ten tons of documents to its Geneva offices. The rest were destroyed in Beirut. Al Hussein discovered that none of the personal information about refugees was available in Geneva, even though between February and April 1950, the ICRC had registered 331,000 refugees in “Arab Palestine” (that is, outside the Israel armistice border of 1948), and an additional 28,000 internal refugees in what became Israel. In all likelihood, these records were passed on to UNRWA with the transfer of responsibility between the two organizations. Similar to what the AFSC archives revealed, here too the bulk of the material in Geneva deals with the administrative and organizational functions of the ICRC and chronicles reports from its field offices in various locations in the Middle East. To the extent that their records dealt with individual refugees, they related to the limited number of family reunification cases, where basic information about the applicant was preserved. However, these application forms did not include the full range of demographic and background data on the applicant. In some cases, the ICRC files contained information about the circumstances surrounding the expulsion and displacement of refugees. In other cases, the ICRC was singled out by its own functionaries for not having provided sufficient assistance to refugees to curtail their hasty departure from Palestine. The definition of what constitutes a refugee seems to be guided by administrative criteria rather than by any universal definition. Thus, the ICRC definition of refugee hinged on one losing their domicile as a result of the 1948 war. As Al Hussein points out, this definition did not accommodate those who lost their livelihood but remained in their domicile, such as the residents of Tulkarm and the Bedouins of Bir al-Sab‘a region. In spite of any shortcomings, the ICRC did manage to set up thirty-six refugee camps and provide preliminary educational, health and relief services until UNRWA took over the task of looking after the “Refugees of Palestine.”

Our estimate, after visiting UNRWA Headquarters in Amman, Gaza, and the West Bank, is that close to seventy million documents are stored in these sites. The survey of the UNRWA offices in Syria, which was carried out by Jaber Suleiman, covered the family files, hardship cases, and educational and health data. He estimated that there are a total of 5.3 million documents. The survey count of documents in UNRWA’s Lebanon fields of operation carried out by Bassem Sirhan produced a figure of 6.3 million sheets of paper. The count for Syria and Lebanon did not include administrative records, since most of these administrative documents are stored in the Amman headquarters. Altogether, we can say that there are around eighty million sheets of paper of direct interest to the digitization project, in addition to audiovisual material.

There are important variations in the administrative practices, depending on the site in question. For example, in Syria the government kept close tabs on the refugee population from the outset and, as pointed out by Suleiman, the Syrian Ministry of Labor and Welfare maintains close coordination with UNRWA, so much so that the registration number given to Palestinian refugees by the Syrian government appears

on the refugee file maintained by UNRWA, and vice versa. As well, any changes in the family status of the refugee (birth, marriage, death, etc.) must be coordinated between the two agencies. This is in contrast to Lebanon where, although the government set up a separate administrative unit in charge of the refugees, the chaotic situation in the country made such close coordination between UNRWA and the Lebanese government impossible to maintain. Jordan also maintains a separate department for dealing with Palestinian refugee affairs, which is affiliated with the prime minister's office. Unlike Syria, Lebanon, and other Arab countries, Jordan granted Palestinian refugees of 1948 full citizenship status, and it coordinates with UNRWA routine monitoring of the camps. Even in the West Bank and Gaza where the rest of the refugees are located, the Israeli occupation authorities carried out in 1967 its census of the occupied territories and maintained the population registry until it was turned over to the Palestinian Authority (PA) in the wake of the Oslo agreements. Even here, the PA, in accordance with the Interim Agreement with Israel, continues to provide the Israeli government with all updates to the population registry. At least this was the case until the outbreak of the second uprising following the collapse of the Camp David talks in September 2000.

The UNRWA registration forms contain historical and current information dating to the pre-1948 period. For example, the pre-1948 information (contained in the family files) covers issues such as birth and marriage certificates, property deeds, land registration, tax receipts, etc. The registration coding scheme makes it possible to trace changes in family and individual member status across four generations, covering social and geographic mobility of the refugees. It is thus possible to construct a demographic profile of Palestinian refugees for policy and research purposes. Through proper linkages with other documents in the files one should be able to examine relationships between health factors, education, and other demographic variables, bearing in mind that the educational and health data extends back to only five years. As it became clear in the workshop, and presented in the summary of the workshop's proceedings prepared by Martina Reiker, the process of making linkages by creating a standardized coding system for the various types of documents in UNRWA's archives is yet to be achieved. This is in spite of UNRWA's valiant attempts to create a uniform registration system. In instances when UNRWA contemplated substituting the current family/household system with an individual-based registration system, the host governments reacted with unease fearing that such a system would imply a census undertaking and as such pose "a threat to their national statistical sovereignty." In order to reduce errors and uncertainty in refugee registration and transliteration of names from Arabic to English, it is recommended that the new digitized system should be bilingual to enable searches to be carried out in either of the two languages. Eventually, this information should be made available to the refugees themselves and to future generations.

On occasion, one comes across data revealing information that has been little known so far. For example, the UNRWA archives in Syria contain information about two depopulated villages near the Syrian-Israeli border containing the Krad al-Baqqara

and Krad al-Ghannameh tribes. Although they first became refugees in 1948, to be later allowed to return to their villages in 1949 after the signing of truce agreement between Israel and Syria, Israel moved some of them in 1951 to other locations within the Green Line, and in 1956, on the eve of the invasion of Egypt, Israel expelled them to the Syrian Golan. They eventually moved to other locations within Syria in the wake of the 1967 war. As of this date UNRWA refuses to register them as refugees, after numerous attempts were made by the refugees themselves. Suleiman provides this as a “case deserving further study.”

Although the UNRWA archives contained information about refugee property ownership, the extent of this information was rather limited. A more comprehensive source is the database compiled by the UNCCP and stored in New York. There is no doubt that there is overlap between the UNRWA and the UNCCP data. The UNCCP did not distinguish between refugee and non-refugee in its survey. It thus included data about Palestinians who became refugees in 1948 but did not register with UNRWA, as well as information about non-Palestinian owners of property in Palestine, and Palestinians who remained in what became Israel. Although Fischbach admits the presence of certain lacuna in the UNCCP records, they contain “the most complete and most reliable source of data indicating the number of refugee landowners and the scope of their losses available in the world.” The shortcoming of these archives is due to the fact that the UNCCP did not take into account collectively owned land, waqf land, built-up areas, publicly owned land, and movable property. In short, the UNCCP records, as Fischbach admits, must be used with care, particularly in calculating Palestinian losses for compensation purposes in any future settlement between the Palestinians and Israelis.

In addition, UNCCP records have major flaws, pointed out both by Fischbach and Abdul Raziq. One of these is the absence of all records pertaining to land in the Bir al-Sab‘a region, where communal and nomadic usufruct was preponderant. That land constituted a very substantial area of Arab property in pre-1948 Palestine. The inclusion of these properties will be a major task involved in the updating of these files.

One main objective of this collection of archival documents is to initiate both policy and scholarly studies on how best to use refugee records in a manner that will relate to the current debate about the future of refugees. Most pressing among them is to help in a concrete way to address the issues of claims for restitution and compensation of refugee property, and the issue of repatriation of refugees. We hope that these documents will contribute to create the basis of an integrated corpus of data that cross-references material from UNRWA, UNCCP, IRC, and AFSC archives. Another task would be to enhance the internal usability of each of those registries. In the case of UNRWA, we are proposing that future input be made in three areas:

One, the expansion of the Unified Registration System (URS) to include regular input from the various health and education field offices so that the demographic profiles are more comprehensive. This will allow not only for regional comparisons about the conditions of refugees, but will also give us time series comparisons about changes in their conditions.

Second, the incorporation of historical material located mainly in the family files, as well as in other data from the Central Registry of UNRWA archives, into the computerized system. This also entails transforming the URS from a current database into a historical database, allowing for the accumulation of biographical data over four generations of refugees.

With such horizontal and vertical expansion of the UNRWA database, the researcher can begin to examine regional differences among refugee communities, and address in a more systematic manner the tasks of rebuilding refugees' lives once schemes for repatriation are undertaken. Material is suggested in this volume about the utility of such investigations using existing data. For example, we show how the URS can be effectively utilized for tracing place of origin of refugees before the 1948 war and correlating this geographic information with their current residence, refugee camp status, material condition of the family, and demographic profiles of its members. With the enhanced incorporation of the family files, and with effective linkages to the UNCCP files, we can expand these correlations to assess losses during the war, property claims, and existing skills obtained by family members. With the preparation of claim files, such data will prove to be indispensable.

But for this type of research and policy programs to be effective we should also focus on a third area, the question of linkages. As they have been constituted since 1950, UNRWA family files are not the proper source for establishing systematic documentation for material and non-material claims by refugee household. Their utility is limited in giving a partial picture about the social conditions about the refugee household, their habitat before their exile, and the conditions that led to their expulsion from Palestine. Only by linking these files to the Refugee Property 1 (RP1) forms (covering the bulk of private property entries) that constitute the basis of the UNCCP data does one begin to acquire a holistic picture about the material conditions of the refugee families and the magnitude of their losses.

The editors hope that these collected papers will provide a modest but useful basis for the researchers and policy makers seeking sources and methods to establish a linkage between the four main data sources on Palestinian refugees.

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