# Managing Palestinian Refugees in Syria: A Socio-historical Overview of UNRWA's Relationship with Syrian Authorities, 1950–70

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**Abstract**

Based on a study of previously unexplored UNRWA archives covering a period from the 1950s to the 1970s, this essay examines the relationship between the UN agency and the Syrian government agency PARI (Palestine Arab Refugee Institution) in managing Palestinian refugees in Syria. It offers insight into this decisive phase during which refugee camps were constructed and the Syrian host policy was developed. By contributing to the debates on humanitarianism in displacement, the author sheds light on divergent visions and economic and political interests, but also on the negotiations that arise between international humanitarian actors and local authorities in the management of refugee arrivals. More precisely, it argues that PARI's policies aimed to support Syria's political line on the Palestinian cause in general, and were also designed to attract international aid to the country. From its side, UNRWA attempted to take maximum advantage of the favorable socio-economic conditions that Syria conferred on the refugees to offload some of its responsibilities and save on its budget intended for them.

**Keywords**

Palestinian refugees; Syria; UNRWA; Palestine Arab Refugee Institution (PARI); humanitarianism.

In each country where it operates, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA) has had to deal with local institutions created to manage the

Palestinian presence in line with the host country's national interests. In Syria, the Palestine Arab Refugee Institution (PARI) was established in 1949 following the arrival of nearly ninety-five thousand Palestinian refugees displaced by the formation of the state of Israel in 1948.[1] This organization, under the responsibility of the interior ministry, was mandated to register refugees and determine their legal status, to establish camps on Syrian territory, and to mediate between the Syrian authorities, on the one hand, and refugees and international aid organizations on the other.[2] As the official vehicle for Syrian policy on Palestinian refugees, PARI thus became UNRWA's main interlocutor in Syria.

PARI and UNRWA had divergent visions of the hosting policy toward Palestinian refugees, and different political and economic interests. PARI aimed to support Syria's political line on the Palestinian cause in general, based on the country's opposition to Israel and its defense of the refugees' "right of return." PARI was also designed to manage Palestinian refugees in Syrian territory, to attract international aid, and to develop Syria's urban infrastructures in areas around refugee camps. UNRWA sought to take maximum advantage of Syria's favorable socio-economic conditions for Palestinian refugees to offload some of its responsibilities and reduce its budget in a context of fluctuating funding that characterized the agency since his inception.[3] At the same time, UNRWA policy in Syria favored the integration of Palestinians into their host society as a long-term solution to the refugee issue, an approach always considered controversial by Syrian authorities. Thus, UNRWA and PARI's relationship was marked by suspicion but also strained cooperation, as each needed the other to help implement their policies.

By exploring the relationship between UNRWA and PARI in the management of Palestinian refugees in Syria, this article aims more generally to illustrate the discrepancies and negotiations that arise between international humanitarian actors and local authorities and organizations in managing refugee arrivals. Recent debates on humanitarian responses to displacement has analyzed the interaction between initiatives led from the Global North and those led from the Global South, which are informed by different visions of refugee welcoming and political priorities.[4] Local hosting and assistance practices, both institutional and informal, have contested the supremacy of Global Northled humanitarianism, showing how local actors can appropriate, and sometimes subvert, international aid for their specific interests.[5] Research on Syrian displacement post-2011, for example, shows how refugee crises turn into conflicts of interest between multiple actors called upon to care for refugees. Decisions to host refugees can provide humanitarian income that can then be used for internal development projects, as highlighted by Jordanian authorities' efforts to link the humanitarian response to resilience, reserving funds to serve vulnerable members of the host society.[6]

Syria's management of the Palestinian refugee presence attempted not only to use UN humanitarian aid to improve local infrastructures for both the refugee and host population, but also to insert its refugee policy into broader political propaganda. By accusing UNRWA of pursuing the permanent resettlement (*tawtin*)

Figure 1. "Palestine refugee students at an UNRWA school in Yarmouk camp, Syria." © 1988 UNRWA Photo by Munir Nasr.

of Palestinian refugees in neighboring countries, and of reducing its aid to them, Syria attempted to present itself as the main defender of the Palestinian cause and of the refugees' right of return.[7]

This article elucidates negotiations between PARI and UNRWA in the decisive period during which refugee camps and most important infrastructure were constructed and improved. In doing so, it contributes to a growing body of research on the Palestinian refugee community in Syria,[8] which, compared to Palestinian communities in other host countries, remains understudied especially in the period before 2011.[9] The bulk of the existing literature concentrates on the management of Palestinian refugees in Syria and their relatively favorable juridical status – including its effects on Palestinians' social, political, and urban life in Syria.[10] The evolution of Yarmuk camp and the issue of refugee camp interactions with urban centers in Syria have also been studied to better understand Palestinians' integration into Syrian host society and the shaping of distinct forms of national belonging, at the center of which are forms of transmitting collective memory.[11] Little attention has been given to UNRWA's role, with the major exception of Nell Gabiam, who focused on rehabilitation projects in Nayrab and 'Ayn al-Tall camps, on the outskirts of Aleppo, in 2010.[12] Gabiam underlined UNRWA's increasing shift toward a development approach to Palestinian refugees, refugees' perceptions of this policy, and their efforts to insert UNRWA's depoliticized relief into a discourse that presented as "the

symbol of continued international responsibility for finding a satisfactory political solution to their predicament."[13]

The article seeks to expand on this work by centering on PARI's role. Access to both UNRWA's headquarters in Damascus and PARI's offices was, even before 2011, extremely difficult. This inaccessibility was compounded by the general censorship that reigned in Syria around sensitive political issues and the complications of accessing material in UNRWA's archives in Amman – explaining in large part the relative dearth of research on Palestinian refugees in Syria. This essay is based on research in UNRWA's archives in Amman, including internal correspondence and memoranda exchanged between the directors of UNRWA headquarters in Beirut, the director and acting director of Syrian affairs, the director of relief services in Damascus, the UN secretary general, and the commissioner general of the UNRWA, as well as correspondence with the director of PARI.[14] UNRWA's archives also hold articles from the Syrian press addressing the relationship between Syria and the UN agency, as well as communication from Palestinian and Syrian political actors.[15] These sources illuminate the tensions and negotiations between UNRWA and PARI, rooted in the disparate visions and interests of each.

I wrote this article analyzing historical documents on Palestinian refugee management in Syria more than eleven years after consulting the archives and in a context when nearly half of the Palestinian population has been displaced internally or to neighboring countries, and refugees camp infrastructure has been seriously damaged. Piecing together the history and evolution of the Palestinian camps in Syria based on previously undiscovered archives is an effort to document a part of their history in this crucial period for the country. It also aims also to provide a better understanding of the reconstruction and management plans that will be put in place in Palestinian camps once the still ongoing war ends.[16]

## Syria's Nationalist Approach to Refugees

Palestinian refugees settled in Syria in several waves. The two most important periods of Palestinian displacement to Syria were the period from 1947 to 1956 (or from the UN partition resolution until the combined British-French-Israeli attack on Egypt), and the period immediately following the June 1967 war, which displaced between sixteen thousand and nineteen thousand new Palestinian refugees, as well as one hundred thousand others (Palestinians and Syrians) from the Golan region.[17] Later, thousands more Palestinians settled in Syria as a result of conflicts in other Arab host countries that had further displaced refugees who had settled in Jordan, Kuwait, and Iraq.[18]

While Syrian authorities' reception policy shifted according to the different flows of Palestinian refugees, it was mainly designed to support an Arab nationalist policy that envisioned Syria as a pillar in the struggle against Israel.[19] Syria's nationalist

perspective explains its choice to provide Palestinian refugees with favorable living conditions compared to other host countries, such as Lebanon. While Syrians showed genuine solidarity with Palestinian refugees, this policy can also be explained by the relatively small number of refugees who arrived there. In 1949, Palestinians did not exceed 2 to 3 percent of the total Syrian population, whereas in Lebanon they represented almost 10 percent and in Jordan more than half the population.[20]

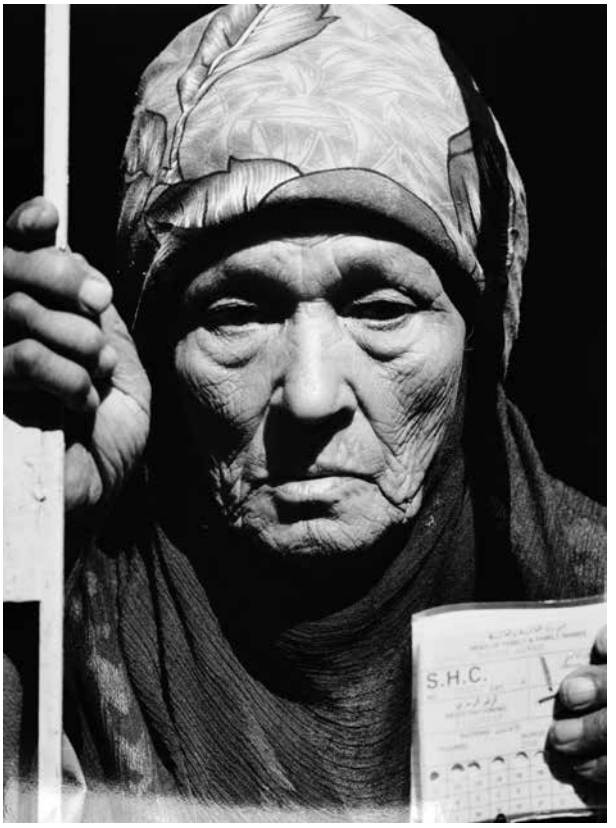


Figure 2. "This elderly Palestine refugee woman fled north to Syria seeking safety during the war in 1948 and then again during the 1967 Arab-Israeli hostilities. She became a permanent refugee in exile living in Yarmouk refugee camp in a small concrete shelter built by UNRWA." © 1975 UNRWA Archive. Photographer unknown.

Syria also granted full civil rights to Palestinians, although it differentiated between Palestinian refugees and Syrian citizens in political and economic terms.[21] Law no. 260, adopted in 1956, stipulates that "Palestinians residing in Syria shall be considered as ethnic Syrians in all areas covered by the law and concerning work, trade and military service, while retaining their original nationality."[22] This law only applies to Palestinians who arrived in the country between 1947 and 1967 and registered with PARI; Palestinian refugees who came to Syria during subsequent migratory episodes are treated according to the same legislation as other foreigners.

Camps for Palestinian refugees were first established near urban centers (Damascus, Aleppo, Dar'a, Homs, Hama, and Latakia), where refugees settled because of work opportunities. These camps are differentiated by the status of the land on which they were constructed, which also determines UNRWA's involvement in their management, as well as that of PARI and local institutions. Indeed, PARI contests UNRWA's categorization of camps, demanding that all Palestinian camps be treated the same.

According to UNRWA, there are three types of camps: "organized" or "official" camps, "unofficial" or "unorganized" camps, and "emergency" camps. Official

camps are defined as "those which were established by the Agency to accommodate Palestine Refugees who came into Syria as a result of the 1948 hostilities. At these camps the Agency provides all relief, health, and education services."[23] In Syria, nine camps meet this definition. These were built between 1949 and 1951, and were established through coordination between UNRWA and PARI. Each Palestinian family was given a plot of land, leased by the state to PARI, the size of which depended on the number of family members.[24] UNRWA, for its part, was responsible for providing materials enabling refugees to build their own living quarters. This practice was specific to the Syrian context; in other Arab countries, UNRWA was tasked with construction of housing.

Table 1. The location and status of Palestinian refugee camps in Syria, according to the official correspondence from the Director of Relief Services to UNRWA General Commissioner, "Camps," 1 April 1970, in RE 400, UNRWA Archives, Amman.

| Camps | Status |
|---|---|
| **Damascus region** | |
| Yarmuk | Unofficial |
| Jaramana | Official and emergency |
| Sbeineh | Official and emergency |
| Khan Dannun | Official |
| Qabr al-Sitt | Official and emergency |
| Khan al-Shih | Official and emergency |
| **Northern region** | |
| ʻAyn al-Tall | Unofficial |
| Latakia | Unofficial |
| Nayrab | Official |
| Hama | Official |
| Homs (al-ʻA'idin) | Official |
| **Southern region** | |
| Darʻa | Official and emergency |

Beginning in the mid-1950s, the Syrian authorities established four additional refugee camps to accommodate the growing population and to provide shelter for Palestinians who remained in a precarious situation. UNRWA classified these camps as "unorganized" or "unofficial." Unofficial camps, including Yarmuk, were run directly by the local Syrian authorities. Unlike the official camps, where a "camp leader" acted as an intermediary between UNRWA and the local population, official camps had no such figure.[25] Moreover, in unofficial camps, UNRWA was not responsible for

Figure 3. "In-service health training: To keep up-to-date with new trends in medical care, UNRWA holds in-service training sessions for its health staff. This session was held in Yarmouk camp, Syria." © 1988 UNRWA Photo by Munir Nasr.

the maintenance of communal infrastructure, nor for waste collection; however, it continued to provide education and health services as well as food. "Emergency" camps were created after the 1967 war to deal with the arrival of new refugees and displaced persons who settled mainly in and around the city of Damascus.[26] These camps resulted from the expansion of official and unofficial camps, and thus adopted the type of administration that already existed in each respective camp. In addition to camps, there were also "gatherings" (*tajammu'at*) consisting of about twenty-five families that established themselves in Syrian neighborhoods but still benefited from UNRWA services.[27] Over time, many Palestinians also settled in Syrian cities without benefiting from UNRWA assistance.

It is within this specific context that UNRWA attempted to fulfill its mission in Syria. While UNRWA benefited from a relatively favorable situation for Palestinian refugees, the agency was careful not to align itself too closely with Syria's explicitly benevolent approach, which would have been seen as an effort to permanently resettle the refugees. This also explains UNRWA's aspiration in Syria to balance intervention with withdrawal, which enabled it to slash its budget. UNRWA was also confronted in Syria by an adverse local environment dominated by wary authorities.

## Acting in a Critical Environment: UNRWA's Strategy in Syria

Since the start of its mission in Syria, PARI criticized UNRWA, accusing it of taking advantage of Syria's support for refugees to limit its own aid. In November 1960, for example, (Arthur Frederick) John Reddaway, UNRWA's acting director in Syria, acknowledged that its spending in Syria was not in direct proportion to the number of Palestinian refugees there, telling PARI's director:

> You well know how limited our fund[s] are … It is undeniable that, in general, the refugees accommodated in the Syrian Region are better off than those in, say, the Gaza Strip and Jordan Valley. If there has, as you suggest, been any tendency in the past for the Agency to spend proportionately more of its funds in those areas and proportionately less in the Syrian region, this is the explanation and not that there has been any deliberate policy on the part of the Agency to discriminate against the refugees in the Syrian Region.[28]

Budgetary considerations but also a general vision of refugees' integration in host countries also informed UNRWA's housing policy in Syria. Responding to PARI's accusation that UNRWA was discriminating against Palestinians in Syria by merely providing materials for families to build their own accommodation rather than undertaking the construction itself, UNRWA's director of Syrian affairs, Arthur L. Geaney, argued that this was not a financial decision but one serving Palestinians' rehabilitation within Syrian society through work and self-sufficiency. In October 1960, Geaney wrote to Reddaway:

> From the beginning it was felt that the refugees should be encouraged to rely upon their own efforts toward social and financial rehabilitation, without, of course, any prejudice to their right for repatriation and/or compensation. Until 1953 there was no distinction of treatment between the refugees in Syria and in other host countries as nowhere was the Agency authorized to build shelters in anything which might look permanent …. In 1953, the Syria Government lifted the ban on permanent dwellings, and although not authorizing construction in anything more solid than mud bricks, all or most of the tents and reed huts disappeared and were replaced by mud brick huts. The Agency could have taken the responsibility of building these huts but it was felt that as mud bricks require only labor (without speaking of a very small amount of money for tibben [chaff] to be mixed with the mud), the refugees themselves should do it …. Without taking into consideration the financial benefit which the Agency has drawn from such a policy, it is my contention that the refugees have largely benefited from it, in as much as they have developed their sense of responsibility and also have, in living in their own houses built by themselves, regained the

> sense of dignity which they definitely lose when they are herded in big army-type camps.[29]

Thus, although Geaney acknowledged the financial savings associated with UNRWA's policy in Syria, he rooted the defense of this policy in a liberal discourse of self-help that saw the refugees rehabilitating their dignity through work. Geaney's letter also exemplifies the defensive stance adopted by UNRWA, which was obliged to justify its choices and balance its attempts to improve refugee conditions against accusations, on the one hand, of pursuing the permanent settlement of refugees and, on the other, of providing inadequate funding to make genuine improvements to these conditions.

Another issue of tension between PARI and UNRWA was the provision of services in "unofficial" camps. Having been created at the initiative of the Syrian authorities, UNRWA disengaged from certain spheres of action in these camps, while PARI argued that they should benefit from the same services as "official" camps, given that both hosted refugee populations in need. In a November 1960 letter to UNRWA's director of Syrian affairs, the director of PARI, Mr. Yafi, wrote:

> We cannot approve in any case whatsoever the principle of sorting the camps into organized camps and unorganized camps for several considerations. In these camps which you consider to be organized, this Directorate was and is still performing services which it is difficult to continue to render. Moreover, these camps became in urgent need of certain basic services which are considered to be within the jurisdiction of the Agency. With our intense care to continue the cooperation existing between us as regards all the camps, we shall be very grateful if you will kindly take the necessary steps to consider all the camps existing in the Syrian region as organized camps inasmuch as there is, generally, no difference between the conditions of refugees residing therein.[30]

In response, UNRWA claimed to have been involved in several infrastructure improvements in the "unofficial" camps, where it continues to provide the same basic services as in the other camps. However, as Geaney maintained in internal correspondence, UNRWA's smaller presence in these camps is justified both by the fact that Syrian authorities did not consult UNRWA during their construction and by the desire to promote integration of the "unofficial" camps into the Syrian urban fabric:

> The reason why there has always been a very firm distinction between organized and non-organized camps in Syria is partly financial. But the true reason why we have not accepted new official camps in Syria

> is, as in the case of our shelter policy, a psychological and economic one. It was felt that the camp atmosphere was good neither for the spirit of the refugees nor for their social and human development. In an official camp the refugees are treated as a separate entity within the country. The responsibility of UNRWA makes it so that they never have the feeling of being on their own. In agglomerations where the refugees are living next to Syrians, and where UNRWA is not constantly present, the amalgamation, even temporary, is much easier.[31]

This acknowledgement that UNRWA sought to promote the integration of refugees into the host society is particularly controversial because, since UNRWA's establishment, Palestinians and Arab governments have seen it as an instrument of the United States and Israel for "liquidating the refugee issue" by promoting their permanent settlement.[32] For example, a July 1965 article in the Ba'th party newspaper *al-Ba'th*, translated into English by UNRWA's press office, refers to a conference of supervisors of Palestinian affairs in Arab host countries held in Amman at which the Syrian delegation presented several memoranda, one of which "demands that a joint Arab plan be laid down to foil UNRWA's schemes for the liquidation of the refugee problem."[33] Another addressed "the poor quality of certain commodities supplied by the agency [UNRWA] to the Palestinians."[34]

Such criticisms, which can be found in many archival documents, were part of a general effort by PARI and the Syrian government more generally to discredit UNRWA and to present it as a part of a foreign conspiracy. Similarly, al-Sa'iqa, a Palestinian faction linked to the Syrian Ba'th party, released a statement in 1964 entitled "The Conspiracy Shows Its Hands: The Role of the Americans and of UNRWA."[35] This communiqué criticized the Palestine Liberation Organization, which the Ba'th party historically opposed, for collaborating with the "American University and UNRWA which are two foreign institutions which are definitively under the influence and control of the U.S.A., which is also their financial backer."[36]

This broader political context framed PARI's efforts to discredit UNRWA and present itself as the main body providing assistance to the refugees, thus reinforcing Syria's nationalist rhetoric. By discrediting UNRWA, Syrian authorities would be in a stronger position to negotiate with the UN agency and other international bodies for financial aid to improve the infrastructure in camps and surrounding areas. The management of Yarmuk Camp demonstrates these dynamics clearly. While Syrian authorities attempted to make it a symbol of their favorable host policy and the Palestinian issue in Syria, UNRWA refers to it as a Syrian "city" or "village," rhetorically emphasizing the camp as part of the host society and distancing itself from its management.

## Making Yarmuk: Model Camp or Syrian Resettlement?

The management of Yarmuk Camp was frequently at the heart of conflicts between PARI and UNRWA. This camp, built in 1954, became the largest Palestinian settlement in Syria, hence its importance for both parties.[37] Yarmuk's construction was launched at Syrian initiative to accommodate Palestinian refugees who were then housed in the official Alliance camp, in the Jewish quarter, and in the Maslakh quarter in the Old City of Damascus. As the director of PARI explained, Yarmuk was established to provide for "refugees who were residing in the mosques and awkaf buildings … Their dwelling there was very disdainful. This in addition to the hindering of exercising religious rites in the mosques for several years."[38] That PARI chose to dismantle an official camp, and without prior consultation with UNRWA, was the initial cause of discord between the two.[39]

UNRWA subsequently classified Yarmuk as an "unofficial" camp, which led PARI to accuse UNRWA of discrimination. PARI explained that, while UNRWA had built classrooms and the Lutheran Federation operated a clinic to provide healthcare to the Palestinian refugees living in Yarmuk camp, the camp's population had "doubled and will redouble once again," rendering these insufficient. UNRWA's insistence that the camp was "unofficial" effectively denied services, according to PARI, "whereas necessity calls for immediate and effective contribution inasmuch as this camp has become the chief center of congregation for refugees and the largest camp in this region."[40] PARI's director thus requested that UNRWA "consider this camp as an organized camp in order to ensure all the services be rendered the refugees residing therein."[41]

UNRWA, for its part, saw Yarmuk's construction as a kind of double standard:

> We thought that the plan was smelling very strongly of resettlement. If the project had been sponsored by UNRWA there would have been a general outcry from the refugees and the Government. The project being entirely PARI's, it was accepted without a murmur and even with great enthusiasm. Thus, the village developed at great speed and after [the influx of] people from the mosques, refugees expelled from the South borders for different reasons, then the whole of Alliance camp. Yarmouk is now a developing town where there is a large proportion of UNRWA registered refugees, but also non-registered Palestinians and even Syrians.[42]

Over time, Yarmuk camp underwent significant urban development, becoming a symbol of the favorable living conditions enjoyed by Palestinians in Syria. In 1960, UNRWA recognized the necessity of providing services in the camp, and adopted a new policy to offer health care and education, and to share with Syrian authorities in funding major infrastructure projects.[43] PARI, meanwhile, made the camp an icon of Syria's refugee policy. Although it continued to call for (and accept) UNRWA

assistance to improve services in Yarmuk camp, PARI sought to appear as the sole sponsor and manager of the Yarmuk construction project. As an UNRWA official wrote:

> No one ever went to visit the agglomeration (including the UNRWA representative) without first paying a visit to the PARI camp leader, or without being accompanied by a representative of PARI. Many foreign visitors were brought in and explained that this was a PARI venture, and that UNRWA had nothing to do with it.[44]

PARI's attempt to monopolize control of the camp and promote development projects within it is part of a broader effort to make Yarmuk a showpiece of Syria's commitment to Palestinian refugees. PARI also worked to improve services and infrastructure (including the electricity grid, drinking water pipes, and the public transport system) in Yarmuk long before other camps. Yarmuk's location in an area of Damascus that rapidly expanded from the 1960s due to rural-urban migration also meant that it needed to be served by Damascus's public transport system. Toward this end, in 1968 PARI tried to obtain UNRWA funding to construct a street linking Yarmuk to the new neighborhoods surrounding it. The chief of UNRWA's budget division, W. M. Rowland, noted that the Syrian proposal was estimated at approximately 480,000 U.S. dollars (or two million Syrian pounds), whereas UNRWA had spent less than eighty thousand dollars total on road construction in all the areas it operated in the preceding five years.[45] Although UNRWA had "no indication of the specific request of the proposed roads," Rowland suggested:

> The real point at issue is probably not one of specifications and lengths of roads but more simply of yielding a little to pressure for the sake of cordial liaison, as indeed the Agency did in 1961 to the tune of $25,000 per year over a three-year period … It is more than sufficient to build all the roads in Yarmouk which we would have constructed had this been an official UNRWA camp; it is the amount which Budget would suggest.[46]

UNRWA was concerned that PARI was seeking to funnel UNRWA funds toward serving Syria's entire population, not just refugees (in this case, as Rowland put it, "a complex of first-class urban highways rather than a few austere camp streets"). Similarly, in 1960, UNRWA claimed reimbursement of an excess budget allocated for a railway that PARI had not returned, demonstrating the latter's lack of transparency and UNRWA's concerns that it sought to profit from assistance to Palestinian refugees.[47] The Yarmuk case is thus highly illustrative of PARI's and UNRWA's divergent objectives. The former wished to derive maximum financial and political benefits from the management of the camp, the latter to maintain a posture of withdrawal that benefited UNRWA's budget and, supposedly, the refugees.

## Conclusion

Previously unexplored documents in the UNRWA archives thus shed light on Syrian state policies during the first phases of Palestinian refugee management. Syria sought to position itself as a welcoming sanctuary to the refugees and, at the same time, a defender of their right of return. From UNRWA's perspective, Syrian authorities presented new challenges by establishing "unofficial" camps and engaging in practices that could otherwise be seen as facilitating permanent resettlement. The establishment and management of Yarmuk camp captures the tensions between PARI and UNRWA; yet, despite their contrasting visions and approaches, and the harsh criticism that each directed toward the other, it is also clear that PARI and UNRWA relied on each other in their efforts to accomplish their respective missions.

Examining the historical interplay of local and international actors in Syria can also shed light on more recent events. Indeed, based on prolonged sociological fieldwork carried out in Yarmuk Camp between 2006 and 2011, it seems that certain attitudes of Syrian authorities toward the Palestinian refugee issue and UNRWA have not changed drastically. In the 2000s, for example, PARI pragmatically supported several camp "rehabilitation" projects to encourage infrastructure development of the surrounding areas, even if this contradicted its rhetorical opposition to permanent refugee resettlement.[48] A street-paving project in 2010, realized by the Yarmuk Local Council, part of the Damascus governorate, with the help of a Turkish NGO in a context of political rapprochement between Turkey and Syria, demonstrated how local infrastructural projects linked to broader policies and how Palestinian refugee management could catalyze different national and international interests and discourses.[49]

For local authorities, refugee management can become a political and economic tool to gain legitimacy, to strengthen their political discourse, and to improve local services and infrastructures. For international humanitarian actors, a favorable local host policy paves the way for long-term refugee integration and a progressive withdrawal from the field. Despite contrasting approaches and visions, each needs the other to accomplish its mission and must find ways to negotiate toward this end. The perspectives of Palestinian refugees and political factions, to which there is little reference in the UNRWA archives, would provide further points of view on refugee management policies in Syria by both local and international actors. A less monolithic vision of humanitarianism and refugee aid shows how these are the product of contrasting visions and divergent interests, far from the universal principles of humanity and neutrality on which they are supposedly based.

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**Endnotes**

1 Anaheed al-Hardan, "The Right of Return Movement in Syria: Building a Culture of Return, Mobilizing Memories for the Return," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 41, no. 2 (Winter 2012): 62–79. Since 1974, PARI has been officially known as the Government Administration for Palestinian Arab Refugees (GAPAR), overseen by the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor. GAPAR is currently composed of two departments: the first in charge of social affairs and civil status, the second in charge of accommodation. See Khadija Fadhel, "Recompositions socio-spatiales d'un camp de réfugiés palestiniens à Damas: Le cas d'al-Yarmûk," in *Les Palestiniens entre État et diaspora: Le temps des incertitudes*, ed. Jalal Al Husseini and Aude Signoles (Paris: Karthala and IISMM, 2011), 312–34.

2 See: Laurie Brand, "Palestinians in Syria: The Politics of Integration," *Middle East Journal* 42, no. 4 (1988): 621–37; Hamad Sa'id Maw'id, *Mukhayyam al-Yarmuk: muqarabat fi susiyulujiyya al-mukhayyam al-Filastini* [Yarmuk camp: approaches in the sociology of the Palestinian camp] (Damascus: Dar al-shajara, 2006); and Fadhel, "Recompositions socio-spatiales." The director of PARI is appointed by the Syrian prime minister and approved by the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs.

3 Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, "The Changing Faces of UNRWA: From the Global to the Local," *Journal of Humanitarian Affairs* 1, no. 1 (2019): 28–41.

4 Julia Pacitto, "South–South Humanitarianism in Contexts of Forced Displacement" (University of Oxford Refugee Studies Center, October 2012), online at (rsc.ox.ac.uk) bit.ly/3PJ0s6g (accessed 6 June 2023); Alastair Ager, "Faith and the Secular: Tensions in Realising Humanitarian Principles," *Forced Migration Review* 48 (November 2014): 16–18; Beste İşleyen, "Humanitarianism and the Non-European World," in *The Routledge International Handbook of Critical Philanthropy and Humanitarianism*, ed. Katharyne Mitchell and Polly Pallister-Wilkins (New York: Routledge, 2023), 125–34.

5 Eva Svoboda and Sara Pantuliano, "International and Local/Diaspora Actors in the Syria Response: A Diverging Set of Systems" (Humanitarian Policy Group Working Paper, March 2015), online at (cdn.odi.org) bit.ly/3JLjgOD (accessed 6 June 2023); Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, "Southern-led Responses to Displacement: Modes of South–South Cooperation?" in *Routledge Handbook of South–South Relations*, ed. Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh and Patricia Daley (New York: Routledge, 2018).

6 Jalal Al-Husseini and Valentina Napolitano, "The Jordanian Policy toward Syrian Refugees: Between Hospitality and Protection of Interests," *Confluences Méditerranée* 110, no. 3 (2019): 127–42.

7 Fadhel, "Recompositions socio-spatiales." *Tawtin* refers to the permanent establishment of Palestinian refugees outside Palestinian territories. It first emerged as a term of protest against improvements in refugee camp infrastructure – when camps were supposed to symbolize the "temporary" nature of Palestinian refugees in the Arab countries. See Riccardo Bocco, "UNRWA and the Palestinian Refugees: A History within History," *Refugee Survey Quarterly* 28, no. 2–3 (2009): 229–52.

8 Before the outbreak of the war in 2011, Syria hosted nearly 525,000 Palestinian refugees officially registered by UNRWA. In 2022, UNRWA counted up to 280,000 Palestine refugees from Syria (PRS) displaced inside Syria, with a further 120,000 displaced to neighboring countries, including Lebanon, Jordan, and Turkey, as well as Egypt and, increasingly, Europe. See "Syria@11," online at www.unrwa.org/syria-crisis (accessed 6 June 2023).

9 After 2011, a number of studies have addressed Palestinian refugees in the context of the Syrian uprising and subsequent civil war, including their secondary displacement to neighboring countries. See: Nidal Bitari, "Yarmuk Refugee Camp and the Syrian Uprising: A View from Within," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 43, no. 1 (Autumn 2013): 61–78; Salim Salamah, "The Unacknowledged Syrians: Mobilization of Palestinian Refugees of Yarmouk in the Syrian Revolution," *Confluences Méditerranée* 99, no. 4 (2016): 47–60; Jalal Al-Husseini and Kamel Doraï, "La vulnérabilité des réfugiés palestiniens à la lumière de la crise syrienne," *Confluences Méditerranée* 87, no. 4 (2013): 95–107; Valentina Napolitano, "From Syria to Lebanon: Migratory and Militant Trajectories of Three Palestinian Women" (Civil Society Knowledge Center, 2016), online at (civilsociety-centre.org) bit.

ly/3OcoTYR (accessed 6 June 2023); and Valentina Napolitano, "Palestinian Refugees and the Syrian Uprising: Subjectivities, Mobilizations, and Challenges," in *The War for Syria: Regional and International Dimensions of the Syrian Uprising*, ed. Raymond Hinnebusch and Adham Saouli (New York: Routledge, 2019), 86–101.

10 See: Sari Hanafi, "Governing the Palestinian Refugee Camps in Lebanon and Syria: The Cases of Nahr el-Bared and Yarmouk Camps," in *Palestinian Refugees: Identity, Space and Place in the Levant*, ed. Are Knudsen and Sari Hanafi (London: Routledge, 2010); Brand, "Palestinians in Syria"; Faedah Totah, "Les Palestiniens de la vielle ville de Damas," in *La Syrie au present: Reflets d'une société*, ed. Baudouin Dupret, Zouhair Ghazzal, Youssef Courbage, and Mohammed al-Dbiyat (Paris: Actes Sud, 2007); and Fadhel, "Recompositions socio-spatiales."

11 See: Faedah M. Totah, "Palestinian Refugees between the City and the Camp," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 52, no. 4 (November 2020): 607–21; and Anaheed al-Hardan, *Palestinians in Syria: Nakba Memories of Shattered Communities* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016).

12 See: Nell Gabiam, "When 'Humanitarianism' Becomes 'Development': The Politics of International Aid in Syria's Palestinian Refugee Camps," *American Anthropologist* 124, no. 1 (2012): 95–107; and Nell Gabiam, *The Politics of Suffering: Syria's Palestinian Refugee Camps* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2016).

13 Gabiam, "When 'Humanitarianism' Becomes 'Development'," 104.

14 The names of these officials are noted here when mentioned in the original documents.

15 For the list of the archives to which I was given access and consulted, see appendix. The documents to which I had access represent only a fraction of UNRWA's material concerning Syria. The folder I was given was chosen by UNRWA employees based on a request for information on Yarmuk camp's construction and management, with no reference to a catalogue of material. Thus, the data here is only partial and gives insight to a circumscribed set of issues pertaining to the relationship between UNRWA and PARI. Moreover, after 2011, I made attempts to access UNRWA's archives again in the hopes of collecting additional data, but my requests have not been approved. This coincided with a change in the official responsible for the archive and in the archive's access policy.

16 See Valentina Napolitano, "Construction, Deconstruction, and Reconstruction of Yarmuk Camp: A Long-Term History of Urban Evolution and Management of a Palestinian Camp in Syria," in *Camps: Genealogy of Refugee Camps in the Middle East*, ed. Ayham Dalal and Kamel Doraï (Beirut: Presses de l'Ifpo, forthcoming).

17 Correspondence between UN Secretary General and UNRWA Commissioner General, "Assistance to Syrian Displaced Persons," 9 October 1967, UNRWA Archives, Amman.

18 Before the outbreak of the war in 2011, Syria hosted nearly 525,000 Palestinian refugees, according to UNRWA figures.

19 This struggle has often been more rhetorical than material. See Ghada Hashem Talhami, *Syria and the Palestinians: The Clash of Nationalism* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2001).

20 Jalal Al Husseini, "The Arab States and the Refugee Issue: A Retrospective View," in *Israel and the Palestinian Refugees*, ed. Eyal Benvenisti, Chaim Gans, and Sari Hanafi (Berlin: Springer, 2008), 436–64.

21 Palestinians have neither the right to vote nor the right to stand for election to the main organs of power. Moreover, they cannot own more than one property per person.

22 Zafir Ibn Khadra, *Suriya wa al-laji'un al-Filastiniyyun al-'arab al-muqimun* [Syria and the resident Palestinian Arab refugees] (Beirut: Dar Kan'an, 2002), 115.

23 Official correspondence from Director of Relief Services to UNRWA General Commissioner, "Camps," 1 April 1970, in RE 400, UNRWA Archives, Amman.

24 Official correspondence between Director of UNRWA and Director of PARI, 27 December 1960, in RE 400(I), UNRWA Archives, Amman.

25 The figure of the camp leader, an intermediary between UNRWA and the Palestinian refugees, disappeared with the assertion of Palestinian political actors in the 1960s and the desire of the UN agency to reduce its involvement in camp management. Extract from Organization Directive no. 5, "Organization of Syrian Region Field Office, Part VII(b)," 1 June 1960, in RE 400, UNRWA Archives, Amman.

26 The refugees who arrived in 1967 settled mainly around Damascus in the Jaramana and Qabr al-Sitt camps and were later resettled in the Yarmuk and Sbeineh camps.
27 The most important Palestinian gatherings in Damascus are in Hayy al-Amin, also known as the Jewish Quarter, and in al-Barza, Rukn al-Din, and Dummar, among others. Totah, "Les Palestiniens."
28 Draft letter from Acting Director, UNRWA, to Mr. Yafi, PARI, 3 November 1960, in RE 400 (1), UNRWA Archives, Amman.
29 Inter Office Memorandum from AD/OPS (Deputy Director of the Syrian Office) to Acting Director, "Yarmouk Camp," 26 October 1960, in RE 400 (I), UNRWA Archives, Amman.
30 Official correspondence from the PARI official in charge with the UNRWA Representative in Syria, 23 November 1960, in 949(23/1), UNRWA Archives, Amman.
31 Inter Office Memorandum from AD/OPS (Deputy Director of the Syrian Office) to Acting Director, "Yarmouk Camp," 26 October 1960, in RE 400 (I), UNRWA Archives, Amman.
32 Jalal Al Husseini, "UNRWA and the Palestinian Nation-Building Process," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 29, no. 2 (Winter 2000): 51–64; Bocco, "UNRWA and the Palestinian Refugees."
33 "Syria Calls for Joint Arab Plan to Counter UNRWA Plans, [to] Liquidate Refugee Problem, and Calls on Arab States to Guarantee Palestinians Freedom of Movement and Work," *al-Thawra*, 6 July 1965, translated into English by the UNRWA Press Office. This conference for Palestinian refugee host countries was organized by the Arab League and met every two years.
34 "Syria Calls for Joint Arab Plan."
35 "The Conspiracy Shows Its Hands: The Role of the Americans and of UNRWA," 1 May 1964, circular no. 11, translated from Arabic to English, in RE 150, UNRWA Archives, Amman.
36 "Conspiracy Shows Its Hands."
37 In 2012, it hosted nearly 150,000 Palestinians officially registered by UNRWA.
38 Letter from S. Yafi, Director of PARI, to Chief of UNRWA Operations, Syrian Region, Damascus, 10 October 1959, in 743(106/1), UNRWA Archives, Amman.
39 Inter Office Memorandum from Director of the Syrian Headquarters to Director General of UNRWA, "Move of Alliance Camp to Yarmouk (Midan)," 26 January 1960, in RE 400 (I), UNRWA Archives, Amman.
40 Letter from S. Yafi, Director of PARI, to Chief of UNRWA Operations, Syrian Region, Damascus, 10 October 1959, in 743(106/1), UNRWA Archives, Amman.
41 Letter from S. Yafi, Director of PARI, to Chief of UNRWA Operations, Syrian Region, Damascus, 10 October 1959, in 743(106/1), UNRWA Archives, Amman.
42 Inter Office Memorandum from AD/OPS (Deputy Director of the Syrian Office) to Acting Director, "Yarmouk Camp," 26 October 1960, in RE 400 (I), UNRWA Archives, Amman.
43 "Unorganized Camps," extract for Quarterly Report for the period ending September 1960 from A/UNRWA Representative, Northern Region of U.A.R., 7 October 1960, 14, in RE 400 (1), UNRWA Archives, Amman. The report reads: "With Alliance camp completely vacated and refugees moved to Yarmouk, the question of UNRWA's policy in regard to responsibility for services [in the] camp [rise] acutely to the fore. Proposals for this new policy were discussed in the HQ cabinet and decision was reached by the Agency expressing its readiness to put in regular health and education and distribution facilities in Yarmouk and participate up to 50% in financing the cost of major undertakings listed in an order of priority (water supply, drainage, etc.) to be constructed and operated by the Syrian authorities was communicated to PARI."
44 Inter Office Memorandum from AD/OPS (Deputy Director of the Syrian Office) to Acting Director, "Yarmouk Camp," 26 October 1960, in RE 400 (I), UNRWA Archives, Amman.
45 Inter Office Memorandum from Chief of Budget Division to General Commissioner, "Road Construction – Yarmouk Camp," 8 August 1968, in BO/7/19 (S/17), UNRWA Archives, Amman.
46 Inter Office Memorandum from Chief of Budget Division to General Commissioner, "Road Construction – Yarmouk Camp."
47 Draft letter from Acting Director to Mr. Yafi, 3 November 1960, in RE 400 (1), UNRWA Archives, Amman.
48 Gabiam, "When 'Humanitarianism' Becomes 'Development.'"
49 See Valentina Napolitano, "S'engager à Yarmouk: Sociologie de la militance palestinienne en Syrie" (PhD diss., École des hautes études en sciences sociales [EHESS] of Paris, 2015).

## Appendix

UNRWA's list of archival files for author's access, consulted in 2011 at UNRWA headquarters, Amman. This list was provided by UNRWA and does not contain all of the archives actually consulted (such as RE 400 and RE 400 (I)).

| File Ref. | Subject | Years | Vol. | Location/ Box |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| RE 210/06 | Displaced Refugees in Syria | 1967–75 | I | RE 8 |
| RE 210/06 | Displaced Refugees in Syria | 1976–83 | II | RE 90 |
| RE 400(7) | Emergency Camps Jordan | 1967–70 | I, II, III, IV | RE 59 |
| RE 400(7) | Emergency Camps Jordan | Feb. 1970–Nov. 1975 | V | RE 60 |
| RE 400(8) | Emergency Camps Syria | 1967–75 | I, II, III | RE 60 |
| RE 400(12) | Emergency Camps Lebanon | Feb. 1977–80 | I, II, III | RE 60 |
| RE 410 | Construction and Maintenance | Jan. 1960–85 | I, II, III, IV | RE 61 |
| RE 410/1 | Road Construction and Maintenance | 1959–75 | I, II | RE 61 |
| RE 410(S) | Construction and Maintenance, Syria | 1959–69 | I | RE 63 |
| RE 410(S) | Construction and Maintenance, Syria | 1970–85 | II | RE 65 |
| RE 410(S) | Construction and Maintenance, Syria | 1986–92 | III | RE 106 |
| RE 410 | Construction and Maintenance | 1986–90 | V | RE 80 |
| RE 430 | Camp Population and Shelter Statistics | 1959–77 | I, II, III, IV | RE 65 |
| RE 430 | Camp Population and Shelter Statistics | 1977–85 | V, VI | RE66 |
| RE 430 | Camp Population and Shelter Statistics | 1986–92 | VII | RE 107 |
| OR 160/2 | Living Condition of Palestine People | 1973–92 | IV,VI | OR 101 |
| LEG 480(S) | Agreement with Syria | 1953–92 | I, II, III | LEG 41 |
| LEG 480/5(14) | Loss Damages due to 1967 | 1967–75 | I, II, III, IV | LEG 26 |