Phantom Archives in a Dispersed History

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Guest Editors

On 8 December 1949, the United Nations established the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) to assist Palestinian refugees expelled from their homes and displaced from their towns and villages after the outbreak of the Arab-Israeli war in 1948–49.[1] Over the decades since then, UNRWA came to influence the shape of Palestinian identity and self-representation, as well as the social, educational, and cultural history of the Palestinian diaspora in the Middle East and beyond. It also had profound impact on the domestic politics of the countries hosting the refugees and UNRWA operations. Despite its often invoked, and in fact quite problematic and controversial, apolitical nature, the organization not only operated in a politically saturated environment, but UNRWA can also be considered a political arena in itself, a dense field of multi-scalar power relations whereby the allegedly apolitical norms of international humanitarianism were deeply shaped and manipulated locally, becoming an incubator of Palestinian political identity and agency.

A fair assessment of the importance of UNRWA at the crossroads between international, regional, and domestic levels begs the question of why UNRWA remains understudied and under-theorized. Despite the centrality of the Middle East in the history of modern "organized compassion" and its integration within shifting international orders over time, global histories of humanitarianism tend to have a Middle Eastern blind spot, so to speak. As Keith Watenpaugh rightly observes, the region is conspicuously absent in the

global history of both human rights and humanitarianism.[2] Recent regional histories of Middle Eastern humanitarianism mostly focus on the Levant in the interwar period as the breeding ground for contemporary human rights thinking in response to the Armenian genocide. This leaves us to wonder why the significance and role of UNRWA, the only UN humanitarian agency created in response to a regionally specific humanitarian crisis and with a mandate separated from the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) after World War II, is marginal in most accounts of later neo-humanitarianism.

Recent historical and anthropological scholarship offers an important corrective to this. Riccardo Bocco, Sari Hanafi, Leila Hilal, and Lex Takkenberg provide relevant sociological and juridical accounts of UNRWA,[3] while Ilana Feldman, Jalal Al Husseini, and others demonstrate UNRWA's emphasis on technocratic developmentalism and its imbrication within the contemporary "full-blown humanitarian industry . . . with its increasing professionalization, standardization, and evaluation metrics."[4] Most importantly, they investigate UNRWA as a prism of divergent claims and aspirations: Palestinian refugees came to inhabit institutional taxonomies while at the same time making use of them to constitute themselves as autonomous and political subjects, despite being inscribed within a present of eternal emergency.[5] New works provide accounts of the social and cultural history of UNRWA, as in the case of educational policies,[6] or use UNRWA's photo and film archive, alongside other institutional and private collections, to explore the forms and meanings in how Palestinian refugees are represented.[7] Work in critical development studies has complemented these narratives, focusing on recent UNRWA organizational crises, setbacks, and chronic lack of funding, and highlighting the profound limits of UNRWA's humanitarian action in the context of a technocratic, apolitical mandate.[8]

Despite this relevant scholarship, the establishment of UNRWA in the aftermath of the 1948 war for Palestine and its daily management and operations in connection with a number of humanitarian, political, and religious institutions of the time remains largely overlooked. Likewise, little has been written about the transformations wrought on UNRWA's internal politics and operations by such turning points as the 1956 Suez crisis, the 1967 war, the first intifada, the Oslo accords, and the second intifada. A social history of UNRWA, from its involvement in the life and networks of the camps, to its role in the broader history of Middle Eastern and global humanitarianism and beyond, still lacks source-based historical investigation.

Archival Labyrinths

In this context, the question of archives is a substantial one. The "phantom sovereign" expressed by UNRWA is in some way reflected in its "phantom" archives.[9] UNRWA's archives have undergone a troubled history of displacement and dispersion. Since the 1990s, various inventory projects have addressed the UNRWA archives' multiple collections over a number of locations.[10] However, financial limitations and political factors hampered this work, leading to the current situation whereby, with the

exception of the UNRWA visual archive, only irregular and limited access to archival material is possible.[11]

In the second half of the 1990s, when the availability of precise quantitative data became a pressing concern for Palestinian negotiators in the context of the faltering Oslo agreements and the breakdown of bilateral talks, the Institute of Jerusalem Studies, with funding from the Swiss Development Cooperation, the Swedish Government, the Ford Foundation, and the Cairo office of the Canadian International Development Agency, deployed a series of initiatives to identify, examine, and digitalize the UNRWA archives, as well as the relevant collections of the International Red Cross located in Geneva and Bern, and of the American Friends Service Committee. These efforts resulted in *Reinterpreting the Historical Record: The Uses of Palestinian Refugee Archives for Social Science Research and Policy Analysis*, edited by Salim Tamari and Elia Zureik, still a fundamental compass for all advocates of Palestinian epistemic justice. The passing of Elia Zureik on 15 January 2023, while this issue of the *Jerusalem Quarterly* was in the final stages of production, prompted us to revisit his work and his claims about the restoration, preservation, and accessibility of Palestinian archives. With that in mind, we are republishing Zureik and Tamari's introduction to *Reinterpreting the Historical Record* in this issue.

The present issue of *JQ* is the first of two special issues that focus on the UN agency for Palestinian refugee relief and its troubled history, reflecting a multidisciplinary approach, engaging and connecting historical, anthropological, and sociological methods. Originally conceived as a single issue, the number and variety of contributions has led us to publish two separate issues, with diverse but complementary scopes and contents. This issue concentrates on the history of the UNRWA archives from their creation to the present; the trajectories and various placements of the written, oral, and visual collections; the politics behind their material and digital preservation policies; their appearance, dispersion, or cessation; conditions of access or denial; and intertwining curatorial practices, critical archival theory, and politics.

Anne Irfan and Joe Kelcey's article "Historical Silencing and Epistemic In/Justice through the UNRWA Archives" places the question of UNRWA archival opaqueness and random accessibility squarely within the important critical scholarship on archives as dispositive, reaffirming dominant epistemologies. Irfan and Kelcey explore the curation of UNRWA's central registry archive, now stored in Amman and previously located in Vienna, Gaza, and Beirut. UNRWA's headquarters, as its central registry pertaining to UNRWA's fields of operations, have been moved several times: scholars have little or no solid information on whether and which documents were lost or destroyed during these phases, especially as a consequence of the Lebanese civil war. Moreover, Irfan and Kelcey point out that

> the under-representation of refugee voices in the archive and the concentration of decision-making power in the hands of a small and predominantly non-Palestinian cadre of senior management, is suggestive of a neo-colonial institutional set-up. This points to a decidedly undemocratic model of governance vis-à-vis the agency's

main constituents: Palestine refugees. It also contrasts with accusations that the agency is biased toward Palestinians – and poses a challenge to UNRWA's own claim that it is a neutral actor on the question of Palestine.

Jalal Al Husseini draws on the archives of UNRWA, the Arab Development Society (ADS), and the International Committee of the Red Cross to unpack the partnership between UNRWA as an international agency and local institutions. "Dilemma of Local Development Partnerships: UNRWA and the Arab Development Society in Jericho (1950–80)" engages development and humanitarian studies to show how refugee (geo)politics, local development, and host authorities shaped how UNRWA service delivery worked or – not infrequently – did not work. Al Husseini shows the fundamental irreconcilability between humanitarian and developmental priorities, and forms of intervention at the local level. His work illuminates the tensions between the refugees' coping strategies and stances vis-à-vis UNRWA, whose aid they feel provisionally entitled to pending the implementation of their right of return, and the ADS's aim to develop Palestinian society beyond humanitarian assistance, irrespective of refugee status.

The importance of looking at UNRWA beyond its institutional archives is also evident in Halima Abu Haneya's contribution. Combining oral history and ethnography, she navigates Shuʻfat refugee camp, whose history has been revisited by a number of important contributions over the last decades,[12] to go beyond official and institutional narratives of Palestinian life after the Nakba. Her work adds to academic and civic efforts by historians, curators, activists, and associations to collect, archive, and use Palestinian oral histories.[13] Abu Haneya explores the diverse paths that brought the Palestinians she interviewed to live in Shuʻfat camp, as well as the processes that produced their identification with and their sense of belonging to Shuʻfat camp as Palestinians, refugees, and Jerusalemites. As Abu Haneya's interviews trouble the notion that "refugee" is a clear, stable, or self-evident category, Nadim Bawalsa's *Transnational Palestine*, reviewed in this issue by Maria Chiara Rioli, also contributes to an effort to think more critically about Palestinian mobilities (voluntary and involuntary) and displacement. Through a study of Palestinian migrations to Latin America in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Bawalsa powerfully argues that any history of Palestinians' exclusion from Palestine – and consequently, their articulation of a Palestinian right of return to Palestine – must begin before 1948.

This special issue also includes an interview by the editors with UNRWA officers Valeria Cetorelli and Dorothée Klaus. Cetorelli and Klaus retrace turning points in the history of UNRWA archives, from the use of Red Cross cards created in 1948–49 to computerization of the family files in 1979 and digitization in the 2000s, and provide information on its latest endeavors, such as the scanning and classifying of documents to reconstruct family trees in the refugee registration information system – a process of archival preservation that involved Palestinian refugees. As a result, in 2021–22, some fifty thousand registered refugees whose families had fled to Lebanon as a result of the destruction of their villages in Palestine in 1948 were linked back to their ancestors through their digitized family

trees. While UNRWA collections remain largely inaccessible to scholars, such efforts demonstrate the need to replace the chimerical regime of documentary (non)consultation, not only to respond to scholarly needs by making documents available to scholars from various disciplines in a transparent way, but also, and more importantly, to acknowledge and realize the legitimate rights of Palestinians to re-appropriate their own histories and cultural heritage. Encouraging precisely such a paradigm shift in archival custody and policy of consultation is a main goal of these special issues.

Finally, the current issue is enriched by historical photographs, mainly related to Shuʻfat and Jericho, whose geographies are discussed in several articles here. A number of the published photographs were generously made available by the UNRWA Film and Photo Archive,[14] while UNRWA donated others to the Institute for Palestine Studies in the late 1970s and early 1980s, forming part of the IPS collections in Beirut. This represents another unexplored case of record circulation, bespeaking UNRWA archival fragmentation.

An increasing interest and attention to Palestinian refugee archives and the availability of funding from Arab, European, and international institutions for research activities and cultural heritage preservation contribute to drive the archival and scholarly work on UNRWA and the opening of its collections. The articles, essays, and interviews in these special issues distill critical knowledge from scholarship and draw on institutional and non-institutional written, oral, and visual sources. They offer a kind of collective call to advocate for and explicitly demand a radical change in the regime of conservation and access to UNRWA records. This could serve to retrace the journeys of an archive, as much "phantasmatic" as tangible, and situate the history of UNRWA in a global framework;[15] but foremost, it should serve to reconnect refugees – Palestinian women, men, children – to their own history.

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Endnotes

1   United Nations General Assembly Resolution 302 (IV). Assistance to Palestinian Refugees, 8 December 1949, A/RES/ 302(IV).

2   Keith David Watenpaugh, for example, notes that Michael Barnett, in his authoritative history of modern humanitarianism, *Empire of Humanity. A History of Humanitarianism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011), "devotes little if any attention to the relief and development operations that took place in the Eastern Mediterranean in the interwar period" and "avoids the work of the UN, national government development agencies, and independent aid organizations that worked among Palestinians displaced in the wake of the creation of the state of Israel." Keith David Watenpaugh, *Bread from Stones: The Middle East and the Making of Modern Humanitarianism* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2015), 206 note 3.

3   See: Riccardo Bocco, "UNRWA and the Palestinian Refugees: A History within History," *Refugee Survey Quarterly* 28, nos. 2/3 (2009): 229–52; and Sari Hanafi, Leila Hilal, and Lex Takkenberg, eds., *UNRWA and Palestinian Refugees: From Relief and Works to Human Development* (London: Routledge, 2014). This fundamental edited volume also contains historical information and appraisals, such as Kjersti Berg's chapter, "From Chaos to Order and Back: The Construction of UNRWA Shelters and Camps, 1950–1970" in Hanafi, Hilal, and Takkenberg, eds., *UNRWA and Palestinian Refugees*, 109–28.

4   Ilana Feldman, *Life Lived in Relief: Humanitarian Predicaments and Palestinian Refugee Politics* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2018), 6. See also by Ilana Feldman: "Humanitarian Care and the Ends of Life: The Politics of Aging and Dying in a Palestinian Refugee Camp," *Cultural Anthropology* 32, no. 1 (2017): 42–67; "Reaction, Experimentation, and Refusal: Palestinian Refugees Confront the Future," *History and Anthropology* 27, no. 4 (2016): 411–29; "Humanitarian Refusals: Palestinian Refugees and Ethnographic Perspectives on Paternalism," in *Paternalism beyond Borders*, ed. Michael Barnett (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 292–315; "Punctuated Humanitarianism: Palestinian Life between the Catastrophic and the Cruddy," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 48, no. 2 (2016): 372–

76; "What Is a Camp? Legitimate Refugee Lives in Spaces of Long-term Displacement," *Geoforum* 66 (2015): 244–52; "Looking for Humanitarian Purpose: Endurance and the Value of Lives in a Palestinian Refugee Camp," *Public Culture* 27, no. 3 (2015): 427–47; and "The Challenge of Categories: UNRWA and the Definition of a 'Palestine Refugee,'" *Journal of Refugee Studies* 25, no. 3 (2012): 387–406.

5   See: Jalal Al Husseini, "UNRWA and the Palestinian Nation-building Process," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 29, no. 2 (2009): 51–64; Jalal Al Husseini, "L'UNRWA et les réfugiés palestiniens: Enjeux humanitaires, intérêts nationaux," *Revue d'études palestiniennes* 86 (2003): 71–85.

6   See Mezna Qato, "A Primer for a New Terrain: Palestinian Schooling in Jordan, 1950," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 48, no. 1 (Autumn 2018): 16–32.

7   On these aspects, see the exhibition "More than the Humanitarian Gaze: Jørgen Grinde's Photography from the Middle East in the 1950s," curated by Kjersti G. Berg, Olaf Knarvik and Synnøve Marie Vik of the University of Bergen Special Collections Library, and its catalogue, with essays by Nadi Abusaada, Yazid Anani, Joe Sacco, Sanabel Abdel Rahman, Øyvind Vågnes, Ilana Feldman, and Mezna Qato. For relevant reflections, see Issam Nassar, "Photography and the Oppressed: On Photographing the Palestinian Refugees," *International Journal for History, Culture, and Modernity* 8, no. 1 (2020): 38–57.

8   See Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, "The Changing Faces of UNRWA: From the Global to the Local," *Journal of Humanitarian Affairs* 1 (2019): 28–41; Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, "UNRWA Financial Crisis: The Impact on Palestinian Employees," *Middle East Report* 286 (2018): 33–36; Noor Tayeh, "Refugee Camps in Gaza: Between Upgrading and Urbicide," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 51, no. 3 (2022): 3–22.

9   Sari Hanafi, "UNRWA as a 'Phantom Sovereign': Governance Practices in Lebanon," in Hanafi, Hilal, and Takkenberg, eds., *UNRWA and Palestinian Refugees*, 258–80.

10   On these topics see Vincent Lemire and Maria Chiara Rioli, "Archives and Potentiality in Jordanian Jerusalem (1948–67)," *Jerusalem Quarterly* 92 (Winter 2022): 143–53.

11 The UNRWA Photo and Film archive, containing 30,520 records, is accessible online at the link unrwa.photoshelter.com (accessed 10 March 2023).

12 See Kjersti G. Berg, "Mu'askar and Shu'fat: Retracing the Histories of Two Palestinian Refugee Camps in Jerusalem," *Jerusalem Quarterly* 88 (Winter 2021): 30–54; Laura Khoury, "Shu'fat Refugee Camp Women Authenticate an Old 'Nakba' and Frame Something 'New' while Narrating It," in *An Oral History of the Palestinian Nakba*, ed. Nahla Abdo and Nur Masalha (London: Zed, 2018), 136–58; Laura Khoury, "Spaces of Truth: Palestinian Refugee Women Reframe Concerns of Jerusalem and Resist Judaisation," *Journal of Holy Land and Palestine Studies* 17, no. 2 (2018): 169–92; Sylvaine Bulle, "Domesticating and Enlarging One's Territory: Day to Day Politics in a Confined Space – the Shu'fat Refugee Camp in East Jerusalem," in *The Social Ecology of Border Landscapes*, ed. Anna Grichting and Michele Zebich-Knos (London: Anthem Press, 2017), 169–80; Sylvaine Bulle, "'We Only Want to Live': From Israeli Domination towards Palestinian Decency in Shu'fat and Other Confined Jerusalem Neighborhoods," *Jerusalem Quarterly* 38 (Summer 2009): 24–34.

13 See Rosemary Sayigh, "Nakba Silencing and the Challenge of Palestinian Oral History," in Masalha and Abdo, *Oral History*, 114–35.

14 The guest editors and the *Jerusalem Quarterly* editorial team express their gratitude to the staff of the UNRWA Film and Photo Archive for their constant availability in the preparation of this issue.

15 See, in this direction, Are John Knudsen and Kjersti G. Berg, eds., *Continental Encampment: Genealogies of Humanitarian Containment* (New York: Berghahn, 2023).