

Popular Services Committees in West Bank Refugee Camps: Political Legacies, Formations, and Tensions

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Abstract

Formed in the mid-1990s, the Popular Services Committees (PSC) in West Bank refugee camps have played a dual role: on the one hand, they are a liaison body between the camps and UNRWA and the Palestinian Authority (PA), and on the other, they perceive themselves as a political body and guardian of the right of return. In this article, Ala Alazzeh ethnographically historicizes the formation and position of the PSCs within the Palestinian political field. The author shows the role of the camp Youth Centers in the formation of PSCs, the post-Oslo tension between camp residents and the PA, and the camp residents' capitalization on the PLO's legacy and authority. He also points out the tension between self-representation of PSCs as a political body versus their de facto practice as municipal-like mediators between refugee camp communities and UNRWA, and the PA.

Keywords

Popular committees; UNRWA; refugee camps; right of return; national liberation.

On Nakba commemoration day in 2022 – under an arch supporting what is claimed to be the largest key in the world, symbolizing the right of return for Palestinian refugees – the head of 'Ayda refugee camp's Popular Services Committee (PSC) addressed hundreds of refugees from the camp and guests from other camps in the Bethlehem area (namely, Dahaysha and al-'Azza (Bayt Jibrin) camps):

More than seventy-four years of the ongoing Nakba, the suffering and injustice continue, the international [community's] complicity to liquidate [*tasfiya*] our case as refugees continues. And yet, we as refugees take – in one way or another – an active role in this. In our case, the first wedge was the formation of the popular committees, which were quickly transformed into services committees used to facilitate UNRWA's reduction of services reduction and more reduction and more reduction until the PCs became responsible for every detail in providing services to the refugees . . . In my name and that of my colleagues in the Popular Committee in 'Ayda camp, I call upon the PLO through the Department of Refugee Affairs to cancel the services component and character of the PCs and return these functions to the UN through UNRWA.

These harsh, self-critical, and reflective words from Sa'id al-'Azzeh, head of 'Ayda's PSC since 2018, illuminate the tensions: between the mandate and political role of the PSCs; UNRWA as a legal body and service provider; the Palestinian Authority (PA) as host political entity of the refugees; and the PLO as the political umbrella under which the PSCs formally operate.¹ These can be understood broadly as tensions: between the PA and the PLO over political representation of the refugees; between the PA and UNRWA over the welfare of the refugees; among various parties over the goal of improving the living conditions within the camp versus the right of return; and more generally around the refugees' position in the larger Palestinian political structure following Oslo. Addressing the formation, rise, and decline of the PSCs' role in the context of the political and social needs of the refugees in the camps helps to unpack these multilayered tensions. In this article, I show how the formation of the Popular Services Committees in the mid-1990s has a long history within West Bank refugee camps linked to previously existing institutions, particularly the Youth Centers (*marakiz al-shabab*, officially called Youth Activities Centers) established by UNRWA.² The article then examines how the PSCs negotiated their position between UNRWA, the PA, the PLO, and the local community. More recently, the PSCs have been subject to critique and self-critique because of their decreased political role.

Although the Popular Services Committees perceive themselves as a continuation of the anti-colonial ethos and movements that grew from the 1970s, they must also negotiate with a new Palestinian political body (the PA) and the transformation of UNRWA's role over the years. After the establishment of the PA in 1994, its Ministry of Local Government suggested that the refugee camps either become part of the municipalities in which they are located or become governed by local bodies under the auspices of the ministry. Refugee camp activists rejected both proposals; they viewed them as tantamount to surrendering the right of return and normalizing the presence of the refugee camps, by giving them the same status as any other locality and thus stripping them of the specific history of their formation due to the Nakba. Such normalization would also signify a recognition of the camps as permanent rather than affirmation of their temporary nature, a status that the refugees hold onto. The

camps' rejection of this change in status was rooted in mobilization that began two years earlier, initiated by the Union of Youth Activity Centers (UYAC). The refugee camp activists insisted that the PA was a "host country," and the PLO was the legal and political representative of the refugees.³ They put pressure on the PLO leadership – at the time officially independent from the PA – to maintain the refugee camps' distinct status. Their political representation would continue to be through the PLO (not the PA) and UNRWA would continue to provide services, bearing sole responsibility for development of the refugee camp and relief of the camp residents. The PLO Department of Refugee Affairs thus officially established PSCs in all nineteen refugee camps in the West Bank in 1996.

In this article, I discuss three components of this history: UYAC mobilization in the refugee camps leading up to the first intifada; refugee camp initiatives in the 1990s that sought to maintain a national liberation ethos built around the right of return; and the PSCs' negotiation of their position in relation to the PA, UNRWA, and local communities in an effort to maintain their culture around the right of return while improving the living conditions for the residents of the refugee camps. Recent academic work on refugee camps as an object of inquiry has studied camps through a number of lenses, including the materiality of the camp, its relationship to the city, spatial and identity positioning, modes of negotiation of daily life challenges, governance and exception, UNRWA's humanitarian mission and practices, transformations of UNRWA's humanitarian approaches, and critique of the anti-political humanitarianism of UNRWA.⁴ Yet, refugee camps – arguably among the most highly politicized Palestinian communities and the site and target of symbolic and tangible violence of the ongoing settler-colonial project in Palestine – have been understudied concerning the political agency of the refugee camp residents.⁵ Here, I approach the refugee camp not as an object or site of inquiry or a designator of spatial politics and violence, but as a place of political agency that challenges dominant mappings of politics in Palestine. I demonstrate through the voices of the people from the camp how the formation and practices of PSCs in three refugee camps in the West Bank disrupt the dominant paradigm that understands Palestinian politics through a sharp differentiation of the periods before and after the Oslo accords, which represented the transition for Palestinians from a struggle for national liberation to a state-building project.⁶

From Youth Centers to a Refugee Political Movement

At the entrance to 'Ayda camp near the office of the UNRWA camp director (*mudir al-mukhayyam*), political slogans painted on the walls express the right of return, support for political prisoners, and politically loaded symbols. Mustafa, a local tour guide from the camp in his mid-twenties, explained to me that some alternative tourist agencies had assigned 'Ayda camp as a tourist site. As he was conducting a tour with German tourists, he introduced me as a refugee from Bayt Jibrin (al-'Azza) camp (where I used to live). He explained to them how the three refugee camps in the Bethlehem area share a common history and similar living conditions and aspirations. To highlight

this history, he explained how the three camps used to have one soccer team from the 1980s to the early 1990s. Such an introduction was not a surprise to me, as the team was seen and thought of as a political endeavor in addition to an athletic one.

The connection between sports and politics in refugee camps in the West Bank goes even further back in the history of the political culture and organizing in the camps. In the 1950s, UNRWA created Youth Centers in the refugee camps to offer a space for sport activities, predominantly targeting male refugees. (A different institution called the Women's Program Centers targeted female refugees.)⁷ The Israeli occupation closed some centers in the West Bank from 1967 to 1972; they then reopened in 1972 as sports sites operated, financially supported, and monitored by UNRWA. Kamal from Dahaysha camp recalled: "The UNRWA social services department used to offer uniforms, balls, and basic sports equipment, and monitor the annual elections [for the YC administration]." Khalid, another Dahaysha soccer player and active member in its YC described the transformations in the YC in the following way:

The Youth Center used to be led by a few men from the older generation who cared only about sports, no political or intellectual affiliation, a group of traditional leaders [*taqlidiyyin*]. In 1976 or 1977 those traditional leaders lost the election to a new group, mainly leftists and almost all of whom were recently released from Israeli jails. That was the moment when the center became full of activities beyond sports It became full of cultural activities, including book readings of political texts and novels. The center hosted music events and theatrical plays. All played a role in creating a generation of political activists.

In similar terms, Hussam Khader, a central figure in the Fatah movement and community leader from Balata Camp in Nablus, described the election of 1979–80 for leadership of Balata's YC as one in which political activists (mainly from Fatah and many ex-political prisoners) ran against what he described as an "apolitical, sports only, traditional administration" of the YC. Khader described the moment with a smile on his face: "We collected all politically affiliated youth from the camp, al-Najah University students, and those in the [labor] unions, and asked them to become members in the YC. We became the majority and won by an enormous margin."

In both accounts, winning the YC elections meant transforming the centers from apolitical institutions into pro-PLO establishments. The change coincided with the overall dynamic in the West Bank, where mass organizations such as labor unions, voluntary work organizations, and student and women's organizations became part of the national infrastructure that replaced traditional structures and colonial control and enabled the mass mobilization of the first intifada in 1987.⁸ Meanwhile professional and cultural institutions such as universities and cultural forums, although not adopting mass mobilization strategies, also played a major role in advancing anti-colonial political consciousness.⁹

Soon, small UNRWA-established sport facilities became sites at the heart of national politics. In a 1977 interview in *al-Fajr* newspaper with Hamdi Farraj, the head of

administration of Dahaysha camp's YC, the interviewer's editorial introduction states: "One feels proud to see national institutions growing in the homeland that show the human face and the best image of the struggle."¹⁰ In the interview, Farraj stressed the cultural and social role of the YC beyond the camp and beyond soccer. He stressed the center's participation in voluntary work activities, hosting lectures, producing a cultural publication, and participating in the Palestinian heritage days at Bethlehem University, among other activities. The YC was seen as a national institution. In 1978, the YC administration sought donations from the pro-PLO elected Hebron municipal council to fulfill its "national duties," and in less than one week the head of the council, Fahd al-Qawasmi, approved the donation.¹¹

In contrast to Dahaysha camp's YC, 'Ayda camp's YC maintained a sports-only administration. Nevertheless, the general atmosphere made politics inevitable and cultural-political activities started to develop in the 'Ayda YC in the early 1980s.¹² Anas Abu Srouf, the current director of 'Ayda camp's YC, described the YC as an "authentic institution that symbolizes the political history of the camp and which is open to everyone in the community." His words speak to the centrality of the YCs in the refugee camps' political history and memory and the rapid gains of the pro-PLO activists in the West Bank camps in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The reference to "authenticity" in Anas's account was elaborated upon by another member of the YC in Dahaysha: "We built it. It has an open membership to all male members of the community, and its administration is democratically elected annually."¹³

According to all accounts, the YCs' buildings were built through the voluntary work of young people in the communities. UNRWA reported in 1978 that

cash, labor, and materials were contributed by members of the centers and the refugee community as a whole. Youth services to the community included special programs for orphans, informal classes for illiterates, tutoring lessons for pupils, assistance in cleanliness campaigns and visits to sick and elderly camp residents.¹⁴

Yet within a few years, Israel started shutting down the Youth Centers in the camps, beginning with Qalandiya camp on 13 December 1981, followed by Dahaysha camp, Balata camp, and 'Arrub and Fawwar camps in Hebron (in April, May, and June 1982, respectively).¹⁵ Tulkarm's YC was shut down from 29 October 1983 until 17 May 1984, and 'Ayda's YC remained closed after 11 March 1983.¹⁶ UNRWA stated in its report in 1983: "Discussions continue with the Israeli authorities to have all these centers reopened, but the Agency has been informed that this is not yet possible for security reasons."¹⁷ UNRWA continued to report to the UN General Assembly about the YCs until 1986, when a noticeable change can be identified in its way of reporting. UNRWA distanced itself from the YCs by highlighting that "the agency also encourages but does not organize or administer youth activities."¹⁸ Despite the closure of the YCs in Dahaysha and 'Ayda, a new initiative emerged by local leaders in Dahaysha at the time. To bypass the Israeli closures of the YCs, Salah 'Abid Rabbu established a new soccer team named 'Ud (عد). The two-lettered name was an abbreviation of the first

letter of the two camps' names and is the imperative "return" in Arabic. The new team continued to play a political role. Its formation was announced during a game with al-Bireh's YC and Ibrahim al-Tawil, the pro-PLO elected head of al-Bireh municipality whom Israel had just removed from office, was to honor the winner. Two years later, the team refused to continue playing in a tournament in Jericho because the Israeli-appointed head of the municipality came to honor the winner.¹⁹

With the outbreak of the 1987 intifada, all cultural and sports activities were suspended, and the YCs continued to be closed by Israel. In 1992, the centers were re-opened with no official clearance from the Israeli occupation authorities, and sports activities in the West Bank resumed. During this time, political activists from Dahaysha, Qalandiya, and Balata camps formed the Union of Youth Activity Centers (UYAC) as an umbrella institution for the refugee camps' social and cultural activities. In the following few years, most of the YCs elected new administrations and the UYAC gained the legitimacy to address refugee political issues, this time confronting the PLO official line.

What originated as a small UNRWA relief and social institution shifted to become a site for political pedagogy and organizing, and a mobilizing force that defies the common trope of refugee camps as isolated or states of exception. Adel Yahya, among others, argued that the refugee camps were at the heart of national politics some twenty years before the outbreak of the 1987 intifada.²⁰ Such a claim has merit when considering that the camps had been the target of more intense Israeli occupation, harassment, and punishment than other localities in the West Bank.²¹ Moreover, political mobilization and organizing, and confrontation with the Israeli military occupation, were present in the refugee camps since the early moments of occupation in 1967.²²

In August 1994, the UYAC and other refugee camp leaders – most of whom were invited by Hussam Khader of Balata – attended a meeting for refugee camp leadership to be held in Nur Shams camp in Nablus. Hussam told me, "The meeting was a response to Arafat's speech on the day in July 1994 he arrived in Gaza, after the Oslo accords, where Arafat did not mention the right of return for refugees. Part of the meeting discussed forming a political movement to represent and unify Palestinian refugees in Palestine and the diaspora."²³ The result was the Committee for the Defense of Palestinian Refugee Rights (CDPRR).²⁴

From Refugees' Political Movement to Popular Committees

The CDPRR put aside its goal of creating an independent (that is, outside the auspices of the PLO) refugee political movement and instead focused on building a grassroots challenge to the official leadership of the newly formed PA. The Committee outlined its aims as "unifying the goals of the Palestinians toward the right of return as a political right and standing against projects promoting the re-settlement [of refugees], their integration [within the host countries], and compensation [instead of return]."²⁵ This political statement insinuated that the PLO's position as the sole political

representative of the Palestinian people was compromised and thus needed to be reshaped. The CDPRR also stressed improving living conditions for the residents in the refugee camps, as well as preserving UNRWA as the “international institutional body that represents the international community’s responsibility toward the refugee question.”²⁶ In 2009, Salah ‘Abid Rabbu, spokesperson of the Union of Youth Activity Centers, described these early efforts to give Palestinian refugees a voice in the wake of the Oslo accords requiring “nonstop coordination with all activists we know in the refugee camps, from all political backgrounds in order to develop the best strategy to make our concerns visible.”²⁷ Such efforts were an early warning from refugee camp activists about the Oslo process’s compromises, and also a threat to the PA’s emerging societal control.

Sociologist Jamil Hilal analyzed the PA’s formative years in 1995–96, when the majority of first intifada activists (mainly from the Fatah movement) were incorporated into either the security forces or the civil bureaucracy and controlled civil society institutions, as a period during which the PA sought to establish hegemony.²⁸ A grassroots initiative coming from the UYAC challenged PA hegemony over the refugee camps. Coming on the seventh anniversary of the PLO’s declaration of independence (1988), the UYAC published a statement on 13 November 1995 in *al-Quds* newspaper stating:

The Oslo accords pushed aside the refugee question in its first phase and threw it into the unknown of the final phase [negotiations], creating disappointment and depression among the refugees, while raising concern and questions about their national destiny and social future, primarily because the refugee question is the mother of all national questions and the center of national struggle, and it is the question that the PLO was created for.²⁹

This critique of the Oslo accords did not come from rival political factions but rather from a substantial sector of Palestinian society and specifically from the refugee camps with their symbolic weight. The UYAC claimed a representational position as a “democratically elected voluntary union representing a wide youth base from all the refugee camps” in the West Bank.³⁰ The UYAC’s legitimacy was key, as ‘Abid Rabbu pointed out: “The UYAC is not a political union in its missions or goals, and yet, coming from a sense of historical responsibility, the UYAC saw it as national duty” to produce the statement that called upon all “national, religious, and social forces to take the initiative in forming active [right of return] defense committees in the refugee camps and to hold regional conferences leading up to a general conference for Palestinian refugees to study the challenges and dangers that face them.”³¹ The statement stressed the right of return as a central slogan and also addressed the intended Palestinian Legislative Council elections, arguing that the proposed election law “does not reflect the factional, political, and ideological diversity of Palestinians and therefore endangers the unity of the Palestinians ... and also adds more challenges to the refugee question.”³²

At the time, the common belief among refugees and the general public was that the Oslo accords would lead to a final agreement in which the PA would surrender the right of return and instead accept financial compensation for the refugees. UNRWA's direct involvement in potential political solutions, which first took place in multilateral negotiations held in Turkey in 1994, also put its position under suspicion. As 'Adnan 'Ajarama from 'Ayda Camp's PSC commented: "We saw UNRWA's actions – such as the move of its headquarters from Vienna to Gaza, the Peace Implantation Project (PIP), and its participation in the multilateral negotiation meetings – as politically motivated steps that had nothing to do with its [UNRWA's] mandate but rather a step toward dismantling the agency and compromising the right of return."³³ With these political transformations, the UYAC called for a refugee conference to be held on 8 December 1995 in the recently evacuated Far'a jail, a former Israeli interrogation center, near al-Far'a refugee camp. The location and timing were significant, marking the eighth anniversary of the 1987 intifada. A year later, Salah 'Abid Rabbu reflected on the symbolism of the conference in a poetic description:

Refugees from all generations walked under the banner of the UYAC with its nineteen rays representing the nineteen refugee camps ... the generation of 1948 and the generation of the intifada met, both generations carrying the same meaning, worries, and questions ... and in their eyes [we see] the concerns and the fear for the most sacred national questions.³⁴

He added another layer to the description when he described the conference starting over an hour late because attendees from the generation of the intifada were busy examining the jail cells and recalling their memories:

They [the generation of the intifada] insisted on communicating to the generation of 1948 ... not only their experiences with interrogation and hanging in the cells and torture, but also how upon their release [mostly] at nighttime, they found the camp [al-Far'a] awaiting them with warmth, accommodation, food, and tenderness, and the stories of al-Far'a refugee camps' kids coming and throwing packs of cigarettes to the prisoners and telling them the news of the outside world ... This jail contains ten years of stories and legends ... of torture and steadfastness.³⁵

While the UYCA was organizing on the meta-politics of national representation, the newly formed PA was establishing its control over the refugee camps. A suggestion came from the Ministry of Local Government to create an administrative body in each camp. As Kamal, a member of the first PC in Dahaysha told me: "They [PA] want to treat us as any other locality, like a municipality or a village council, and do not see the refugee camp as a political space or a question."³⁶ The ministry's proposal was rejected by the activists in the camps as an attempt toward "normalization of the abnormal, making the temporary permanent."³⁷ The activists stressed the political

nature, abnormality, and temporariness of the camp and sought political representation through the PLO and not the PA, pressuring the PLO not to abandon the right of return.

This grassroots pressure contributed to the PLO's formation of the Department of Refugee Affairs in its 1996 National Council meeting in Gaza. The department began to establish Popular Services Committees in each refugee camp for the purpose of facilitating the services provided by UNRWA and the PA to the refugee camps, as well as maintaining the political nature of the refugee camps, defending the right of return, and overseeing the negotiation on the issue of the refugees.³⁸ Ibrahim from al-'Azza camp described his confrontation with the head of the PSC in the camp in the late 1990s: "When I asked the head of the PSC to put pressure on UNRWA to improve the sanitation in the camp, the head was angry and pulled a paper from his shirt pocket saying that he was appointed by Arafat. He said: 'I am a representative of the PLO. I am not the municipality.'"³⁹ The PSCs found themselves operating in a field of power among institutional structures like the PA, UNRWA, and the PLO, while balancing the right of return as a political project and the daily living needs of the camp residents. Such positioning foregrounded questions of their authority, legitimacy, responsibilities, and visions, which were also undergoing continual transformations according to shifting power dynamics between the major institutional actors.

The Tension of Services

They are not called Services Committees ... This is a name associated with and used by UNRWA. We call ourselves the Popular Committees ... to make it clear, the committees were formed as a political reaction to the disregard of the refugee issue by the peace-making project between the PLO and the state of Israel.

This was the response of 'Adnan 'Ajarama, the previous head of the Popular Committee in 'Ayda refugee camp, when I asked about the PSCs.⁴⁰ Although officially the committees are called Popular Service Committees, committee members are uncomfortable with the notion of "services." For them, services mean, on the one hand, providing for the needs of the residents of the camps and therefore taking on UNRWA's mandate, and, on the other an attempt by UNRWA "to depoliticize refugees and their representatives."⁴¹ The committees' self-perception as a form of refugee political representation can be seen in discussions about the committees' composition and their involvement in municipal elections in the West Bank.

Since the late 1990s, the composition of PSCs was based on an agreement among political faction representatives in the camps and a process of nominating individuals politically connected to PLO factions. In 'Ayda, Dahaysha, and al-'Azza refugee camps, Hamas-associated individuals were also nominated. Some camp residents did not support elections for the PSCs because of their concern that electoral legitimacy

could be co-opted by institutional powers, largely the PA, to compromise the right of return in political negotiations. Other residents questioned the legitimacy of the PSCs and requested that PSC representatives be elected. Several committee members told me that they were not against elections, but they feared that the committees would be viewed as a municipal council and would replace UNRWA as a service provider.

Since the al-Far'a conference, the issue of refugee camp residents' participation in municipal elections has been discussed. The overwhelming majority rejected the idea that refugee camp residents participate because they viewed the PA as a "host country" for the refugees, like any other Arab state. Thus, to participate in the municipal elections would be to treat the refugee camp as any other neighborhood or community, dissolving the legal status of refugee. It would also enable UNRWA to absolve itself of the responsibility to provide services to the camps, while also diminishing the political signification of the camps as symbolizing the right of return. This rejection was maintained in PSC meetings in 1996 and 1997. In 2004, the Department of Refugee Affairs held a workshop on the issue of refugee camp participation in local elections attended by more than fifty individuals from the PSCs and representatives from political factions.⁴² Several presented papers for discussion on issues related to PSC or municipal elections, such as their legality, their potential impact on the development of the camps and relations with UNRWA, and their political consequences.

After the workshop, and without involving the Department of Refugee Affairs, PSCs in the West Bank issued a statement that stressed the necessity to maintain the independence of the refugee camps and their particularity and political identity to "remain as witnesses to the Zionist crime" [the Nakba], as well as an assurance that refugee camp residents can elect their representatives for the PSCs within the borders of the camp and under the political, legal, and administrative direction of the Department of Refugee Affairs. The statement also requested that the department coordinate with the PA and its ministries to create a legal regulation for these camp elections.

The legal regulation, officially called the internal code for the PSCs, was instituted in 2011 and required the creation of a general assembly comprised of individuals from PLO factions and those active in institutions within the camp such as the Youth Activity Centers, Women's Program Centers, and other initiatives. The general assembly, which should be no less than 1 percent of the refugee camp population, would have the mandate to elect from seven to thirteen PSC members. The shift from the 2004 statement that spoke about general elections in the camps to choose their representatives to the 2011 code that limited the electing body to be in effect 1 percent of the residents was a politically motivated transformation due to the Department of Refugee Affairs' fear that Hamas would win camp elections following its victory in the 2007 legislative elections. We see this clearly in point 2 of article 7 of the code that states that the PSCs must acknowledge "the PLO as the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people."⁴³ These two aspects of the code were meant to prevent Hamas-affiliated members from participating in the elections or leading the PSCs. Many camp residents criticized the code as subverting legitimate representation of the camps.⁴⁴

With regard to UNRWA, the code stated that among the PSCs' responsibilities was to follow up daily with UNRWA's administered services, to encourage the development of those services, and to protest their reduction as well as any initiative to cancel the right of return. The PSCs put pressure on UNRWA to improve its services to the camps in terms of its emergency and regular programs of relief, education, and health. At the same time, the PSCs were aware of the political agenda, led primarily by the United States, to dismantle UNRWA and undermine its mandate.⁴⁵ This was most visible during Donald Trump's presidency, when he stopped all U.S. funding to UNRWA. In 2007, the Department of Refugee Affairs held a meeting for all the PSCs in the West Bank, UNRWA's director, and UNRWA's head of programs. In the meeting, the PSCs played the role of monitoring and questioning UNRWA's operations, programs, and practices in the camps, including their employment policies, the existence of health clinics, and the quality of education, to name only a few.⁴⁶ As one of the members of the PSCs in 'Ayda refugee camp proudly told me: "We know everything within UNRWA, who works to serve the refugees and who does not. We follow their work and reports. We are UNRWA's monitoring body."⁴⁷

PSC members have described UNRWA's policies as being based on a language of humanitarian relief and "need."⁴⁸ In this dynamic, UNRWA expects PSCs to play a mediating role with the refugee camp community that in effect facilitates UNRWA's operations while giving the PSCs a sense of meaning to their work. Ahmad, an al-'Azza refugee camp PSC member, commented:

They [UNRWA] want us to play a mediator role for them ... and we were willing to do that, but we were not willing to be a replacement for UNRWA ... We will always be on the side of our community ... everyone in the community talks about their rights and UNRWA's obligations ... at times we feel that we and UNRWA speak different languages.⁴⁹

The PSCs see UNRWA's services not only as interim humanitarian interventions but as a matter of rights and obligations – in other words, the right of refugees to get some form of "symbolic compensation" for their daily suffering. The food ration (as an example) signifies the world's responsibility for the refugees' conditions embodied in UNRWA's mandate toward them, while also serving as a status-affirming practice, namely recognition of their legal status as refugees.⁵⁰

The PSCs' mediating role is one of negotiation that at times compromises what are considered the rights of the community. As one Dahaysha refugee camp PSC member told me:

The formal policy of assessing a family's needs takes the form of a visit by an UNRWA social worker who implements guidelines of who is and who is not considered in need. We [PSC members] have little control to revise these guidelines. We [the PSC] argue with them about the criteria in general ... usually failing ... We then go to the UNRWA employees starting from the lower-ranking ones, making our way up to the chief of

the program ... In the end, how does the issue get solved? Usually they give us an additional number of food rations for the community and in return UNRWA expects us to convince the excluded families to accept.⁵¹

Although the PCSs are often able to achieve some increase in the number of relief recipients, they acknowledge their difficulties in negotiating or addressing UNRWA's policies.

The Popular Services Committees' presence in the community becomes more visible during planning and implementation of UNRWA's emergency relief and infrastructure development programs because of UNRWA's increased daily contact with the PCSs in those moments. However, since 2018, PSC members have seen fewer development projects undertaken by UNRWA in the refugee camps. PSCs have thus sought funding from other sources such as PA ministries, Mahmud 'Abbas's presidential office, the PLO Department of Refugee Affairs, and international donors in order to implement development projects in the camps such as paving streets, creating public spaces for residents, and maintaining houses, sewage systems, and water pipelines. The tensions highlighted in my interviews with PSC members were based on their understanding of the needs of the refugee communities alongside the fear that the PSCs were being forced to take over UNRWA's role and responsibilities. These dynamics maintain the PSCs' role as service recipients and facilitators, which is seen by PSC members as depoliticizing and limiting the political vision of the PSCs.

Conclusion

Since their formation, the PSCs have played a role that aids both UNRWA's and the PA's governing of the refugee camp communities. Yet they also proudly define this role as one that uses the power and resources offered by UNRWA and the PA to actively maintain the culture of the right of return. PSC negotiations with UNRWA and the PA are bounded by a national liberation discourse that grew from political consciousness activities within the camps and that has not dissolved under the hegemony of the state-building project. Because of their affiliation with the PLO (and not the PA), their discourse and adherence to the right of return, and their foundation in the national consciousness from the early days following the 1967 occupation, the PSCs also challenge the dominant paradigm of thinking about Palestinian politics – one that views Oslo as a historical, social, and economic break between national liberation politics and a state-building project.

While representation of Palestinian resistance to Oslo has often focused on the political discourse of rival factions, this article elaborates a different modality of opposition and critique, one manifested specifically through grassroots mobilization. As refugee camps are themselves living sites of the settler-colonial project and its violence, the multilayered, transforming politics of the refugee camps are central to Palestinians' anticolonial consciousness. The construction of this political consciousness over the years must be understood from the perspectives of refugee camp residents themselves, including how camp residents hold the PSCs accountable

to a national liberation ethos centered on the right of return. The experiences of the refugee camps' residents thus provide a lens that gives historical depth to Palestinian national politics, institutional power dynamics, and grassroots mobilization.

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Endnotes

- 1 In interviews, most members of the PSCs self-described the committees as Popular Committees because of the apolitical connotation of the term "services." Interviews for this article were conducted in two phases: the first was in 2009 and the research based on these interviews was presented at a panel ("Sixty Years On: A Critical Revisiting of UNRWA for Palestine Refugees") supported by the Palestinian American Research Council at the 2009 annual conference of the Middle East Studies Association of North America; the second research phase was conducted in 2022. The main interviews for this article were thus conducted over ten years apart, while the research continued via informal interviews and media analysis of the PSCs. It is important to note that utilizing what may be considered "old" ethnographic data becomes necessary and beneficial when practices are governed by relatively stable fields of power and when the ethnographic object of inquiry is institutional; thus, individual interlocutors' reflections and narratives become illuminating traces of the structures of power rather than a main site of analysis.
- 2 This research is based in the West Bank due to colonial restrictions on the movement of Palestinian researchers. Therefore, it is difficult to extricate ethnographically valid comparisons between the case of the PSCs in the West Bank and Gaza.
- 3 'Adnan 'Ajarama and Samir 'Ata from 'Ayda refugee camp's PSC, interview by author, summer 2009. Under pressure from the refugee camp PSCs and the larger refugee movement, the PLO requested that the PA be treated by UNRWA as a "host country," the same as Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria. This status signifies that refugees are temporarily under the authority of the PA until the question of the refugees would be resolved, which for Palestinian refugees entails the return to the villages, town, and cities in which they resided before 1948.
- 4 See, for example: Nasser Abourahme, "Assembling and Spilling-Over: Towards an 'Ethnography of Cement' in a Palestinian Refugee Camp," *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 39, no. 2 (2014): 200–217; Dorota Woroniecka-Krzyzanowska, "The Right to the Camp: Spatial Politics of Protracted Encampment in the West Bank," *Political Geography* 61 (2017): 160–69; Alessandra Gola, "Homing Displacements: Socio-Spatial Identities in Contemporary Urban Palestine," in *Making Home(s) in Displacement: Critical Reflections on a Spatial Practice*, ed. Alessandra Gola, Luce Beeckmans, Ashika Singh, and Hilde Heynen (Leuven, Belgium: Leuven University Press, 2022), 239–64; Dorota Woroniecka-Krzyzanowska, "The Meanings of Ordinary in Times of Crisis: The Case of a Palestinian Refugee Camp in the West Bank," *Polish Sociological Review* 187 (2014): 395–410; Penny Johnson, "Tales of Strength and Danger: Sahar and the Tactics of Everyday Life in Amari Refugee Camp, Palestine," *Signs* 32, no. 3 (2007): 597–619; Sari Hanafi and Taylor Long, "Governance, Governmentalities, and the State of Exception in the Palestinian Refugee Camps of Lebanon," *Journal of Refugee Studies* 23, no. 2 (June 2010): 134–59; Ilana Feldman, "Palestinian Refugee Experience in a Changing Humanitarian Order," Birzeit University Working Paper 2011/58(ENG), online at (ssrn.com) bit.ly/30qXSAU; Jalal Al Hussein, "UNRWA and the Refugees: A Difficult but Lasting Marriage," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 40, no. 1 (2010): 6–26; and Linda Tabar, "The 'Urban Redesign' of Jenin Refugee Camp: Humanitarian Intervention and Rational Violence," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 41, no. 2 (2012): 44–61.
- 5 See Maya Rosenfeld, *Confronting the*

- Occupation: Work, Education, and Political Activism of Palestinian Families in a Refugee Camp* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004).
- 6 See, for example, Jamil Hilal, *al-Nidham al-siyasi ba'd Oslo: dirasa tahliliyya naqdiyya* [The Palestinian political system after Oslo: a critical assessment] (Ramallah and Beirut: Muwatin, the Palestinian Institute for the Study of Democracy, and Institute of Palestine Studies, 1998).
 - 7 UNRWA's Women's Program Centers promote traditional roles for women within the household that include trainings on housekeeping, cooking, sewing, and beautification. Also note UNRWA's gender-based discrimination in refugee status which is given through the patrilineal line only. See Christine M. Cervenak, "Promoting Inequality: Gender-Based Discrimination in UNRWA's Approach to Palestine Refugee Status," *Human Rights Quarterly* 16, no. 2 (1994): 300–374.
 - 8 Lisa Taraki, "Mass Organizations in the West Bank," in *Occupation: Israel over Palestine*, ed. Naseer Aruri (Belmont, MA: Association of Arab-American University Graduates, 1989), 431–52.
 - 9 Lisa Taraki, "The Development of Political Consciousness among Palestinians in the Occupied Territories," in *Intifada: Palestine at the Crossroads*, ed. Jamal Raji Nassar and Roger Heacock (New York: Praeger, 1991), 53–72.
 - 10 'Umran al-Sharabati, "Waqfatun 'ala nashatat markaz shabab al-Dahaysha" [Elaborating on the Activities of the Dahaysha Youth Center], *al-Fajr* (Jerusalem), 8 June 1977, 5, online at (palarchive.org) bit.ly/3Y38Ob7 (accessed 22 May 2023).
 - 11 Letter sent on 16 July 1978, response received on 25 July 1978. These letters can be found online in the Palestinian Museum Digital Archive, at (palarchive.org) bit.ly/3K888LW and (palarchive.org) bit.ly/3XDMynU, respectively (accessed 22 May 2023).
 - 12 Interview with one of the football players and political activists from the first intifada from al-'Azza refugee camp, summer 2022.
 - 13 Their notion of inclusivity is clearly gendered.
 - 14 "Report of the Commissioner-General of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East, 1 July 1977–30 June 1978," General Assembly 33rd session, Supplement no. 13 (A/33/13), online at (digitallibrary.un.org) bit.ly/44ezdEX (accessed 22 May 2023).
 - 15 "Report of the Commissioner-General of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East, 1 July 1981–30 June 1982," General Assembly 37th session, Supplement no. 13 (A/37/13), online at (un.org) bit.ly/3pKas4u (accessed 22 May 2023).
 - 16 "Report of the Commissioner-General of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East, 1 July 1982–30 June 1983," General Assembly 38th session, Supplement no. 13 (A/38/13), online at (digitallibrary.un.org) bit.ly/46z3jEN (accessed 22 May 2023).
 - 17 "Report of the Commissioner-General of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East, 1 July 1982–30 June 1983."
 - 18 Report of the Commissioner-General of UNRWA to the UN General Assembly, 1986.
 - 19 Interview with Khalid, a football player from Dahaysha refugee camp, summer 2022.
 - 20 Adel Yahya, "The Role of the Refugee Camps," in *Intifada*, ed. Nassar and Heacock, 91–106.
 - 21 Sarah Graham-Brown, "Impact on the Social Structure of Palestinian Society," in *Occupation*, ed. Aruri, 167–222.
 - 22 Rosenfeld, *Confronting the Occupation*.
 - 23 Hussam Khader, conversation/interview with the author, summer 2022. Khader is a Fatah leader and well known for his opposition to PA chairman Mahmud 'Abbas. Before the first intifada, he had already been arrested twenty-three times, and in early 1988 he was in the first group of intifada activists to be deported.
 - 24 Several committees with similar names were formed in the mid-1990s in the West Bank and Gaza, 1948 occupied Palestine, and in the diaspora.
 - 25 "About CDP RR," online at (yafa.info) bit.ly/3rfsIJ9 (last accessed 6 August 2022; link no longer active).
 - 26 "About CDP RR."
 - 27 Salah 'Abid Rabbu, interview with the author, summer 2009.
 - 28 Hilal, *al-Nidham al-siyasi*.
 - 29 "Bayan itihad marakaz al-shabab al-

- ijtima'iyya fi mukhayyamat al-daffa yu'akkad 'ala huquq al-laji' in wa al-tamassuk bi-l-munadhdhama mumathilan shari'an wa wahidan" [Statement of the Union of Youth Activity Centers in the West Bank camps affirms the rights of the refugees and adheres to the (Palestine Liberation) Organization as sole legitimate representative], *al-Quds*, 13 November 1995.
- 30 Salah 'Abid Rabbu, *al-Laji'un wa hulm al-'awda ila ard al-burtuqal al-hazin* [The refugees and the dream of return to the land of the sad oranges] (Bethlehem: BADIL Resource Center for Palestinian Residency and Refugee Rights, 1996).
- 31 "Bayan ittihad marakaz al-shabab."
- 32 "Bayan ittihad marakaz al-shabab."
- 33 'Adnan 'Ajarama from 'Ayda refugee camp's PSC, interview with the author, summer 2009.
- 34 'Abid Rabbu, *al-Laji'un*, 31–45.
- 35 'Abid Rabbu, *al-Laji'un*, 31–45. The timing and location of the conference, drawing on the memory of the beginning of the 1987 intifada and the site being the interrogation jail near the refugee camp, shows the links between memory and politics in the settler-colonial context where memory and commemorations are valuable resources for mobilization and the production of futuristic political visions. See: 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 (2012): 62–79; and Ala Alazzez, "al-Dhakira bi-wasfiha khitaban wa ru'ya mustaqbaliyya: mumarisat takhlid intifadat 'am 1987" [Memory as discourse and futuristic vision: mnemonic practices of the 1987 Intifada], *Idafat: The Arab Journal of Sociology* 43–44 (Summer–Fall 2018): 63–80.
- 36 Kamal Hamash, interview with the author, summer 2022.
- 37 Kamal Hamash, interview with the author, summer 2022.
- 38 Salim Tamari, "Palestinian Refugees and the Palestinian-Israeli Negotiations," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 29, no. 1 (Autumn 1999): 81–89.
- 39 Assad (name changed) from Bayt Jibrin refugee camp, interview with the author, summer 2022.
- 40 'Adnan 'Ajarama, interview with the author, summer 2009.
- 41 'Adnan 'Ajarama, interview with the author, summer 2009.
- 42 Proceedings of the meeting published as *Mukhayyamat al-laji'in wa al-intikhabat al-mahaliyya (al-daffa al-gharbiyya wa qita' Ghazza)* [Refugee camps and local elections (West Bank and Gaza Strip)] (PLO Department of Refugee Affairs, 2005), which can be found online at bit.ly/43iNS0G (accessed 23 May 2023).
- 43 "al-Nidham al-dakhili al-mu'addal li-l-lijan al-sha'biyya li-l-khidmat fi mukhayyamat al-laji'in al-Filastiniyyin" [Amended rules of procedure for the popular service committees in the Palestinian refugee camps], PLO Department of Refugee Affairs, April 2011.
- 44 I was told this in most interviews, including by an official in the Department of Refugee Affairs.
- 45 Anwar Hamam, an official from the Department of Refugee Affairs, interview with the author, summer 2022.
- 46 Proceedings of a workshop titled "Baramij wikalat al-umum al-muttahida li-ghawth wa tashghil al-laji'in (al-UNRWA) fi al-daffa al-gharbiyya" [Programs of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Refugees (UNRWA) in the West Bank], held on 8 August 2007 in Ramallah, published by the PLO Department for Refugee Affairs, online at (plord.ps) bit.ly/3O0d0VI (accessed 22 May 2023).
- 47 Interview with PSC member of 'Ayda refugee camp, summer 2009.
- 48 Ahmad from Bayt Jibrin refugee camp, PSC member, interview with the author, summer 2022.
- 49 Ahmad from Bayt Jibrin refugee camp, PSC member, interview with the author, summer 2022.
- 50 In 2011, UNRWA changed its food-ration-based Special Hardship Assistance Program to a Social Safety Net Program with criteria based on the national poverty line, while also ending its emergency food assistance program in the West Bank.
- 51 Ahmad from Bayt Jibrin refugee camp, PSC member, interview with the author, summer 2022.