

EDITORIAL

Relief, Work, and Agency: Palestinians and UNRWA in the Prolonged Nakba

As Palestinians observed the seventy-fifth anniversary of the Nakba on 15 May, they were not commemorating a distant historic episode that occurred in 1948. Rather, they were recalling, memorializing, and summoning the events and political developments that had first led to their mass expulsion and the large-scale destruction of the social, political, and economic life of historic Palestine, and that continued thereafter to deepen the dispossession of Palestinians. In the articles in this issue of the *Jerusalem Quarterly* and in the previous issue, the Nakba – its antecedents, and its consequences and aftermath – are ever-present in the locations highlighted, particularly in Jerusalem: whether in Silwan, in the Shu‘fat refugee camp, in Kafr ‘Aqab, in the first Protestant church erected inside Jaffa Gate, or in Rehavia in West Jerusalem. Meanwhile, Israel’s far-right government celebrated the “reunification” of Jerusalem this year by staging its weekly cabinet meeting on 21 May in a tunnel under al-Aqsa Mosque compound, as a signal to Palestinians and the rest of the world that Israel has sole sovereignty over the city.

As Palestinians live the fact that the Nakba remains in the here and now, what more dramatic reminder is there than the continued existence, three quarters of a century later, of a United Nations agency assigned the task of dealing with the Nakba’s protracted consequences? This second issue of the *Jerusalem Quarterly* devoted to UNRWA focuses on some of the issues related to the structures and power relations within which UNRWA is situated.

We observed in our previous editorial that UNRWA continued to generate

headlines due to the ongoing labor dispute that involved work stoppages and the closure of UNRWA headquarters in Jerusalem. The struggle, led by the Federation of Arab Employees of UNRWA, is still ongoing, but the more recent agitation by activists in popular committees in some refugee camps has once again brought to prominence the larger political issues about the organization and its political orientation, relations with the “international community,” and ultimately, its commitment to refugee futures. These activists have been raising persistent questions about the leadership of UNRWA and their alleged intention of “liquidating” the refugee issue, that is, the inevitability of return. At the same time, they have been voicing criticism of the Palestinian Authority, the PLO, and the employees’ union for their inability to resolve the dispute. Relevant to this point, the article in this issue by Ala Alazzeq provides a rich background to the history of power relations – and often struggles – between camp residents, camp activists, the PLO, the PA, and UNRWA, seen from the ground up.

The current strife involving UNRWA and the communities it serves also brings to life the acute observations by guest editors Francesca Biancani and Maria Chiara Rioli as they explain the value of studying UNRWA through its own documents but also through other, complementary means of capturing the lived experiences of the refugees themselves. These sources, they remind us, are important to “illuminate areas of subaltern agency or complex interactions between subalterns and power,” debunking “the myth of apolitical humanitarianism, exposing UNRWA as a political field itself operating within an already politically saturated environment of multi-scalar power relations.” The article by Atwa Jaber in this issue, combining archival and ethnographic investigation, is a good example of what the approach can reveal.

While Palestine is and has long been an object of international diplomacy, great power politics (as seen in Yousef Omar’s essay on the establishment of the first Protestant church in Jerusalem), and a setting for individual dramas (as seen in Norbert Schwake’s biographical explorations of two colorful figures from the early twentieth century), we should not lose sight of developments at scales somewhere between the international and the individual: various historical and ongoing collective efforts of Palestinians not only to forge better lives for themselves and their compatriots, but to mobilize against their marginalization, to make demands of the powerful, and to articulate alternative visions of the future – in short, to engage in politics.