

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

# What UNRWA Teaches Us about Humanitarian Histories

Ilana Feldman

In their introduction to this two-part special issue, Francesca Biancani and Maria Chiara Rioli emphasize how much more remains to be considered about UNRWA, an institution at the center of Palestinian life since its establishment in 1949. The essays in the special issue confirm how much can be learned by investigating Palestinian history through the prism of UNRWA. The central importance of the agency underscores the necessity of researchers having more sustained and reliable access to its archival records, as explored by Anne Irfan and Jo Kelcey. In addition, as Atwa Jaber makes clear, the documentary record is only one source for exploring this history. Refugee memories provide crucial details and insights.

Following Biancani and Rioli's insistence on the importance of considering what exploring UNRWA can tell us about humanitarianism more generally, in these brief reflections I draw on my reading of these pieces and my own research in and on UNRWA spaces and practices to call attention to some of the lessons from UNRWA's operations and its interactions with Palestinian refugees. To ask what UNRWA reveals about humanitarian practice, politics, and history broadly is not to turn away from the Palestinian experience. It is to recognize the central importance of Palestinian history and present life to global phenomena.

Scholars of Palestine, exploring any facet of its history and present condition, regularly have to battle against the intellectual and political limitations of discourses of exceptionalism, where the Palestinian experience is deemed to be so distinctive, so unusual, as to be incomparable to any other. When I

applied for research funding for a large research project on the Palestinian refugee experience with humanitarianism across multiple countries and over seven decades – research that culminated in the book, *Life Lived in Relief: Humanitarian Predicaments and Palestinian Refugee Politics* – one reviewer of my proposal (which was ultimately successful) argued that the project should not be awarded funding because, although the questions I was asking about humanitarianism were important, the Palestinian instance was a poor “case” through which to consider these dynamics. The aspects that rendered the instance “ungeneralizable” (to use the social scientific language of the funding agency) were the intrusion of politics into the humanitarian terrain and the longevity of displacement, which, according to the reviewer, meant that Palestinians were not refugees and the places where they lived not really camps.

Efforts to disengage from Palestinian history and experiences by mobilizing the language of exceptionality are politically pernicious and intellectually wrongheaded, and they remain all too common. Analysis that begins from the intersection of Palestinian life and UNRWA practice offers significant insight into enduring, transforming, and global humanitarian dynamics.

When I present my research on the long Palestinian experience with humanitarianism, an experience in which UNRWA is a central actor, I am frequently asked about UNRWA’s “state-like” activities, sometimes posed as a question about whether an institution that carries such wide-ranging responsibilities can be considered a humanitarian body. In fact, however much state authorities, humanitarian agencies, and donors might say otherwise, humanitarianism is a mode of governance. Didier Fassin calls it “non-governmental government.”<sup>1</sup> At the international scale, donor states bring geopolitical and domestic considerations to bear as they seek to influence humanitarian practice. Donors, in other words, try to govern humanitarians. As Valentina Napolitano’s article shows, humanitarian agency negotiations with state parties – which often proceed under the guise of clear distinction between governing work and humanitarian action – reveal that governance, in fact, crosses these institutional boundaries.<sup>2</sup> Debates about jurisdiction, about best practices, about financial obligations are debates that take place within, not at the edge of, governance.

Longevity is another apparently distinctive feature of UNRWA operations that, upon closer inspection, is revealed as a general characteristic of humanitarian operations. Rather than the self-described short-term, emergency intervention that frames humanitarian activity, long-term engagement is the more common experience. In Kenya, Thailand, and Nepal, for example, refugees have lived in camps for decades and have received varied forms of humanitarian assistance over that extended period.<sup>3</sup> Recognition of the routineness of protracted displacement, and the concomitant complexity of aid in these conditions, confirms the broad significance of analyses of the interplay between relief and development in UNRWA operations as explored by Jalal Al Hussein.<sup>4</sup> It also underscores the necessity of investigating the dynamism and diversity of refugee camp experiences, including movement from one camp to another and transformations in camps, as Halima Abu Haneya elucidates in the case of Shu‘fat.

Palestinian refugee engagement with UNRWA policy and practice over the years reveals another crucial feature of humanitarian dynamics that is often overlooked – that the recipients of aid shape that humanitarian action. Recipients do not act with power equal to donors and governments, but they act consequentially. As Ala Alazzez describes from the vantage point of West Bank refugee camps, refugees can transform the mandates and missions of humanitarian institutions. They do so by rejecting policies that do not meet their aspirations (for example, refugee refusal of resettlement projects), by affirming a broader vision of humanitarian mandates, and by activating humanitarian apparatuses as platforms for political and social life.<sup>5</sup>

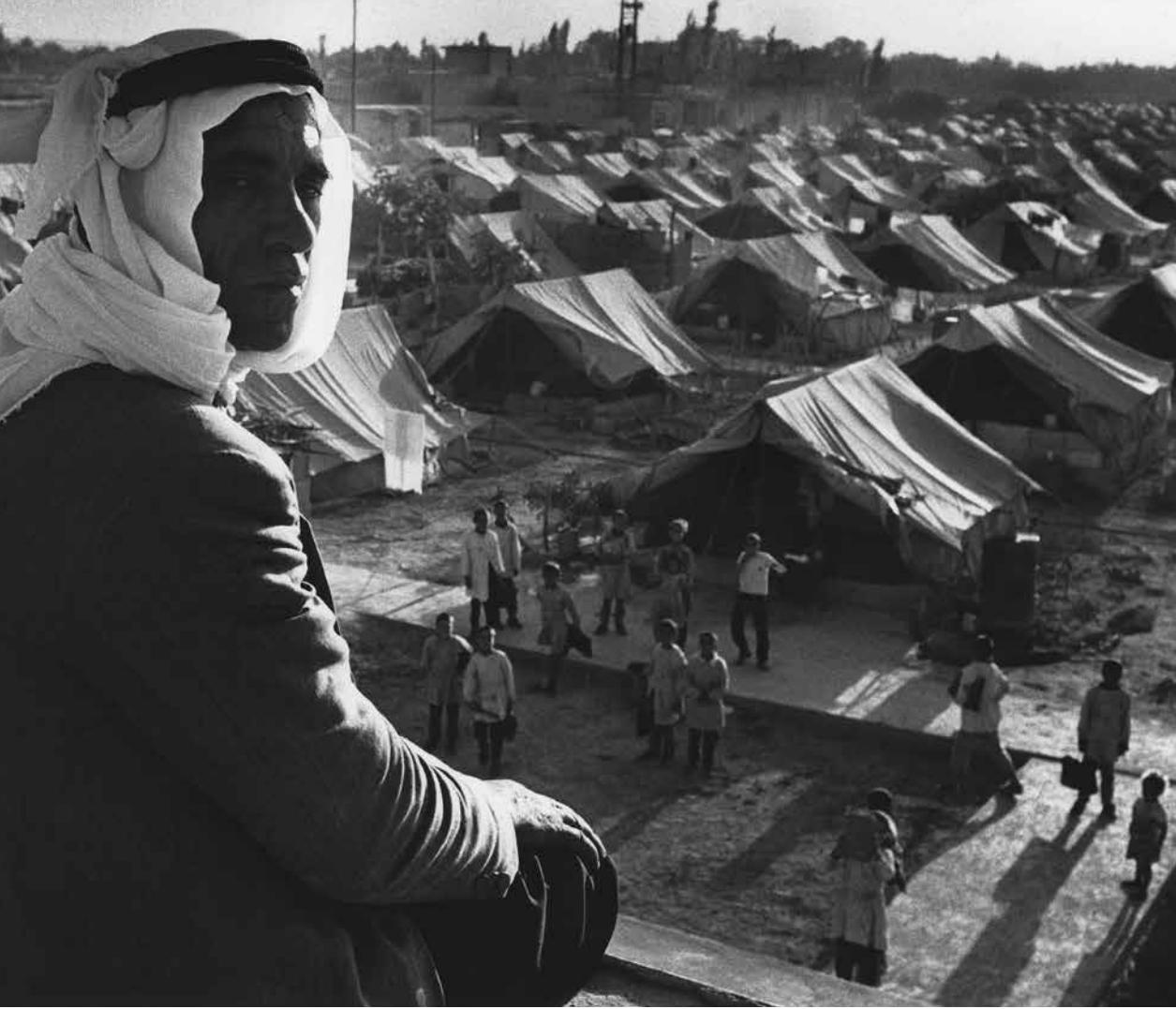
I conclude by noting a final feature of UNRWA operations that reframes understandings of international humanitarianism writ large. Humanitarianism is often described as operationalized concern for “distant strangers.” In fact, humanitarian practice is almost always a complex mix of local and foreign, distant and near. The vast majority of UNRWA’s staff are themselves Palestinian, making the agency a helpful lens through which to consider how local staff shape on-the-ground operations and dynamics,<sup>6</sup> as well as to trace how humanitarian organizations embody global hierarchies.

*Ilana Feldman is professor of anthropology, history, and international affairs at George Washington University. Her research focuses on the Palestinian experience, both inside and outside of historic Palestine, examining practices of government, policing, and humanitarianism. She is the author of multiple books, including most recently, Life Lived in Relief: Humanitarian Predicaments and Palestinian Refugee Politics (University of California Press, 2018).*

#### Endnotes

- 1 Didier Fassin, “Humanitarianism, a Non-governmental Government,” in *Non-governmental Politics*, ed. Michel Feher (New York: Zone Books), 151.
- 2 See also Ilana Feldman, “Mercy Trains and Ration Rolls: Between Government and Humanitarianism in Gaza (1948–67),” in *Interpreting Welfare and Relief in the Middle East*, ed. Nefissa Naguib and Inger Marie Okkenhaug (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 175–94.
- 3 See: Jennifer Hyndman, “A Refugee Camp Conundrum: Geopolitics, Liberal Democracy, and Protracted Refugee Situations,” *Refuge: Canada’s Journal on Refugees* 28, no. 2 (2011): 7–16; Rahul Chandrashekar Oka, “Coping with the Refugee Wait: The Role of Consumption, Normalcy, and Dignity in Refugee Lives at Kakuma Refugee Camp, Kenya,” *American Anthropologist* 116, no. 1 (2014): 23–37; Sandra Dudley, “Feeling at Home: Producing and Consuming Things

- in Karenni Refugee Camps on the Thai-Burma Border,” *Population, Space, and Place* 17, no. 6 (2011): 742–55; and Retika Adhikari, “Temporalities of Resettlement: Date-Waiting for an American Future in a Buthanese Refugee Camp in Nepal,” *American Anthropologist* 123, no. 2 (2021): 237–49.
- 4 See also Nell Gabiam, “When ‘Humanitarianism’ Becomes ‘Development’: The Politics of International Aid in Syria’s Palestinian Refugee Camps,” *American Anthropologist* 114, no. 1 (2012): 95–107.
- 5 See Ilana Feldman, *Life Lived in Relief: Humanitarian Predicaments and Palestinian Refugee Politics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2018).
- 6 See Randa Farah, “UNRWA: Through the Eyes of Its Refugee Employees in Jordan,” *Refugee Survey Quarterly* 28, no. 2–3 (2009): 389–411.



“This UNRWA administered tented camp near Damascus provided temporary shelter for some 3,200 homeless Palestine Arab refugees. As a result of the June 1967 hostilities in the Middle East, 117,500 people were displaced from the Quneitra region of Syria, which was occupied by Israel; among them were 17,500 Palestine refugees registered with UNRWA. Those displaced refugees, unable to find shelter for themselves, numbering over 10,000 persons have been accommodated in four emergency camps near Damascus & Dera’a. The tents have been replaced by more permanent shelters.” Photographer: Jack Madvo, 1974. UNRWA Collection, Institute for Palestine Studies, Beirut.



A Palestine Refugee With Her Child: Sbeineh Emergency Camp, Syrian Arab Republic. Photographer: Jack Madvo, undated. UNRWA Collection, Institute for Palestine Studies, Beirut.