



What is a camp? Legitimate refugee lives in spaces of long-term displacement



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ABSTRACT

Given their importance to a range of actors, refugee camps are an excellent site to consider the production of legitimacy in “anomalous geopolitical spaces.” Rather than focusing on how the parties that govern camps gain legitimacy, or do not, in the eyes their inhabitants, this essay considers the problem of refugee lives: how various actors define the right way to live as a refugee, what role they ascribe to refugee camps in this way of living, and the complex realities of actual refugee lives amidst these various claims. The legitimacy at issue here is not of a form of governing, but of a way of being, of living. Different arguments about the right way of being depend to a considerable degree on the perspectives these actors bring to bear: whether they approach refugees as primarily recipients of assistance, political symbols and actors, or multi-faceted subjects with a range of concerns. There is, of course, no final arbiter to decide what actually is the right way of living as a refugee: it is an ongoing debate. Even without resolution, these different arguments about legitimate refugee life are consequential, in no small part because they can shape the contours of people’s lives and relationships and influence the allocation of resources.

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Introduction

Given their importance to a range of actors, refugee camps are an excellent site to consider the question of legitimacy in “anomalous geopolitical spaces.” There is no doubt that these spaces are anomalous in precisely the ways the editors of this special issue describe: with often fragmented authority, uncertain sovereignty, provisional legality, and undetermined duration (McConnell, 2009; Jeffrey, 2012; Wilson, 2014). In such circumstances, governing authority sometimes depends precisely on holding legitimacy in abeyance, by deferring the question to another time and by turning attention to other matters (Feldman, 2008a). In humanitarian conditions those who rule over refugee populations (whether aid agencies or host governments) do not generally claim sovereign authority over their subjects (in the case of host governments because refugees are not their citizens; in the case of aid agencies because they do not think of themselves as sovereigns). By and large they do not consider themselves to be the political representatives of the aided population (though humanitarians debate the question of political responsibility). And they do not intend to remain over the long-term (even as they often do).

Even as much is held in abeyance, questions of legitimacy are not irrelevant to these conditions (Slim, 2002). Aided populations

not only make judgments about humanitarian work, but consider it their right to do so. And humanitarian actors seek not simply to impose themselves on populations in need, but to be welcomed by them (Vestergaard, 2014). The language of legitimacy is not always explicitly used in these judgments, but it is at stake in them.¹ Because the presence of humanitarianism is an indication of failure – failure of states to protect, of societies to manage conflict, of infrastructures to withstand disasters – to the extent that legitimacy is a structuring concept in relations among humanitarian providers and recipients, it is always a temporary, provisional legitimacy.² And therefore its legitimacy is always in question, even when it is granted. The rich and growing literature on humanitarian governance has illuminated these dynamics (Barnett, 2013; Fassin, 2007; Kennedy, 2004; McConnachie, 2014).

In this essay I turn in a slightly different direction. Rather than focusing on how the parties that govern camps gain legitimacy, or do not, in the eyes their inhabitants, I look at the problem of

¹ When people talk about the legitimacy of a government, they tend to mean that its subjects accept the authority of that regime as not just actual, but right. The very presence of humanitarianism is evidence that things are dramatically wrong. When humanitarian actors come into fill dangerous gaps in provision and protection, few would argue that this system is the most appropriate in a general sense, but most would say that it is necessary.

² The international legitimacy of humanitarian intervention in the face of opposition from governing authorities is another crucial question, one that is beyond the scope of this essay (see Mills, 1997; Kahler, 2011; Buchanan, 1999).

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refugee lives: how various actors define the right way to live as a refugee, what role they ascribe to refugee camps in this way of living, and the complex realities of actual refugee lives amidst these various claims. The legitimacy at issue here is not of a form of governing, but of a way of being, of living.³ There is, of course, no final arbiter to bring debates about the right way of living as a refugee to a close. Even without resolution, these different arguments about legitimate refugee life are consequential, in no small part because they can shape the contours of people's lives and relationships and influence the allocation of resources.

These are questions that extend across the global humanitarian landscape and confront refugees in many locales. The Palestinian refugee experience is exemplary both in its longevity, which permits consideration of these dynamics over a sixty-five year period, and in the signal importance that refugees and camps have played in the Palestinian national imagination and national struggle (Farah, 1999, 2009). I explore responses to these questions about camps and refugee lives by a range of actors on the Palestinian scene: humanitarian agencies, host governments, and refugees themselves. All of these parties concur that camps are not just the stage for expressions of claims about refugee lives, but are centrally important in making and shaping those lives (Ramadan, 2013).

Palestinian political actors often see the camps as crucial reminders of their right of return and a sign of refugee refusal of resettlement [*tawteen*], and understand the right way of living as a refugee to involve persistence in struggle (sometimes struggling by persisting) towards the goal of national liberation (Bowker, 2003; Schulz and Hammer, 2003). From this perspective – which has often dominated, but does not exhaust, Palestinian political thinking about camps and refugees – people are meant to persist as refugees until the threshold moment of liberation and return. Refugees are charged at once with living in waiting for that moment (an obligation which renders changes in living conditions or subjectivities dangerous), with serving as symbols of Palestinian national claims, and with anticipating a future liberation.

For service providers and government officials, who approach refugees as recipients of humanitarian assistance and not as political actors or symbols, camps are viewed through the lens of protection, and sometimes development, and evaluated in relation to those goals. For humanitarian actors legitimate refugee life is often defined in the seemingly contradictory nexus of the apolitical victim and the improving subject. From that perspective the right way to be a refugee can be to be always preparing not to be a refugee. But, in contrast to the views described above, this transformation is often understood as requiring work towards resettlement, becoming an object of development, and achieving self-reliance.

How refugees, across generations, actually live with and in relation to the camps cannot be wholly captured by either the perspective of nationalist politics or the viewpoint of humanitarian provisioning. The complex terrain of emotional life in the camps exposes a not-explicitly articulated, but no less significant, argument for the legitimacy of living fully even before return/liberation and for living as refugees even while seeking improvements. And this full life includes doing things with and in the camps that conform neither to the demands of national politics nor to the requirements of humanitarian assistance. This lived perspective does not entirely reject these other positions, but it does challenge them.

To explore these perspectives I draw from extensive archival research and sixteen months of ethnographic fieldwork I conducted about and in Palestinian camps across the Middle East. This

research involved life history interviews, observations of humanitarian projects, and readings of the administrative records of humanitarian organizations.⁴ I use each of these kinds of data to consider three different camps, at different moments in this history: Dheisheh in the West Bank, Yarmouk in Syria, and Wihdat in Jordan. I highlight three aspects of the camp that have particular bearing on the shaping of refugee lives: the camp as a humanitarian space, as a political space, and as an emotional space. I forego the depth of ethnographic description that the focus on a single camp would permit in the service of a consideration of multiple expressions of this concern with legitimate refugee life, found across the length and breadth of the camps' existence. This diverse field of camp experiences illuminates the extent to which refugee life is lived in the nexus of constraint and possibility

Camp geographies in the Middle East

Approximately 750,000 Palestinians were displaced from their homes in 1948, an experience they remember as the *nakba* [catastrophe]. Most refugees went to neighboring countries (Jordan, Syria, Lebanon) or to the parts of historic Palestine that had not become Israel (the West Bank and Gaza Strip). When the United Nations established the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees [UNRWA], these five areas became the "fields" of UNRWA operation. Refugee camps were set up in each of these areas, some initiated by host governments, some by private aid agencies, and some by UNRWA itself. There are now 58 official camps across the Middle East, including those created after the 1967 war which produced a second major wave of displacement. Of the 5 million Palestinian refugees registered with UNRWA, 1.5 million live in camps. In no host country are refugees required to reside in camps and, in fact, significantly more refugees live in towns and cities among non-refugee populations than live in camps. Even as the camp is not the demographically primary setting for refugee life, it has been the paradigmatic one and looms centrally in thinking about how to live right as a refugee. A range of factors (overcrowding, lack of space for building, greater income and opportunity) have led people to move from these spaces over the years. Jordan has the smallest percentage of refugees in camps, at 18%, and Lebanon has the largest, at 57%. Even in the earliest years after the *nakba* only about half of the refugees lived in camps.

The three camps discussed in this article offer a window into some of the diversity among camps in general and Palestinian camps in particular (Sanyal, 2012, 2014; Farah, 2009). Both Wihdat and Dheisheh were established by UNRWA in territory that was then Jordan, shortly after the *nakba*. Yarmouk is an unofficial camp (one of six such camps) set up by the Syrian government in 1957. At 148,000 residents, the Yarmouk was the largest camp until the recent dispersal of much of its population in the course of the conflict in Syria.⁵ All three are urban camps (Agier, 2002): Dheisheh was from its creation inside the municipal boundaries of Bethlehem; Amman and Damascus expanded around Wihdat and Yarmouk.

In both Syria and Jordan the "host government" exercises a high degree of control over the camps, including appointing local committees as camp representatives; these are not independent bodies (Hanafi, 2010). In the West Bank the 1967 Israeli occupation led to

³ Fassin (2009: 50) has suggested the term "biolegitimacy" to describe the value ascribed to "life as such". My exploration here is focused less on biological life and more on social and political ways of living.

⁴ The broad aim of the research is to investigate both the impact of living with humanitarianism on Palestinian refugees and Palestinian political community and the effects of the shift to the long-term on humanitarian practice. From 2007–2014, in multiple periods of fieldwork, I conducted more than 200 interviews with refugees and humanitarian workers, engaged in extended observations of eight humanitarian projects in four refugee camps, and collected extensive archival materials from collections in the Middle East and the United States. The UNRWA archives, whose materials I use in this article are located in Amman, Jordan.

⁵ <http://www.unrwa.org/where-we-work/syria/camp-profiles?field=16> (accessed 05.09.14).

repression of the camps, but also a degree of autonomy as they became key sites of resistance. After the establishment of the Palestinian Authority [PA] in 1994, a new Palestinian agency with responsibility for refugees was created and “popular committees” were set up in the camps. As in Lebanon, these committees are made up of representatives of the dominant political factions. As Sari Hanafi describes: “They are the equivalent of municipal administrations and are, among other things, responsible for the water and electricity supply, garbage collection, for the settling of conflicts between camp residents, and for dealing with external authorities” (Hanafi, 2010: 10). Especially in Lebanon the committees have fraught relations with camp residents, but they are more independent from host government control than the committees in either Syria or Jordan. In all the camps UNRWA is the primary service provider, and so has important governance functions, but it does not claim a political role, even as refugees often ascribe one to it.

Even as the percentage of refugees living in camps has shrunk over the sixty-five years of displacement, their populations have increased tremendously. Overcrowding and precarious construction is a characteristic of many camps, but some are more dense than others (Allan, 2013; Feldman, 2012; Suleiman, 1999). Their shape and form have changed considerably over their long history (Peteet, 2005).⁶ Some camps (such as Khan Yunis in Gaza and Wavel in Lebanon) were created on the sites of older military bases and made use of existing barracks. Others began as tent encampments (such as Burj al Barajneh in Lebanon and Jerash in Jordan). Within a few years tents were replaced with more permanent buildings. Over a somewhat longer time span the open spaces people had around their dwellings, spaces which were often used for gardening, have been converted to buildings to accommodate growing populations. Vertical growth in camps has been significant, as expansion of camp boundaries is not allowed. In many places camps have effectively spilled beyond their borders, and in some places these boundaries are entirely unmarked. Much of the building in the camps has been ad hoc, responding both to a longevity that was not anticipated and to the initiatives of camp residents that are not entirely within UNRWA or host country control (Al-Hamarnah, 2002). As people struggle to make their lives in the camps, they confront the question of what the camps mean for these lives.

The camp as a humanitarian space

Camps are perhaps the quintessential humanitarian space (Agier and Bouchet-Saulnier, 2004) – in the sense of a space apart from the conditions of crisis (whether war or natural disaster) that enables the provision of assistance to people in need.⁷ The general commitment of humanitarian agencies and host governments to the idea of the refugee camp as a humanitarian space is the starting point for a set of conversations about what that means (and what are its limits) and what the effects of these spaces are on their inhabitants. Among the many challenges and contradictions that define humanitarianism (Terry, 2002; Fassin, 2013; Feldman, 2007b; Redfield, 2012) is the question of effect: to what extent should a crisis intervention focused on the task of saving lives have a broader impact on the societies and places where humanitarians intervene (Barnett, 2011; Slim, 2000; Redfield, 2005)? Is it possible to avoid

⁶ Ten camps were established after the 1967 war and therefore have a forty-year life.

⁷ Drawing from the arguments of Agamben (1998, 2005) and Arendt (1951) in recent years scholars have investigated camps as “spaces of exception” (Hanafi, 2008; Ramadan, 2009; Turner, 2005) that offer refugees a form of protection which ensures their powerlessness (Rajaram and Grundy-Warr, 2004; Fassin, 2005; Papastergiadis, 2006). The camp has also been approached as a space of intense regulation organized for the bureaucratic management of life and the convenience of humanitarian providers (Hyndman, 2000; Agier, 2011; Mortland, 1987; Hilhorst and Jansen, 2010).

such broader effects even if that is the aim (Feldman, 2007a)? In these sorts of discussions one can glean some very clear, even if contradictory and competing, ideas about what sorts of lives refugees are meant to be living. A debate between UNRWA and the Syrian government in the late 1950s about the import of camps was caught up in all these questions. For both Syrian and UNRWA officials the question of ‘what is a camp?’ was closely linked to the question of ‘what is it to be a refugee?’.

The unofficial Yarmouk camp was first established by the Syrian government in 1957 to house refugees who had been living in mosques and other religious buildings and its initial population was around 7000. Nearly as soon as it was established UNRWA and the Syrian government’s refugee support agency (at the time called PARI) got into a conflict about its status. PARI wanted the camp to be recognized as an official camp eligible for all UNRWA services and resources, while the Agency did not. In the ensuing debate both parties mobilized arguments about what a camp was – as both a social and as a regulatory space – to press their claims. A discussion that was in the first instance about money – who would pay for camp services? – reveals the contours of humanitarian thinking about what a camp is and can be, and about who refugees are and should be. This entire conversation about refugees and about the right way to live as a refugee took place without the participation of refugee themselves.

In rejecting PARI’s request that Yarmouk be recognized as an official camp, UNRWA’s first concern was about the “heavy financial liability”⁸ of providing the services that would go along with recognition (sanitation and infrastructure support, including water supply). But even when the Agency came to accept the practical need to provide some of these services – thereby taking on much of this financial burden – it continued to refuse Yarmouk official status. In a September 1960 letter to PARI, the Agency’s representative in Syria argued that:

The view taken by Headquarters is that it would not be appropriate to treat Yarmouk in all respects as an official UNRWA camp since the conditions under which the refugees are living there are not really comparable with those in the normal Agency camps and are indeed in many respects decidedly superior. The Agency believes that the better conditions observable at Yarmouk are in a large degree due to the most helpful interest which PARI has shown and the initiative it has taken in administering the affairs of the refugee community there. My Headquarters feel therefore that it would be a backward step and not truly in the interests of the refugees themselves if Yarmouk were to become an official UNRWA camp.⁹

The question of camp status had clearly turned from a concern with financial consequences to a matter of the essence of the category itself. The conditions of living, and therefore the condition of refugee lives, were identified as the heart of the matter. Perhaps ironically for an organization devoted to refugee services, it was precisely poor conditions that UNRWA identified as the defining feature of a camp. To make Yarmouk an official camp, the letter suggested, would be to degrade its condition. Those refugees who were living in Yarmouk, it seems, were on path away from being the quintessential needy subjects of humanitarian assistance (Malkki, 1996), and UNRWA did not want to interrupt this process.

In his objection to this position al-Yafi not only rejected the material status argument, he suggested an alternative definitional lens for approaching the camp, and therefore for apprehending refugees – ownership of land and homes:

⁸ UNRWA, RE 59, RE 400 (1) – Part 1 – Camps and Buildings – Yarmouk Camp and Other Unorganized Camps, “Minutes of Meeting held at PARI headquarters 2nd of April 1959.” All the documents about this debate are from this file.

⁹ Draft letter from UNRWA representative in Syria to PARI, 27 September 1960.

The word (camp), as I believe, does not necessarily mean a place where refugees are living under tents, and I do not think it means such a sort of place in the Host countries. This idiom is now indicating the places and centers of refugees congregations. Yarmouk is one of the largest centers in general and is absolutely the largest in the Syrian Region. The refugees residing in this camp are not owning the land or the constructions. The land is a State domain and the constructions were erected with the help of PARI under urgent need. It is not permitted to exploit the buildings or use them unless for the purposes for which they were constructed. If some of the buildings appear to be in a good condition, the major part of them are equally bad. Moreover, I do not imagine that the Agency prefers to keep the refugees in unhealthy dwellings and in places not suitable for a people who had their houses villas and properties in Palestine before they were extorted, in order to consider these dwelling as official organized camps. I do not know what would be the attitude of the Agency if we resolved to improve the dwellings of refugees in other organized camps. Will it abandon considering them organized camps?! ... and will it see in that a backward step?! ... and will it stop rendering its services?! ...¹⁰

Al-Yafi rejected the idea that an improving refugee condition should mean the loss of humanitarian status. But even as he challenged the argument that abject need was at the heart of the matter, he insisted that refugees were fundamentally defined by another sort of deprivation, that of ownership and control over their living spaces.

The head of UNRWA's office in Syria (Louis Gendron) reflected on al-Yafi's letter by linking camp definition to social development, highlighting a humanitarian sensitivity to the contradictions of camp effects. In this view, camps may be necessary for the protection of refugees, but they are also an impediment to refugee rehabilitation:

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 ... 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 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.¹¹

Gendron's statement reiterated the claim that Yarmouk should not be an official camp because camps are not a social and psychological good for refugees. It further explicated the argument that "pure" humanitarian activity – saving lives without transforming them – can be an impediment to development.¹² In this view, to be a refugee is to be a diminished subject, and part of the responsibility of aid organizations like UNRWA is to facilitate transformation from this status.

¹⁰ Letter from PARI to UNRWA rep Syria (translation), 20 October 1960.

¹¹ Inter-office memorandum from Louis Gendron, 26 October 1960.

¹² In the case of Yarmouk, UNRWA came to provide a broad range of services in the camp, including schools, health clinics, and rations distribution centers. Sanitation services is where the Agency drew the line. In its current identification of Yarmouk as a camp – with an asterisks to acknowledge its unofficial status – UNRWA's website indicates that nearly all services available in other camps are available in Yarmouk: "In all respects, refugees in official and unofficial camps have equal access to UNRWA services, except that UNRWA is not responsible for solid waste collection in the unofficial camps" (<http://www.unrwa.org/where-we-work/syria/camp-profiles?field=16>. Accessed 12.05.14).

The importance that Gendron attributed to this position is evident in arguments he made about other camp-related policies. He was particularly concerned about different procedures for shelter-building across the five fields of UNRWA operations. In the immediate aftermath of 1948 none of the host countries allowed the construction of permanent buildings in the camps. As the refugee problem dragged on, these restrictions were relaxed. Once the Syrian government lifted the ban on building, permitting shelter construction with mud-bricks, UNRWA's Syria office felt it imperative, as part of its efforts to make refugees self-sufficient, that refugees build their own shelters. The Agency provided a grant of materials for roofs (later a cash grant), but otherwise refugees did all the work. Gendron noted with dismay that in other fields UNRWA had actually built the shelters, not even requiring labor from refugees. He argued that the Syria policy had the benefit of providing financial savings to the Agency and, even more importantly he suggested, benefitted the refugees "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."¹³ Shelter policy, like other camp procedures, was not only intended to promote administrative efficiency, but also to shape the psychological and social effects of camp life on refugees. These positions confirm the essential tensions in the humanitarian perspective. Even as they often approach refugees through the limited frame of lives to be saved, not wholly lived, humanitarian actors express anxiety about the ways this humanitarian space can inhibit the development of people's lives and communities.

The camp as a political space

At no point in the discussion between UNRWA and the Syrian government was the camp described as a political space. A key aspect of the humanitarian perspective on the camp is, in fact, that it is meant to be a space apart from politics. And yet, for Palestinians politics is a crucial part of their meaning. The political importance of camps is in part symbolic: evidence of the lack of resolution of the Palestine question, a reminder of international responsibility to Palestinians (Feldman, 2008b). Camps have occupied an important place in the official discourse of Palestinian nationalism. As Randa Farah notes "in the PLO's heyday, Palestinian camps emerged as national signifiers derived from a pronounced emphasis on armed struggle ... complementing their reputation as repositories of Palestine's pre-1948 rural memory and ethos" (Farah, 2009: 86). But, as she notes, and as Allan (2013) also argues, there can be a significant gap between the formal nationalist narrative of camp politics and refugees' own ideas about this politics. To understand how Palestinians think about and engage the camps as active sites of political invention and imagination, I consider Palestinian debates about Palestinian politics as articulated by refugees living in the camps.

"How will I be represented as a refugee after moving to live in the suburb?" "As a refugee does the place where I live have anything to do with my political representation?" "What is my relationship to the camp going to be after I move to the suburb?" These are questions posed by a young resident of the Dheisheh refugee camp in Bethlehem as his family prepared to move from their home inside the camp to a new, larger, house in an area just beyond its boundaries: the suburb (Abu Aker and Al Lahham, 2013). The occasion of this move prompted reflection on both the political significance of the camp as a refugee space and the emotional connection that refugees have to these long-term spaces of displacement. In worrying about his relationship to the camp

¹³ Inter-office memorandum from Louis Gendron, 26 October 1960.

Ahmad confronted a question that has troubled Palestinian refugees since the earliest years after their displacement from their homes in 1948: Is the camp a necessary space for living a legitimate refugee life?

The building of the new suburb provided an occasion both for personal reflection on the meaning of this move and for consideration of the politics of space and place in the Palestinian experience. These questions were posed as part of a project undertaken, in 2013, by refugees from Dheisheh to explore the meaning of the establishment and move to the suburb. This project was itself one part of a larger experimental program called *Campus in Camps* which engaged young people from camps in the southern West Bank in a process of re-imagining, rethinking, and ultimately re-engaging the camps where they live (www.campusincamps.ps/en).¹⁴ The investigation into the history of the land on which the suburb is being built, the process of movement into this space, and people's feelings about the move were structured by questions that are both personal and political. Among these questions is: "Am I normalizing my refugee status by building a new house in the suburb" (Abu Aker and Al Lahham, 2013)? The reference to normalization [*tatbiya*] which, along with resettlement [*tawteen*], is a key concern about changes in refugee lives, gestures to the complex political landscape oriented toward the preservation of the refugee right of return and the refugee feeling of displacement over an extended period of time.

Since their displacement from their homes in 1948 Palestinian refugees have pursued a politics of restoration and return and have opposed efforts to resettle them in exile permanently (even as in practice many have indeed settled elsewhere). This politics has produced a discourse of refusal – refusal to transform or "improve" the camps (Gabiam, 2012) – even as most refugees live in much more complex relationship to changes in camp structures and improvements in their lives. The suburb project, like all the *Campus in Camps* initiatives, began from a sense both that the camps are a crucial site of political possibility and that the dominant structures of Palestinian politics may in fact inhibit this possibility. The political malaise which characterized the West Bank (and the wider Palestinian community) during this period helps explain the frustration with existing political discourse. But rather than turning away from politics, as plenty of people have, participants in *Campus in Camps* tried to think about a new politics. In taking on key precepts of Palestinian politics, the suburb project directly confronted the question of what constitutes both legitimate politics and legitimate refugee life in the eyes of the Palestinian community.

These Dheisheh residents suggested that humanitarian discourse and nationalist discourse share a view of the camps as spaces (only?) of suffering and deprivation. And they rejected this perspective. Part of what led them to challenge this image is that their experience teaches them that the camps are much more than that. Dheisheh in particular is a site of power in the Bethlehem area (Rosenfeld, 2004). As one wrote in the booklet they produced from the research: "if you want an active political movement, it has to be in the camp. ... The idea that Dheisheh is weak and the city is strong – this is wrong. ... The real movement is in Dheisheh" (Abu Aker and Al Lahham, 2013). The importance of the camp as a site of generative activity is evident in a request by residents of the new suburb to be represented by Dheisheh's popular committee. Although the official responsibilities of the committee are primarily administrative, it is seen by camp residents as having a politically representative function: "In principle these committees were meant to be only service providers, but in practice they have taken on the responsibility to politically represent the camp at the

local level" (Abu Aker and Al Lahham, 2013). This attribution is especially the case for the Dheisheh committee:

In the case of Dheisheh, the popular committee of the camp has always been strong and has been considered the leader of the other West Bank camp committees. Moreover, the popular committee of Dheisheh does not only have influence inside the camp. Rather, this committee has transgressed the boundaries of the camp to act as an effective body in the surrounding municipalities, such as Doha city. The strength of the popular committee has played an important role in making the camp special and in making it attractive for people from the camp who now live outside it.

[Abu Aker and Al Lahham, 2013]

It would be nearly impossible for popular committee jurisdiction to be extended beyond the camp's boundaries, but the request shows the extent to which it is viewed by people in the area as a site of power and possibility.

The suburb project, and *Campus in Camps* more generally, recognizes this political potential and experiments with new ways of thinking about it. One of the propositions of the suburb project is that the political potential of the camp is not limited to its formal boundaries and that the camp is, in part, a deterritorialized political space. By rethinking spatial relations – "transgressing boundaries" as the booklet is subtitled – the suburb project challenges the view that political possibility rests primarily in a stance of refusal, a condition that can lead to stasis. This view leads the participants to question the discourse of normalization as it is usually articulated. They do not accept the proposition that they must accept resettlement, but see political opportunity in camp transformations. Despite the risks involved in taking on the question of normalization so directly, the project participants felt it imperative to do so:

Normalization has been always a very problematic term when it comes to talking about the camp and its political exceptionality. This word has been used in refugee discourse to try to keep refugees restricted within the camp boundaries and within narrow concepts and ideas. For me personally, it is very hard to write about the normalization issue because of its sensitivity. Addressing it is sometimes considered to be taboo. But I think that we have to think about everything regarding our lives, status, and situation and not be stopped by any taboos.

[Abu Aker and Al Lahham, 2013]

This statement describes a dominant discourse about refugee lives in relation to camps that articulates a view of the proper, legitimate, way to be a refugee. It also raises the question about whether there can, and should be, legitimacy in having a different relation to the camp. The claim made here is considerably more than the pragmatic one that it is impossible to expect people to live their lives only in waiting for return. Rather, the argument is one about politics, that a transformed view about what the camps are and can be – materially, geographically, socially, and politically – can produce a more effective politics for the pursuit of Palestinian rights:

The Palestinian official discourse in general and the refugees' discourse in particular have usually highlighted and brought to the surface only the weaknesses of refugees. ... This discourse is, in fact, an unfair representation of the refugee achievements and transformations and ignores the many strengths of refugees and the positive changes they have achieved over these 65 years. ... In proving that refugees have the right to return we can show everything that we have achieved in exile, rather than only showing ourselves as weak, poor, and victims.

[Abu Aker and Al Lahham, 2013]

¹⁴ I have been engaged in participant observation with this project since 2012.

Asking about the meaning of the move to the suburb is not just a matter of understanding social transformation, or personal emotions, but is also a way of intervening in Palestinian refugee politics. The research itself seeks to open a space for new ways of framing refugee practice and the bases of refugee claims. In so doing, the initiative is not primarily about imposing a new politics, but recognizing and legitimizing a politics already taking place on the ground, but which remains not fully acknowledged in dominant nationalist discourse.

The camp as an emotional space

The Dheisheh-based effort at political re-imagination began from the position that the meaning of the camp in the Palestinian experience is more multifaceted than either humanitarian or nationalist actors can easily acknowledge (even if they confront these complexities on the ground all the time). The extent of this complexity is evident in the lives people lead in the camps and in the range of emotions they express about them. One question that refugees regularly confront is: what kind of relationship can they have with a place that is both not wholly their own (inhabitants own neither the land nor the shelters) and that is intended to be temporary (even though experience belies that assumption)? Both humanitarian and political actors have sought to control how Palestinian refugees have lived in camps: the first through strict regulations on the use of shelters, including prohibiting construction, and the second through making a discursive connection between participation in national struggle and the refusal of transformation. That refugees did not (and do not) always accede to these strict controls is a reminder that however authorities who service and govern the camps seek to define the contours of legitimate life in these spaces, they cannot entirely control this terrain.¹⁵ Sometimes they are met with outright opposition, when refugees protest and petition for greater rights over their living spaces (Agier, 2011). Even more common, though, are processes through which refugees simply live differently and use these spaces differently than regulations seek to permit (Sanyal, 2011).

This phenomenon is especially marked in long-term camps, where people live out a much broader range of experiences than they might in a short-term camp stay. They build, alter, and even sell homes (Al-Husseini, 2011; Al-Hamarnah, 2002). They set up shops and conduct a variety of commerce. They move out of camps and sometimes move back in. Each of these life activities is regulated to some degree by the governance structures in place in the camp, but, equally, these activities often challenge regulatory mechanisms that were set up with emergency in mind. The ways that people have lived in and used camp spaces have pushed administrative bodies (both UNRWA and host governments) to acknowledge and support a much broader range of activity than they might have hoped to permit. Authorities cannot fully govern the experience, condition, or legitimacy of the camps.

People's life choices, and their evaluations of these choices, constitutes an argument that camps are not partial places in the way envisaged by either humanitarianism or some political positions. Rather, they experience them as legitimate sites for full, complex lives. This is especially a position of the generations born into displacement, a possibility that has emerged over time. In the first

years after 1948 people were hesitant to fully live in the camps, lest they be less ready to return. Thus, for some of an older generation camps were experienced as waiting zones, and refugees put many things on hold as they hoped in vain for the opportunity to return home. People have told me, for instance, about how some people from the first generation of refugees did not go on the haj [the Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca] because they wanted to begin that journey from their homes, not from exile. Those people died without reaching this goal. The pragmatic requirements of long-term displacement necessarily produced a different way of living and, along with it, a different collection of feelings about that life and the camps.

Refugees living in Wihdat camp in East Amman indicate both deep attachment to and alienation from the camp. My conversations there in 2011 echoed what I heard in my research in other camps and what other scholars have also described (Peteet, 2005; Allan, 2013; Sayigh, 2005). People's complicated feelings about life in the camp are bound up in transformations of time (as generations multiply and life in Palestine becomes more remote) and space (as overcrowding and some people's increased wealth change the landscape in divergent ways). Alia, a high school principal with a masters degree in education, told me that she never wanted to move from the camp, despite having the financial means to do so: "I lived all the conditions of the camp. I love the camp to be honest. I have the ability to leave it . . . but the nature of the camp, my connection with my cause, my connection with the national suffering are what is connecting me to the camp."¹⁶ It is both political commitment and social attachment that tie people like Alia to the camps.

Many people I talked with in Wihdat were neither engaged in explicit political reflection nor saw themselves as recipients of significant humanitarian assistance.¹⁷ Their view of themselves as refugees was expressed through a slightly different frame: that of the daily grind, the struggle to get by, the conditions of precarity that structure so many people's lives across the globe (Muehlebach, 2013; Molé, 2010; Allison, 2013). Abu Firas, a 42 year-old father of four, was both frustrated and often funny as he talked about his feelings about Wihdat:

Is this life? It is not life. There are no trees around you, there is no freedom, there is no space. The people are stacked on top of each other like canned sardines. It does not work. . . . Population pressure. There is no infrastructure. There are no public services. . . . If you have a visitor, you will be embarrassed . . . there is no space. The streets are narrow and there are many people. There is no comfort. There is no freedom. There is nothing.¹⁸

When I asked Abu Firas if he would like to leave the camp, he told me that if he could afford it he would get a trailer home, like the Americans he said, and just drive: "I would keep on driving until the tires get worn out. Yeah I would leave the camp. . . . I would go far. Because a human being likes freedom, likes space." Like many refugees, Abu Firas thinks about his life in the camp now in comparison to a range of pasts (and sometimes futures). The past in Palestine matters, but it is the past in the camp that looms largest for him, and for many others of his generation. Abu Firas never directly experienced life in Palestine. Like many of his generation his encounter with it is through the stories his parents

¹⁵ In the Palestinian case life in the camps is regulated by a complex array of actors who collectively govern these spaces: UNRWA, host countries, Palestinian political parties, and religious establishments. In all cases UNRWA services, but does not formally govern the camps. Security is meant to fall to the host countries, but what that looks like depends very much on the state of those states as well as their relations with refugees. Even though UNRWA does not have a formal governance role, its regulation of services – including housing, education, and healthcare – does, of course, govern the population (Feldman, 2008c).

¹⁶ Interview, Wihdat camp, Jordan, 30 June 2011. The names Alia and Abu Firas are both pseudonyms.

¹⁷ When I asked people in interviews about their experiences with humanitarian assistance, many told me that they received none. Although this is not technically true for most, whose children attend UNRWA schools and who sometimes receive healthcare in UNRWA clinics, it reflects the relative paucity of humanitarian presence in Wihdat and other camps in Jordan. This is in sharp contrast to Lebanon and the West Bank which are full of humanitarian activity.

¹⁸ Interview, Wihdat camp, Jordan, 22 June 2011.

tell and the photographs his father displays in his salon. But he did experience the camp's past, and it is this connection that seems to evoke the strongest feelings.

Even though Abu Firas claimed a desire to leave the camp behind, his comments also reflect how attached he is to it, and how much of his sense of self and community is bound up with this place. Considering the global management of displacement, Dan Bulley (2014) has described how community-building projects have become part of a bundle of humanitarian services that serve the requirements of neoliberal governmentality in refugee camps and also how refugees develop their own community practices, sometimes in resistance to this governance. The question of community looms large in Wihdat's emotional landscape, but what Wihdat's residents see themselves as struggling against is less the strictures of a humanitarian apparatus (whose felt presence is somewhat tenuous in Wihdat) and more the pressures of economics and population that have transformed camp conditions over the years.

Both Abu Firas and Alia (and many others) told me that despite the fact that there was greater poverty in the past, the camp was better then. Diminishing humanitarian assistance is a common trope in camp narratives and a significant fact of refugee life. In the past UNRWA provided rations to camp residents, but no longer: "Today we are men and fathers. We run after the loaf of bread. And the loaf of bread here in Jordan is round . . . so it can drive away. So it will keep on going away and you will keep chasing after it. And this is it. If you work, you eat and live. If you sit down, you'll be hungry. And this is our life here in Jordan." The challenges of earning a living go along with a loss of space and privacy and, people's biggest lament, a felt loss of community relationships. As Abu Firas described: "people in the past were simpler and better at heart. . . . Today people are different. They are totally different." Where people used to share what they had with each other, now "everything is 'aib [shame/disgrace]. In the past it was not 'aib. It was 'aib if you eat without feeding your neighbor. Now if you just say I want to give my neighbor a plate, it might be 'aib." These comments reflect frustration at the loss of familiar forms of sociality and connection.

When I asked him about the causes of this difference, he started by saying it was because of "the pressure – the population pressure and the difficult life conditions." He also attributed the loss to changes in the camp population. His own experience is a case in point. He grew up in a neighborhood in the center of the camp, but now lives in another on its outskirts. Like many of his generation he found that there was no space for his family in the area where he grew up so he had to rent a home elsewhere:

The people changed. Some people left the camp. New people came. You see? Our neighbor Im Naba [my research assistant] is from this neighborhood – one of the founders of the neighborhood. I have been here for 2 years. She does not know about me. I did not grow up with her. We did not eat from the same plate. How am I going to talk to her and her daughter? But I can take you now to my father's neighborhood. The women in the neighborhood there, I have nicknames for them. And I can talk to her while her brother and husband are standing and they would laugh happily. He knows her and knows me. Now these people, many of them left the camp. And many from outside the camp came to the camp. The people are different. How are they going to live with each other?

There are two particular features of past sociality that these comments suggest have been lost: (1) deep familiarity among neighbors, a condition where the neighborhood [*hara*] was socially similar to the villages from which refugees came and (2) the possibility of easy sociability among unrelated men and women. The

shift in gender relations that Abu Firas noted has multiple causes, including the increasing emphasis on piety and orthodox Islamic practice that can be found across the Middle East. He emphasized more local reasons for the change.

Even as Abu Firas expressed frustration and alienation, these feelings were not the entirety of his experience of the camp. One of Abu Firas's favorite activities was gardening. Since he had no land to plant, not even a courtyard, he used the roof of his home to grow vegetables and other plants. His pride in the garden was evident, as was the personal satisfaction he derived from the activity. When I first visited him he insisted that I take two large heads of lettuce from his garden as a gift. His reflections on this practice in the present indicate the importance of time in people's emotional experiences. When he talked about gardening Abu Firas invoked a range of temporalities including a past or future in Palestine: "I wish I could live in a house – with space. If I had a piece of land or if I lived in my country – here I am living in a little alley and can you see the plants? I plant, and water. I like nature because this is how I grew up. This is how I was created. If there is space, even just two rooms, but when you open your door to go out and you smell the fresh air – it is the best thing in the world."

Even as Palestine was present for him, Wihdat's past loomed larger. In our conversation I was struck by, not a tension exactly, but a divergence between the attitude expressed by Abu Firas and my research assistant. Even as Im Naba sometimes tried to turn the conversation towards Palestine, he would bring it back to Wihdat. Im Naba commented on our visit to his father's house and that we had seen the photos of their land in Palestine on the living room wall. Abu Firas responded with a reflection not about that land, but about the house in Wihdat: "And our house that you went to, it was not like it is now. It was three rooms . . . next to each other. And the yard in front of it – until you entered the house it was all a yard. There were trees. We had a pond for the ducks and we had rabbits and chicken. We ate from our house. Not anymore." It is no surprise that Abu Firas might feel a closer connection to the camp where he was raised than to long lost lands in Palestine. And I think it is this same connection that contributed to his feeling of alienation from the now overcrowded camp.

The temporal comparisons that structure so much of people's commentary on camp life are products of this long-term living. It is the passage of time and the settling into a space that happens over that time (even when, as a political matter, people reject the idea that they are re-settled) that makes temporality so central to people's experience of that space. Just as people live in such spaces differently over the long-term – embarking on new building, engaging in new forms of commerce, and grappling with the limits of infrastructure – so too does the long-term shape how people feel about and in them. Feeling these complex emotions, and living these multifaceted lives, is an enacted claim about the legitimacy of leading as full a life as possible now, even as they continue to hope for, and sometime despair of, a better future and political resolution and restitution.

Conclusion

So what is a refugee camp? Camps have been variously understood – by both humanitarians and refugees – as spaces of deprivation and of protection, as temporary and long-term, and as psychologically damaging and nurturing. The meanings ascribed to camps, and the uses to which they are put, further shape the relationships that emerge among the various actors in these spaces. Debates about whether camps are spaces of protection or detention, whether they preserve refugee rights or erode them, are crucial for thinking about strategies of humanitarian interven-

tion (Shearlaw, 2013; Rosenberg, 2011; Lischer, 2006; Crisp, 2000). At the same time, the dynamism that emerges in long-term camps – and which emerges more quickly than many might expect – underscores the importance of evaluating camps not only for their impact on “humanitarian rights,” but also for their conditions of living and their potential as grounds for new politics. The humanitarian and political aspects of the camp experience are not utterly opposed. To say that the camp is a humanitarian space does not have to mean denying or giving up on its political potential, but can in fact serve as a grounds for thinking more precisely about what kind of politics can be conceived from this space, and how it might be able to transform other spaces and other politics.

Arguments about what a camp is are also arguments about how to be a refugee. All these actors understand that the space of the camp is not just a setting for refugee lives, claims, and possibilities, but is a structuring force in all these things. They are spaces through which humanitarian actors and other official parties make judgments about refugees – their capacities, characters, and futures. Camp residents have found themselves in conflict with both humanitarian providers and their own political leaders. Camps also structure social worlds, both in terms of patterns of movement and encounter and in terms of networks of care and obligation. The importance of camp spaces is one reason why contests over their form can be so difficult.

Each of these ways of engaging the camp – humanitarian, political, emotional – also constitutes an argument about how to be a refugee. These positions, found across space and time, are forwarded in developmental, experimental, and pragmatic registers. These multiple perspectives are never resolved into a single view of what constitutes legitimate refugee life. They may often seem to talk past each other, but they do regularly encounter each other on the ground. Refugees in Wihdat, who may think about their lives primarily in the emotional expression of a pragmatic register, are also sometimes the targets of developmentalist humanitarian initiatives which seek to make them improved subjects. Humanitarian officials, such as those who debated the status of Yarmouk, regularly find themselves confronted with, and needing to respond to, refugee claims about the political significance of camp life and camp status. Experiments in new refugee politics, such as those undertaken in Dheishah, sometimes find their limit in the emotional demands of getting-by as a refugee.

Legitimacy constitutes the (sometimes provisional) end of an argument, the achievement of hegemony of a particular perspective or position. As this essay confirms, there is no settled position on what comprises legitimate refugee life in the Palestinian case. How differently located actors respond to this question structures claims about a range of matters: services, rights, and relations. It shapes how people understand both what a camp is and what they think it can be. The appearance of this question in so many times and places is a reflection both of its unsettled character and of its importance for humanitarian policy, political projects, and personal experience.

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