

INTRODUCTION

Scales and Geographies of Contention, Containment, and Mobilization

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Guest Editors

This issue of the *Jerusalem Quarterly* is the second of two special issues dedicated to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), its archives, and its history/ies. The first special issue, *JQ* 93, published in spring 2023, applied critical archival theory to the documentation generated by UNRWA since its establishment in 1949, and to a number of institutional and private archives. In their articles and essays, Anne Irfan, Jo Kelcey, Halima Abu Haneya, and Jalal Al Husseini reflected on the mechanisms and processes of epistemic silencing, subjectification, erasure, and reappearance of Palestinian refugee archives. These contributions revealed and unpacked UNRWA's complex and troubled history, reflecting on the institutional strategies of documentary preservation as well as loss within UNRWA's archives.¹ Additionally, the pieces in *JQ* 93 explored historical forms of belonging and identity making in refugee camps,² the critical relationship between UNRWA and development agencies,³ and recent UNRWA initiatives aimed at improving access to documents for refugees and scholars.⁴

This second special issue complements the first one by showing how UNRWA sources can be used to retrieve, first of all, aspects of Palestinian refugee political history and, secondly, the role played by UNRWA in the making of regional and international politics on a more systemic level. In fact, it situates UNRWA at the crossroads of multiple political scales, ranging from the bottom-up perspective of the camps to the regional and international levels. Taken together, the pieces in this

special issue bring together historical, anthropological, and sociological methods to explore in diverse geographies the different patterns of contention, mobilization, and resignification of humanitarian norms and humanitarian technopolitics. In doing so, the contributions reveal UNRWA's humanitarianism as a critical site of political competition within Palestinian political constituencies, regional powers, and international donors, whose impact in shaping the region, especially at some pivotal historical moments, certainly needs more sustained investigation.

In his article "No Bridge Will Take You Home," Atwa Jaber combines ethnographic and archival research to focus on Palestinian narratives of displacement, dispossession, and ethnic cleansing rooted in the Jordan Valley exodus in the aftermath of June 1967. As he shows, these materials expose important knowledge about the Jordan Valley and the lives of the Palestinian refugees between their original expulsion in 1948 and the further impact of the 1967 war and Israel's occupation of the Jordan Valley. They provide insights into material conditions and infrastructures of survival in the immediate aftermath of the Nakba; relations between the refugees, UNRWA, and the local inhabitants of the Jordan Valley that allowed for thriving communities to emerge; and the fraught Israeli-Jordanian negotiations over the return of those displaced again in 1967.

Ala Alazzeh's article, "Popular Services Committees in West Bank Refugee Camps: Political Legacies, Formations, and Tensions," contributes to the discussion over the forms of negotiation and contention between UNRWA, the Palestinian Authority, and the Palestine Liberation Organization before and after the Oslo accords. Based on extensive ethnographic research, it digs into the agency of West Bank popular committees and their efforts to reconcile "humanitarian concerns," that is, the everyday needs of camp dwellers, with the long-term goal of return and the radical political mobilization of the PLO, without being overridden or subsumed into the PA's hegemonic territorial project.

Similar to Jalal Al Hussein's article in the previous issue, Valentina Napolitano's article, "Managing Palestinian Refugees in Syria," is informed by a critical development studies approach, through which she examines the strategies implemented by UNRWA and the Syrian government agency PARI (Palestine Arab Refugee Institution) in managing Palestinian refugees in Syria. Through a sociological analysis of UNRWA's documents, this study demonstrates how the Syrian government's management and containment of Palestinian refugees sought to integrate humanitarian assistance into a broader political project. As the author states, "by accusing UNRWA of pursuing the permanent resettlement (*tawtin*) of Palestinian refugees in neighboring countries, and of reducing its aid to them, Syria has attempted to present itself as the main defender of the Palestinian cause and of the refugees' right of return." At the same time, the Syrian government hoped that UNRWA development projects might be used to improve the living conditions of Syrians as well as Palestinians living in "unofficial" camps.

In "What UNRWA Teaches Us about Humanitarian Histories," the closing remarks for this issue, Ilana Feldman draws attention again to the entanglement of local and global scales in UNRWA humanitarian practices. By stressing the salience of UNRWA

to the making of modern humanitarianism, she makes a most important point about how the situated and peculiar Palestinian humanitarian experience, far from reflecting any form of exceptionalism, actually magnifies some defining features of modern global humanitarianism. As she argues, “Analysis that begins from the intersection of Palestinian life and UNRWA practices offers significant insight into enduring, transforming, and global humanitarian dynamics.” It reveals local Palestinian agency as much as the reproduction of global hierarchies of power.

As in *JQ* 93, this issue includes a series of historical photographs that were generously made available by the UNRWA Film and Photo Archive and the Institute for Palestine Studies (donated by UNRWA).

The idea for these special issues derived from the perceived need to share scholars’ reflections about their research encounters with UNRWA archives, their criticalities and potentialities. We aimed to energize a critical conversation about a most paradoxical state of affairs whereby UNRWA’s collections, despite (or perhaps because of) their overall institutional relevance and status locally and internationally, are somewhat ghostly, phantasmatic, and chimerical. As part of a vigorous deconstructionist trend in critical archival theory, we looked at the history of UNRWA archives as a political process in itself. We consider archives as congealed representations of power relations, both disciplinary and enabling. Palestinian refugees were produced as subjects by the disciplinary practices to which they were subjected, the first being quantification and labeling, that is, being defined as deserving aid recipients. As such, they were able to articulate claims with an agentive potential, to challenge their subalternity by appropriating and manipulating this same disciplinary normative discourse. All of the essays in these two issues highlight how UNRWA sources can be used to illuminate areas of subaltern agency or complex interactions between subalterns and power, in addition to integrating alternative archives (visual) or sources (oral history) to this effect. At the same time, they debunk the myth of apolitical humanitarianism, exposing UNRWA as a political field itself operating within an already politically saturated environment of multi-scalar power relations, as outlined also in recent publications, conferences, and workshops.⁵

Twenty-five years after the workshop on “Palestinian Refugee Archives: Uses for Research and Policy Analysis,” organized by the Institute of Jerusalem Studies and held at the French Institute for the Near East in Amman, Jordan, in June 1998 – whose contribution resulted in the seminal volume edited by Salim Tamari and Elia Zureik, *Reinterpreting the Historical Record*⁶ – and in the current ominous political scenario, we aspire to keep open (or, if necessary, re-open) a necessary debate on Palestinian refugees, archives, and their mutual agency.

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Endnotes

- 1 In our longer introduction to the first of these two issues, we situated these contributions more fully in the scholarly literature on UNRWA. See Francesca Biancani and Maria Chiara Rioli, “Phantom Archives in a Dispersed History,” *Jerusalem Quarterly* 93 (Spring 2023): 6–12.
- 2 Halima Abu Haneya, “The Intertwined History of Shu‘fat Refugee Camp in Jerusalem: The Making of Refugees,” *Jerusalem Quarterly* 93 (Spring 2023): 36–60.
- 3 Jalal Al Hussein, “The Dilemmas of Local Development and Palestine Refugee Integration in Jordan: UNRWA and the Arab Development Society in Jericho (1950–80),” *Jerusalem Quarterly* 93 (Spring 2023): 61–79.
- 4 Valeria Cetorelli and Dorothee Klaus, “UNRWA Archives of Palestine Refugee Family Files,” *Jerusalem Quarterly* 93 (Spring 2023): 80–87.
- 5 See, for example: Anne Irfan, *Refuge and Resistance: Palestinians and the International Refugee System* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2023); and Amal Khaleefa’s and Valentina Napolitano’s synopsis in this issue of the symposium organized by the French Institute for the Near East (Ifpo) in Amman, Jordan, entitled “Migrations in Jordan: (Counter-)Narratives of Whom and for What?” 2–3 May 2023.
- 6 Salim Tamari and Elia Zureik, eds., *Reinterpreting the Historical Record: The Uses of Palestinian Refugee Archives for Social Science Research and Policy Analysis* (Jerusalem: Institute for Palestine Studies, 2001). See “Elia Zureik: In Memoriam,” *Jerusalem Quarterly* 93 (Spring 2023): 138–49.