

Punctuated Humanitarianism and Discordant Politics

THE ENTRANCE TO THE BURJ AL BARAJNEH refugee camp in Beirut announces itself with a splash of color. Banners hanging overhead and graffiti on the walls proclaim support for a variety of Palestinian political factions. Deeper into the camp, past the mosque sitting at the entrance, the numerous businesses lining the roads, and the Palestine Red Crescent Society's Haifa hospital farther along the way, the streets are still festooned with declarations of political allegiance. But the passages—alleyways, really—become increasingly narrow. A motorbike can squeeze through, and many do, but larger vehicles cannot. Within the warrens are numerous humanitarian organizations, including local institutions like the Women's Humanitarian Organization and international ones such as Médecins Sans Frontières. A close agglomeration of multistory dwellings and street-level shops, topped with tangles of electrical wire, Burj al Barajneh does not look like a refugee camp as commonly imagined—a sprawl of tents regulated by host-country officials and outside relief workers. The camp did begin its life as a maze of canvas shelters, but as the mass displacement of Palestinians in 1948 dragged on, first over years and then over decades, it had to evolve. Such change in the built environment is inevitable in any human settlement in existence for seventy years. And yet it often comes as a surprise that refugee camps, like other spaces where people make their lives, have histories.

All of the fifty-eight Palestinian camps officially recognized by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA), along with ten unofficial camps that it also acknowledges, have undergone tremendous changes in shape and form in their decades of existence. But the camps are not identical. Overcrowding and precarious construction are characteristic of many, but some are more densely populated than others. Some

camps, including Neirab in Syria and Wavell in Lebanon, were founded on the sites of military bases and housed refugees in the old barracks. Others, such as Shati in Gaza and Jerash in Jordan, began as tent encampments. Camp dwellings were once surrounded by open spaces where Palestinians often planted gardens, but nearly every square inch is now built up to accommodate the growing populations. The camps mostly grow upward, as the host-country governments do not allow horizontal expansion of the boundaries. Construction in the camps has been largely ad hoc, responding to the unexpected duration of Palestinian displacement and to the initiatives of camp residents, who are not entirely within UNRWA or host-country control.

The political placards and slogans that emblazon the landscape of camps in Lebanon are nearly absent from camps in Jordan, where the government does not permit such freewheeling expression. UNRWA installations, painted in their distinctive blue and white to match the UN flag flying above, make the clearest visual statement in the approach to the Jerash camp, located fifteen minutes outside of the town of Jerash, Jordan. With most shelters rising one story above the ground, the camp is nowhere near as dense as Burj al Barajneh, but it long suffered from a severely inadequate sewage system. Open sewers were running through the streets when I conducted field research in the camp during 2008–11.¹

In addition to their iconography, infrastructure, and density, Palestinian camps are distinguished by their degree of observable and formal separation from their environs. When they were first established, many camps were in isolated spots, but no longer. The Shati (Beach) camp in Gaza was placed at a remove from Gaza City, along the seashore, as the name indicates. Today it is in the middle of the vastly expanded city. Wihdat camp, in East Amman, the poorer part of the Jordanian capital, is nearly indistinguishable from its surroundings. Swatches of UN blue appear here and there, but the color does not mark the camp entrance or otherwise dominate in the landscape. Many other urban camps, such as Yarmouk in Damascus, have similarly blended in to the neighborhood. By contrast, many refugee camps in Lebanon, such as Rashadiyyah and Ein el Hilweh, in the south of the country, have army checkpoints at the gates. Soldiers check the papers of all who seek entry, and non-Palestinians require a permit. During the years of direct Israeli occupation of the West Bank, the thickly settled Dheisheh camp in Bethlehem was walled off with fencing and barrels, with entrance possible only through a turnstile. When the Palestinian Authority took control of Bethlehem under

the terms of the 1993 Oslo accords, the physical barriers were removed, but Dheisheh is still considerably denser than the adjoining town.

As sites of aid provision and spaces for living, refugee camps reveal unanticipated transformations in humanitarian practice and procedure over the long period of Palestinian displacement. Whenever humanitarian activity stretches out over time, planners and fieldworkers confront challenges that emerge from humanitarianism's general orientation to the present. Given its definition as crisis response, with the goal of saving lives and moving on, humanitarian practice is usually focused on needs that are both urgent now and capable of being addressed now, rather than on planning for change.² And humanitarian interventions frequently have short mandates and temporary funding streams that limit their planning horizon. Humanitarian emergencies rarely end on schedule, however. The UN High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) has estimated that two-thirds of the global refugee population experience protracted displacement.³ Scholars, practitioners, and publics have to confront the fact that long-term humanitarian presence is not exceptional.

Humanitarianism has never been a single thing, but its interventions are broadly united by the conviction that people have a mutual responsibility to react to conditions of human suffering and that such reactions can alter at least some of these conditions. It is structured by intersecting and sometimes competing demands of compassion, obligation, and governance. The call for compassion links people across a vast humanitarian circuit, as aid agencies send appeals that frequently include the images, and less often the words, of victims to mailboxes and inboxes around the world. Humanitarian obligations are most clearly encapsulated in international legal regulations meant to protect civilians and refugees. The absence of a robust enforcement mechanism in international law means, though, that humanitarian obligations are regularly disregarded.⁴ Humanitarian governance pursues the double goal of addressing need and containing threat.⁵ It is a practice of care that entails significant coercion and control. Understanding the shifting interplay of these humanitarian facets in the many circumstances of protracted displacement across the globe demands consideration of the long Palestinian refugee experience.⁶

The material and regulatory histories of refugee camps reveal changing dynamics of living in what I will call the "humanitarian condition"—the long-term need that may be less acute than the trauma of initial displacement, but is no less fundamental to life and work as the displacement

perdures. Furthermore, these camps—and the humanitarian apparatus that administers them—are sites of politics. From Burj al Barajneh to Jerash to Dheisheh, there is a clearly evident humanitarian “politics of life”—the governance of bodies and populations in the management of aid delivery. This politics of life entails not just generic attention to the welfare of populations, but also a politics of distinction that involves “deciding the sort of life people may or may not live.”⁷ Humanitarian actors, whether employed by host-country governments, the UN, or independent relief agencies, may not claim the prerogative of this decision—in fact, they generally disavow it—but humanitarian work enacts such decisions at every turn. These include the delineation of the refugee category, the procedures that govern access to it, the food people receive, the shelters they are provided, and also the withdrawal of these services. In protracted displacement these decisions reverberate across generations.

Also evident in the camps is a “politics of living,” by which I mean the ways that people survive and strive within humanitarian spaces. Like the politics of life, the politics of living has transgenerational effects. Such politics is pursued despite humanitarian restrictions, which include an insistence on political neutrality as well as the effort to create and maintain a “humanitarian space”⁸ governed by “concern for humanity”⁹ or the “humanitarian imperative.”¹⁰ The politics of living is also advanced in and through humanitarianism, which in fact offers mechanisms through which refugees act politically and a language in which they press claims. Attuned to the dramatically uneven distribution of capacity, opportunity, and influence across the humanitarian field, I seek to understand both the contours and conditions of “life lived in relief” and the form that politics takes when it is pursued under the writ of an avowedly nonpolitical, neutral actor: the humanitarian apparatus.

This book explores refugee lives and politics across the length and much of the breadth of Palestinian exile. It describes the intersecting, but not identical, experiences of both providers and recipients. It also elucidates the degree to which these categories are not separate, in that the vast majority of on-the-ground aid practitioners are themselves refugees. And it tracks both the politics *of* humanitarianism—how it shapes subjects, alters societies, and enforces or disrupts geopolitical inequities—and politics *in* humanitarianism—how people living inside this system seek to change their circumstances, make claims of various kinds, and lead their lives in ways that are valued by themselves and their community. The different aspects of humanitarian

effect are not wholly separable: what people do with humanitarianism is inextricably intertwined with what it does to them. If the politics of life is aimed in part at the fixing of value, attention to the politics of living highlights the enduring contestation over such calculations within recipient communities. Such a politics insists on the existence and persistence of persons, communities, and claims beyond the limits of the regulatory framework in which they are ensconced. It also involves making a sometimes coercive argument about the forms of life that these persons, communities, and claims should inhabit. My aim is to explore this “grip of encounter”¹¹ without either painting a picture of utter abjection or describing a scene of unending resistance. Neither account would capture the conditions of humanitarian life.¹²

Displaced Palestinians live across the globe, but this book will focus on the geography of near displacement—Lebanon, Jordan, Syria, the West Bank, and the Gaza Strip, the five fields of UNRWA operations in the Middle East—and on those who fall within the jurisdiction of the humanitarian apparatus established soon after the *nakba* (catastrophe, the Palestinian term for the losses of 1948). In 1948, when around 750,000 Palestinians left their homes in the course of the struggle over the end of the British Mandate in Palestine and the establishment of the State of Israel, they anticipated that they would return home in relatively short order. Instead, by 2018 there were over five million refugees registered with UNRWA. Israel has never permitted refugees to return home, and the “international community” has put no significant pressure on Israel to change course. Seventy years after their initial displacement, multiple generations of Palestinians have remained refugees and have lived their lives in various relations to a changing humanitarian assistance apparatus. The problem of politics—refugee politics, humanitarian politics—has been at the center of their efforts not only to live, but, at least sometimes, to live well.

AID TO PALESTINIAN REFUGEES AT THE DAWN OF A NEW HUMANITARIAN ERA

The Palestinian *nakba* occurred at a time of massive global population displacement.¹³ Europe was still confronting the demands of the displaced persons of World War II. Independence for India and Pakistan in 1947 was accompanied by tremendous violence and one of the largest population movements in history.¹⁴ Fighting between nationalist and communist forces

in China sent refugees streaming into Hong Kong.¹⁵ Although European refugees received the most international attention, the “problem of people”¹⁶ was a global phenomenon, and potentially a global crisis. Responding to population instability—in Palestine, in Europe, and elsewhere—entailed the elaboration of frameworks to make sense of need. A key part of the response to population movement was the counting, categorizing, and defining of people on the move. The refugee flows also required the deployment of personnel and resources to provide assistance. This displacement moment was not the birth of a humanitarian politics of life. Humanitarian practice has deep roots in both colonialism and abolitionism¹⁷ and was already manifest in both the laws of war and traditions of charity.¹⁸ And an international refugee regime was elaborated in the interwar period.¹⁹ But the institutions that structure today’s refugee regime, including the 1951 International Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and UNHCR, were fashioned after World War II. In the ensuing decades, a full-blown humanitarian industry has developed, along with increasing professionalization, standardization, and evaluation metrics. Despite these changes, today’s global debates about good humanitarian practice are not that different from those that preoccupied aid workers in the 1950s.

As hundreds of thousands of Palestinians left their homes, whether pushed out by fighting, frightened by news of massacres such as the one at Deir Yassin, or expelled by advancing Zionist (later Israeli) forces, their needs were acute. Assistance was first provided by receiving governments and communities, and by local aid organizations such as national Red Cross societies. Recognizing that the need exceeded existing capacity, and that the international community bore significant responsibility for the fate of Palestine and Palestinians, the UN established the United Nations Relief for Palestine Refugees (UNRPR) to coordinate relief in the various places where Palestinians had sought refuge. The UNRPR was not an operational agency, but rather recruited other organizations to distribute UN-provided supplies. In addition to its Geneva Convention–mandated responsibility for prisoners of war, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) agreed to provide relief to refugees in conflict zones where “a neutral intermediary is indispensable”²⁰—the areas that are now the West Bank and Israel. The League of Red Cross Societies (LRCS) took on distribution responsibility for Lebanon, Syria, and Jordan, and the American Friends Service Committee for the Gaza Strip.²¹ By the spring of 1949, Stanton Griffis, the UNRPR director, could report a partial success for the mission: “We have of course

failed to give the great mass of refugees complete shelter, warmth or clothing during the winter, but we have kept them from hunger and so far have saved them reasonably health [*sic*] and fortunately without serious epidemics.”²²

In their negotiations over aid arrangements, the ICRC and LRCS wrote to the UN that “the creation, management and guarding of camps in Palestine represent problems of such great and complex importance that they must be studied closely as such and should be the object of eventual distinct arrangements.”²³ The UN responded that “establishment of these camps when absolutely necessary is part and parcel of the essential relief programme and cannot be divorced from it.”²⁴ A further concern, in the wake of the Holocaust, was about “any tendency to set up concentration camps.” The parties agreed that in the memorandum of agreement the terms *shelters* and *refugee centres* should be used instead of *camps*.²⁵ Even as they recognized the necessity of camps for population management and shelter provision, the agencies did not want responsibility for these spaces. Policing of the camps should be carried out by local authorities, they stipulated.²⁶ And so the terms of the agreement indicated that the ICRC “would promote and encourage to the extent deemed necessary the establishment of reception centres where Palestine refugees can obtain shelter and assistance. To this end local authorities will be requested to assist in the establishment of these reception centres and particularly to assume responsibility for the maintenance of order in such centres.”²⁷ As the UN set up its relief liaison office, its instructions were to insist that local governments provide as much as possible for these centers, that refugees be asked to contribute labor in building them, and that they be large (housing up to ten thousand persons), so as to simplify relief delivery.²⁸

The establishment of camps was formally the responsibility of host countries, and the improvement of camps was the domain of the operating agencies. The camp director in Lebanon described how, when the LRCS began its work, “the refugees in the camp were living without any organization. I started to organize from the beginning the Camps in Beqa’a District on the plan of a village or town running by the refugees themselves.”²⁹ The ICRC also reported the benefits of this organization: “A social structure is being evolved in the camps, where the people are grouped together, first by families and then by villages. . . . In many cases the original mayors or mukhtars are still in charge of their villages.”³⁰ The LRCS director further highlighted the administrative structure he had established in the camps, with departments for food distribution, education, administration, and sanitation. This



FIGURE 1. Palestinian refugee camp, 1948. ICRC audiovisual archives.

organization had the additional benefit of providing refugees with “some kind of occupation even if it was not paid and they were working voluntary [sic].” Engaging refugees in volunteer work was viewed as a way to mitigate the problem of idleness and to train future paid personnel for the camps, and it succeeded on both counts. As this early concern about idleness confirms, many of the problems that people worry about today were present from the outset of camp establishment.

The UNRPR was created with the presumption that the conflict over Palestine, and the concomitant refugee crisis, would be resolved relatively quickly. The fallacy of this belief soon became clear, as all efforts to negotiate either a refugee return or an end to the state of suspended war that existed in the region failed. Given the magnitude of the need and the lack of action toward political resolution, almost as soon as the relief operation got under way the necessity of its extension beyond the initially agreed-upon end date of August 31, 1949, became evident. Anticipating relief beyond the UNRPR, the General Assembly created UNRWA. This new agency was also intended to be temporary. The UN resolution that established it indicated that “constructive measures should be undertaken at an early date with a view to the termination of international assistance for relief.”³¹ The brief mandates granted to UNRWA—first one year, with later authorizations extending to

five years—reflect the continued assumption that the conflict and refugee crisis would be over sooner rather than later.

UNRWA was formally established at the end of 1949, but getting it operational took additional time, requiring the extension of the operating agencies' work. The agencies accepted this necessity but were unwilling to agree to an "indefinite period."³² The ICRC insisted that its intervention, "which must, we are convinced, confine itself strictly to relief in emergency circumstances, should come to an end at the earliest convenient date."³³ The LRCS echoed this sentiment, and the director affirmed that the League "intervenes only in case of emergency."³⁴ The program was "an emergency operation and therefore [the LRCS] cannot commit itself beyond the 31st December 1949. After this date the action would lose its character of emergency."³⁵ The American Friends Service Committee was especially anxious about the narrowness of its mission, seeing simple relief as inadequate. The agencies all sought some assurance that "the utmost pressure was being exerted by the UN on all parties to arrive at a permanent solution of the problem."³⁶ In the end, they agreed to extend their services until April 1950, but not beyond.

The UNRPR, under whose auspices all the agencies worked, was resolute in its view of mission boundaries. At an April 1949 advisory committee meeting, representatives from Arab countries tried to push precisely on this point. The Egyptian envoy pointed to UN Resolution 194 on the right of refugee return: "We all know that relief work is provisional in character and that a final solution of the refugee problem can only be found in repatriation. . . . Relief, if it does not tend towards the repatriation of the refugees, will be useless, except insofar as it represents a temporary palliative by the relief of suffering and the provision of aid."³⁷ Stanton Griffis replied that, while he agreed on the necessity of a resolution to the conflict, "my job is solely to keep these people alive and healthy until the solution of their problem is reached through the Conciliation Commission or otherwise." Pressed by the Lebanese representative to describe the social and emotional effects of displacement on Palestinians, Griffis again insisted that "my job is a perfectly defined job and that is to keep those refugees alive and to let someone else solve their political future." This tension over the relationship of aid provision to a political solution for the refugee problem has been a persistent feature of the Palestinian humanitarian condition, as it has been of many humanitarian situations.

With this tension baked in, the agencies pursued their work of delivering relief. But the fact that they could not take action toward resolution did not

mean that they ever forgot its importance. As the associate director put it in an LRCS newsletter distributed to refugees, “We . . . are perfectly aware that the only remedy for [refugees’] moral and physical misery is to return to their homes. At the same time, we cannot but realise the political difficulties which will arise from such an eventual return. . . . Refugees will have to keep, for an undetermined time, the uncertain position which is so difficult to support.”³⁸ By October 1949, the LRCS reported that they had moved from “a period of transition during which the operation passed from a stage of improvisation to one of consolidation and expansion.”³⁹ It had, therefore, been able to pursue the somewhat expanded activities “which are inherent in every relief operation once the crisis has passed.” These activities included more extensive medical care, social welfare, and educational programs, “all of which are contrived to raise the morale of the refugees who were by now beginning to realise that they were not being neglected and left to their fate.”

Reports for the following months indicated the continuing “uphill struggle”⁴⁰ of both providing the necessary assistance and beginning to prepare the refugees for a post-UNRPR era. Now that the Red Cross had gained the trust of the refugees, these aid officials worried about what would follow: “The fear and suspicion which they now express centre around the work program of the new United Nations agency, which foreshadows final resettlement in the countries which now give them refuge and the doom of their hopes of returning home.”⁴¹ Presciently, the LRCS warned that any resettlement scheme that could not secure the cooperation of the refugees themselves was destined to fail.

The operating agencies all expressed concern about the refugees’ future, but they were also all resolute that their missions must come to an end. Responding to questions from a Beirut newspaper, an LRCS official said that “it is a great disappointment to the League and to the representatives of 18 different countries working out here with me that our departure does not coincide with the return of the refugees to their homes, as we had all been hoping from the day of our arrival.”⁴² Responding to a question about the possible unintended political effects of the Red Cross presence—that it had enabled the development of resettlement projects which refugees opposed—he was emphatic that “the refugees have accepted the Red Cross as the neutral, impartial humanitarian intermediary it has been in the field of pure relief work; that they understand that the Red Cross workers have been more than technical operators and regard them as men and women who, one and all, approached and assisted the refugees in their everyday lives with the love

and in the spirit of the Red Cross and Red Crescent.” The LRCS report on its final month of work underscored that its relief “contributed to convince refugees that they were not being neglected, and that international humanitarian organizations were aware of their plight and were doing their best to alleviate suffering. All these efforts contrived to give hope to the refugees and to stimulate their morale. Nevertheless, these efforts could never avail to provide a solution to the problem.”⁴³

These were the conditions in which humanitarian assistance began, and with which aid agencies have grappled since.⁴⁴ Assistance is deemed necessary both for the survival of the refugees and to assure them of international concern for their plight. This aid is also necessarily insufficient to meet the needs, both material and political, of the displaced population. Political questions—resettlement and/or return key among them—always lurk at the edges of humanitarian activity. These questions will not go away until they are resolved, and they cannot be resolved within the humanitarian sphere.

FRACTURED SOVEREIGNTIES IN THE AID LANDSCAPE

Palestinians were displaced into an unsettled geopolitical landscape. Lebanon, Jordan, and Syria had all achieved the status of fully independent states only recently, during or soon after World War II. Each confronted challenges endemic to postcolonial transitions, and the influx of large numbers of Palestinian refugees further complicated this newly asserted sovereignty. The West Bank and Gaza Strip were slices of historical Palestine that were then absorbed into the governing order of other states. The West Bank was annexed to Jordan, while the Gaza Strip was administered as a Palestinian space by Egypt. As refugees came in, each host government contributed food, shelter, and medical aid, and allocated plots of land for refugee camps.⁴⁵ All of the host countries worried about the material burden this population could impose, as well as the security and the stability of their own regimes. Even as they provided services and support to refugees, host countries (along with the refugees themselves) viewed the United Nations as a responsible party in the situation, with obligations stemming from that responsibility. But what precisely did this responsibility entail? There has been no single or simple answer to that question. Any answers that have emerged have come largely through on-the-ground negotiations over UNRWA operations. And

these answers highlight the fractured sovereignty that has been a central feature of the Palestinian experience in exile and with humanitarianism.

Sovereignty is fractured in several ways. The Palestinian population is dispersed across several states and subject to different sovereign authorities. The ruling orders in these territories have shifted dramatically over the decades, with significant consequences for refugee lives. Attributes of sovereignty are also split among multiple actors, even within a single locale. Control over security, territory, and population is differently distributed in different refugee spaces. Not all of the actors who govern the camps claim sovereignty, but even without the claim they exercise some of its features. In any response to displacement, a humanitarian politics of life proceeds in the interstices of state power and international intervention. Promoting the survival and managing the welfare of displaced populations requires financial support from government and private donors, permission for access from whatever parties exercise power in an area (be they states or militias), and logistical and security arrangements from a similar array of parties. The Palestinian case is an especially complex instance of a general humanitarian dynamic.⁴⁶

The most significant attempt to create some similarity of rights for Palestinian refugees as residents of host countries was the 1965 Arab League collective rights regime for Palestinians—the Casablanca Protocol—that “called on Arab nations hosting refugees to grant them rights of work, travel and residency.” All of the primary host countries signed, though Lebanon appended reservations.⁴⁷ Implementation of the protocol has been inconsistent. Whatever the actual conditions, all of the Arab host governments have lent rhetorical support to the Palestinian cause, even as that rhetoric is sometimes marshaled in support of policies that harm Palestinians. In the West Bank and Gaza Strip, under Israeli occupation since 1967, Palestinians—both refugees and natives—are “the enemy.” They have been subjected to continued dispossession and displacement and, when they have organized against occupation, they have also been subjected to mobility restrictions and bureaucratic and physical violence.

Palestinians were granted citizenship in Jordan in 1954, a status that was formally maintained by residents of the West Bank until 1988, amid the first *intifada* (uprising), when Jordan renounced its claims to the territory. Distinctions between the original Transjordanian, largely tribal, population and the now-majority Palestinians remained, and remain, but their formal status was rendered the same.⁴⁸ In Lebanon, Palestinians have gone from being vulnerable to being powerful, and back again. Before 1969, when

Palestinian national forces acquired control of the refugee camps, the Deuxième Bureau (the Lebanese army's intelligence bureau) policed the camps with a heavy hand, imposing significant strictures on economic and political life. Under the dominance of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), Palestinians in Lebanon experienced a period of political freedom and economic flourishing. When the PLO was forced to leave the country in 1982, the refugee population that remained behind had little protection or support. They lost the "citizenship" rights of "residency, work and free movement"⁴⁹ the PLO had ensured.

In Syria, the 2011 uprising-turned-war has been devastating for the entire population and has introduced dramatic new vulnerabilities into Palestinian lives. Until then, Palestinians had the status of what Nell Gambian calls, "informal citizens,"⁵⁰ people afforded the same privileges and subject to the same restrictions as Syrians. The Palestinians in Syria benefited from the fact that, until recently, "unlike the communities in Jordan and Lebanon, [they] have never been exposed to massive military assaults from either the government or the Israelis."⁵¹ These events include conflict between Palestinian forces and the Jordanian government in 1970–71, events known as Black September in reference to the time of the most sustained violence; the long Lebanese civil war of 1975–90, along with repeated Israeli invasions of the country; and the Lebanese government's 2007 destruction of Nahr el Bared camp in confrontation with an outside militant group. Palestinians in Syria now share in such experiences.

The creation and continued existence of UNRWA was authorized by the United Nations, but the agency can operate in a given territory only with the consent of that territory's government. And it is only willing to operate with that government's (at least nominal) cooperation. Such cooperation is structured by the agreements signed between UNRWA and the host countries, but there is considerable variation among those agreements. The agency's operations in Syria, for instance, are guided by the agreement made between the government and the UN Mediator for Palestine (Folke Bernadotte, a Swedish diplomat assassinated by Zionist paramilitaries in 1948).⁵² Efforts to negotiate a successor agreement, undertaken in 1953, were never successfully concluded.⁵³ Egypt entered into an agreement for operations in the Gaza Strip but did not accept the status of host government.⁵⁴ UNRWA reached an operating agreement with Jordan in 1951, but from the agency's perspective this accord did not adequately block government interference with its operations.⁵⁵ In every host country, UNRWA has encountered difficulties in

exercising its “privileges and immunities,” which include tax exemptions, employee immunity, and legal protection.⁵⁶ It has also encountered difficulties in obtaining cooperation with policy enforcement, especially with regard to the policing of eligibility for assistance.

UNRWA, along with other humanitarian organizations, has been largely responsible for services to refugees, including education and primary health care, even as host governments exercise considerable control over their form (especially the curricula in schools).⁵⁷ Significantly, it “does not administer the camps [and] is not responsible for security or law and order in the camps and has no police force or intelligence service. This responsibility has always remained with the relevant host and other authorities.”⁵⁸ As the agency describes its unusual status: “In carrying out its quasi-governmental tasks, UNRWA, of course, possesses no *territorial authority*, no *legislative power*, and no *jurisdiction* over the refugees in its care, but even so UNRWA performs many tasks which would normally fall to a territorial authority.”⁵⁹ In recognition of this complexity, Sari Hanafi calls UNRWA a “phantom authority” in the camps.⁶⁰

State security concerns and refugee demands for rights and representation coexist, sometimes uneasily, in camp governance. Since UNRWA claims no administrative authority over the camps, it is formally a bystander to governing arrangements. But because accomplishing its work necessitates regular engagement with camp authorities, the agency is in fact deeply enmeshed in them. The host countries all established government departments to coordinate with UNRWA and oversee the camps. In different countries, and at different moments within a single country, camp residents have had varying degrees of autonomy. Broadly, in Syria and Jordan the government has exercised a high degree of control over the camps, including appointing local committees as camp representatives; these are not independent bodies.⁶¹ In Lebanon since 1969 and in the West Bank and Gaza since the Palestinian Authority was established in 1994, camps have had powerful “popular committees” made up of representatives of the dominant political factions. UNRWA activities in the camps require coordination with—and at least the tacit support of—both these committees and host governments.

Further complicating the landscape of sovereignty, even as UNRWA has never sought territorial authority, Palestinian political movements have. Conflicts between Palestinian organizations and host countries—such as those in Jordan and Lebanon noted above—have impeded UNRWA’s performance of the tasks in its jurisdiction.⁶² To the extent that sovereignty also

entails a responsibility of representation, since 1974 the PLO has been recognized by the UN as the “sole and legitimate representative of the Palestinian people.” Despite this formal recognition, Palestinian refugees have also regularly looked to UNRWA to take on some role in representing their claims to international and national audiences. The differential distribution of aspects of sovereignty is neither neat nor entirely stable. Refugees contend with overlapping, often contested, authorities. And these fractured sovereignties ensure that humanitarians will struggle with such uncertainties as a persistent part of their practice.

PUNCTUATED HUMANITARIANISM

Over the course of many decades of displacement, Palestinians and aid providers have been caught in the movement between the “humanitarian situation”—the emergency that presents itself as pressing and mobilizes a humanitarian machinery; and the “humanitarian condition”—the less acute, but no less fundamental, experience of living and working in circumstances of long-term displacement and need. In referring to the humanitarian situation, I mean both the elements that provoke intervention and the forms that such intervention takes.⁶³ To explore the humanitarian situation is to ask what people and institutions do when faced with human suffering, and also how such suffering comes to be recognizable as a crisis. It is to explore the concrete ways in which naming something, defining it as a certain sort of problem, structures a response. The category of the refugee, techniques of ration delivery and management, and debates about humanitarian ethics are all fundamental to this definition.⁶⁴

In thinking about the humanitarian condition—an obvious nod to Hannah Arendt’s “the human condition”—I reference the longevity of displacement and need, the settling in to aid relationships and circumstances, and the conditions of possibility and impossibility that emerge in these circumstances. Even though situations of long-term displacement are common, they strain the limits of the humanitarian imaginary, and also of humanitarian resources. These conditions require organizations that are oriented toward emergency to respond to circumstances that are “protracted.” They pose operational and existential difficulties for what Peter Redfield terms humanitarianism’s “minimalist biopolitics,” the use of biopolitical techniques in an effort primarily to keep people alive rather than to help them