The Right of Return Movement in Syria: Building a Culture of Return, Mobilizing Memories for the Return

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The Palestinian Right of Return Movement (RoRM) emerged among diaspora refugee communities following the Oslo accords and the perceived threat to the right of return. This article focuses on the RoRM in Syria in the context of the community's history and unique civil rights there. Based on extensive interviews in the Damascus area, it provides an overview of the heterogeneous movement, which, while requiring state approval, operates in an autonomous civil society sphere. RoRM activists translate visions of the return formulated in the Palestinian national arena into local community practices that mobilize memories of Palestine as resources (through oral history, village commemorations, etc.) with the aim of ensuring a future return by the new generation of refugees.

The Palestinian refugee community in Syria is today almost half a million strong.[1] This community, like other Palestinian communities in Arab host states, has been and continues to be shaped by the general post-1948 Palestinian experiences of statelessness and the trials of the Palestinian national movement. Its unique Syrian context, however, sets it apart because it has been relatively stable over the past six decades and enjoys civil rights shared by no other disenfranchised Palestinian refugee community. This article contributes to understanding this community, which is almost absent from Arabic- and English-language scholarship and is also often neglected in Palestinian political discourse, the latter implicitly presenting the Lebanon-based Palestinian refugees' right of return as the only right, if any, that will eventually need to be reckoned with during "final status" negotiations.[2]

The outcome of the ongoing turmoil in Syria notwithstanding, what is certain in these changing times is that the Syrian state has had a historically unique relationship to Palestinian refugees there. Laurie Brand aptly summarized this relationship as one that "gradually paved the way for

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[the refugees'] thorough integration into the Syrian socioeconomic structure while preserving their separate Palestinian identity."[3] Others, like Sari Hanafi, have argued that Palestinians in Syria lie somewhere in between an established diaspora (like communities descending from late Ottoman immigrants to the Americas) and a transit refugee community (like the Palestinians in Lebanon, with their institutionalized temporariness and insecurity).[4] Derived from a larger research project investigating practices of memory and remembrance of the 1948 Nakba in the Palestinian refugee camps of Damascus,[5] what follows draws on interviews with members of the community, community activists, workers from the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), and civil servants in the General Authority for Palestinian Arab Refugees (GAPAR, part of the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor) to construct a bottom-up representation of the experiences of Palestinians in Syria after 1948, with a focus on the Right of Return Movement (RoRM).[6]

The RoRM in Syria emerged as a response to the unprecedented threat following the Oslo Accord (1993) to the refugees' legally enshrined right of return. While the RoRM can operate in Syria only with state approval, the movement does constitute "a space (as independent as possible from the direct interventions from the state, private business and family realms) for voluntary collective deliberations and actions that function as a source of autonomy."[7] Within this autonomous space, activists seek to undermine the agenda of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and the Palestinian Authority (PA), especially on the legitimate representation of the refugees, and thus the PLO/PA's ability to forfeit the right of return in negotiations. On the local level, activists are building a "culture of return" to impede the negotiators' ability to sign away the right. An important facet of this culture is the mobilization of memories associated with historic Palestine, with the goal of the future return of the new generation of refugees. These memories are the most valuable resources for activists in what social movement theorists term the mobilization of resources for collective action.[8] This mobilization of memories as resources is a response to the passing of the generation that experienced the Nakba and the coming of age of new generations under the shadow of the national movement's transformation since Oslo.

THE PALESTINIANS IN SYRIA: FROM THE EARLY YEARS TO TODAY

Estimates of the number of Palestinians arriving in Syria during the Palestine War (1948–49) range from 75,000 to 100,000.[9] The Syrian state registered approximately 95,000 refugees in 1949.[10] The great majority came from northern Palestine. The Safad subdistrict was the main place of origin, followed by the Tiberias, Haifa, Acre, Nazareth, and Jaffa subdistricts.[11] Although most came during 1948, Palestinians continued to arrive in Syria following the Nakba. During the Suez War (1956), Israel

used the increased tension on its border with Syria as a pretext to expel for the second and final time the Safad subdistrict tribes of Akrad Baqqara and Akrad Ghanama, previously expelled in 1948 to Syria and then repatriated to become "internal refugees."[12] A number of Palestinians also arrived following the Israeli occupation of the remainder of Palestine during the June 1967 war,[13] the expulsion of the PLO from Jordan (1970), and the Israeli invasion of Lebanon (1982).[14] Most recently, Palestinian refugees have come from Iraq following the U.S.-led invasion in 2003. Although most of the latter are undocumented, as they were not allowed to legally enter Syria, al-Hol Camp was established in the northeast of the country for the few who were retroactively legalized or transferred there from the recently closed border camp of al-Tanf.[15]

What the Nakba meant was the destruction and dispersal of entire communities, and thus the annihilation of half of Palestinian society as it had once existed. Barring the minority who could afford to resettle in second homes or purchase or claim host-country citizenship, what the Nakba wrought on most Palestinians was an en masse uprooting and pauperization that came through an abrupt "refugee-ization."[16] The sentiment of starting from scratch was echoed by many interviewees who fled or were expelled with nothing, under the impression that they would return to their homes in a matter of days, only to find themselves subsisting on the goodwill of the Red Cross, their Syrian hosts, or relatives and acquaintances. Using bitter irony, Abu Ahmad, who left Safad at the age of eighteen, put it this way:

> When we first came we thought that we were staying for a week, ten days, a month; it was only later that we realized that the whole situation was messed up. We didn't become refugees; we became beggars.[17]

The inability of anyone to foresee the magnitude of the calamity that unfolded and the assumption that the Arab states would offer rescue, amplified by inflated rhetoric,[18] played an important role in these initial expectations of temporariness. I asked Abu Samih, who was a young volunteer in 'Abd al-Qadr al-Husayni's Jaysh al-Jihad al-Muqaddas (Holy War Army) from Lubya (Tiberias subdistrict),[19] how he could have continued to hope for Arab rescue after having witnessed the fall of Palestine's major towns and of Lubya itself. He said,

> We used to say that this was all temporary, that the Arab armies will eventually reclaim it . . . because of [what was said on] the [radio] stations, so-and-so says: "The cannons [shall] speak," and so-and-so says: "We will attack." In the end, it was just talk, nothing more.[20]

Until early 1949, Arab host governments bore "the main burden for the care and maintenance of the refugees, assisted by public subscriptions, voluntary agencies and the United Nations' Disaster Relief Project."[21] In

Syria, the Red Cross provided immediate relief to the arriving refugees. This included providing tents and food rations that were critical to the survival of many who had fled the onslaught with nothing. Al-Hajj abu Khalil, of Yaquq (Tiberias subdistrict), told me:

> We first came to the Golan, to an area known by the name of al-Butayha, it is on the border with Palestine. . . . After four or five days, the Red Cross arrived and they brought us some cheese. . . . Later, they said, "Gather yourselves in Kufr Alma village," that became the gathering point. . . . They eventually gave us tents, and about a month later, they began giving out flour and dates, these kinds of things . . . and a bit of lentils . . . we stayed there for two years.[22]

Although tents were set up in various open-air sites, like the one described by al-Hajj abu Khalil, and some Palestinian refugees did remain in the Golan until 1967, others took shelter in places like the abandoned Allied Army barracks outside Aleppo, the citadel in Busra, and the Ottoman-era khans (inns) around Damascus. In Damascus itself, some were also hosted for extended periods in public institutions such as schools and mosques. Others lodged with family or acquaintances, and the more well-to-do rented at their own expense.

Umm 'Izz al-Din, at thirty-five a survivor of the Tantura village massacre (Haifa subdistrict),[23] recounted her early days as a refugee in the Busra citadel during a particularly harsh winter:

> We stayed for fifty-five days. I almost lost my mind, I said: "What is this!" The Hawranis [the people of the Hawran, a region of Syria bordering Jordan] had no food or vegetables or anything; they were living on bulgur and lentils. . . . The people of Tantura eventually received permission to go to Damascus . . . we were placed in mosques. There were seventeen different mosques with refugees. Al-Mu'alaq mosque is still around . . . the people of Lubya were in al-Mu'alaq mosque, there were one hundred families . . . we stayed there for seven years . . . we were the first people to rent [private lodgings].[24]

In January 1949, the Syrian government set up the Palestine Arab Refugee Institution (PARI, renamed GAPAR in 1974) as the highest state body responsible for Palestinians. In addition to being in charge of Palestinian refugees' affairs, it also oversees the Syrian operations of UNRWA, which began in May 1950.[25] Together with and under the supervision of PARI, UNRWA was responsible for providing the Palestinians in Syria with their basic needs, including shelter, food, education, and healthcare, in the years immediately following the Nakba.[26] It continues to provide what are arguably "responsibilities traditionally assigned to national governments in the field of education, health and social services."[27] In Syria, Palestinian refugees qualify for these services from the state as well.

Refugee camps were established on PARI-allotted state land. Refugees subsequently built and came to own private homes on camp land, which continues to belong to the Syrian state.[28] Today, there are nine official UNRWA camps in Syria, five of which are in the Damascus region. There are also three state-defined camps, which UNRWA terms "unofficial," in or near Damascus, Latakia, and Aleppo.[29] Furthermore, there are numerous Palestinian non-camp population concentrations in so-called gatherings (*tajammu'at*), sometimes locally referred to as "camps," with services provided by UNRWA. Palestinians also live outside of these localities, whether in towns or in the countryside.[30] Damascus and its Yarmouk Camp are very significant for Palestinian refugee life. This is because three-quarters of UNRWA-registered refugees live in the capital, with approximately half of those (or one-third of all Palestinians in Syria) in Yarmouk.[31]

As early as September 1949, legislation was passed that allowed Palestinians access to public-sector employment; further legislation during the early years made more jobs accessible.[32] Law 260, promulgated in 1956, governs the Syrian state's relationship to the Palestinians present in Syria upon its adoption and their descendants. Article 1 states:

> The Palestinians residing in the Syrian Republic as of the adoption of this law are to be regarded as Syrians in origin in relation to all the laws and regulations that have thus far been adopted viz. employment, work and trade rights and military service, while retaining their original nationality.[33]

Four years later, under a decree issued shortly before the dissolution of the United Arab Republic (1958–61), Palestinians were issued travel documents.[34] Today, Law 260 means that Palestinians in Syria have civil rights on par with those of Syrian citizens, lacking only the right to vote and citizenship. These include rights to private- and public-sector employment, state education (including higher education), and limited property ownership.[35] Men over the age of eighteen are subject to compulsory military service, undertaken in the Syrian branch of the Palestine Liberation Army (PLA).[36] The state issues "temporary" residency cards that in reality do not need to be renewed. Today, this group of 1948 refugees is the overwhelming majority of Palestinians in the country and forms a distinct politico-legal community, defined and institutionalized through laws and bureaucratic practices.

In addition to the state and UNRWA, another important actor for the community has been the Palestinian national movement. According to Zafir bin Khadra', who states that he helped establish the Arab Nationalists Movement's (ANM) Syrian branch, an early Palestinian national organization in Syria was Palestine's Children (Abna' Filastin), a clandestine group of University of Damascus students he helped establish in 1953–54.[37] He states that their main goals were to organize around the right of return,

equal rights, and military enlistment. In 1956 Palestine's Children contacted another Palestinian group, The Heroes of the Return (Abtal al-'Awda), based in Homs Camp, which was organizing around the same goals, but two years later its members dissolved the group.[38]

Brand has argued that the early post-Nakba years were "a critical formative period for the later development of the quasi-governmental institutions that emerged,"[39] but that in Syria, Palestinian popular organizations, like unions, "have tended to be weak and only marginally active."[40] This is because, she contends, Syrian unions and other instruments of popular mobilization have always been open to Palestinian refugees, with a resultant duality in purpose, whether through organizing or through providing a space for the expression of Palestinian identity. In addition, Palestinian organizations, like their Syrian equivalents, have been subject since 1963 to the Ba'th Party's stringent control of these movements.

After the PLO, created by the Nasser-dominated Arab League in 1964, subsumed the unions, Palestinian mass organizing became contingent on the relationship between Syria and Egypt. Similarly, the ability of such extra-PLO groups as Fatah and the ANM to organize was also contingent upon this relationship.[41] The Syrian Ba'th Party attempted to co-opt Palestinian fighters through the creation of its own Vanguards of the Popular War of Liberation (al-Sa'iqa) in 1966. With the aim of waging a "people's war" against Israel, al-Sa'iqa was an element in the Syrian effort to push Nasser toward a confrontation with Israel before the June War.[42]

After 1967, Syrian policy toward the guerrillas—who took control of the PLO in 1969—became a central issue in the power struggles within the regime's top military echelons. Hafiz al-Asad and the officers who came to power in the wake of Black September (1970) opposed independent Palestinian political initiative and uncontrolled military activity, which they saw as clashing with Syria's regional interests.[43] Tension between the PLO and Syria simmered, and open clashes occurred during Lebanon's civil war, when Syria intervened against the PLO-Lebanese leftist coalition in 1976.[44] Although relations thawed, the final parting of ways occurred after Syria stood by during Israel's war on the PLO and its siege of Beirut in 1982.[45] Syria openly supported the secessionists during the intra-Fatah fighting that broke out in northern Lebanon in 1983,[46] and subsequently cracked down on Fatah cadres in Syria, imprisoning up to two thousand activists.[47] PLO and Fatah institutions in Syria—the former now semi-defunct, the latter operating indirectly through charitable or educational enterprises—never fully recovered and remain marginal to Palestinian life in the country.

PLO and Fatah institutions in Syria—the former now semi-defunct, the latter operating indirectly through charitable enterprises—never fully recovered from the 1983 crackdown, and are marginal to Palestinian life in the country.

In this context, Syria has hosted anti-PLO and anti-Fatah factions. During the 1990s, these were joined by the political bureau of the Islamic Resistance Movement (Hamas). Today, the former Palestinian guerrilla organizations (now political factions) and civil-society initiatives have moved in to fill the institutional void resulting from the Fatah/PLO eclipse, and to combat the refugees' post-1993 political marginalization. Not all these civil-society organizations are directly affiliated with factions, and not all factions are anti-Fatah/PLO, as the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) and the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP), which historically formed a "loyal opposition" within the PLO,[48] clearly illustrate.

It is against this background that some political factions and civil-society organizations today compose the RoRM, a movement that emerged in response to the perceived threat posed to the right of return by the PA. While the RoRM operates within parameters set by the Syrian state, it is nonetheless an autonomous Palestinian movement, similar to those that emerged in response to the same threat among other Palestinian refugee communities, including Palestinians who remained as "internal refugees" in what became the state of Israel.[49]

PALESTINIAN CIVIL SOCIETY AND THE RIGHT OF RETURN MOVEMENT

Palestinian civil society in Syria is today the heir of the Palestinian national movement and the institutional context outlined above. It therefore involves civil society inasmuch as it involves political society, and it is within this arena that the RoRM emerged. It is important to note that this introduction to the RoRM is not meant to provide a comprehensive map of all constituent groups in the Damascus area. Rather, the point is to stress the groups' heterogeneity and the multifacetedness of this arena, which belies traditional conceptions of "civil society" (strictly speaking, a sphere independent of and distinct from the family, business, and state spheres). Furthermore, although the RoRM operates within a civil-society arena constrained by the state, the groups forming the movement are autonomous with respect to their political goals and how they advance them.

Some RoRM groups are directly affiliated with factions, like the PFLP's Refugees and Right of Return Committee (RRRC) or the DFLP's electronic online portal, the 194 Group, formed as a research group in 2001 and housed in the headquarters of the DFLP's main publication, *al-Hurriya*.[50] Some factions, such as Islamic Jihad (which sees the movement as essentially futile)[51] and the PFLP–General Command, are not part of the RoRM at all. Other groups have a looser factional affiliation through funding, like the Palestinian Return Community–Wajeb (Duty), established in 2006 and perceived as a Hamas front by community members. A Wajeb activist whom I interviewed insisted that this is not the case, as the group is

nonfactional and open to no-strings-attached financial contributions from any donor. He did acknowledge that Wajeb and Hamas have a common Islamist outlook, and conceded that Hamas is Wajeb's biggest funder.[52] Other groups are staffed by former members of factions, some of whom continue to have relationships to the PLO. An example of this is Ai'doun, an advocacy and pressure group established in 2000 that uses as its headquarters the semi-defunct PLO Media and Cultural Affairs Office for free and solicits donations for its activities. Other RoRM groups are in part commercial initiatives, which allows them to fund their activities and secure autonomy—for example, the Dar al-Shajara publishing house, linked to the Shajara Institute for Oral Memory, is active in commemoration. Finally, some "groups" represent fewer people, lack the resources of bigger groups, and can comprise only one or two persons.[53]

The beginnings of right-of-return-oriented civil-society initiatives as a response to Oslo was underscored by a worker for Shajara, who told me that the publishing house began as the "Committee for the Defense of Palestinian National Culture," founded in 1994 by eighty-three intellectuals, journalists, and writers. The committee's financial difficulties led to the creation of Dar al-Shajara as a commercial enterprise.[54] Some RoRM activists, acknowledging that Oslo raised the alarm, emphasized the failed Camp David final-status negotiations of 2000 as a turning point. When I asked an activist in Ai'doun why it took so long for the Oslo-created alarm to translate into action on the ground, he said,

> Politically speaking, since 1993 . . . the primary and essential Palestinian issues . . . refugees, Jerusalem, the borders, and the issue of the settlements—the very bases of the solution . . . were all postponed. . . . And hence the fear began in 1993, but it became frantic horror in 2000 when Clinton decided that he [could not] finish his presidency without achieving a solution. . . . [So] they took Arafat and put him in a corner for fifteen days, with a lot of pressure in order to sign an agreement.[55]

Camp David was therefore a watershed in the rise of the RoRM in Syria, as it was in other refugee communities. Even political factions, especially those that opposed or had reservations about the Oslo Accord, see themselves as part of this movement. An activist in the PFLP's RRRC explained that

> insofar as Syria is concerned, the return movement grew out of civil initiatives and independent committees after the Oslo accords. There were truly popular feelings among the refugees concerning the unfolding of something threatening their rights and interests. So several committees were formed; the committees were personal or collective initiatives. And then it reached the stage where all the Palestinian factions formed a committee in order to defend the right of return, especially when the

> refugee issue was being discussed within the framework of the multilateral negotiations.[56]

The heterogeneous groups comprising the RoRM simultaneously operate in an autonomous Palestinian civil-society arena in Syria and in a contested Palestinian national arena. When read in this way, the narrative is clear: The once military-oriented, Fatah-dominated PLO recognized Israel's right to exist on the Palestine of the refugees but in return did not get its desired statelet in the truncated occupied Palestinian territories. This betrayal marginalized the refugees, once the core of the Palestinian national movement, and threatened their legally enshrined right of return.[57] The RoRM groups arose in response, and their activities are geared toward claiming a stake for refugees in Palestinian national politics.[58] Thus, the RoRM's commemorative activities take place in the broader context of grass-roots national activities aimed at mobilizing the refugee constituency to prevent the PLO/PA from negotiating away the right of return.[59]

This national arena of contention notwithstanding, the abundance of RoRM groups—fully or semi-independent, factionally affiliated or not—has led many to remark on (private) "right-of-return corner shops [*dakakin*]" that "trade" on the right of return. Theorists of social movements have argued that activists are rational actors, social entrepreneurs who mobilize resources for collective action.[60] The popular perception that RoRM initiatives constitute *dakakin* highlights the high currency that "return" has among Palestinian refugees and can shed light on the exchange value for activists when mobilizing resources for return.[61] The question is, therefore, how do activists (as social entrepreneurs) and the RoRM (as a social movement) employ resources to further their national goals in the community, and what does this actually mean in practice?

BUILDING A CULTURE OF RETURN, MOBILIZING MEMORIES FOR THE RETURN

The translation of activists' visions and aims into practices enables the RoRM to fill the institutional vacuum in the community and to take on a leadership role. At the same time, the most valuable resources that activists mobilize for the return are memories of and claims to historic Palestine. The importance of memory as a resource needs to be read against the backdrop of the emergence of "memory as guarantor of return" discourses.[62] These discourses have emerged because of the PLO's failure to deliver on the right of return and its perceived willingness to negotiate it away.[63] Thus at this moment, when a coherent national liberation project that encompasses the refugees has disintegrated and when, crucially, the Nakba generation is disappearing, memories of the Palestine that once belonged to the refugees are seen by activists as guarantors of the future return of generations born in exile, because these memories

play a crucial role in harnessing young refugees' political awareness and national identification.

RoRM activists' emphasis on building a "culture of return" (*thaqafat al-'awda*) for the younger refugees is thus the translation into community practices of visions formulated in this national arena of contention. The Ai'doun activist related the group's vision in this way:

> to spread the culture of return among the Palestinian refugees, and to implant the hope that, despite the difficult circumstances, and despite the imbalance in power to the advantage of our enemies, we shouldn't lose hope and [ensure] that a hope and a conviction continues to exist among the new and young generations, that they have a right in Palestine, and that they won't give up this right, and that they call for its implementation, even if time passes, and even if the current circumstances don't allow for the return of the refugees.[64]

Building hope implies reaching out to refugees, spreading a political vision, and therefore filling the leadership and institutional void on the grass-roots level. The culture of return seeks to ensure that newer generations of refugees are aware of their right to return and the need to exercise it. It is a political culture envisioned and advanced because of the current impossibility of return and the potential impact of the passage of time on the actual return. The Ai'doun activist underscored the culture's orientation toward the future and its political message for young refugees:

> The right of return is a personal right, and a collective right, this is your right which isn't going to disappear through . . . the passage of time, and no one ought to manipulate it. I want to make the Palestinian young person understand that this personal right shouldn't be touched, Mahmud Abbas cannot give up your father's right—whether it is to a house or a dunam of land in Palestine—on your behalf, because this is a personal right. If you don't personally give it up—you—the political leader won't be able to. . . . I would make him [the young person] understand these issues . . . this right is not only a personal right, but an inheritance right, for your children and grandchildren, so it is the right of the children and the grandchildren to demand this right.

Activists therefore address "forgetfulness," the nemesis of memory, in the political sense—the possibility that younger refugees might relinquish their political rights because of the passage of time or the threat of the right being negotiated away. One way the culture of return is translated into concrete community practice is through the mobilization of memories of historic Palestine. These memories are among the most important resources at the activists' disposal, given the personal and

emotional connections Palestinian refugees have to their families' places of origin, and can therefore serve as a potent reminder of what continues to be theirs.

The ways in which these memory practices speak to refugees and help spread a culture of return can be seen in the reaction of Abu Muhammad, a second-generation refugee from Tantura, to Wajeb's open-air "village day" event on Tantura in the Damascus neighborhood of al-Qabun, where many Tanturans and their descendants live:

> They were showing us that, until this day, the generations that are like myself and younger, they care about these issues. Take this example, the paper which they printed: "On the occasion of the sixtieth anniversary of the occupation of Palestine, The Palestinian Return Community–Wajeb, al-Qabun Committee, invites you to attend the Palestinian Village Day event," and between three dots they have put "al-Tantura," which is our village, "at 5:30 P.M. on Friday, 6 June 2008, in the tent that has been erected in al-Qabun Park east of the vegetable market. Your presence is support for the right of return." Look at how beautiful this sentence is: "Your presence is support for the right of return". . . "and the invitation is public." I even have some Syrian friends who came with me and participated in this event, which made me so happy. . . . This paper has no value but it means so much to me and my village, so I keep it with me in my pocket.[65]

Recording oral history is another way that activists mobilize memories. Focusing on preserving the Nakba generation's memories of 1948 for younger generations, activists ensure the continued existence of a counter-narrative to the Israeli state's denial of the Nakba, even after its last witnesses pass away.[66] While researching this article I was struck by the frequent association by refugees of my own research with "*al-dhakira al-shafawiyya* [oral memory]," indicating familiarity with the RoRM's use of the practice of oral history. The Wajeb activist described the then-preliminary undertakings of its "Documentation and Oral History Section":

> The section asked all Wajeb's camp-based committees [in Syria] to work on surveying the elderly. Every elderly person who witnessed the Nakba, who lived during the Nakba period and is able [to recollect], meaning that they were cognizant of the unfolding events, should have his name, telephone number, and the village from which he comes, his address, and so on, recorded. We now have the addresses of most of the elderly in all the Syrian camps, and we have now begun paying visits, in a slow and gradual manner. We are going to those who are older than the others because of the age issue, and the life and death issue—we are racing against time.[67]

How activists envision the use of oral history sheds light on the importance of memory, conceived in its concrete and referential sense; as the Ai'doun activist put it, "oral memory in fact completes Palestinian history, because history is written . . . and filtered."[68] As members of the Nakba generation pass away, recording their memories, which are more valuable than the preexisting "filtered" history that lacks their voices, is important to constructing a culture of return.[69] When mobilizing memories for the return, however, activists employ not only memories (in the sense of oral narratives) but also material presented as "historical." This, for example, occurs when Nakba-generation community members narrate their memories in village-day events alongside the presentation of materials like "pictures" and "belongings" of people of the given village,[70] or through the publication of books, by Dar al-Shajara and others, on destroyed localities in Palestine.[71] Published as a response to the "huge heritage that is now on the threshold of forgetfulness,"[72] as the Shajara worker put it, these books employ memories to construct histories. That controversy surrounds the community's reception of these books, with some regarding them as nothing more than glorified family histories, is testament to the messiness of what we call "memory;" what is evoked after an event is never a "pure" memory, in a concrete and referential sense.[73] Ultimately, memory is also "filtered" when used as a basis of narrated, recorded, or written histories intended to mobilize for an envisioned return.

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In constructing a culture of return, activists use memories—of the Nakba and places of origin—as resources for their political objectives, to ensure that the younger generation has a "more intense awareness of its past and present."[74] This awareness is based on every young refugee's knowledge of his or her family's forced uprooting from Palestine some sixty years ago, and an enforced statelessness that is yet to be redressed. The insistence on the right of return and the political uses of memories as claims to Palestine are therefore about resisting the current impossibility of, and threat to, the return. Utilizing the resources available at their disposal, and despite all odds, community activists refuse to submit to the wholesale surrender of their political rights and the political rights of the young refugees, a reminder that accountability for the crimes that took place during 1948 is six decades too late.

CONCLUSION

The emergence of the RoRM in Syria, among a community that has been relatively privileged compared to other Palestinian communities, both refugees and otherwise, demonstrates that the mobilization of

memories for a future return is not the result of a bleak present in which refugees are denied basic rights. Rather, the emergence of the RoRM is a result of the political will and agency of a group of (largely) Syria-born community activists. Furthermore, while the RoRM's translation of aims formulated in the national arena into the building of a culture of return at the local level is telling of the political marginalization of the refugees, it is also telling of the extent of this marginalization. It is as a result of Ramallah not taking notice of the political aspirations of those it claims to represent that the RoRM has emerged, and it is as a result of the RoRM not being able to change this indifference that activists have turned to effecting change where they can make a difference, in the community in Syria. Finally, the turn to memories is also resistance to the Israeli state, which is not only heavily invested in the continued denial and erasure of these memories and the world which these memories lay claim to, but also the ongoing denial and erasure of what remains of Arab Palestine and its Palestinian communities.

ENDNOTES

1. As of December 2011, there are a total of 496,000 refugees registered by the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA). See UNRWA, "Syria," UNRWA website.

2. The published Arabic literature mostly comprises semi-scholarly works, comparative studies with refugees in Lebanon, and articles soliciting refugees' opinions on the negotiations during the early 1990s. With few exceptions, the published English-language literature is mostly of a policy-oriented nature. See, for example, Adnan Abdul-Rahim, "Palestinian Refugee and Caregivers in Syria," in Dawn Chatty and Gillian Lewando Hundt, eds., *Children of Palestine: Experiencing Forced Migration in the Middle East* (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2005); Hamad al-Mawed, *Al-Yarmouk Camp* (Damascus: Dar al-Shajara, 2002) [in Arabic]; Hamad al-Mawed, "The Palestinian Refugees in Syria: Their Past, Present and Future" (paper for the International Development Research Centre, Ottawa, Canada,1999), http://cmsweb.idrc.ca/uploads/user-S/12075964281Syria_Past_Present_..al-mawed.pdf; Nabil al-Sahli, "The Palestinian Refugees in Syria: Basic Data," *Majallat al-Dirasat al-Filastiniyya* 12, no. 45–46 (2001), pp. 119–129 [in Arabic]; 'Ali Badwan, *The Palestinian Refugees in Syria: Towards a Homeland* (Damascus and Beirut: Mu'assasat al-Manara, 2004) [in Arabic]; Dawn Chatty, *Displacement and Dispossession in the Modern Middle East* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 220–230; Nell Gabiam, "Rethinking Camps: Palestinian Refugees in Damascus," in George Gmelch, Robert Kemper, and Walter Zenner, eds., *Urban Life: Readings in Anthropology of the City*, 5th ed. (Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, 2009) 144–156; Zafir bin Khadra', *Syria and the Resident Palestinian Arab Refugees* (Damascus: Dar Kan'an li-l-Dirasat wa-l-Nashir, 1999) [in Arabic]; Laurie Brand, "The Palestinians in Syria: The Politics of Integration," *Middle East Journal* 42, no. 4 (1988), pp. 621–637; Sari Hanafi, "The Palestinians in Syria and the Peace Process," *Majallat al-Dirasat al-Filastiniyya* 7, no. 28 (1996), pp. 85–103 [in Arabic]; Sari Hanafi, "Governing the Palestinian Refugee Camps in Lebanon and Syria: The Cases of Nahr el-Bared and Yarmouk Camps," in Are Knudsen and Sari Hanafi, eds., *Palestinian Refugees: Identity, Space and Place in the Levant*

(London and New York: Routledge, 2010) 29–49; Hala Rizqallah, *The Palestinians in Syria and Lebanon: A Comparative Demographic Study, 1948–1995* (Damascus and Beirut: Dar al-Jalil, 1996) [in Arabic]; Bassem Serhan, *The Transformation of the Palestinian Family in the Diaspora: A Comparative Sociological Study* (Beirut: Institute for Palestine Studies, 2005) [in Arabic]; Jaber Suleiman, "The Palestinians in Syria: Statements and Testimonies," *Majallat al-Dirasat al-Filastiniyya* 5, no. 20 (1994), pp.136–162 [in Arabic]; Åge A. Tiltnes, ed., *Palestinian Refugees in Syria: Human Capital, Economic Resources and Living Conditions* (Norway: Allkopu AS, 2006).

3. Brand, "The Palestinians in Syria," p. 621.

4. Sari Hanafi, "Rethinking the Palestinians Abroad as a Diaspora: The Relationship Between the Diaspora and the Palestinian Territories," *HAGAR: International Social Science Review* 4, no. 1–2 (2003), pp.157–182. For a critique, see Julie Peteet, "Problematizing a Palestinian Diaspora," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 39, no. 4 (2007), pp. 627–646. The notion of "community" is itself the subject of debate. For an overview, see Gerard Delanty, *Community* (London: Routledge, 2003).

5. For the larger project, see Anaheed Al-Hardan, "Remembering the Catastrophe: Uprooted Histories and the Grandchildren of the Nakba" (PhD diss., Department of Sociology, Trinity College, University of Dublin, 2011). On the significance of the Nakba in Arab nationalist thought and to Palestinian society, see Maher Cherif, "The Nakba and Its Meaning in Critical Thought," *Majallat al-Dirasat al-Filastiniyya* 19, no. 74–75 (2008), pp. 15–23 [in Arabic]; Mustafa Kabha, ed., *Towards a Historical Narrative of the Catastrophe: Complexities and Challenges* (Haifa: Mada al-Carmel, 2006) [in Arabic]; Ahmad Sa'di and Lila Abu-Lughod, eds., *Nakba: Palestine, 1948, and the Claims of Memory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007); Constantine Zurayk, "The Meaning of the Catastrophe," in *The General Intellectual Works of Doctor Qustantin Zurayq, Vol. 1* (Beirut: Centre for Arab Unity Studies, 2001), pp. 191–260 [in Arabic].

6. Although many RoRM activists are headquartered in Yarmouk, and the scope of this article is limited to the groups in the Damascus area, as will become clear from interviews with activists, their activities extend to other camps and suburbs of the capital and to Syria as a whole. Jaber Suleiman defines the RoRM as a movement "born out of the various popular, community-based initiatives within the Palestinian society in Palestine and the diaspora . . . a protest movement that was conceived within the framework of preserving the inalienable national rights of the Palestinian people. As such, it seeks to confront all attempts to liquidate or compromise the right of return. It is also a proactive movement which aims at mobilizing and organizing efforts dedicated to the protection and preservation of this right." See his "The Right of Return Movement: Reality and Ambition," in Jaber Suleiman and Raja Deeb, eds., *The Issue of Palestinian Refugees and International Law: The Proceedings of Damascus International Symposium: "A Just Solution for Palestinian Refugees?" Damascus 6-7/9/2004* (Damascus: Ai'doun Group, 2004), pp. 265–266.

7. Benoît Challand, "The Evolution of Western Aid for Palestinian Civil Society: Bypassing Local Knowledge and Resources," *Middle Eastern Studies* 44, no. 3 (2008), p. 399.

8. For an overview of social movement theory, see Donatella Della Porta and Mario Diani, *Social Movements: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006).

9. Rizqallah, *The Palestinians in Syria*, p. 59; Yezid Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State: The Palestinian National Movement, 1948–1993* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 37–46.

10. GAPAR, *The General Authority for Palestinian Arab Refugees and the Palestinian Refugees in the Syrian Arab Republic: Laws, Protocols, Resolutions, Services, Statements, Statistics* (Damascus: GAPAR, date n/a), p. 10 [in Arabic].

11. Tiltnes, *Palestinian Refugees in Syria*, p. 16.

12. Some members of the 'Arab al-Shamalina tribe (Safad subdistrict) were also repatriated to their lands, which fell under the jurisdiction of what was deemed a "demilitarized zone" in the 1949 armistice agreements, and were expelled for the second and final time in 1951. See Suleiman, "Palestinians in Syria," p. 154; Ghazi Falah, *The Plans for the Judaization of the Galilee* (Beirut: Institute for Palestine Studies, 1993), pp. 54–56 [in Arabic].

13. The Israeli occupation of the Syrian Golan Heights in 1967 led to the internal displacement of up to 17,000 refugees. A new UNRWA camp, Qabr Essit, locally known as al-Sit Zaynab, was established near Damascus for internally displaced Palestinian refugees. Several other camps also received a large influx of refugees. See UN General Assembly (UNGA), "Report of the Secretary-General under General Assembly Resolution 2252 (ES-V) and Security Council Resolution 237 (1967)," 15 September 1967, UN document A/6797, *The United Nations Information System on the Question of Palestine,* http://unispal.un.org/UNISPAL.NSF/0/CC2CFCFE1A52BDEC852568D20051B645.

14. Employee of GAPAR Personal Affairs and Statistics Department, interview by the author, July 2008, Damascus.

15. On the arrival of Palestinian refugees from Iraq to Syria, see my "Iraq's Palestinian Refugees Back at Square One," *Electronic Intifada*, 5 March 2009, http://electronicintifada.net/content/iraqs-palestinian-refugees-back-square-one/8115; Dalia al-Achi, "End of Long Ordeal for Palestinian Refugees as Desert Camp Closes," website of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 1 February 2010, http://www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/search?page=search&docid=4b67064c6&query=al%20hol%20camp.

16. Laurie Brand, *The Palestinians in the Arab World: Institution Building and the Search for State* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), pp. 1–21; Rashid Khalidi, *Palestinian Identity: The Construction of a Modern National Consciousness* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), pp. 177–186.

17. Abu Ahmad, interview by the author, June 2008, Damascus.

18. Zurayk, "The Meaning of the Catastrophe," p. 201.

19. Composed of local volunteers, the Holy War Army operated in Palestine prior to the entry of the regular Arab armies. See Ilan Pappé, *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2006).

20. Abu Samih, interview by the author, May 2008, Yarmouk Camp.

21. Harry N. Howard, "UNRWA, the Arab Host Countries and the Arab Refugees," *Middle East Forum* 42, no. 3 (1966), p. 31. On the evolution of UNRWA's policies, see Maya Rosenfeld, "From Emergency Relief Assistance to Human Development and Back: UNRWA and the Palestinian Refugees, 1950–2009," *Refugee Survey Quarterly* 28, no. 2–3 (2010), pp. 286–317.

22. Al-Hajj abu Khalil, interview by the author, March 2008, Khan Eshieh Camp.

23. The Tantura massacre was one of the approximately seventy documented massacres perpetuated by Zionist militias and the incipient Israeli army during the ethnic cleansing of Palestine. See "The Tantura Massacre, 22–23 May 1948," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 30, no. 3 (2001), 5–18; Saleh Abdel Jawad, "Zionist Massacres: The Creation of the Palestinian Refugee Problem in the 1948 War," in Eyal Benvenisti, Chaim Gans, and Sari Hanafi, eds., *Israel and the Palestinian Refugees* (Berlin, New York, and Heidelberg: Springer, 2007).

24. Umm 'Izz al-Din, interview by the author, May 2008, Yarmouk Camp.

25. UN General Assembly, "302 (IV). Assistance to Palestine Refugees 1," 8 December 1949, UN Document A/RES/302 (IV), *The United Nations Information System on the Question of Palestine,* Accessed 10 January 2012: http://unispal.un.org/UNISPAL.NSF/0/AF5F909791DE7FB0852560E500687282

26. GAPAR, *Laws, Protocols, Resolutions.*

27. Jalal al-Husseini, "UNRWA and the Palestinian Nation-Building Process," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 29, no. 2 (2000), p. 51.

28. GAPAR employee, interview.

29. UNRWA defines a camp according to the role it plays in solid-waste collection; this definition does not affect UNRWA's extending its three main services to "unofficial" (state-defined) camps or refugee "gatherings." UNRWA cooperates with GAPAR vis-à-vis basic camp infrastructure services, even in the UNRWA camps. GAPAR employee, interview; employee of UNRWA's Field Administration Office, interview by the author, July 2008, Damascus.

30. Ibid.

31. Ibid; employee of UNRWA's Eligibility and Registration Office, interview by the author, June 2008, Damascus. At the time of carrying out research for this article, there was a minor discrepancy between government and UNRWA statistics, owing to their respective working definitions of what constitutes a Palestinian refugee. I have relied on UNRWA statistics in order to shed light on the sociogeographical reality of the community.

32. Brand, "The Palestinians in Syria," p. 623.

33. GAPAR, *Laws, Protocols, Resolutions*, p. 40.

34. Prior to this, Palestinians had state identification cards as well as UNRWA and PARI ration-entitlement booklets. See al-Husseini, "UNRWA and the Palestinian Nation-Building Process," p. 53; Brand, "The Palestinians in Syria," p. 623.

35. Property ownership is limited to one property per refugee. The official reason for this is the state's compliance with Arab League resolutions that call on member states not to encourage resettlement. In reality, however, there are loopholes and ways in which to circumvent these restrictions.

36. The PLA was created as part of the formation of the PLO in 1964. See Yezid Sayigh, "Struggle Within, Struggle Without: The Transformation of PLO Politics since 1982," *International Affairs* 65, no. 2 (1989), pp. 247–271.

37. Bin Khadra', *Syria and the Resident Palestinian Arab Refugees*, pp. 120–124. One of the founding members of this group, according to Bin Khadra', was Mahmud Abbas.

38. Bin Khadra', *Syria and the Resident Palestinian Arab Refugees*, pp. 120–124.

39. Brand, *Palestinians in the Arab World*, p. 4.

40. Brand, "The Palestinians in Syria," p. 628.

41. Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State*, pp. 25–142.

42. Brand, "Palestinians in Syria."

43. Rashid Khalidi, "The Asad Regime and the Palestinian Resistance," *Arab Studies Quarterly* 6, no.4 (1984), pp. 24–65.

44. Brand, "Palestinians in Syria"; Sayigh, "Struggle Within, Struggle Without."

45. Yezid Sayigh, "Israel's Military Performance in Lebanon, June 1982," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 13, no. 1 (1983), pp. 24–65; Yezid Sayigh, "Palestinian Military Performance in the 1982 War," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 12, no. 4 (1983), pp. 3–24.

46. Brand, "Palestinians in Syria"; Sayigh, "Struggle Within, Struggle Without."

47. Khalidi, "The Asad Regime and the Palestinian Resistance"; Sayigh, "Struggle Within, Struggle Without."

48. Sayigh, "Struggle Within, Struggle Without," p. 248.

49. See, for example, Ingrid Gassner Jaradat, "A Programme for an Independent Rights Campaign," in Naseer Aruri, ed., *Palestinian Refugees: The Right of Return* (London: Pluto Press, 2001); Suleiman, "The Right of Return Movement."

50. 194 Group activist, interview by the author, June 2008, Yarmouk Camp.

51. Islamic Jihad activist, interview by the author, July 2008, Yarmouk Camp.

52. Wajeb activist, interview by author, June 2008, Yarmouk Camp.

53. Assessing the extent of the RoRM's membership and influence is more difficult than assessing the civil-society arena in which the RoRM groups operate, because of the differences in the groups' nature, activities, scope, and influence. Commonly, these groups aspire to be grassroots and to have as wide a scope as possible. However, another common feature is the top-down nature of their visions and activities, in that these visions and

activities are formulated by the groups' full-time activists (voluntary or paid) and implemented among the target constituency. This also means that these groups, even those with closer factional affiliations, are not based on mass membership.

54. Shajara worker, interview by the author, February 2008, Yarmouk Camp.

55. Ai'doun activist, interview by the author, May 2008, Damascus.

56. RRRC activist, interview by the author, July 2008, Yarmouk Camp.

57. Jaber Suleiman, "The Palestine Liberation Organisation: From the Right of Return to Bantustan," in Aruri, *Palestinian Refugees: The Right of Return*.

58. Rosemary Sayigh, "Palestinians: From Peasants to Revolutionaries a Quarter of a Century On," in Roger Heacock, ed., (Beirut: Institut Français du Proche-Orient, 2008), http://ifpo.revues.org/index495.html.

59. Laleh Khalili, "Grass-Roots Commemorations: Remembering the Land in the Camps of Lebanon," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 34, no. 1 (2004), pp. 6–22.

60. I wish to thank David Landy, who in a reading of a very early draft of this article stressed the relationship between RoRM activists' roles as activists and their perception in the community. See John D. McCarthy and Mayer N. Zald, "Resource Mobilization and Social Movements: A Partial Theory," *American Journal of Sociology* 82, no. 6 (1977), pp. 1212–1241; Robert D. Benford and David A. Snow, "Framing Processes and Social Movements: An Overview and Assessment," *Annual Review of Sociology* 26 (2000), pp. 611–639.

61. I wish to thank Helga Tawil-Souri, who raised the question of the exchange value for activists at a presentation of a draft of this article at the Third World Congress for Middle Eastern Studies at the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona in July 2010.

62. For an analysis and critique of representations of memory as redeemer of the nation, see Rema Hammami, "Gender, Nakba and Nation: Palestinian Women's Presence and Absence in the Narration of 1948 Memories," in Ilan Pappé and Jamil Hilal, eds., *Across the Wall: Narratives of Israeli-Palestinian History* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2010); Tom Hill, "Historicity and the *Nakba* Commemorations of 1998" (Working Paper No. 2005/33, European University Institute, Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies, Mediterranean Program Series, San Domenico di Fiesole, 2005), http://cadmus.iue.it/dspace/bitstream/1814/3768/1/2005_33 Hill.pdf.

63. The "Palestine Papers" leaked in January 2011 have corroborated these popular perceptions. See Clayton Swisher, *The Palestine Papers: The End of the Road* (London: Hesperus Press, 2011).

64. Ai'doun activist, interview.

65. Abu Muhammad, interview by the author, June 2008, Yarmouk Camp.

66. A snapshot of Wajeb's oral history work in the form of written summaries is available on their website; see "Oral History," website of the Palestinian Return Community–Wajeb, http://www.wajeb.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=blogsection&id=22&Itemid=320&limit=31&limitstart=31 [in Arabic].

67. Wajeb activist, interview.

68. Ai'doun activist, interview.

69. Thus, it is not history that activists are making available to the new generations through recording memories, but these referential memories that are on the verge of being lost to history. This betrays a dichotomization of memory and history, or a memory in realization of its sharp break with the past. See Pierre Nora, "General Introduction: Between Memory and History," *Realms of Memory: Rethinking the French Past, Vol. 1: Conflicts and Divisions* (Columbia: Columbia University Press, 1996); Pierre Nora, "General Introduction," *Rethinking France: Les lieux de mémoire, Vol. 1: The State* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

70. Wajeb activist, interview. The coexistence of "memory" and "history" in such events, as well as in community members' memory practices more generally, complicates both the relationship between memory and history and, in the context of the examination of Palestinian practices of memory and remembrance, those arguments

that reproduce the orality (memory) versus literacy (history) dichotomy. See Patrick Hutton, *History as an Art of Memory* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1993).

71. These books have been the subject of scholarly interest. See Susan Slyomovics, *The Object of Memory: Arab and Jew Narrate the Palestinian Village* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998); Rochelle Davis, *Geographies of the Displaced: Palestinian Village Histories* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011).

72. Shajara worker, interview.

73. This is not to say that Nakba generation community members cannot evoke memories of Palestine or the Nakba, but rather, that what they evoke is as much a product of 1948 as it is a product of the last sixty years of exile. On the relationship between memory and post-memory, see Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1997); Liz Stanley, *Mourning Becomes . . . Post/memory and Commemoration of the Concentration Camps of the South African War* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2006).

74. Maurice Halbwachs, *Collective Memory* (New York: Harper and Row, 1980), p. 131.