



UNRWA AND THE PALESTINIAN NATION-BUILDING PROCESS

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This paper focuses on the political dimensions of UNRWA's mandate and activities through an analysis of its relations with the Palestinian national movement. The evolution of the UNRWA-PLO relationship, from uneasy coexistence to active partnership, parallels changes in each of the two bodies: UNRWA's movement toward greater politicization, and the PLO's gradual embrace of developmental goals associated with the state-building process. The article ends by touching on the problems inherent in the new development approach, particularly with reference to the refugees' right of return.

THE UNITED NATIONS RELIEF AND WORKS AGENCY for Palestinian Refugees (UNRWA) was established by the UN General Assembly on 8 December 1949 as an operational, nonpolitical agency to take responsibility for the humanitarian aspects of the Palestinian refugee problem and thus to promote conditions of peace and security in the Middle East. Although the agency's mandate was intended to be temporary, its existence has nonetheless been perpetuated because of the intractability of the Palestine problem. Over the years, the agency has established itself as a quasi-state institution, taking on responsibilities traditionally assigned to national governments in the fields of education, health, and social services.¹

While the nonpolitical character of UNRWA's mandate remains unchanged on paper, its assistance has progressively acquired an eminently political dimension that has gradually become embedded in the Palestinian nation-building process. This has been mainly due to changes in the political context in which UNRWA was called upon to operate, namely the emergence of the Palestinian national movement and the subsequent crystallization of a Palestinian national identity among the refugee communities.

THE EARLY YEARS

The PLO's initial stance toward UNRWA was largely determined by the fourteen years of coexistence between the agency and the Palestinian refugee communities that predated its creation in 1964. During those years—

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often called “lost years” in the literature on Palestine²—the main principle with regard to UNRWA that was publicly emphasized through local refugee committees, Arab political parties, and Arab States referred to the refugees’ unquestioned *entitlement* to UNRWA’s services pending the implementation of UN General Assembly Resolution 194, particularly their right to return to their homes in Palestine. Since the refugee problem had resulted from the Palestine policies of the United Nations, and more specifically the Western powers, it was up to those actors to assume responsibility for the consequences. Accordingly, the agency’s assistance program was regarded not just as a temporary international charity venture, but above all as recognition of the refugees’ *status* as refugees endowed with political rights.³ Thus, every decision adopted by the agency was to be scrutinized politically, both through the prism of its adequacy with regard to the right of return and, since the late 1960s, its value to the Palestinian national movement per se.

The political interpretation of UNRWA’s mandate and activities was unintentionally strengthened by the latter’s administrative practices. To facilitate its work, the agency gave ration cards to every “Palestine *Bona Fide* refugee,” defined since 1952 as “a person whose normal residence was Palestine for a minimum of two years preceding the conflict in 1948, and who, as a result of this conflict, lost both his home and his means of livelihood and took refuge in 1948 in one of the countries where UNRWA provides relief.”⁴ Although the refugee status symbolized by the ration card was not meant by UNRWA to have political implications, it nevertheless came to be regarded by the refugees as a legal justification for their right to return and/or obtain compensation. The ration card itself has constituted an official—and often unique—piece of documentary evidence attesting to a physical link with Palestine, thereby becoming a symbol of Palestinian identity.

A second principle guiding the refugees’ attitudes toward UNRWA was their opposition to any program that could lead to resettlement and thus undermine their right to return. Since UNRWA’s mandate was based on

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the Economic Survey Mission reports (late 1949), which specifically recommended the socioeconomic integration of the refugees in the host countries through the provision of work opportunities, a large part of the agency’s efforts in the early years involved development/resettlement schemes. These ranged from small-scale temporary “relief works” in 1950-51 (such as terracing, afforestation, and road construction) to ambitious infrastructural works (such as land reclamation and construction of irrigation systems) in the Sinai and the Jordan Valley from 1952 to 1956. It was because of the emphasis on resettlement that UNRWA, despite assurances of the humanitarian nature of its efforts, was from the outset seen in Palestinian political circles as having been created by the Western powers to liquidate the refugees’ political rights through socioeconomic means. Refugee opposition to the resettlement ef-

forts in the early to mid-1950s was such that by the end of the decade, UNRWA was obliged to terminate these programs and reorient its mandate toward general and vocational education.

It was during those same pre-PLO years that the Palestinians began to see the agency as an informal institutional framework within which the rehabilitation of Palestinian society could take place. UNRWA's various welfare services and the employment opportunities it provided—often the sole tool of social mobility available for the camp refugees—were already beginning to benefit Palestinian society in socioeconomic terms. More importantly, the agency's role in the recovery process also was beginning to have a sociopolitical impact, thus turning it into a defacto actor on the Palestinian political stage. First of all, by setting up an administrative infrastructure managed in the field by Palestinian staff, and by relying (initially) on the traditional elites to facilitate the delivery of services, UNRWA favored the reorganization in the camps of Palestinian society along traditional patterns and thus helped preserve a collective, though fragmented, Palestinian identity in exile. As Kimmerling and Migdal put it, "The definition of what it meant to be Palestinian seemed to grow spontaneously from the community's poorest, more hard-pressed members, the former fallahin who made up the bulk of camp society."⁵

Secondly, because UNRWA's status protected it to some extent from interference by host governments, it rapidly became a privileged forum for Palestinian activism and autonomous institutional action.⁶ Members of the Communist party, the Muslim Brotherhood, Fatah, the Ba'th, and other Arab nationalist parties secured positions in the agency, politicizing the staff. UNRWA institutions—especially its schools and Youth Activities Centers—became places where a collective Palestinian exile identity, based on the memory of the land of Palestine and the claim of return, was constantly reactivated and transmitted to the younger generations despite UNRWA's reliance on the curricula of Arab host states. As is clear from refugee narratives, from the mid-1960s onward, UNRWA's education system led to the emergence of a new generation of refugees politically more aware and more open to modern nationalist approaches than the generation that left Palestine in 1948-49.

It was also within the framework of the agency's school system that the first Palestinian teachers' unions were established in Gaza and Jordan in the mid-1950s. Set up to handle practical matters pertaining to the working conditions in the agency, the unions also served as a forum for political dialogue among their members. These unions in Gaza were banned by Egypt in 1955, and by Jordan in 1957.

Lastly, in the absence of an internationally recognized Palestinian national institution, UNRWA became the quasi-political representative for the Palestinians on the international stage, both as a witness to the refugees' plight and as a reminder of their right to return.⁷ This factor was reinforced by the empathy toward the refugees that began to appear in the annual reports of

UNRWA's commissioner-general in the mid-1950s. While the early reports had presented the refugees as individuals lacking solidarity,⁸ later reports regularly expressed sympathy for their political demands and, in particular, their longing for return. UNRWA reports even came to be quoted in Palestinian officials' speeches at the United Nations and other international fora.

THE EMERGENCE OF THE PLO

By the time the PLO was established in 1964, UNRWA was already deeply integrated in the refugee communities as a provider of welfare and career opportunities, as well as a concrete reminder of the Palestinian refugee question. It was mainly on this basis that the PLO's perception of UNRWA was to be forged. At the same time, despite the inherent "reintegrationist" inclination of UNRWA's mandate, its institutional weaknesses (including a fragile funding system covered almost exclusively by contributions from donor states), and an operational dependence on the goodwill of the host authorities, UNRWA proved to be of crucial importance for the PLO's national project, both in political and economic terms.

Politically, UNRWA facilities constituted an essential prop for the PLO within the framework of its strategy of national struggle. UNRWA's services were instrumental in ensuring the very existence of the camps, which became bastions of Palestinian nationalism as of the late 1960s and simultaneously the focus of the PLO's implantation and its main recruiting ground. Thanks to its powerful position in Lebanon, the PLO was able to use UNRWA facilities for military purposes,⁹ as highlighted in UNRWA's yearly reports (1969-73) and in Israeli press articles in the wake of Israel's invasion of Lebanon in 1982. Simultaneously, UNRWA schools, staffed largely by teachers who subscribed to the PLO's nationalist agenda, became an informal space for the construction and reproduction of a specific Palestinian *national* identity that was to coexist with traditional, local identities, thus reinforcing the schools' role as a channel for political mobilization. The PLO endeavored to complete the political education of the refugees, renamed "returnees" to break the image of dependency and defeat associated with the word "refugee." Wherever it could do so—mainly in Lebanon—it organized classes for refugee children after UNRWA's regular classes.

In terms of socioeconomic impact, UNRWA's employment schemes, designed to decrease the number of applicants to its services, unexpectedly came to serve Palestinian national interests. In particular, its policy as of the early 1960s, aimed at integrating refugees into the fast-growing economies of the Gulf, led to remittances sent by the emigrants (mostly teachers and vocational workers) to relatives, which in turn became a mainstay of the "refugee economy" and contributed to the consolidation of the camps. (This was particularly true in the Gaza Strip, from where about one-third of the refugees emigrated in the 1960s and 1970s.)¹⁰ The emigration process also specifically

benefited the PLO, whose funding until the late 1980s was largely secured by the Palestinian communities in the Gulf states.¹¹

At the same time, the agency, by promoting the professional status and skills of its local staff, directly contributed to the emergence of a new "bureaucratic" middle class that would come to play a significant political role in leading refugee communities. Although not easily quantifiable, this factor is clearly visible in the field, where the number of local community leaders who have worked or still work for UNRWA is striking.

Apart from this *de facto* instrumentalization of UNRWA, it is difficult to say whether there has been from the outset a clear PLO strategy toward the agency. The PLO's first official position with regard to UNRWA, adopted at the second meeting of the Palestine National Council in 1965, was noncommittal, reaffirming the long-held Palestinian and Arab position that moral and financial responsibility for the provision of relief services to the Palestinian refugees would fall to the UN until the liberation of the homeland. This noncommittal attitude was reciprocated by UNRWA, which for years affirmed that it could not establish contact with the PLO without formal endorsement by the General Assembly. And indeed, before the General Assembly granted the PLO observer status in 1974, opening the way to the establishment of official relations between the two institutions,¹² the only direct interaction between the PLO and UNRWA took place in Lebanon. Following the 1969 Cairo Agreements between Lebanon and the PLO, the Beirut government, arguing that the PLO was, *de facto*, responsible for the Palestinian refugees in the country, specifically requested that UNRWA deal with the PLO on refugee issues.¹³ This inaugurated a "routine" operational relationship, comparable to UNRWA's relationship with other host authorities, that was to last until 1982.

In general, the PLO's policy toward UNRWA since the mid-1970s has had two aims: (1) to keep the agency alive and increase the level of the services provided and (2) to ensure that UNRWA's decisions and programs were in keeping with Palestinian political and humanitarian interests. The results of this policy have been mixed. Whereas the PLO did manage to secure important funds for the agency in times of emergency (especially from Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states until the late 1980s), its influence on UNRWA's decision-making process has remained weak. Even when backed by UNGA resolutions, the PLO was never able to counter agency decisions that it considered contrary to Palestinian interests, such as the transfer of UNRWA headquarters from Beirut to Vienna in 1978 or the suspension of UNRWA's basic ration program in 1982.¹⁴ Nor could the PLO ever formally influence the agency's mandate or regulations. One thinks here of the failed PLO (and Arab) attempts to induce the UN and UNRWA to include protection activities¹⁵ within the framework of its general mandate and to have the agency's regular budget covered by the UN headquarters instead of by voluntary contributions.¹⁶ With hindsight, the only Palestinian achievement formally affecting UNRWA's mandate dates back to the "pre-PLO" era, when refugee

opposition to resettlement programs forced the agency to reorient itself to education, as discussed above.

Indeed, with the notable exception of matters pertaining to its Palestinian staff, UNRWA was able to bypass PLO opposition to its decisions and prevent PLO interference in its internal affairs. Given the Palestinian body's overwhelming impact on refugees and local UNRWA staff since the late 1960s, it is not surprising that the PLO should have been viewed as a potential threat to the agency's integrity and neutrality.¹⁷ UNRWA's reluctance to take the PLO's viewpoint into account was assisted by the latter's peculiar status within the UN system: never a full member either of the UN or UNRWA's Advisory Committee,¹⁸ the PLO could not be considered a partner on a par with other host or donor states. Moreover, the PLO, with its traditional focus on politico-military matters but lack of territorial sovereignty, was not in a position to develop national education or health plans capable of providing an alternative to UNRWA's programs. Even in Lebanon, where the PLO was able to establish quasi-state institutions from the early 1970s to 1982, the primary goal of these institutions was a politico-military one rather than the delivery of assistance.¹⁹

UNRWA's refusal, usually on technical or financial grounds, to represent Palestinian political interests gave rise to considerable resentment toward the agency, as evidenced by countless pamphlets published over the years by refugee committees and the PLO *tanzimat* (member organizations) accusing UNRWA of having a patronizing attitude and indeed of "conspiring" against the refugee cause. The resentment targeted not only the agency and its international staff, but also the few Palestinians who had succeeded in securing high positions within UNRWA since the 1980s, who were regularly accused of betraying the cause for higher salaries and living standards. Nonetheless, in view of the socioeconomic and political importance UNRWA had acquired over the years, criticism of the organization, however harsh, never went so far as to question the existence of the agency as such.

Overall, it appears that the PLO's impact on UNRWA's mandate has been of an informal nature, primarily through its decisive sociopolitical influence on the agency's clientele and staff. The links between the PLO and UNRWA's teachers—many of whom defied staff regulations forbidding political activism and joined the PLO member organizations that flourished as of the late 1960s—are a case in point. The PLO reinforced those links through its support of the teachers' unions' demands, either by turning their claims into a "national" issue and mobilizing popular support, or, as happened during the 1982 teachers' strike in the West Bank, by negotiating directly with UNRWA on behalf of UNRWA personnel.²⁰ At the same time, the Palestinian "touch" given by UNRWA teachers to the curricula taught in UNRWA schools finally led UNRWA officially to alter its educational policy: what UNRWA teachers called the "Agency's hidden curriculum"—informal references to Palestinian history and geography—became such an important feature of UNRWA education that the agency ended up incorporating it as part of a "curriculum

enrichment" scheme initiated in 1980. According to the agency, the aim of the revised program was "to provide, within the framework of the curricula prescribed by the host countries, general education and vocational and technical education for Palestinian refugees in accordance with their educational needs, identity and cultural heritage."²¹

TOWARD A PLO-UNRWA PARTNERSHIP IN THE TERRITORIES

With the expulsion of the PLO from Lebanon following the Israeli invasion of 1982, the organization increasingly began to focus its attention on the West Bank and Gaza, where "steadfastness" had developed as the peculiar form of resistance to the occupation. The Palestinian nation-state formation project in the West Bank and Gaza Strip gained momentum with the intifada and, four years later, with the peace process launched in Madrid. These events profoundly affected the PLO-UNRWA relationship. Indeed, at the initiative of the UN and the donor countries, UNRWA's mandate since 1988 has turned into a socioeconomic prop for the future Palestinian state entity, thus resuming, on a smaller scale, the developmental approach the agency had relinquished more than thirty years earlier.²²

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In line with this new approach, several development assistance activities have been conducted since the late 1980s—notably the Expanded Program of Assistance (EPA), launched in 1988, and the Peace Implementation Program (PIP), which replaced the EPA in 1993 following the Oslo accords.²³ The PIP program—one of the most important aspects of which has been the PLO's involvement in its planning²⁴—aimed at permanently improving the living conditions of the refugee communities through upgrading the camps' infrastructure and setting up income-generating schemes. At the same time, the agency has sought to "empower" the refugee community as a whole by encouraging it to provide social relief services of its own.²⁵ In so doing, it has attempted to initiate a process of transition whereby UNRWA services would gradually be administered by the Palestinians themselves.

The official PLO-UNRWA partnership on development schemes, though a clear departure from the PLO's traditional stance, in fact had its roots in the early 1980s,²⁶ when the PLO showed itself sufficiently flexible on the refugee issue to secure funding for UNRWA and encourage it to implement long-range projects in the camps. This informal and confidential PLO-UNRWA partnership grew out of the Joint Jordanian-Palestinian Fund for the Steadfastness of the Palestinian People in the Occupied Homeland (JJPF) set up in the wake of the 1978 Baghdad Arab Summit to confront the political implications of Camp David by supporting Palestinian "steadfastness" against Israeli occupation. Indeed, it was this Arab venture—which financed health, education, and charitable institutions in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip and pro-

vided work for the unemployed (particularly unemployed university graduates) to prevent them from working in Israel—that had enabled the PLO to take root in the occupied territories by focusing on the actual socio-economic needs of the population.

Theoretically, the JJPF's financial assistance targeted the nonrefugee population exclusively, with UNRWA continuing to have sole responsibility for the refugees. In fact, the PLO channelled most of its "steadfastness funds" for Gaza to UNRWA for the funding of infrastructural projects the agency had frozen for want of funds. From the PLO's standpoint, the agency was the only organization in which the Israeli authorities could not directly interfere. Moreover, according to some PLO officials, the JJPF had been unable to find a local Gaza institution sufficiently reliable to make good use of the funds. As for UNRWA, its dire financial straits at the time compelled it to accept the JJPF's partnership offer despite the tensions it knew would result with the "host government," namely the Israeli occupation authorities. Nonetheless, reflecting the balance of power between the two bodies, UNRWA managed to impose upon the PLO the rules of this partnership: UNRWA would remain in control of the choice of projects and their implementation. Similarly, though UNRWA had ostensibly acquiesced in the PLO's insistence that the "steadfastness funds" not be used to offset the agency's regular budget, in fact this demand could be easily bypassed by presenting regular projects as "special projects." Moreover, any special project conducted in the long run—as would be the case for the contract teacher program—contributed *de facto* to UNRWA's regular budget.

Interestingly, the PLO-UNRWA venture included the same components that would be taken into account in the EPA and PIP some years later: an "infrastructural" component, in the form of projects aimed at improving the educational, health, and welfare system within the camps; and a "works" component through the employment of graduates, both registered refugees and otherwise, as contract teachers' assistants and/or substitutes.²⁷

Obviously, UNRWA and the PLO had divergent interpretations of the overall aim of the projects involved. For UNRWA, it was a means of upgrading its services and facilities as well as indirectly offsetting the deficit of its regular budget. For the PLO, what mattered was to support the steadfastness efforts of the camp refugees and to lessen their dependence on Israel's economy.

In retrospect, this unique venture thus appears to have been more a process of "double instrumentalization" than genuine cooperation. Despite serious differences, the JJPF project was instrumental in ushering in the concept of development within PLO-UNRWA relations, thereby preparing the ground for the advent of the official collaboration of the two bodies around the PIP projects in the wake of the Oslo agreements.

THE NEW PRAGMATISM

The confidential partnership of the early 1980s was followed by other moves confirming the PLO's new pragmatism. Its participation in the Refugee Working Group (RWG) set up within the framework of the Madrid multilateral talks in 1991, which explicitly adopted a technical nonpolitical approach to the refugee question, is an important case in point (although the PLO may well have initially regarded the RWG as a forum in which the issue of the political rights of the refugees could also be discussed).²⁸ Numerous public statements emphasized development schemes aimed at camp refugees, even while insisting that the socioeconomic rehabilitation and urbanization of the camps and improvement of the inhabitants' living conditions were by no means tantamount to permanent resettlement in the host region and did not undermine the validity of their right of return.²⁹

In the euphoria accompanying the early stages of the peace process, the entente between UNRWA and the PLO, as well as the refugees' apparent acquiescence in this relationship, aroused little notice. Yet the PLO's new approach clearly challenged some traditional Palestinian positions toward UNRWA, notably its insistence that UNRWA shoulder the entire burden of assistance to the refugees as well as its opposition to any development scheme that could be steered toward resettlement. (The Israeli Civil Administration's use in the 1980s of a developmental discourse to justify its housing and resettlement policies in the occupied territories exacerbated Palestinians' traditional suspicion toward development schemes.)

The historical processes that led Palestinians in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip to reconsider their attitude toward development schemes, in apparent disregard for the implications for the right of return, is a research area that remains largely neglected. Attempts to explain the change generally focus on the goodwill UNRWA generated among Palestinians following the implementation of the Emergency Measures for the Occupied Territories (EMOT) program, launched parallel to the EPA during the intifada and aimed at helping the population endure the hardships of the occupation. The program comprised assistance in cash and in kind as well as "passive protection" measures³⁰ to the entire camp population, including nonrefugees.³¹ However, if the Palestinians have generally perceived EMOT as symbolizing the international community's acknowledgement of the uprising's legitimacy, this only indirectly accounts for the acceptance by the PLO and the refugees of UNRWA's long-term development plans.

One of the most important factors in this change relates to the PLO's perception of the role UNRWA could play within the context of its nation-state formation agenda. Since the early 1990s, UNRWA has indeed come to be regarded as an essential institutional pillar upon which the "newborn" Palestinian state entity could lean during the transitional period. Aside from utilizing its expertise to help prepare the ground for the return of PLO staff and their families and integrate them in the autonomous territories as the Pales-

tinian Authority (PA),³² UNRWA's services were essential for controlling and "stabilizing" the refugee population.

The prospect of establishing a Palestinian state entity in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip as of the 1988 PNC decision has reduced the importance of the right of return in the Palestinian political agenda, leading the PLO to give up its demands for absolute justice and to consider compensation as an alternative to return within the framework of UN Resolution 194. The Palestine state entity project also has deeply affected the nature of the relationship that traditionally bound the PLO leadership to the refugee communities. Previously considered the "fuel" or "backbone" of the Palestinian resistance against Israeli occupation in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, these communities have come to be regarded as a potential economic burden and political liability. Indeed, the question has arisen as to whether a sustainable Palestinian state can emerge as long as a significant part of its population—the refugee camp dwellers—remain socially and economically marginalized and apparently adamant in their will to return to their homes. Accordingly, the refugee issue is increasingly seen as a *Palestinian* problem (rather than an international, or UNRWA, problem) in terms of economic and political security. There is no doubt that this new view of the refugees has contributed to the Palestinian leadership's support for UNRWA developmental schemes.³³

As for the refugees themselves, their attitudes are complex and have evolved over the years due to changing circumstances. In the 1950s, Palestinian refugees had rejected the notions of socioeconomic rehabilitation, mainly because their most important concern was returning to their homes in Palestine. To this day, the creation of a Palestinian state in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip is by no means wholly accepted as a substitute for the right of return; when asked about their reluctance to accept reintegration on these parts of the Palestinian soil, and under Palestinian leadership, most refugees answer that those parts are not *their* Palestine.

At the same time, there is no question that the refugee vision of return has changed. Although return has remained a powerful motivating image, in the decades following the Nakba it has become increasingly abstract. Since 1967 many refugees from the West Bank and the Gaza Strip have had access to their towns and villages of origin, only to find that they did not correspond to their parents' or grandparents' narratives. Moreover, a considerable majority of the Palestinian population at the time of the intifada had no other memory than that of occupation.³⁴ Meanwhile, since the early 1980s, the belief has spread among refugee camp communities that the improvement in their living standards does not have direct bearing on their political rights. Although not always clearly articulated, the notions of *ta'hil* (socioeconomic rehabilitation) and *tawtin* (permanent resettlement) are constantly differentiated in the camp refugees' narratives. While the camps are still perceived as collective symbols of the right of return (which therefore must be preserved), the decision to stay or to move out has finally depended upon indi-

vidual, often financial, considerations. (In this regard, the rise of family incomes following the opening up of work opportunities in the Gulf and Israel, as well as the need to rehabilitate the camps as a means of confronting Israel's resettlement policies in the occupied territories, should be mentioned.) However, as was demonstrated during the intifada in the case of the refugees who were relocated through Israeli housing schemes in the Gaza Strip, the resulting improvement of their living standards has not affected their political identity and commitment to the national cause.³⁵

AN UNCERTAIN FUTURE

In the immediate wake of the Oslo agreements, the gap between the political aims of the Palestinian leadership (which focused on state formation) and the refugee communities (which insisted on the right of return) seemed less unbridgeable than originally had appeared. The refugees' acceptance of the developmental policy that UNRWA had been pursuing since the outbreak of the intifada in 1987 showed that they were more inclined to socioeconomic reintegration than before. This seemed to offer opportunities for an acceptable provisional settlement of the refugee problem in the Palestinian autonomous territories pending the outcome of the Palestinian-Israeli final status talks on the issue.

Meanwhile, it had become clear that the transfer of UNRWA's personnel and facilities to the PA was envisaged by both bodies.³⁶ The move of UNRWA's headquarters from Vienna to Gaza in July 1996—instead of to Beirut, its original site—was widely interpreted as a first step in that direction. The transfer was seen as the culmination of a historical process whereby UNRWA's activities had gradually become embedded in the Palestinian nation-building process—as a reminder of the refugee issue; as an institutional framework where a specific cultural and political Palestinian identity has been preserved and reproduced; and, finally, as a socioeconomic and political support for the emergent Palestinian state entity in the territories.

During the last few years, however, refugee hopes in the peace process have been dampened by various factors, thus contributing to a reversal in their position. Among these elements are donor pressures to phase out UNRWA despite the lack of progress in Israeli-Palestinian talks, repeated cut-backs in the agency's services, and, perhaps more importantly, a growing distrust in the ability of the Palestinian leadership to represent the refugees' political interests. This feeling may have been reinforced by Palestinian officials' lack of negotiating strategy as regards the refugee issue. As Elia Zureik, a member of the Palestinian negotiating team at the RWG, put it, "refugee compensation, modalities of return, and resettlement were left unarticulated at the official level."³⁷

These uncertainties have contributed to the rising tensions in the refugee communities' relations with UNRWA on the one hand and with the PLO/PA on the other, a situation that is likely to threaten the political stability of the

autonomous areas. Already the Refugee Youth Activities Centers have endorsed the political rights of the refugee community and stated their intention to pressure the Palestinian leadership to keep the refugee issue on its agenda.³⁸ The once-envisioned transfer of UNRWA's activities to the PA is now considered a taboo issue by both institutions.³⁹

To a large extent, the lack of cohesion on the Palestinian side reflects the Palestinian national movement's inability (or refusal) to tackle a number of thorny issues that have been carefully set aside since 1974,⁴⁰ including how to reconcile the notions of nation-state formation based on UN Resolution 181 (implying recognition of Israel) and the right of return as formulated in Resolution 194; how to reconcile the need to create a viable socioeconomic infrastructure in the context of nation-state formation on the one hand and the political need to ensure the continuation of the camps (as a reminder and symbol of the right of return) on the other; and finally, how to reconsider the issue of compensation, and therefore reintegration, as an alternative to the right of return without giving the impression of betraying the refugees' cause.

Clearly, what is needed today is a sincere dialogue between the Palestinian and international actors involved in the Palestinian refugee issue aimed at defining the roles and status of each within the framework of the Palestinian nation-state formation process. This may also lead to a serious debate within the Palestinian community itself on the long-avoided issues mentioned above. Indeed, now that the final status talks have resumed, such a debate has become a necessity.

NOTES

1. Currently staffed by nearly 22,000 employees, the agency looks after over 3.5 million registered refugees in these fields (*UNRWA in Figures*, 31 December 1998).

2. As Laurie Brand rightly puts it in *Palestinians in the Arab World* [(New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), p. 4], "the establishment of the PLO in 1964 should be viewed, not as the beginning of the first chapter of the re-emergence of the Palestinian national movement, but as . . . the natural extension of Palestinian efforts in the 1950s and early 1960s . . . to establish a national entity."

3. Actually, Resolution 302 (IV) did not establish a permanent link between UNRWA's activities and Resolution 194. It states that UNRWA is to "carry out in consultation with local governments the direct relief and works programmes as recommended by the Economic Survey Mission [and] to consult with the inter-

ested Near Eastern governments concerning measures to be taken by them preparatory to the time when international assistance for relief and work projects is no longer available."

4. The definition adds that the said refugees "and the direct descendants of such refugees are eligible to Agency assistance if they are: registered with UNRWA; living in the area; and in need," but these last two requirements for access to UNRWA's services were dropped in 1993. See UNRWA, *UNRWA 1950-1990: Serving Palestine Refugees* (Vienna: Author, 1990).

5. Baruch Kimmerling and Joel S. Migdal, *Palestinians: The Making of a People* (New York: Free Press, 1993), p. 204.

6. The UN charter and the Convention on United Nations Privileges and Immunities (1946) delineate relations between the host countries and UNRWA.

7. From 1952 to 1974, the Arab refugees were represented at UN debates on UNRWA's yearly reports by "refugee groups," such as the Palestine Arab Refugee Office and the Palestine Arab Delegation, which actually represented the Arab Higher Committee. However, this did not entail the General Assembly's formal recognition of these groups.

8. See *Report of the Commissioner-General of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees in the Near East*, annual report for the period May 1950–June 1951, p. 5, paragraph 32.

9. This included the temporary occupation of UNRWA administrative buildings, schools, vocational training centers, etc. After the 1982 invasion, Israel revealed that the Sibli Vocational Training Center in south Lebanon had been used as a PLO arms cache and military training facility. See Ben Schiff, *Refugees unto the Third Generation: UN Aid to the Palestinians* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1995), p. 100.

10. Hassan Elnajjar, "Planned Emigration: The Palestinian Case," *International Migration Review* 27, no. 101 (Spring 1993), p. 34.

11. For example, from the late 1960s to the late 1980s the Kuwaiti government collected 5 percent of its Palestinian employees' salaries as a "liberation tax," which was then given to the Palestinian National Fund. Similar taxes were also directly levied by the PLO where it was able to do so, such as in Lebanon in the 1970s.

12. Relations were formally established in 1975 following the adoption of General Assembly Resolution 3236 requesting the secretary general to establish contacts with the PLO in all matters relating to the question of Palestine.

13. UNRWA, *A Brief History 1950–1982* (Vienna: Author, 1982), p. 233.

14. The PLO and the Arabs were supported on both issues by yearly UN General Assembly resolutions on UNRWA: Assistance to Palestine Refugees, (1978–93), paras. 3 or 4; and Resumption of Ration Distribution to Palestine Refugees (1982–92).

15. In 1949, the Palestinian refugees registered with UNRWA were excluded from the UN High Commissioner for Ref-

ugees (UNHCR) regime on the (fallacious) grounds that UNRWA was already taking care of them. But while one of UNHCR's tasks is the protection (unarmed or passive) of refugees, UNRWA's mandate is limited to basic services. The PLO has tried unsuccessfully to get UNRWA to ensure this kind of protection to the refugees or to have UNHCR provide it.

16. Currently, the only item in UNRWA's budget covered by UN headquarters is the international personnel's salaries.

17. The *Report of the Commissioner-General of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East* for the period June 1969–June 1970 explicitly expresses fears as to the impact of the emergence of the Palestinian national movement on refugees and local staff.

18. Even after its recognition by UNRWA as a "host authority" in 1994, the PLO was not given full status by UNRWA's Advisory Committee, which includes representatives of the host countries and the main donors.

19. M. L. Weighill, *Palestinian Refugees in Lebanon: The Politics of Assistance*, conference paper prepared for Center for Lebanese Studies/Refugee Studies, 1966, p. 36.

20. The PLO also may have reimbursed the strikers for wages and salaries lost. As a result of the PLO's intervention, UNRWA agreed to raise the teachers' salaries. See Ben Schiff, *Refugees*, pp. 162–64' and *Projects for Sponsorship: The JJPF*, UNRWA Archives FI 32 6/1, several items in volumes 2 and 3.

21. UNRWA/UNESCO Department of Education, *Biennial Workplan for Curriculum Enrichment and In-Service training*, 1980–1981.

22. UN General Assembly Resolution 19 48/40, Aid to the Palestine Refugees, 10 December 1993.

23. The PIP was also implemented in UNRWA's other operational areas, although on a much smaller scale.

24. Referring to the PIP, UNRWA's *Annual Report 1994–1995* states that it was launched "following consultations with the PLO leadership and with the Agency's major donors" (p. 3, emphasis added).

25. Such efforts have been successful because they have coincided in the years following the intifada with an increased

level of community initiatives. As a result, the Youth Activities Centers and the Rehabilitation Centers for Disabled Persons, originally set up by UNRWA, are now run and managed by elected representatives of the refugee community. Women's Program Centers are supposed to follow suit.

26. The following paragraphs are based on *Projects for Sponsorship: The JJPF*, UNRWA Archives FI 32 6/1, vols. 1-6.

27. The PLO also financed UNRWA emergency operations during the intifada, including the cash assistance program. From 1980 to 1989, the PLO contributed about \$10 million to UNRWA for these various projects. The contract teacher program, to which the Israeli authorities were favorable, continued until 1993, whereas the infrastructural projects were stopped by the Israeli authorities in the mid-1980s.

28. Despite the PLO's efforts, the talks have remained limited to technical issues, such as the gathering of statistical data, family reunification, or refugees' welfare issues. See Salim Tamari, *Palestinian Refugee Negotiations: From Madrid to Oslo II* (Washington: Institute for Palestine Studies, 1996).

29. See, for instance, *Filastin al-Thawra*, no. 987 (5 June 1994), pp. 10-12.

30. In the wake of the intifada, at the initiative of the UN Security Council, the secretary general, and UNRWA's European donors, UNRWA implemented the Refugee Affairs Officers (RAO) scheme whereby international staff in the field were to report brutalities committed by the Israel Defense Forces during clashes with the population. The presence of the UN officials was also to deter violence. The RAO program was implemented in the occupied territories only and was terminated when the Palestinian Authority was established in 1994.

31. See Schiff, *Refugees*, p. 226; and Don Peretz, *Palestinians, Refugees, and the Middle East Peace Process* (Washington: U.S. Institute of Peace Press, 1993), pp. 104-11.

32. Among the services that UNRWA provided was making buildings available to house the families of PLO staff and acting as a channel for paying the PA police.

33. The priority given to the state-formation process in the West Bank and the

Gaza Strip has also affected the PLO's relations with the refugee communities living in other regions of the Middle East. In this respect, the PLO has adopted a wait-and-see policy, waiting for the negotiations on the final status to take some form of official position.

34. Georges E. Bisharat, "Displacement and Social Identity: Palestinian Refugees in the West Bank," in *Population Displacement and Resettlement: Development and Conflict in the Middle East*, ed. by Setenay Shami (New York: Center for Migration Studies, 1994), p. 178.

35. See Norma Masriyeh Hazboun, *Israeli Resettlement Schemes for Palestinian Refugees in the West Bank and Gaza Strip Since 1967* (Ramallah: Palestinian Diaspora and Refugee Center, 1996).

36. UNRWA stated: "the discontinuation of the Agency's role in providing services to Palestine refugees should take place within the next five years, that is, no longer than the successful completion of negotiations on the refugee problem" [UNRWA, *UNRWA and the Transitional Period* (Vienna: Author, 31 January 1995), p. 9]. Not long before the establishment of the PA, PLO officials had expressed their willingness to see UNRWA's programs managed by the Palestinian Authority; see Salim Tamari, *The Political, Economic, and Social Dimensions of the Refugees' Reintegration* (Nablus: Center for Palestine Research and Studies, August 1995), p. 12 [in Arabic].

37. Elia Zureik, *Palestinian Refugees and the Peace Process* (Washington: Institute for Palestine Studies, 1996), p. 89.

38. Since 1996, the union they set up in 1992 has organized numerous conferences and workshops in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip with that purpose. However, the revival of the PLO's Department of Refugee Affairs in 1997, and its establishment of camps services committees in both areas, seems to have reduced their political clout.

39. A technical cooperation process has, nevertheless, taken place between UNRWA and the PA.

40. The principle of a Palestinian state limited to the occupied territories was first formulated during the Palestine National Council (PNC) session in Cairo in June 1974. In November 1988, the PNC definitively adopted this principle by recognizing UN Resolutions 181 and 242.