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# PALESTINIAN REFUGEE CAMPS: DISCIPLINARY SPACE AND TERRITORY OF EXCEPTION

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**CARIM Analytic and Synthetic Notes 2008/44**

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**Analytic and Synthetic Notes – Socio-Political Module**  
**CARIM-AS 2008/44**

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## **Abstract**

This paper explores the impact of living in the Palestinian camps on the socio-economic situation and on the construction of political and national identities.

It first presents an overview of the living conditions of Palestinian refugees with a comparison between the lives of the camp dwellers and those of other refugees. Then it argues that there are major differences between closed and open refugee camps, and that the camp setting as a closed space is not a 'natural' setting for refugees, but that it is a matter of disciplinary power. It also demonstrates that in Palestinian camps, the relationship between national identity and residential setting is weak and that the camps end up modelling a new, urban identity as opposed to a new national identity.

## **Résumé**

Ce papier explore l'impact des conditions de vie dans les camps palestiniens sur la situation socio-économique et la construction des identités nationales et politiques.

En premier lieu, l'auteur passe en revue les conditions de vie des réfugiés palestiniens en comparant la vie des résidents du camp et la vie d'autres réfugiés. Puis, il démontre qu'il y a des différences majeures entre les camps fermés et ouverts, et que l'environnement des camps fermés ne constitue point un cadre naturel pour les réfugiés, mais est la conséquence d'un exercice de pouvoir et de discipline. Il démontre aussi que la relation entre l'identité nationale et le cadre résidentiel dans les camps palestiniens est faible et que les camps finissent par modeler une identité nouvelle, urbaine, opposée à la création d'une nouvelle identité nationale.

## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Palestinian nationalist discourse used to rely on two main pillars: the *Nakba*<sup>2</sup> and the right of return of refugees. To keep this discourse as vibrant as possible the camp was seen as the primary unit in maintaining Palestinian identity in Arab host countries. Using the camp setting to reinforce nationalism is not unique to Palestinians. For instance, Burundian refugees in camps in Tanzania cultivate their Hutu nationalism while those who dwell in the towns identify as “out of the group”.<sup>3</sup>

For humanitarian organizations, the camp remains the most suitable spatial configuration for control and surveillance and it is an imposed form as refugees themselves generally resist at times their confinement in such a space. According to the statistics of the HCR, in 2002 only 38 % of the world’s refugees were camp dwellers while 20 % were urban-zone dwellers. In the case of Palestinians, the average rate of refugees inside camps is fairly significant at 29 %, but in Gaza and in Lebanon these rates rise to around 50 %. (see Table 1).

**Table 1: Palestinian refugees registered at UNRWA (2005)**

Region or Country	Number of Camps	Number of Refugees			% Refugees inside the Camps	% Refugees compared with the local population
		Refugees inside the Camps	Refugees Outside the camps	Total Number of Refugees		
Jordan	10	283,183	1,497,518	1,780,701	15.9	32.8 *
West Bank	19	181,241	506,301	687,542	26.4	31.4**
Gaza Strip	8	471,555	490,090	961,645	49	78.4**
Lebanon	12	210,952	189,630	400,582	52.7	10.7 *
Syria	10	112,882 <sup>4</sup>	311,768	424,650	26.6	2.4 *
Total	59	1,146,931	3,108,189	4,255,120	29.6	

\* Statistics dating from 2005

\*\* Extrapolation based on 1997 Census by the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS)

What is the impact, however, of living in such spaces, first, on the socio-economic situation and, second, on political and national identities? Many studies that I have conducted in the past on the Palestinian Diaspora, demonstrate substantial differences in terms of socio-economic status, living conditions and identity formation between those who are camp dwellers and urban dwellers (Hanafi, 1997, 2001); and this article will move in the same direction. I will first start by presenting an overview of the living conditions of Palestinian refugees with a comparison between the lives of the camp dwellers and those of other refugees. I will argue that there are major differences between closed and open refugee camps and that the camp setting as a closed space is not a 'natural' setting for

1 I would like to thank those who contributed in enriching the first version of this paper, especially Michal Givoni and Yael Berda.

2 Nakba is the Palestinian catastrophe of 1948.

3 Liisa Malkki (1997:67-68) wrote: "In contrast [to the nationalists in the camps], the town refugees had not constructed such a categorically distinct, collective identity. Rather than defining themselves collectively as 'the Hutu refugees,' they tended to seek ways of assimilating and of manipulating multiple identities - identities derived or 'borrowed' from the social context of the township. The town refugees were not essentially 'Hutu' or 'refugees' or 'Tanzanians' or 'Burundians' but rather just 'broad persons' (Hebdige 1987: 159). They were creolized, rhizomatic identities - changing and situational rather than essential and moral [...]. In the process of managing these 'rootless' identities in township life, they were creating not a heroized national identity but a lively cosmopolitanism"

4 This figure does not include the dwellers of Yarmouk camp which is the biggest Palestinian camp in the World, as it is not an official camp for the UNRWA.

3 This does not always include the availability of sanitation and drinking water.

refugees but that it is a matter of disciplinary power: control, surveillance, and the ‘imposition of exception’. Some consider the absence of refugee camps a determining factor in confusing the national identity of refugees with that of the host country. We will see though, instead, that the relationship between national identity and residential setting is weak and that the camps create a new, urban identity as opposed to a new national identity.

Palestinian refugee camps are highly problematic, given the gap between refugees’ legitimate claims and rights with regard to UN Security Council resolutions and international law (Hanafi, 2002), and the demographic expansion and structural changes that have taken place in the camps since their establishment. This brings them close to being slum areas or under-developed urban sprawls.

## **I. Palestinians in Camps**

Although camp dwellers generally enjoy adequate health<sup>3</sup> and education services, they are overlooked in the socio-economic plans of host countries. The differences between the numbers of refugee camp dwellers and refugee urban dwellers in Syria and, to a lesser extent, Jordan are minimal. But the gap between the numbers of camp and urban refugee dwellers in Lebanon is enormous. This can be explained by the fact that the camps in Jordan and Syria are generally found in open spaces regulated by the host state, while Lebanese camps are set in closed spaces. By “open space” I mean: urban and societal. And by urban I mean that the space should be regulated by the host country in such a way that it looks like any low-income residential neighborhood, connected with surrounding cities and villages. By “societal” I mean that camp dwellers should be able to normalize, as far as that is possible, their relations with the local population. A closed space is a space which does not meet at least one of these two conditions.

Table 2 shows the correlation between the poverty rates of Palestinian refugees when compared with local populations in different localities and two factors: the discrimination against Palestinian refugees in local labor markets and the type of residential area that they dwell in. As one can clearly see from the table, the poverty rate is higher compared to the local population only in Lebanon and in the Palestinian Territory (particularly in the West Bank), despite the fact that in the PT there is no institutional discrimination on the labor market. This discrimination certainly plays a role in the poverty rate as noticed in Egypt and Lebanon. The poverty-producing feature shared by Lebanon and the Palestinian Territory is a closed space. This demonstrates how salient such a space is not only in relation to the living conditions of Palestinian refugees, but also, we will see below, in their urban identity as well as their relationship to Palestinian nationalism. This country-by-country analysis does not in any way suggest internal homogeneity, because the question of camp locations within the different countries matters as well. Some camps are located in an urban context, other camps are situated on the urban periphery, and several camps have been built in a rural setting. The differences are sometimes huge.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> See in this regard the typology of refugee camps (Dorai, 2006).

**Table 2. Relationship between the poverty rate, the type of residence and discrimination in the labor market**

Country	No camps	Camps as open space	Camps as closed space	Discrimination in labor market	High rate of poverty compared to the local one.
Egypt	X			X	
Syria		X			
Jordan		X			
Palestinian Territory (Mainly West Bank)			X		X
Lebanon			X	X	X

According to the Norwegian Institute for Applied Social Science (Fafo)'s surveys in Jordan and Syria,<sup>6</sup> the living conditions of Palestinian refugees outside the camps are not much different from those of the general population in the host country.<sup>7</sup> The situation for refugees living in camps in all countries, however, is worse. But the camp populations do not face consistently poor-living conditions, nor do they constitute the main poverty problem of the host countries. The exception is in Lebanon, where all the indicators of Fafo's survey there illustrate poorer living conditions than in other areas. (Hanssen-Bauer and Jacobsen, 2003).

Even if education is generally at a good level thanks to the intervention of the UNRWA, one notices that in Lebanon 60 % of Palestinians aged 18-29 do not finish their basic education. In the Palestinian Territory, girls do not complete high school because they get married early, and generally one would find a stronger illiteracy rate in female members of the family. The incompatibility between the relatively high level of education and the low socio-economic status of camp dwellers arises from the fact that people whose economic status and situations have improved usually leave the camp for the cities, where more work is available.

In regard to the infrastructure, one may observe that 60 % or more of homes in Lebanese and Jordanian refugee camps are without proper sanitary installations for drinking water or, even, for regular tap water. Yet the largest problem concerns population density inside the camps: 30 to 40 % of homes have a density of 3 people or more. This problem particularly concerns large households of 11 people or more. The environmental problems are enormous.<sup>8</sup> The buildings are often crammed together in narrow alleys, where there is a lack of natural light, exposure to hazardous building material, inadequate temperature control, and poor ventilation. The infant mortality rate is higher in

6 The Fafo survey concerns the living conditions of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon and Jordan. In Lebanon it covers a sample of 4,000 household residents in refugee camps and relatively homogenous refugee areas (Ugland, 2003). In Jordan, the survey employed two methods: a survey using a stratified probability sample of about 3,100 households selected from 12 camps, and 13 focus groups. The primary purpose of the focus group discussions was to learn how camp dwellers perceive economic hardship, unemployment, and work opportunities (Khawaja and Tiltes, 2002).

7 Actually the difference in living conditions among Palestinian refugees, between those who are camp dwellers and those who are not, is more important than what is mentioned in the Fafo surveys. I based my study on my own anthropological observations as well as statistics from the Syrian and Palestinian central bureau of statistics. Usually Fafo conducted its surveys in the refugee camps or from Palestinian gathering sites. However, Palestinian refugees also live in the cities, integrate with the local population, and it is usually hard to identify them.

8 One medical doctor expressed the environmental problem in the Badawi refugee camps in north of Lebanon with the following words: "The saddest thing is that people die from the simplest diseases; diseases that are easily curable. It is devastating to know that people wouldn't die if they had the money to pay for cures to diseases that were discovered decades ago. Most of the rampant diseases in the camps do not require advancement treatment; they are usually very simple diseases that result from poor sanitary conditions." Interview on 12 July 2006.



the camps in Lebanon (with 239 deaths for 100,000 births) in addition to higher rates of chronic infant illnesses (2 to 3 times higher than the host country norm).

## II. Camps in Palestinian Territory

Contrary to the version of the two anthropologists Emanuel Marx and Yoram Ben-Porath (1971; Marx 1990) who perceive Palestinian refugee camps as a normal urban space with ongoing processes of assimilation in the city syntax, the camp as an entity carries the weight of Palestinian history, and it is indeed very difficult to talk about 'normality' in this context.

Let us scrutinize the urban situation of camps in the Palestinian Territory. According to UNRWA (2005), 664,104 of the 1,587,920 Palestinian refugees in the Palestinian Territory live in camps: 27 % of those are on the West Bank and 53 % are in Gaza (See Table 1). Camps have better health and educational services, but higher unemployment than urban and rural areas,<sup>9</sup> (21.5 % in camps compared to 17.2 % and 16 % respectively in urban and rural areas).

This situation was confirmed by the Palestinian Diaspora and Refugee Center (Shaml)'s survey of Palestinian refugees. This survey illustrates how camp dwellers suffer urban problems in their life.<sup>10</sup> According to this survey, two thirds of camp dwellers felt that their home was too small for their family, half felt that the camps do not meet their basic needs, and 57 % stated that the camps lacked the conditions conducive to good health. Two thirds said that they would be willing to move out of the camp if their financial situation improved. Poverty in the camps is in part structural, as they lack land. The PCBS also provides valuable data here. Relatively more camp-dwellers work for the Palestinian National Authority (PNA)<sup>11</sup> (where the salary is modest), and fewer work for international organizations other than UNRWA. Approximately, a third of camp dwellers work in the private sector as opposed to 46.6 percent of those from urban areas (Al-Rimmawi and Bukhari, 2002: 23-24).

Society in the Palestinian Territory is not integrative, either for returnees or for refugees, as it is highly fragmented, mirroring partly its fragmented geography. Culturally and socially, refugees in the Territory are well integrated into society when they live outside a camp, but much less so when they live inside the camps. Thus, according to the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research (PSR) survey of 2003,<sup>12</sup> 40 % of refugees living outside camps have at least one family member married to a non-refugee, in contrast to 20 % of camp dwellers.

In the Palestinian Territory, the camps have become a symbol of territorial illegitimacy. This results from two processes, one from above and one from below. First, from above: the camps are invisible in the Oslo process. Israel's new surveillance regime mainly divided the territories into three zones (A, B and C) while the PNA reinforced the division of space into refugee and non-refugee areas, generally excluding the camps from urban or infrastructural projects. Actually the position of the PNA is very complex. While, the PNA has been developing some projects for the camps, the camps are still conceived as being the responsibility of the international community and especially the UNRWA. The PNA then disconnects the camps from local PNA-funded development. For instance, the recent commission to supervise the work on a master plan for three municipalities, Bireh, Ramallah and Bitonia, was produced without input from representatives of the local refugee camps. The question is not, thus, how many projects the PNA have executed in these camps, but the fact that the camps are

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9 All the following statistical data are drawn from the 1997 census (al Rimmawi and Bukhari, 2002), unless mentioned otherwise. There is no need to update these figures to neutralize the effect of the Intifada.

10 As a team leader, I conducted this survey between January and October 2003. Five-hundred and sixty open questionnaires were completed by refugees and non refugees living in the camps and outside them.

11 27.4% compared to 19.5% and 12.8% in urban and rural areas respectively.

12 PSR's survey was conducted between 16 January and 5 February 2003 targeting 1,498 Palestinian refugee households distributed among 150 localities in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip.

considered as a space of exception. This master plan will reflect the power structure in three areas as the representatives in such a commission are elected by the population of these areas. However, the West Bank camp dwellers do not vote, so they are not represented. These closed refugee camps are extra-territorial, not-truly-belonging-to-the-place, and 'in' but not 'of' the space that they physically occupy, a gray zone of ambivalence in relation to their internality/externality vis-à-vis society.

From below, the camps, as heterotopic places in the Foucauldian sense (1997), were disconnected from the social and urban tissues of neighboring areas. The camps are, in fact, a space of tension revolving around deviation, marginality and contradiction: a space of total control or places on the margins in which potential acts of resistance and transgression take place. This disconnection happened gradually and was expedited by local elections, which excluded the refugee-camp dwellers from voting. What the camps dwellers now share is extra-territoriality, their not-truly-belonging-to-the-place, being 'in' but not 'of' the space that they physically occupy.

This delegitimization has had an impact on the social identity and the self-identification of refugee camp dwellers. Urban identity becomes a decisive factor in forging local and national identity. Although the Shaml survey found that the vast majority of camp dwellers were proud of their camp identity, some, notably those in the Shufat camp, hide from their university colleagues the fact that they live there. Any minor social dispute between city people and camp dwellers quickly escalates, as in the clashes between people in the Kalandia camp and Ramallah in 2001. One cannot understand the problems of refugee camps unless one studies them as urban sites. Many years of marginalization caused by both Israeli and Palestinian authorities have turned these areas into slums, resembling in some aspects slum-like sprawls all over the world.

In the end, the camp dwellers are conscious of their marginality and wish to transform their camp into something better. According to the PSR's 2003 survey, half of the refugees there would not mind being settled outside the camp and would accept radical improvements inside the camp. In particular, 87 % wanted to vote in municipal elections (when the camp is inside the city, and three quarters when it is outside) and about half favored taking land to increase the size of the camp inside the city parameters.

### III. Camps as Disciplinary Space

The bio-power<sup>13</sup> exercised by humanitarian organizations has had the effect of depoliticizing those needy people that they serve. Humanitarian law used to talk about "protected people", but current humanitarian practices focus on "victims". By classifying people as victims, the basis of humanitarian action is shifted from rights to welfare. In disaster areas – the space of exception – the values of generosity and pragmatism obscure any references to the rights and responsibilities of the concerned people (refugees, humanitarian organizations, international community, etc.).

If we look at refugee organizations from the Nansen Bureau for Russian and Armenian refugees (1921), the High Commission for Refugees from Germany (1936), the Intergovernmental Committee for Refugees (1938), the International Refugee Organization of the United Nations (1946), the UNRWA (1950) and, up to the present, the High Commission for Refugees (1951), we see that their activities, according to their statutes, have a "humanitarian and social", rather than a political character (Agamben, 1997). Despite the fact that the majority of cases with which refugee organizations deal are of a mass nature, the political identity of refugees has been submerged by their status as individuals in need of shelter and food. In this way, the entire question was transferred to the police and military

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13 Michel Foucault (1994) concept of "bio politics" refers to the way modern western states sought to manage the 'social body'. The practices and functions that were mobilized by the state or supra state authority (UN, humanitarian organizations, etc.) were formed by the production of knowledge-power networks, which were implemented in specific institutions like immigration offices and humanitarian organizations, and articulated by professionals in fields as far apart as medicine and architecture. These new forms of knowledge for the representation of the 'social body' and the new techniques of organization and policing were far from being consistent and unisonant.

forces, and service organizations like the UNRWA. The USA and some European donors to the UNRWA consider that if the UNRWA goes in the direction of looking for a permanent solution, this will be a dangerous step towards politicization, though the case of the UNHCR has shown that being involved in the search for durable solutions does not conflict with an essentially humanitarian mandate (Takkenberg, 2007). Here we return to the initial problem of the emergence of an urban identity among camp dwellers which is related to the nature of the camp, and this is why non camp dwellers quickly establish a good relationship to the host society and avoid victimhood.

Bio-politics cannot be exercised by the UNRWA and the host country unless those people needing assistance are gathered in central and controlled places where they can be under constant surveillance. Refugee camps are thus often disciplinary spaces (Zureik, 2003: 165; Peteet, 2005:45). Actually the UNRWA is a service provider created in 1950 as a specific body for Palestinian refugees because the UN wanted to assign a specific mandate to the UNRWA which did not involve protection or return. While the mandate is very strict, one should acknowledge some transgressions in the last 15 years. First there was what was called the “passive protection” of Palestinian refugees during the first Intifada. Since the UNRWA donor meeting, held in Geneva in June 2004, the UNRWA is connecting the service-providing mission to an advocacy mission. A rights-based approach to their humanitarian mandate is then emerging. One can also notice the relatively strong language used in UNRWA publications to attract the attention of the international community to the continuous plight of Palestinian refugees.<sup>14</sup> However, taking into account housing rights, children and women’s rights and other rights does not mean that the right of return has become part of the UNRWA’s advocacy strategy. In spite of the importance of UNRWA publications in mobilizing the international community, the very concept of refugees as an artifact of the victimization discourse obstructs the possibility of resistance for their return and statehood.

It is interesting to note that “refugee studies” is conceived mainly as a study of the humanitarian condition of refugees, rather than of their political condition.<sup>15</sup> The discipline is functionalist: it is funded by international organizations and its questions are shaped by it, while issues like protection are still only weakly connected to the political rights of the refugees as human beings. Yes, within its mandate the UNRWA has played an important role in empowering Palestinian refugees by providing education, health and sometime work. But this empowerment has not been sufficient to get the Palestinian better integrated into their host societies. The recent UNRWA reconstruction of the Jenin refugee camp, after its partial destruction by the Israeli army of occupation in 2001, suggests that camp dwellers will either stay in the camp or let the camp become an extension of the city of Jenin while there is no suggestion that they will return to their villages of origin. A third of the refugees of the camp come from the village of Zaraan, some 17 km west of Jenin. The UNRWA sometimes has submitted to the will of the host authorities in keeping the camps as temporary spaces. With coercive measures (deprivation of elementary rations), the camp dwellers in Lebanon, from the 1950s to the 1970s, have been obliged to construct their roofs from zinc instead of concrete. Therefore we see that cooperation to ‘better’ manage a population deprived of resources and an attempt to keep the camps as only temporary spaces have had the consequence of further marginalizing this population. One of the indirect consequences of such governance is emigration. The first wave towards the Gulf in the 1960s and 1970s was economically successful, whereas the second one to Scandinavian countries and Germany in the 1980s and 1990s was not. Indeed, the refugees retire early even though their age does not pass 40 years (Dorai, 2003). By maintaining refugees in camps, ready to return home, the result has been to relocate them even further from their place of origin and to keep them in a state of double

14 One can notice also the positive change in the discourse of the UNRWA through the presentations of Lex Takkenberg and Anders Fange in the International Conference organized by Al-Quds University in Jerusalem on “the Palestinian Refugees: Conditions and Recent Developments” on November 25th and 26th 2006.

15 Mallki (1995: 599) noted that “refugee studies” has tended to lack theory as it has uncritically imported its main theoretical ideas, often on an ad hoc basis, from other scholarly domains, especially development studies.

alienation: alienation preventing access to their place of origin and alienation disconnecting them from the urban and social domains in the host country's society.

This double alienation is related not only to spatial suspension but also to temporal suspension. These refugee camps, characterized by the French anthropologist Michel Agier as 'frozen transience', are the temporary rendered permanent. As in the prisons and the 'hyperghettos' scrutinized by Loïc Wacquant (1999), camp dwellers 'learn to live, or rather survive, in the here-and-now, bathed in the concentrate of violence and hopelessness brewing within its walls' (Agier, 2002: 318).

#### IV. Closed Camps as a Space of Exception

Closed camps have become a space of exception in Lebanon and the Palestinian Territory. In the latter, they are subjected to bio-power and the use of the state of exception, put into play by a 'sovereign' who was historically the Israeli military Forces and then the UNRWA and finally, since the Oslo agreements, both the Palestinian National Authority (PNA) and the UNRWA. The sovereign, according to the German philosopher Carl Schmitt, is the one who may proclaim the state of exception. He is not characterized by the order that he institutes through the constitution but by the suspension of this order (Agamben, 1998). A politics of exception has been exercised against these urban places on two levels: urban planning and the establishment of borders.

On the one hand, the state is present in public places in its urban laws, but on the other hand, it abandons the camps and allows them to become places without laws and regulations at the mercy of emergency laws. Urbanization in this case grows wild as there is no planning policy and no supervision and enforcement of construction law. Everyone builds as s/he sees fit, and the result is hundreds of illegal buildings spreading in all directions. The process of urbanization in the camps resulted in large populations suffering from poverty, slum areas surrounding the cities.<sup>16</sup> The camp directors, the leaders of all sorts of political factions and the representatives of the security forces, have imposed measures which change as the balance of power between these groups change. The interviews that I conducted in different camps showed how frustrating it was to live in the disarray of this state of exception. An old woman refugee expressed her anger: "*Who can I complain to when my neighbor builds a second and third floor without leaving any proper space for my apartment?*"

It is thus noteworthy that nothing is legally defined. Everything is suspended but the suspension itself is not put into writing. The Lebanese camps have been under PLO authority since the Cairo Agreement in 1971, but the PLO has not officially been there since 1982. Camps then are governed by a web of complex power structures made up of popular committees, local committees, political factions, NGOs and the UNRWA director. The police cannot enter the camps without negotiating with the powerful actors there, and those actors will decide whether to cooperate or not on a case-by-case basis. The same problem has been observed in Palestinian Territory, even if the law in this territory is supposed to be applied everywhere and to everyone. Social conflict is typically resolved with reference to local notables and local security leaders there. While such conflict resolution methods have been used in Palestinian Territory during the Israeli occupation and have worked well enough, refugee camps no longer have a harmonious communitarian structure with a hierarchy from the local notable (*mukhtar*) to the intermediaries to the subjects. Rather there is a structure where the new elites have no history except their participation in the Palestinian national struggle.

The state of exception, according to Agamben, is a succession of legal suspensions in which everything becomes possible. Here the field of what is possible is blurred and massive as the sovereigns are multiple: there is the official sovereign i.e. the state in which the camps are situated. But there are also *phantom sovereigns* like UNRWA and then a web of actors which contribute during

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<sup>16</sup> The Lebanese authority urban regulations in the camps of southern Lebanon consist of refusing entry of building materials into the camps.

the state of exception and the suspension of laws.<sup>17</sup> It is very important to see the UNRWA as a phantom sovereign. This is not because this organization claims to govern the camp, but because camp dwellers interviewed in Palestinian Territory always consider the UNRWA as responsible for disorder in the camps. The UNRWA calls its representatives in the camp “camp directors”, and this appellation carries with it the symbolic violence of occupying a position while not acting accordingly. The resulting confusion is not a cognitive disorder on the part of Palestinian refugee, but rather a consequence of the historical role played by the UNRWA director in organizing the life of the refugees and in providing their services.

The state of exception also regulates urbanism by drawing the borders. It is the Israeli military power that establishes and controls these borders in a context of apartheid. Today, to be able to live safely in a camp on the West Bank, you must know how to recognize the camp borders and those of the zones A, B, B+, B-, C, H1, H2; you must cross through the intimidating presence of men in uniforms with weapons and armored vehicles, and you must learn to live with barbed wire, with gates blocking the avenue, and with long waits at 'check points'. The barbed wire and the walls add to the domino effect caused by the process of bio-politics, colonization and ethnic cleansing. Drawing borders does not only institute refugee camps, but also other camps of all sorts, closed Palestinian villages and cities and "protected" enclaves for the settlers. Barbed wire and surveillance form a unique colonial device and stand for the spatial application of power. The camps become, through the sovereign exercising the state of exception, the symbols of territorial illegitimacy.

However, this state of exception is not only exercised by the “real” sovereign, but by the actors themselves. Giorgio Agamben, indeed, falls short in addressing the agency of the actor resisting the "total institution". He constructs its political thought from the conception of the camp as a paradigmatic place of modernity and modern politics. The salient examples were concentration camps like Auschwitz (Agamben, 1999). An indistinct zone between the public and the private, this camp is without agency and all is submitted to the sovereign's subjectivization. Having said that, the Palestinian refugee camps are, indeed, a space of resistance and transgression. The agency does not only express itself through resistance, even to the point of using bodies as bombs, but also by the use of the same power process: the state of exception. Discursively, many actors, often the political commissars of these camps, what I will call the “*local*” *sovereigns*, insist on the exceptional status of camps, while refusing to submit it to the urban or tax regulations. These are power techniques used by these political commissars to maintain their authority without elections. This refusal preserves a *status quo* where the majority of the popular committees in the camps in Palestinian Territory and in Lebanon are nominated by the PLO, Fatah or other political parties. Economically, the same popular committees do not allow camp dwellers to pay municipal tax or to pay for electricity or water because historically the UNRWA or/and the host country exempt them. These political commissioners' position reflects the position of a minority of camp dwellers.

Living in a space of exception proclaimed either by real, phantom or local sovereigns has enormous consequences on urbanization and the urbanity of the camp, as well as on its relation to the surrounding environment (cities or villages). The most salient example may be that of Ain Helwa camp in Saida (southern Lebanon). This forbidden place is spatially and administratively modeled on a prison, and is surrounded by the Lebanese army and operated by different Palestinian factions as well as non-Palestinian Islamist groups. Severely overcrowded, it has become a fertile ground for radical Islamic movements and conservative religious forces. As in Agamben's concept of *homo sacer* (1998), the camp is a ‘sacred’ space or *space sacer* in the sense that it is a space which can be ‘eliminated’ without consequences from internal or external mechanisms.

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17 The Israeli lawyer Yael Berda suggested, during discussion of this paper, “phantom sovereignty” as a reference term to bodies like UNRWA.

## V. Conclusion

In addition to looking at refugee camps as an extreme case under the state of exception, I attempted in this paper to flag up complexities by typologizing the camps into open and closed categories. The closed camp is subject to the state of exception. However, this state of exception has different modalities and forms depending on the sovereign in question: real, phantom or local. Still, while Palestinian refugees are subjected to these extreme legal conditions, they are still resisting and expressing human subjectivity.

In these legal and spatial configurations, the relationship between national identity and the type of residential area is weak and, contrary to popular belief, the camps have produced a new urban identity rather than a national one. Also there is no relationship between being an ardent supporter of the right of return and the place of residence. The right of return movement emerged and developed in Europe and North America more than it did in the Arabic World. Thus we do not need to be in closed refugee camp to maintain a Palestinian right-of-return identity.

The dominant Palestinian and humanitarian-organization discourses have narrated the conflict in terms of human suffering and victimhood. The closed camps were a suitable setting for such narration as a kind of museum. Moreover, they are considered as the primary unit in maintaining the refugees' identities in Arab host countries and thereby in maintaining Palestinian identity as a whole. As a result, the camp, as a quasi-political entity, has been studied and shown to reproduce the structure and places of pre-1948 Palestinian society as if *Lobieh*, *Safad*, etc. could be seen in the *Ain Al-Hilwa* and *Yarmouk* camps. This ethnicization of refugees' history overlooked the importance of the economic, social, and cultural relations with host countries. Very few ethnographic studies were able to identify ties with host countries (Zureik, 2003: 159).

The image of a refugee in the Arab world was confined to those who dwell in the miserable camps and not typically upon those who dwell outside. Many myths were circulated in popular but also in academic thought: e.g. the more miserable the camp, the more people would ultimately return home, not wanting to settle in the host country. The discourse, a discourse of stagnation and control, involved silencing the camp dwellers.

Now, it is time to think of the refugee camps as a space where spatial and temporal suspensions become a source of radicalism and a space that perpetuates the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. There is a real need to empower these dwellers by giving them civil and economic rights, recognizing the transnational character of their identity, and radically improving the urban condition of their space. This will not be possible without connecting these spaces to the urban tissue of cities and creating a transparent mode of governance based on elections.

I am advocating, of course, the rehabilitation of the refugee camps. An urban plan based on rehabilitation should take into account the physical, socio-economic, and cultural fabric of these spaces. A bottom-up participatory approach is a must in marking out the different needs of the Palestinian refugee population: women, men, children, working class and middle class, etc. Waiting for a solution grounded in the right of choice (return, settling in the host land, Palestinian Territory or in third countries) and close cooperation (and not competition) between the Palestinian National Authority, UNRWA and the host Authority may be a first step in alleviating the problems of these refugees. Alleviation is at the base of empowering these refugees as transnational subjects. Some efforts are being made in Jordan and to a lesser extent in Syria to include the camps in the state's urban projects or infrastructure, but nothing has been initiated yet by the PNA or by the Lebanese authority.

In this perspective, such authorities should recognize the transnational and flexible nature of identity and citizenship within the refugee community (Hanafi, 2005). There is no opposition between the rehabilitation of a place where refugees live and the ardent desire of some of them for return. A refugee is able to place himself or herself in a succession or a multiplicity of temporalities and spaces of reference.

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