Educating Palestinian refugees:
The Origins of UNRWA's unique schooling system

This article examines the origins of the unique schooling system for Palestinian refugees run by the UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA). Examining developments c. 1950-57, it illuminates the programme's beginning and explores the objectives of those behind it. Using archival evidence from numerous international welfare organisations and testimonies from refugees themselves, this article argues that the parties providing education and the refugees receiving it often had conflicting objectives that were highly politicised on both sides. Despite the comparatively greater power and resources of the UN, the Palestinian refugees were able to make use of their limited leverage in order to shape the education system as they preferred. The UNRWA education programme thus serves as a revealing case study for explaining developmental aid to refugee populations and its inevitable intersection with politics.

KEYWORDS: Palestinian refugees, UNRWA, education, refugee camps, Middle East

Introduction

'[Schools] are an indispensable part of camp life for their morale value alone. As long as it is necessary to have refugee camps, there must be refugee schools in the camps.'
Charlotte Johnson, League of Red Cross Societies, 12 May 1950.

In May 1950, the Palestinian refugee crisis was about to enter its third year. At least 750,000 Palestinians had been expelled or fled their homes during the national dispossession of 1948, known in Arabic as the *nakba* or 'catastrophe' (UN 1949; Khalidi 1998; Pappe 2006). Their initial hopes of returning to their homes in a matter of weeks had been utterly frustrated (Khaled 1973; Turki 1994; Al Hout 2011). Instead, two years later, just under a million Palestinians found themselves registered as refugees across the Middle East, with many taking shelter in improvised camps (UNCCP 1949). Observing the potential longevity of the situation, relief organisations began to look at providing long-term services, particularly education, as the opening quotation from Charlotte Johnson shows. However, Western aid agencies were not the first to look at the refugees' schooling. Individual teachers from the refugee communities had already initiated efforts to

provide schooling to Palestinian children in exile, setting up basic classes and even makeshift schools.

These efforts marked the beginning of what would eventually evolve into a fully-fledged education programme for generations of Palestinian refugee children. When the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA) began operations in May 1950, it took over the running of these early schools in Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, the West Bank and Gaza. Momentously, UNRWA introduced free education for registered Palestinian refugee children across the geographical fields in which it worked. Within a decade, education had become the Agency's largest programme in terms of both budget and personnel (Bocco 2010). A unique situation thus developed wherein an international organisation administered a specially-devised schooling system for one national group. As this became an essential element of Palestinian exile, Charlotte Johnson's comment in May 1950 turned out to be not only an accurate description of the situation in the camps at the time, but also prescient of what was to come.

This article focuses on the early years of Palestinian exile, examining how UNRWA's unique education system came to be created. It identifies the main actors involved in establishing schooling for Palestinian refugee children, and explores their respective motives. In so doing, the article assesses the extent to which UNRWA's unique education system aligns in practice with what was originally intended. Evidence is taken from the early records of the organisations responsible for developing the first schools in Palestinian refugee camps: most notably UNRWA, but also the Red Cross, the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC), and the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO). Much of this material was originally recorded either for internal logistical purposes or for fundraising efforts. The various organisational records are therefore used collectively here in order to overcome potential institutional biases. They are supplemented with the accounts of individual refugees and other observers in the camps, to show how the education system functioned and was received in practice.

Three core arguments are drawn from this evidence. Firstly, this article shows that it was the Palestinian refugees themselves who drove early education in the camps, and then continued to play an active role in shaping the UNRWA programme. Secondly, it contends that while the refugees and UNRWA had conflicting motives when it came to camp education, both were informed by political considerations. On this basis, the third argument follows that the resulting confrontations over camp schooling made UNRWA's education programme emblematic of the inherent tensions of its set-up, and of the Agency's complex relationship with the refugees.

It is this latter point that makes the findings presented here of particular value to the field of Refugee Studies, as they comprise a case study of the challenges involved in providing supposedly apolitical welfare in an arena saturated with politics. This case study also speaks to the complexities of development programmes in refugee situations that are ostensibly temporary. The UNRWA education programme exemplifies internationalised responses to regional refugee crises, and the use of education as part of welfare. As a result, the usefulness of these findings is not limited to the fields of Palestinian or Middle Eastern studies.

There is widespread consensus among scholars that UNRWA's provision of universal free education had a transformative impact on society and politics among Palestinian refugees. Rashid Khalidi (1997), Jalal Al Husseini (2000) and Michael Dumper (2006) have all written of the programme's positive and progressive socio-economic impact; David Forsythe (1983) and Julie Peteet (2005) emphasise its influence on Palestinian national identity. However, these analyses are all retrospective, assessing the *effects* of the education programme. As such, they are ultimately incomplete; the programme's *origins* must also be considered in order to gain a comprehensive understanding of its set-up. This early period is not mere background; in examining it, this article casts the UNRWA schooling system in a different light, taking account of the multiple parties and purposes that drove its creation and construction.

The importance of this article's intervention is multi-faceted. As the aforementioned scholars have noted, the UNRWA education programme has been a key feature of Palestinian exile, helping shape the political, social, cultural and economic conditions of the refugee camps. Generations of Palestinians who came through the UNRWA education programme went on to become key figures in the politics of the Middle East; leading nationalists Khalil Wazir, Ghassan Kanafani and Naji al-Ali were all UNRWA graduates. Understanding the ethos behind the programme is thus crucial to understanding this history. Moreover, its origins are emblematic of the complexity and contradictions of the Palestinian refugee crisis itself. This early period saw the emergence and embedding of features that would characterise the Palestinian refugee situation over subsequent decades, among them the active agency of the refugees themselves; the unique treatment of Palestinians within the framework of the UN; and the inherent politicisation of international humanitarianism.

The motives behind the UNRWA education programme are indicative of the unavoidable presence of politics in welfare services to refugee. Notwithstanding the UN convention that aid should be entirely apolitical,

the programme was aligned with the Western states' preference for permanently settling the Palestinians in the Arab host states – a policy referred to as 'reintegration'. Yet at the same time, the refugees' success in reshaping the education programme around their opposing cause of repatriation typified the ultimate limitations of pursuing such policies without the partnership of the refugee communities themselves – an approach that was commonplace in aid programmes in the mid-twentieth century.

This article is organised into three sections. The first examines early efforts to provide education in the Palestinian refugee camps immediately after the Nakba. It focuses on the activities of the refugees themselves, demonstrating how they were the driving force behind these activities. Building on this context, the second section then addresses the beginning of UNRWA's work, investigating whether the onset of its large-scale education programme showed more continuity or change with what had gone before. The second section will also establish how the Agency's objectives were diametrically opposed to those of the refugees, creating a fundamental and lasting tension in their relationship. Finally, the third section examines the impact of the Palestinian refugees' response to UNRWA's work and objectives. In the process, it assess the long-term significance of this early period, and what it signifies about the intersection between politics and humanitarian projects for refugees in the mid-twentieth century.

Early Education Efforts, 1948-50

While UNRWA would become inextricably linked with Palestinian refugee education, it was not responsible for the first camp schools. In fact, the earliest moves to provide schooling for Palestinian children in exile came not from any organisation, but from individuals within the community (UNRWA 1990). Many of the first classes were set up by refugees who had been teachers in Palestine and were determined that the Nakba would not put a stop to children's education (UNESCO 1953). As early as 1948, makeshift classes were being conducted in tents or outside in the open-air, with resourceful individuals finding ways to teach without books, pens or furniture [see Figure 1] (UNESCO 2017). Indeed, at the beginning of 1950, the only refugee school operating in Jordan was one that had been set up by refugee teachers in Al Karama camp, without any external assistance (Johnson 1950). This exemplifies the active agency that has consistently characterised Palestinian exile.

Such activities were also in keeping with the Palestinian refugees' widespread demand for education for their children – a priority not uncommon among dispossessed communities. Many saw education as a way

out of the poverty and deprivation they were facing in exile, and accordingly seized any opportunity to educate their children (Turki 1972; Atwan 2008; Abu Sitta 2016). As Maya Rosenfeld and Yezid Sayigh point out, the camp refugees were overwhelmingly of peasant origin; having lost the land that had defined them and been their main currency for generations, they now looked to education as the key to improving their prospects (Rosenfeld 2010; Y. Sayigh 1997). Recalling his childhood after the Nakba, leading Palestinian nationalist Abu Iyad makes the same point (Abu Iyad 1978). Moreover, many refugees were uneducated themselves and felt that they had lost their country in 1948 because of ignorance (R. Sayigh 1994). Education was accordingly the first step to getting it back. From the start, then, their goal of education was informed by the politics of the Palestinians' plight.

<Figure 1>

Accordingly, Palestinian refugees throughout the Middle East tended to be highly responsive to any opportunity to educate their children (Turki 1972). As the months in exile rolled on, such opportunities came not only from refugee teachers but also from the range of international organisations providing services in the camps. Chief among these were the UN Disaster Relief Project (UNDRP) and its successor UN Relief for Palestine Refugees (UNRPR), along with the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), the League of Red Cross Societies (LORCS), and the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC). The latter established camp schools in Gaza from March 1949, while the Red Cross worked in the West Bank and Arab host states (Schiff 1995). These organisations dominated the provision of welfare to Palestinian refugees prior to UNRWA's arrival on the scene in May 1950.

The plethora of international bodies active on the ground was indicative of the emerging post-war consensus that refugee crises should be treated as a global responsibility, not merely a matter for the region concerned (Akram 2002). The ecumenical organisations that had conventionally dominated welfare services now saw their formerly prominent role overtaken, although they remained active, with the Pontifical Mission for Palestine, the Congregational Christian Service Committee, and the Church World Service all involved in aid to Palestinian refugees (Johnson 1950). More specifically, the Armenian Catholic priest Father Malek was responsible for starting the El Buss camp school in Lebanon in 1949 (Highwood 1949).

However, these piecemeal attempts were insufficient to meet the refugees' ardent demands for education services. In 1950, the Red Cross reported that it was receiving constant requests and petitions to open more

schools and expand the existing ones. International aid workers Charlotte Johnson and Peter Malak described sad scenes of non-enrolled children standing outside schools and looking longingly at their counterparts inside. In what would become a familiar refrain for UNRWA over the decades, the Red Cross added that it had to decline these requests due to insufficient funding (Johnson 1950). The following year, a report from the Anglican Church in Jerusalem noted 'ever-increasing demand among refugee parents for education for their children', with insufficient schools to meet it (Anglican Bishop in Jerusalem 1951). The demand for a more comprehensive system was palpable. UNRWA arrived at just the right time.

The role of UNESCO

On the surface, the aforementioned multiplicity of organisations operating in the Palestinian refugee camps at this time might suggest a wide variance in activities and objectives. In reality, their operations were fairly standardised. Moreover, many of the schooling norms established in this period would continue under UNRWA's regime, for the simple reason that these organisations were largely funded by and answerable to the same players, usually via the UN. The latter not only oversaw UNDRP, UNRPR and later UNRWA, but also commissioned the AFSC's work in Gaza. From November 1948, UNRPR functioned as an umbrella body, overseeing the activities of the various INGOs (Feldman 2007). As a result, the provision of relief services was driven by the UN's concerns – which were in turn shaped by the objectives of the Western powers dominating the supranational organisation at that time.

Formally, the UN – along with the US and UK – supported the refugees' return to their homes, in line with UN General Assembly (UNGA) Resolution 194 (UNGA 1949). Yet in practice, from the late 1940s UN officials were increasingly looking to the refugees' integration into the host countries as an alternative supposed 'solution' (Schiff 1995). This was encouraged by the US and the UK, which were the biggest global powers involved. While publicly backing UNGA Resolution 194, which called for the Palestinian refugees' repatriation, senior figures in both governments privately supported their permanent resettlement in the Arab host states (Rosenfeld 2010; MacDonald 1950). They took advantage of their power at the UN to push for their goal (Gendzier 2016). This strategy was not lost on the Palestinian refugees, and would become a key factor in their difficult relationship with the UN and its agencies.

The continuity provided by the ongoing role of the UN, and indirectly the US, meant that the schooling projects of 1948-50 laid many of the foundations for what would become UNRWA's flagship education

programme. One UN body in particular is especially important for understanding the lasting significance of this period: UNESCO. Indeed, the role of UNESCO in educating Palestinian refugees is insufficiently considered in much of the existing literature. While UNRWA holds the exclusive mandate for serving registered Palestinian refugees, it has delivered its education programme in partnership with UNESCO from the beginning (Schiff 1995). The two bodies issue joint Annual Education Reports, and since 1964 have managed affairs via the UNRWA-UNESCO Institute of Education, based first in Beirut and then in Vienna (UNESCO/UNRWA 1964). Moreover, UNESCO's involvement in providing education for Palestinian refugees preceded that of UNRWA - a significant factor in explaining the consistency between the late 1940s and subsequent years.

UNESCO first became involved in refugee schooling in response to the aforementioned demand from the refugees themselves. It provided low-key support to the refugees' school in Al Karama, and then began coordinating bigger plans with NGOs on the ground. In May 1949, UNESCO forged an agreement with the LORCS over a schooling programme to be used in schools for Palestinian refugees in Lebanon, Syria and Jordan. The programme was initially intended to last four months, with measures put in place to enable its continuation if necessary (Johnson 1950). This foreshadowed the nature of UNESCO's later involvement, when it would work with UNRWA on developing curricula for the Palestinian camps (Shabaneh 2012).

Many of the decisions taken by the LORCS and UNESCO had lasting consequences for the education programme later implemented by UNRWA in Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, the West Bank and Gaza. Most crucially, while the Red Cross' early programme had tended to use the former syllabus of Mandate Palestine, it now approved the move to use host state textbooks and curricula, including those of Jordan in the West Bank and Egypt in Gaza (Johnson 1950). This would become a hallmark of schooling for Palestinian refugees across the five geographical fields in which UNRWA worked (UNESCO 1953).

Other precedents came in the international organisations' relations with Palestinian teachers. In employing Palestinian refugees to teach in internationally-managed camp schools, UNESCO established another feature that would become a key feature of the UNRWA system. In 1953, UNESCO reported that the 1,527 teaching staff in camp schools were 'all Palestinian refugees' (UNESCO 1953). Their employment in this guise was consistent with their earlier role in initiating the first camp schools after the Nakba, and served as a further signifier of their active involvement in refugee education from the beginning. At the same time, this set-up ushered

in the multi-layered and often difficult relationship between Palestinian refugee teachers and the international organisations employing them. From early on, the former complained about their insufficient pay and requested better working conditions. The LORCS supported them in this, stating in overtures to the UN that the teachers' allowance was 'unsound, unjust and unsafe' (Johnson 1953). In future decades, UNRWA would repeatedly face the same grievances from Palestinian teachers.

Finally, UNESCO's interventions at this time provided a harbinger of how UNRWA would later depict its schooling programme when seeking financial support on the world stage. In 1949, UNESCO appealed to governments around the world to fund its efforts to provide schooling for Palestinian refugee children. Its appeals were couched in humanitarian terms about the wellbeing, future prospects, and 'right to learn' of 200,000 refugee children (Bodet 1949); this approach paid off, as the resulting donations led to the establishment of 31 emergency schools in the camps (UNESCO 1953). In similar terms, UNRWA would later continually highlight the humanitarian impact of its education programme, marketing it as a multi-faceted welfare project with widespread progressive socio-economic benefits. Yet at the same time, both UN agencies also subtly acknowledged the political objectives of education by alluding to its positive contribution to political stability and peace in the Middle East (Bodet 1949; UNRWA 1960-1980).

The establishment of UNRWA

It is thus clear that when the newly-created UNRWA began operations in May 1950, it was neither the first organisation to provide services to Palestinian refugees, nor even the first UN agency to do so. Instead, UNRWA's distinguishing feature was its construction as a comprehensive relief system after the more piecemeal efforts of UNRPR, the AFSC and the LORCS. Indeed, its creation was justified by way of this distinction. UNRWA was designed to be far-reaching and sweeping. By contrast, UNRPR's work had been premised on the understanding that the political causes of the Palestinian refugee crisis would be resolved imminently (Feldman 2007).

In keeping with the objective of establishing a comprehensive welfare system, UNRWA took over the running of all Palestinian refugee schools when it began operations. At the beginning of the 1950/51 school year, the Agency was running 74 schools across its five fields of operation, with 700 teachers and 35,700 pupils (UNRWA/UNESCO Institute of Education 1973). The programme expanded quickly; by late 1954, UNRWA was responsible for 242 elementary schools, and 154,735 students, including

those whom it subsidised in government and private schools (Dickerson 1974). UNRWA would later cite the large size and comprehensive nature of its education programme as positive attributes. Defending the Agency in a 1974 article, Public Information Officer George Dickerson wrote proudly that it was 'comparable in size, scope and complexity with a national education system' (Dickerson 1974).

<Figure 2>

While the UN's continuing involvement meant that the transition to the UNRWA system was marked by more continuity than change, its impact on Palestinian society was still considerable. In providing all registered refugee children with free access to education, the programme instantly transformed social and political life in the camps. In 1940s Mandate Palestine, only 3 in 10 Palestinians had attended school (Segev 2001). Now, near-universal literacy among the refugees was achieved within a generation (Khalidi 1997). From the mid-1950s, education constituted the Agency's largest programme in terms of budget and staffing – an importance it has retained to this day (Dickerson 1974; Schiff 1995; Bocco 2010).

UNRWA also proudly cited the programme's impact on gender equality (Ardill 1970). The provision of free education to *all* children meant that families no longer saved to educate their sons while keeping their daughters at home – as had been the case in the initial period of exile, when schooling places had been more limited (UNESCO 1953). As a result, education rates among Palestinian girls increased hugely in both relative and absolute terms in the 1950s and 1960s (Abu Lughod 1973).

Of course, full equality was not achieved, and UNRWA continued to reinforce conventional notions of gender with its separate vocational subjects for boys and girls; the former studied woodwork while the latter were instructed in home economics [see Figure 3] (UNRWA 1967). Nevertheless, the education programme had an important impact in raising female literacy and increasing opportunities for Palestinian refugee women. At the same time, this progress was juxtaposed with the protracted precarity of the refugees' situations, as they remained stateless and disenfranchised decades after the Nakba. With the opportunities afforded by increased education often unmatched by legal rights, the programme's impact demonstrated the complex and difficult relationship between welfare and politics in refugee crises.

<Figure 3>

UNRWA's motives: Refugee 'reintegration'

Like UNESCO, UNRWA largely characterised the motives behind its education policy as humanitarian, progressive and apolitical. In a 1952 memo, the Agency's Chief of Education J. Robbins stated:

> Education alone among the relief services offers the possibility of developing the resources remaining in the possession of the Palestinian Community [sic]. It is able to add to their capital equipment, to prepare them for re-establishment without prejudging the answer to the questions of 'when' and 'where' (Robbins, 1952).

This internal memo, sent to the UNRWA Executive Office to appeal for more investment in education, uses highly revealing language. Robbins, evidently aware of the imperatives of the Agency's apolitical mandate, underlines that the programme has no bearing on what he calls the 'highly controversial questions' of how the Palestine refugees' plight should be resolved. At the same time, he emphasises the benefits that education brings to the Palestinians in exile, and its uniqueness in comparison with the other services provided by UNRWA. In speaking about the long-term benefits of education for Palestinian refugees, Robbins invoked the same ideas behind UNESCO's 1949 appeals for funding.

This messaging was in keeping with UNRWA's presentation of itself as a non-political organisation solely concerned with welfare (Kennedy 1950). From the time of the Agency's creation, management were keen to emphasise that it had no political mandate and was not involved in pursuing solutions to the refugee crisis. At most, official communications from the Agency acknowledged the political nature of the Palestinian refugee issue, while clarifying that its own work was limited to the provision of welfare services (UNRWA 1977). Successive Directors and Commissioner-Generals stated in their annual reports that the Agency went no further than endorsing the call for the refugees' return in UNGA Resolution 194 (UNRWA 1960-1982).

Behind the scenes, the line between politics and service provision was rather more blurred. As noted above, by the early 1950s the UN was increasingly moving away from the notion of repatriation, which the new Israeli government had firmly rejected (Rosenfeld 2010). Its shift towards the refugees' 'reintegration' into the Arab host countries as an alternative solution was also in keeping with the post-war era's focus on non-*refoulement*, and the resulting emphasis on resettlement as a durable solution rather than repatriation (Akram 2002).

This focus on resettlement received support from the US and UK, who increasingly saw UN welfare as a means to achieve policy goals (Schiff 1995;

Lord Macdonald 1950; Al Husseini 2010). Accordingly, in 1949, the UN commissioned the US-backed Economic Survey Mission (ESM) to tour the Middle East and identify possible measures to address the Palestinian refugee situation. The ESM's report, submitted in November 1949, reflected the Western powers' increasing engagement with the idea of settling the refugees permanently outside Palestine (UN 1949). While they ostensibly supported the latter's repatriation – voting for it in UNGA Resolution 194 (UNGA 1949a) – behind the scenes they were seeking alternative proposals.

Specifically, the ESM recommended the creation of a specific agency to facilitate the refugees' integration. The following month, the UNGA formally adopted the ESM's recommendations in Resolution 302(IV), which created UNRWA with a mandate to carry out 'direct relief and works programmes [for Palestine refugees]… in collaboration with local governments [in Jordan, the West Bank, Gaza, Syria and Lebanon]' (UNGA 1949). In other words, the UN in general, and UNRWA in particular, served as direct vehicles for promoting the refugees' permanent resettlement in the Arab states.

As this makes clear, UNRWA did not remain detached from politics, despite its claims in official communications, In fact, the Western powers that dominated the UN saw UNRWA as a key tool for achieving the objective of 'reintegration'. Internally, the UK Foreign Office even stated that the Agency had in fact been created as a means to implement resettlement (Richmond 1952). Nor was this entirely secret; in 1952 the UNGA, to which UNRWA reported, officially endorsed the resettlement policy in Resolution 513. At the same time, it authorised a $200 million 'Reintegration Fund' to enable the Agency to accomplish the full integration of the Palestine refugees into the host countries over a three-year period (UNGA 1952).

Thus despite official insistence that its mandate was apolitical, UNRWA was working not merely to provide relief but to actually implement a political solution to the Palestine refugee crisis. Indeed, the documents further reveal that behind the scenes, UNRWA management were relatively open about this objective. In a private meeting with UNESCO in 1952, UNRWA Director Blandford admitted that he was 'doing his best to get the Arab governments to agree to the resettlement of the refugees' (Akrawi 1952).

The education programme was central to this objective. UNESCO representative Dr Matta Akrawi reported in 1952 that Blandford would only allow educational budgetary increases for activities closely linked to reintegration. Akrawi added that when pushed, the Director revealed that

this restriction came from the US State Department (Akrawi 1952). Akrawi's report does not indicate *which* activities came into this category, but it is particularly significant in view of the politicised debates that have raged for decades over UNRWA's insistence on using host state curricula in its schools. As such, the latter is worth considering briefly here.

From the beginning, the Agency took the decision to continue using host state curricula – as its predecessors had done in refugee schools – rather than developing a uniquely Palestinian one. It accordingly organised its schooling system in consultation with the host governments: Lebanon, Syria, Jordan (including the West Bank, which it had annexed in 1950), and Egypt (which administered Gaza from 1948-67) (UNRWA Public Information Office 1950). UNRWA management justified this approach on the grounds that it enabled Palestinian refugee children to later participate in the host states' secondary and higher education systems, and compete on the job markets (van Vliet 1964; Reddaway 1967; Reddaway 1968; Beroudiaux 1970; Reddaway 1970; Samady 1973). As a lesser point, they also argued that it allowed Palestinian refugee children to maintain their connection with Arab culture (Dickerson 1974).

However, the decision did not go unquestioned. From early on, critics condemned it as a political calculation designed to facilitate the refugees' permanent resettlement in the Arab host states and eradicate any distinctive Palestinian identity (Turki 1972, Peteet 2005). Years later, Palestinian scholar Ibrahim Abu Lughod provided one of the most forceful critiques of the policy when he wrote in 1973 that the use of Arab state curricula to educate Palestinian children was depriving them of any in-depth knowledge of their history, particularly the struggle against the Zionist movement. Instead, he argued, it was presenting the liberation of Palestine as an Arab problem, with the effect of 'weaken[ing] Palestinianism'. In more strategic terms, he further argued that the curricula and teaching methodologies of stable societies were inappropriate for educating an exiled community that was seeking national liberation (Abu Lughod 1973).

Unsurprisingly, UNRWA management rejected these charges. Writing in direct response to Abu Lughod's criticisms, UNRWA Public Information Officer George Dickerson contended in 1974 that the Agency's education programme contributed directly to 'the preservation of the Palestine refugees' identity with the Palestine culture [sic].' He attributed this to the existence of a predominantly Palestinian student and teaching body in UNRWA schools. He also pointed out that after 1967, an autonomous Palestinian-run education programme would be impossible in the occupied West Bank and Gaza (Dickerson 1974).

More generally, UNRWA management were keen to highlight that the Arab host states themselves favoured the curriculum policy (UNRWA Public Information Office 1970; Dickerson 1970). Indeed, in 1968, the Conference of Arab Ministers of Education had complained about reports that UNRWA has ceased applying host state curricula in its schools (Conference of Arab Ministers of Education 1968). From this perspective, then, the Agency was simply complying with the wishes of the governments hosting its work. Yet it is undeniable that the use of Arab host state curricula in UNRWA schools neatly aligned with the objective of permanently resettling Palestinian refugees in these countries.

The role of the refugees

Needless to say, UNRWA failed decisively in the objective of inculcating the refugees' 'reintegration' into the Arab host states. While its education system facilitated the large-scale labour migration of Palestinian refugees to the Gulf states in the 1970s, they never 'integrated' to the point of obliterating their Palestinian identity (Al Husseini 2010). Indeed, despite years and eventually decades of being educated in the systems of the host countries, successive generations of refugees retained a decisive and significant sense of themselves as Palestinian – even in Jordan, where many held citizenship (Viorst 1984). Two decades after beginning its operations, UNRWA publicly acknowledged 'the enhanced political consciousness of the Palestine refugee community' (UNRWA 1970). This unintended outcome was due in no small part to the actions of the refugees themselves.

From the beginning, Palestinian refugee communities across the Levant were fiercely opposed to any 'solution' to their plight besides return to Palestine. Suspecting – not without cause – that UNRWA's real purpose was to facilitate their resettlement outside Palestine, refugees frequently reiterated their demands to return home in accordance with UNGA Resolution 194 ('Palestinian Pupils in Lebanon' nd; Badge of the Arab Palestine Youth in Lebanon 1960; 'The Palestinians in Lebanon' 1962). Accordingly, they largely rejected any programmes tainted with the objective of resettlement (Turki 1972).

The programme was most culpable on these grounds was UNRWA's 1950s 'Works' scheme, which was designed to facilitate the refugees' economic integration in the host states by way of local employment. Refugees largely rejected the schemes as 'imperialist', and overwhelming numbers boycotted them (Committee of Action for the Congress of Palestinian Refugees 1950). Of the 878,000 refugees registered with the Agency in the early 1950s, the largest number ever employed under its Works programme was 12,000, and in less than a year this had reportedly

dwindled to 812 (Turki 1972). So overwhelming was the refugees' aversion to the Works programme that the Agency was forced to dispense with it altogether by 1957 (Schiff 1995). The refugees were thus able to effectively make use of their limited leverage against UNRWA in order to push its services in their preferred direction.

Nowhere was this clearer than in the field of education. The refugees favoured UNRWA's schooling system as strongly as they had opposed its Works programme; indeed historian Yezid Sayigh has described their keenness on this front as an 'obsessive new striving', such was its intensity (Y. Sayigh 1997). Enthusiasm for an education programme in the camps was shared by everyone from teachers and administrators to the students themselves and their parents [see Figures 4 and 5]. It was substantial enough to be noted at a high level - in 1952, a UNESCO Working Group spoke of the great pressure coming from Palestinian refugees for adequate education (UNESCO Working Group 1952). Indeed the refugees' only major criticism of UNRWA's early schooling programme was that it did not cover all years (R. Sayigh 1994).

<Figure 4>
<Figure 5>

Just as the refugees' antipathy towards the Works scheme had resulted in the latter's dissolution, so their enthusiasm for education led the Agency to increasingly focus on schooling. In a clear indication of the refugees' success in shaping the structures around them, the mid-1950s saw UNRWA shift its priorities from employment to education (Takkenberg 2010; Forsythe 1983). The camp education programme, which had been run on a small scale for the first half of the 1950s, was now expanded significantly (Robbins 1952; UNESCO 1952; Schiff 1995; Al Husseini 2010). The number of UNRWA schools increased from 61 in 1950 to 386 in 1958 (Rosenfeld 2010). In subsequent years, UNRWA's school programme developed into a modern-style education system, operating at elementary and middle school level and also providing university scholarships to exceptional students.

In common with the Agency and as outlined earlier, the refugees' support for camp schools was driven by a combination of material and political concerns. Of course, education was seen as providing social capital that could lead to material security (Rosenfeld 2010; Y. Sayigh 1997). In more abstract terms, there was also a sense that education could serve as a means to restore the dignity that many refugees felt they had lost in exile (Y. Sayigh 1997). Seeing their reliance on welfare services in the camps as fundamentally humiliating, the refugees looked to education as a source of

information and empowerment (Feldman 2008; Turki 1988; Khaled 1973; Turki 1994). In this sense, the purpose of education was implicitly political, as it had the power to augment the agency of a marginalised and disenfranchised community.

Yet the refugees' desire for education was also driven by an even more explicitly political rationale. As mentioned earlier, many Palestinians believed that they had lost their country in 1948 because their comparative lack of education vis-à-vis the *yishuv* [Jewish community in Mandate Palestine] had placed them at a considerable disadvantage (R. Sayigh 1994). This belief directly fuelled their desire to ensure that the next generation of Palestinians would be highly educated and accordingly able to win back the land (Abu Lughod 1973). As such, education's political significance was the polar opposite to that of the hated Works schemes; in the refugees' eyes, it was a tool to facilitate their return to Palestine and prevent their permanent resettlement elsewhere.

Of course, this was completely at odds with the objectives of the Western states that provided the bulk of the funding for UNRWA's services. As already explained, and in complete contrast to the refugees, the US and the UK – which dominated UN policy in the Middle East at this time – accepted the Israeli state's opposition to the Palestinians' repatriation. Instead of promoting the right of return codified in UNGA Resolution 194, they sought to use UNRWA's services to facilitate the refugees' full integration into the Arab host states.

Education was key to this strategy - yet UNRWA and the Western states could only push it so far without the support of the refugees themselves. Just as the Palestinians had succeeded in spurning the Agency's 'Works' schemes in the early 1950s, in subsequent decades they succeeded in lobbying UNRWA to compromise on its use of host state curricula (Conference of Arab host states and UNESCO/UNRWA 1969; Ardill 1969; UNRWA 1969; Michelmore 1970). As noted above, critics changed that the latter did not cover Palestinian history sufficiently, only referencing it as a fleeting part of wider Arab history – or in the case of the Lebanese curriculum, not at all (Turki 1972; R. Sayigh 2007).[*] When the PLO gained strength after 1967, it also took up the refugees' long-running activism on the issue and began lobbying UNRWA to 'Palestinianise' its curriculum (Khalili 2007; R. Sayigh 2007).

These efforts bore fruit. In 1969, UNRWA hired Palestinian educators to develop a Palestinian history syllabus, covering events from ancient times

[*] Interview with Hasna Rida, former UNRWA Education Researcher, Beirut, December 7, 2016.

to the 20th century (Rennie 1969).† In internal communications, senior management explicitly cited pressure from Palestinian refugee communities as a factor behind this policy shift, showing again the potential power of the latter's activism (Rennie 1969). Over subsequent years the 'Palestinianised' syllabus was implemented at UNRWA schools in Lebanon, where the PLO was strongest and where the host state curriculum was entirely devoid of any Palestinian history (Michelmore 1970a).

It should be noted that the long-term impact of this syllabus shift was limited. Suggestions that UNRWA's 'Palestinianised' curriculum would eventually be rolled out across all five of its fields of operation did not come to pass, in part because the Israeli invasion of Lebanon destroyed the PLO's regional base and severely reduced the Palestinians' leverage. By the end of the century, the Palestinian curriculum had also disappeared from UNRWA schools in Lebanon (Khalili 2007; R. Sayigh 2014). Nevertheless, the historical use of UNRWA schools to promote awareness of the Palestinian national heritage proved decisively that attempts to 'reintegrate' the refugees by way of education had failed. Instead, the Palestinian national identity had endured and even triumphed in exile.

The refugees thus effectively turned the original purpose of the schooling programme on its head, ensuring that rather than facilitating their 'reintegration', it bolstered their national identity (Shabaneh 2012). As Rosemary Sayigh argues, a similar phenomenon occurred when it came to the camps themselves, which were intended to contain the Palestinian refugees and thus limit their organisational capacity, but instead ended up acting as hubs for the nationalist movement in exile (R. Sayigh 2007). These contrary outcomes were the result of the complex dynamics between the numerous parties involved in shaping development programmes for the Palestinian refugees. It was the latter themselves who established the first camp schools and went on to populate them as teachers and students. They used the leverage this brought them to ensure that the Agency was only able to push its objectives so far, and was continually compelled to compromise with the opposing goals of the refugees themselves.

Conclusion

The early development of the UNRWA education programme for Palestinian refugees denotes several important points about both this particular history and international responses to refugee crises more generally. Most importantly, the refugees' victories in first securing more education, and then modifying the curriculum to include Palestinian-specific

† *Ibid.*

subjects, are highly significant. These victories demonstrate the refugees' ongoing propensity to exercise whatever leverage they had – however limited – in order to sway events in their favour. As the example of their early education shows, the Palestinian refugees were not ignorant and passive recipients of international aid, but active agents who organised themselves to make demands and have their voices heard.

It is particularly important to note that UNRWA's education programme, which has become a defining feature of the Agency's work, was built on foundations established by Palestinian refugees themselves. As noted at the outset of this article, it was individual refugees who took the first steps to create classes and makeshift schools for Palestinian children in exile. Contrary to what is often assumed, UNRWA did not introduce education into a setting from which it was previously entirely absent, or impose it onto recipients who provided no input themselves.

Moreover, the enduring role of the UN meant that UNRWA's arrival on the scene in 1950 was marked by more continuity than change. Fewer differences can be identified between UNRWA and its predecessors than between the objectives of the international relief organisations *en masse* and those of the Palestinian refugee communities, with whom there were frequent tensions. The nature of these tensions is itself revealing. Differences over whether education should facilitate resettlement or repatriation show that UNRWA was demonstrably involved in the politics of the refugees' plight - in spite of its claims to be a purely humanitarian organisation detached from politics. Such differences are also indicative of the difficulties inherent in reconciling the desires of refugees receiving international welfare services with the objectives of the bodies funding those services.

This article has addressed how the origins of UNRWA's education programme came to be established, who drove it, and with what objectives. In exploring these questions, it has also demonstrated broader points about the Palestinian experience of exile, including the refugees' activism and the ongoing politicisation of the international welfare services provided to them. UNRWA management have long cited the Agency's free and comprehensive education programme as one of its most beneficial services. This article has shown that its significance goes even further than this; the programme's origins were also emblematic of the tensions inherent in constructing and delivering international relief services within the settings of highly politicised regional refugee crises.

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