'Min Al-Mukhayyam' ('From the Camp')

Discourses of Difference and the Boundaries of Exile amongst Palestinian Refugees in Jordan

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Abstract: This article examines the implications of long-term encampment and exile for the meaning of Palestinian identity amongst refugees. It shows how the conditions of Palestinian camps in Jordan function as a key marker of social difference between refugees of the camps and the city. Whereas camp refugees see the hardships of camp life as conditions to be confronted, urban refugees take them as constitutive features of a socially distinct refugee. As I argue, the distinctions between camp and city refugees illustrate how the refugee category and the humanitarian camp exceed the ideology and function of humanitarianism. They demonstrate how, in protracted refugee situations, the refugee label and the historical context of the camp can become socially significant and contested features of identity.

Keywords: exile, identity, Jordan, Palestinian refugees, protracted displacement, refugee camps

Asad was the director of the Markaz Itam Al-Islami (Islamic Orphan Centre) in the Wihdat camp.¹ The child of refugees displaced from Palestine in 1948, he was not a camp resident. He lived several kilometres away in the Hashmi Shamali, an area of East Amman with a high concentration of Palestinian families like his. Asad lacked formal refugee status and had never lived in a refugee camp.² Since his parents arrived in Jordan, they have been able to find housing in Amman's neighbourhoods until finally settling down in the Hashmi. Despite his experiences in the city, Asad identified as a refugee and felt a deep connection to the camp. Indeed, most of his days were spent in Wihdat working with the children or interacting with its residents. The camp was familiar, like a second home.

During my two years in Amman, Asad allowed me to visit the Markaz for participant observation and interviews with its Palestinian staff. All of the workers were Wihdat residents. The building was a three-storey structure adjacent to a United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) compound and primary school. One day, while writing notes in the Markaz's lobby, Asad called me into his corner office. He escorted me to one of the windows and pointed to the courtyard below. In a shaded corner where the UN compound wall joined the Markaz's exterior, a boy was urinating. Asad gestured towards the child. 'This is what happens to Palestinians in the camp', he said. 'Burdened by harsh conditions, their *akhlaq* (morals) are diminished.'

Asad's comments were striking. Throughout our many discussions at the Markaz and his home, he never spoke ill of camp refugees. On the contrary, he assigned both the camps and their inhabitants high symbolic value in the Palestinian national community. In his view, they were the purest victims of Israel's creation and ongoing colonisation. They were also emblematic of Palestinian resistance. Knowing that camp Palestinians in Jordan and Lebanon once led the national movement and struggle against Israel, he felt that they suffered more than other Palestinians. This unique sacrifice earned them an honourable place in his conception of the Palestinian nation. But the camps today were the sites of a particular social malady represented by the actions of this child. Asad felt the camps, as spaces of poverty and underdevelopment, compromised the well-being of their residents and produced a different kind of refugee than the refugee that lived outside the camps.

Asad's framing of camp refugees as an inferior community was similar to perspectives offered by other Palestinian refugees living outside of the camps. Like him, many Palestinians I interviewed shared a stereotyped image (Collins 1986) of the camp refugees that distinguished them from refugees in the city. Palestinians in the camp, however, did not share such a viewpoint. Identifying with Palestinians outside of the camps as refugees, they saw the challenges of camp life as a source of struggle, not definition. How do the circumstances of exile matter for Palestinian understandings of refugee identity in the camps and the city? What differences exist in the identity of camp and city refugees? How do city refugees perceive the camp and how do those perceptions figure in their identification of a stereotyped image of a camp refugee? This article examines how Palestinian refugees in the city of Amman and several UNRWA camps articulate their relationship to one another in exile. Concerned with the implications of long-term encampment for the meaning of identity amongst Palestinian refugees in Amman, this article examines how ideas about *al-mukhawayyat* (the camps) figure into conceptualisations of 'Palestinianness' (Sayigh 2012: 13), and reflect processes of social differentiation grounded in distinct moral understandings of the conditions of exile. Specifically, through an analysis of discourses of identification amongst refugees, it shows how stereotypes of camp refugees by city refugees essentialise the difference between the camp and the city, and facilitate the idea of two distinct, unequal communities in exile.

Creating Discourses of Difference

In her work amongst Palestinian refugees in Lebanon, Rosemary Sayigh (2011, 2012, 2013) examined the different ways Palestinian refugees identify across generations – namely, as peasants, revolutionaries or refugees. Her work has tracked some of the key transformations in Palestinian identity, attending to national ideologies and the local subtleties of camp politics (Sayigh 2012). Sayigh is not alone in seeking to understand the consequences of over 70 years of exile for the meaning of identity amongst Palestinian refugees. Many scholars of Palestinian displacement have examined the commonalities and differences in identity amongst diasporic Palestinians in camps and beyond (Achilli 2018; Al-Hardan 2016; Allan 2014; Davis 2011; Gabiam 2018; Nasser 2005; Peteet 2005).

One of the critical issues we find in this body of scholarship is the immense challenge Palestinians face in maintaining a sense of national affiliation both within and across disparate conditions of exile. Throughout the world, Palestinians exist as official refugees, unofficial refugees, citizen-refugees and stateless refugees. They live in UNRWA camps, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) camps, suburbs, slums, Israeli-occupied villages and more. Palestinians occupy distinct class, gender and religious positions, and express varying political sentiments. In short, both the duration and diversity of exile has long presented a key problem for the possibility of a unified identity amongst Palestinian refugees.

Here, I consider the question of identity and difference from the perspective of camp and non-camp Palestinians. I take the predicament of long-term encampment and the context of exile as a point of departure for examining the possibilities of a common identity amongst refugees. My discussion of Palestinian difference is informed by a conception of identity that focusses on what I call ‘discourses of identification’. Such an approach acknowledges that, while people often use identity in ways that point to a static, unchanging feature of one’s self and community, the actual meaning of identity is a more fluid, historically unstable phenomenon. As Rogers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper have noted, scholars seeking to examine conceptions like the ‘nation’ or ‘ethnic group’ should seek to account for reification and explain the processes and mechanisms through which these identifications are made real (Brubaker and Cooper 2000). The focus on discourses of identification underscores the contextual nature of what people claim as an identity. It is a concept that marks the contingencies of essentialisation and directs our attention to the symbolic and material resources people use to claim an identity. More importantly, because discourses of identification represent a social practice of both inclusion and exclusion, of *identifying* and *disidentifying*, these discourses allow us to consider the production of difference and forms of social closure (Hall 2000).

In the identity discourse of Palestinian refugees in this article, an emphasis on the contingencies of identity and the relationship between identification

and exclusion are critical. As I show, the essentialisation of camp refugees by Palestinians living outside of the camps is much more than a stereotyped image grounded in current perceptions of economic and social differences. It is also a discourse that is inseparable from the historical transformations of the Palestinian camps in Jordan and the circumstances of their inhabitants. Once the sites of national mobilisation and politics, the camps in Amman today are perceived by outsiders as exilic spaces of dependency and destitution. Visible through the nostalgic frame of their revolutionary past, the camp's material conditions today represent symbolic evidence of the failures of camp refugees to exceed their circumstances, and provides a boundary of difference between refugees of the camps and refugees of the city.

Methods

This article is based on research conducted between 2006 and 2008 and between 2015 and 2016 in Amman, Jordan. My research involved participant observation, survey questionnaires, and interviews conducted with Palestinians in three UNRWA refugee camps and in several non-camp neighbourhoods. Although I interviewed over 20 participants from varying socio-economic backgrounds, ages and genders for my research, in this article I focus on a few key interlocutors. Four of these Palestinians were born in refugee camps and continued to live in the camps at the time of my research. Another participant was born in a camp but moved to non-camp neighbourhood, and the remaining two participants were born outside of the camps.

All of the Palestinians in this article self-identified as refugees. This included Palestinians who held official refugee status with the UNRWA and Palestinians who identified as refugees but never registered with the UNRWA or made use of its services. For these Palestinians, identifying as a refugee meant either that they were directly displaced from Palestine or that their parents or grandparents were displaced. Refugee identification was thus grounded in an inheritance stemming from the experience of relatives that fled Palestine and were unable to return. Whether my interlocutors were registered or non-registered refugees, most held Jordanian citizenship except for a minority who remain stateless refugees. Displaced from the Gaza Strip in 1967 to Jordan, these refugees are known as ex-Gazans and were never offered Jordanian citizenship (Pérez 2011, 2020).

The Palestinian Camps

As a response to mass displacement under conditions of war, Palestinian refugee camps have long been the sites of immense humanitarian challenges. Primarily under the auspices of the UNRWA, camps have provided temporary

shelter for families without homes, education for children without schools, healthcare for ageing generations and training for workers with little means (Feldman 2018; Gabiam 2016; Hanafi et al. 2014; Peteet 2005; Rueff and Viaro 2009; Sayigh 2013; Sirhan 1975). Today, after 70 years of 'temporary refuge', Palestinian camps no longer function as solutions to the immediate problems of displacement. Instead, they represent diverse humanitarian spaces meant to address the long-term consequences of dispossession for communities dealing with a range of local circumstances. The emergency services provided by the UNRWA in the Gaza Strip, for example, where an illegal Israeli blockade has made conditions unliveable for the majority of the population (Erekat 2011–2012; Piper 2017), differ sharply from those in Jordanian camps, where assistance is focussed on improving opportunities in education, healthcare and what the UNRWA calls 'human development' (Hanafi et al. 2014).

Their functional differences notwithstanding, Palestinian camps throughout the region are often essentialised by host societies as a single phenomenon. That is, while the varying social, political and economic circumstances of their locations have resulted in diverse situations for camp inhabitants, they are nonetheless commonly perceived as singular spatial contexts distinct from their local settings. At times, this is visible in rhetoric that situates the camps within broader discourses of urban threat and decay. In Nell Gabiam's work amongst Palestinian refugees in Syria, for example, camps like Yarmouk have been framed by some Syrians as dangerous spaces 'comparable to the inner cities of big American urban centres such as Chicago that are often associated with poverty, crime, and racialized ghettos' (2016: 114). In other cases, the camps represent a more menacing presence capable of unravelling the fragility of the local nation. Examining the situation of Palestinian camps in Lebanon, for instance, Julie Peteet (2005) has shown how pre- and post-civil war discourses amongst the Lebanese right have shifted from that of camps as violent threats to that of foreign impositions.

In Jordan, Palestinian camps have figured in various local framings of the Palestinian community amongst both Palestinians and Jordanians. Whether as sites of pride and resistance (Farah 2009; Sayigh 1999; Terrill 2001) or of ambiguity and suffering (Achilli and Oesch 2016; Marshood 2010), the camps have played a critical role in the political and social meanings of Palestinian identity in Jordan. In the following section, I offer a brief background on the camps in Jordan, emphasising their relationship to non-camp settings amongst Palestinian refugees.

The Palestinian Camps in Jordan

Jordan today is home to approximately 2.4 million Palestinian refugees. Approximately 18 per cent of these refugees live in ten official UNRWA refugee camps. Many of these refugees were originally displaced in 1948 and have

their origins in specific areas of Palestine, including Khalil (Hebron), Ramla, Jaffa, Bir Sheba and Jerusalem (Tiltne and Zhang 2011). Like Palestinian camps in Lebanon, Syria and the Occupied West Bank and Gaza Strip, most camp inhabitants have their roots in rural areas (Peteet 2005; Sayigh 2013). Whether as former tenant farmers or landowners, this peasant class of refugees suffered dramatic losses during the creation of Israel and represented the overwhelming number of displaced Palestinians in 1948.³ As Pamela Ann Smith has noted, ‘unlike those who had experienced urban life, who had received an education, or who had business contacts abroad, the peasantry was uniquely deprived because its sources of livelihood, the land, was lost’ (1986: 93).

Palestinian camps in Jordan are diverse in their historical, social and economic dimensions. Four of the country’s refugee camps were created in response to the displacement of 1948. Situated on the peripheries of major cities, these camps have evolved into large urban spaces loosely integrated into the cities they once bordered (Maraq 2004). The remaining six camps in Jordan were established in the wake of the 1967 War. Unlike the camps of 1948, these ‘emergency camps’ were constructed in rural areas of the country. Today, some of these camps remain relatively isolated from major cities and are often marked by lower socio-economic circumstances. Urban camps like Wihdat, for example, offer comparatively better employment opportunities and thus higher incomes for residents than the rural camps of Souf and Jarash in the north (Hejoj 2007). While the geography of Palestinian camps has contributed to some of the differences between the camps of 1948 and 1967, all camps display some degree of internal heterogeneity. The inhabitants of any single camp can exhibit significant economic differences depending on factors including household size and national status. The lower income of ex-Gaza refugees in camps, for example, reflects their status as non-citizens and related exclusions from healthcare, education and the labour market (Pérez 2018; Tiltne and Zhang 2013).

Despite the diversity of Palestinian camps in Jordan, several features distinguish them and the situation of their inhabitants from those of the city. Camp homes, for example, are generally smaller and infrastructurally more precarious than city dwellings. Many continue to use corrugated metal plates (*zinco*) and other temporary building materials for their roofs and structures. In addition, refugees living in camps have comparatively less access to proper sanitation and water than do refugees living in city neighbourhoods (Tiltne and Zhang 2013). Perhaps one of the more striking differences concerns economics. Camp refugees in Jordan have substantially lower income levels than refugees in the city and are far more likely to be poor. In 2013, for example, ‘the median and mean annual household income for outside-camp refugees [was] 4,000 Jordanian Dinars [US \$5,641] (JD) and 5,499 JD [US \$7,756] respectively, while it [was] 2,880 JD [US \$4,062] and 3,276 JD [US \$4,620] for camp dwellers, over 1,000 JD lower [US \$1,410]’ (Tiltne and Zhang 2013: 226). In

addition, whereas the poverty rate amongst city refugees is about 14 per cent, it is approximately 31 per cent amongst camp residents.

The differences between Palestinian camps and the city notwithstanding, the socioeconomic circumstances of my interlocutors demonstrate a more complex picture. While comparative income level data underscore a better economic situation for city refugees than for camp refugees, the differences between refugees in the city can be significant. Their situation is largely reflective of the economic geography of Amman that divides the city into an expanding affluent 'West' and a working-class and poorer 'East'. Although not without its complications (Schwedler 2010), the division of Amman into West and East in some ways reproduces some of the divisions between the camps and the city. In her analysis of urban policies in Amman, for example, Myriam Ababsa (2010) has demonstrated that, despite rapid development in the city, social disparities continue to grow between West and East Amman. These disparities, she argues, 'tie in with morphological differences between informal housing communities developed near the Palestinian camps of Wihdat and Jabal Hussein, with their self-built buildings, and West Amman neighbourhoods with family-owned four-story buildings, interspersed with villas and office blocks' (2010: 207). In her analysis of cosmopolitanism in Amman, Jillian Schwedler has similarly noted that, while West Amman has experienced significant spatial, cultural, economic and political transformations and improvements, 'the basic layout and infrastructure of most parts of East Amman have remained unchanged for many of its residents' (2010: 548).

These differences were significant for the Palestinians I interviewed during my fieldwork. Some of my interlocutors, for example, lived in East Amman neighbourhoods like the Hashmi Shamali and Jabal Al-Natheef. Although the housing in these areas is generally better than most camp dwellings, many of the homes I visited during my fieldwork reflected similar problems to those in the camps. Some families, for example, packed as many as eight or nine relatives into two-bedroom apartments. For them, limited economic means necessitated a crowded household much like the situation of Palestinians in the camps. Other families I met dealt with persistent plumbing issues and limited trash collection. Whether living in informal housing or city-planned areas, the problems of infrastructural neglect in East Amman set them apart from the world of Palestinians living in West Amman, who were often affluent and living distinct lifestyles in the upscale areas of Shmaisani and Abdoun.

The differences between Palestinians living in West and East Amman underscore the challenges in making any firm distinctions between the city and the camp. Whether in terms of poverty or infrastructure, the city reflects diverse realities that can blur the line between some of the differences claimed by my Palestinian interlocutors. Yet in the discourses of identification I discuss below, the camp and the city were essentialised into two distinct entities. In both symbolic and material terms, the camp was located within a geography

of exile that was both external and inferior to the city. In this framing, the class differences between Palestinians in West and East Amman did not undermine the identification of the camp and the city as unified spatial worlds. Indeed, as I show below, the camp remained a spatial and moral space that marked a key form of difference between Palestinian refugees in exile.

Refugees of the Camp

Palestinians I met during fieldwork shared a common identity as refugees. Whether in the camps or the city, whether as official or unofficial refugees, they identified as refugees displaced from Palestine either in terms of 1948 (*laji'*) or 1967 (*nazih*). Asad, for example, did not take the lack of official refugee status as a limit on his identity as a refugee. He and I originally met in the Wihdat camp at the Markaz Itam, a religious orphanage for boys. Although intimately connected to the Markaz and the people of the camp, he lived in the eastern neighbourhood of the Hashmi Shamali. Born in Amman, his parents were originally from Ayn Karam, an area just a few kilometres outside of Jerusalem, until their displacement in 1948. Neither he nor his siblings ever lived in a camp or received aid from the *wakala* (UNRWA). Asad nonetheless identified as a refugee, an identity he inherited from his parents and his connection to generations of relatives who once lived in Palestine.

The claim to a refugee identity was shared amongst my Palestinian interlocutors in the camps and the city. For them, a common experience of displacement, or a common relationship to the displaced, established the basis of their identification as *laji'* or *nazih* (Pérez 2011). But this common identification as refugees did not necessarily translate into a common sense of refugee-ness. On the contrary, the connection between identity and place played a critical role in the construction of a distinction amongst refugees grounded in the meaning of the context of exile. According to this distinction, whether a Palestinian was a refugee from the camp or the city had significant implications for the meaning of refugee identity.

The figure of the camp refugee amongst Palestinians in the city heavily depended on an essentialisation of the camp. Despite the complex boundaries and differences between UNRWA camps, their surrounding neighbourhoods, and the city, this meant that the idea of the Palestinian *mukhayyam* (camp) relied on certain material conditions that were made symbolically specific to the camp and that established its unique location in the geography of exile in Jordan. Specifically, the camp functioned as a signifier of destitution and a context of exile in which an identifiable refugee was inseparable from its conditions. From this perspective, according to city Palestinians the camps represented compromised social spaces in which material challenges impinged on the lives of their residents in important ways.

In the discourse of city refugees, the essentialisation of the camp necessitated an objectification of particular camp features including infrastructure and poverty. As discussed, above, these features were significant problems for the camps and, to some extent, did distinguish them from the situation of Palestinian neighbourhoods in the city. The identification of these issues was largely shared amongst city and camp refugees. In his discussion of the camp, for example, Asad identified several problems that distinguished it from the city:

The camps face many problems that we [refugees] don't in the city. [The] biggest problems are the services. That is, the municipal services are insufficient in the camps. Sanitary services, healthcare services, road services, traffic lights, etc. The camps have a lot of shortcomings. Another problem in the camps is the overcrowding. There is no space between the people and the housing. This is something important because everyone knows something about his neighbour.

Speaking from the context of the camp, Imad offered a similar view on the differences between the camps and the city. Unlike Asad, Imad was a resident of the Wihdat camp. Born in the camp, his parents were originally from Jafa in pre-Partition Palestine and fled during the 1948 War to Jordan. Since their arrival, his family had lived exclusively in Palestinian camps and understood their circumstances. Although he never lived outside of the camp, Imad nonetheless identified several problems that marked the camp as a unique exilic space:

There is a definite difference between the camps and the city. The first difference is the services. If we [in the camps] face a problem with the sewage, it takes the people in charge a very long time to fix it and, most of the time, the camp people fix it themselves. You do not see that problem in other parts of Amman.

The perspectives offered by Asad and Imad above were echoed by Palestinians I met in the city and the camps. When asked about the circumstances of camp life for refugees, material conditions were often cited as one of the key differences from the city. In several survey responses, for example, Palestinians from the camps emphasised material difficulties as a common issue. 'In the camps, everything is difficult', one respondent explained. 'In this sense, all of the camps are similar. Life in all of the camps is difficult'. Similarly, another respondent suggested overcrowding and poverty as the two biggest problems in the camps: 'There is no money and there is no space to move'. Assigning the camps a unified character, another Palestinian said that they could be identified by their poverty: 'They are all poor and have a similar style; that is, they look poor'.

Such perspectives underscored the idea that, although displaced Palestinians in the city and camps may identify in common as refugees, their

living conditions were often perceived as a clear line of difference between them. The space of Palestinian exile could be partitioned according to circumstances that made the camp a singular entity defined by its material problems. But if Palestinian refugees shared a view of the camps as common spaces of structural inferiority vis-à-vis the city, they differed in their perceptions of the consequences of those problems for their inhabitants. From the city, Palestinian refugees described camp residents as a community constituted by its material conditions. According to them, camp refugees were not a community in poverty; they were a poor community. Thus, to be *in* the camp was to be *of* the camp. During my discussions with Asad, for example, he claimed that the material poverty of the camps was inseparable from the social lives of camp refugees:

In the camps, the bad behaviours can spread easily among the refugees. Smoking among children is a very big problem. Actually, it is widespread in the camps. It may be difficult to control your children because they walk around the neighbourhoods with other people and are influenced by them [in negative ways]. This causes problems for raising children in the camps. *It impacts their manners and the future society.*

Two important points stand out from Asad's description above. First, he linked the problem of overcrowding to the spread of what he considered bad behaviours in the camp amongst children. With too many people living in a restricted space, he saw social problems as contagions capable of spreading throughout the community. This perspective explains Asad's attention to the boy in the opening vignette of this article. Although an individual act by a single child, the boy's behaviour typified the compromised social existence of camp refugees, according to Asad. It was a sign of the problems that spread through the practices of camp refugees. Second, Asad saw these behaviours as a potential threat to Palestinian generations to come. In his view, the link between the material problems of the camp and the social being of camp refugees transcended the current population. It was a threat to the character of the Palestinian society of the future.

In addition to the spread of inferior social behaviours, Asad felt the camps produced refugees with limited aspirations. Living in such rough conditions, Palestinian refugees lost a sense of striving that can be seen in the city, Asad suggested:

Also, the camp refugees' aspirations are limited. Perhaps [s/he] can become the driver of a *servees* (fixed-route taxi) or a taxi driver. Outside of the camp, aspirations are bigger than this and maybe the [city] refugee has greater *iltizaam* (commitment) to his religion. But the majority of the residents of the camp, a large segment of them anyways, *takfirhum* (their ideas and aspirations) are always what? Simple.

In this excerpt, Asad framed the difference between the city and the camp in terms of refugee aspirations. As a space of hardship, he suggested the camp

restricted the desires of camp refugees to become more than a working-class community. In this case, it was not that the economic options available to camp refugees directed them towards low-income opportunities, it was, rather, that the camp produced an aspirational deficit that was socially shared amongst refugees. Camp refugees, in other words, could seek more but did not; they conformed to their conditions instead of rising above them.

The idea that camp refugees were less driven than city refugees and that the discrepancy could be explained by the camp was at odds with my experience with camp Palestinians and existing labour force data. The majority of Palestinian camp refugees I met in camps held jobs or were struggling to find work. Even in the difficult circumstances of camps like the Gaza camp in Jarash, where Palestinians lack citizenship and are excluded from several areas of the labour market, work was an important aspiration. For them, cycles of unemployment and the experience of often unsatisfying labour did not prevent them from seeking employment. My fieldwork encounters were supported by existing data on Palestinian refugee labour aspirations and participation. In a comparative study of refugee work attitudes conducted in 1999 and again in 2011, camp refugee men expressed slightly greater desires for work than those living outside the city (Tiltne and Zhang 2013). In addition, these data show that camp refugee participation in the labour force actually exceeds participation amongst refugees living outside the camps by one percentage point (Tiltne and Zhang 2013). While increased labour force participation may not mean that camp and city refugees access the same work opportunities, it is clear that work aspirations in the camp are not as simple as Asad claimed. Embracing a middle-class conception of individual responsibility, he stereotyped camp refugees as victims of their own unwillingness to strive and better oneself in an imaginary economy of possibility. Moreover, Asad ignored the economic challenges in the city that upset the binary used to distinguish the camp as a unique space of aspirational failure. Poverty in the camps was thus read as the outcome of the camp refugee instead of a larger political economy of neoliberalism in Amman and the sharpening divides between East and West in the city.

The idea that material conditions in the camp produced a refugee with limited goals and compromised social practices was not exclusive to city refugees like Asad. It was also expressed by some Palestinians who once lived in the camp but now lived in the city. Resembling ideas about the undeserving poor in US discourses on poverty (Gans 1996), camp refugees were sometimes described as a community responsible for their own social and economic problems.

Um Arif, for example, expressed views of camp refugees similar to those of Asad. Framed from the perspective of a camp refugee who successfully left the camp, she saw its conditions as a departure from the revolutionary period and a product of refugees themselves. Um Arif and her family were originally from the Gaza Strip. Her father was once active in the Palestinian resistance of the

1960s and survived the violent period known as Black September when the Palestinian national movement and its supporters clashed with the Jordanian monarchy (Barari 2008; Sayigh 1999; Sirriyeh 2000). Living in the camp for much of her life, Um Arif eventually acquired a job through a contact in the UNRWA and earned enough money to relocate to the city. During our interviews about the camps and refugee identity, she spoke of the camp and its inhabitants in the following way:

In the camps, there are unemployed refugees, and the unemployed refugee, God only knows, may be uneducated or maybe [s/he] has lost [her/his] mind. So the factors that were in the camp originally – the revolutionary spirit, the intellectualism, the *'aqa-ideeyah* (creed) – is now gone because the revolution came to an end. And in place of that generation came another generation that is irresponsible and indifferent. It is now on the *inhiraf* (deviants/those on the crooked path) . . . there are deviant ways available to them. So [the new refugee] goes on to support him/herself [through deviance] and s/he may attack or rob or even kidnap someone. And sometimes you'll see them sniffing glue. This is the deviance present in the camps.

In Um Arif's identity discourse, she drew a distinction between the *jeel al-thawra* (revolutionary generation) and the generation of today. In the 1970s, prior to the expulsion of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) from Jordan and the civil war, Palestinian refugee camps were the nucleus of national activity and resistance. Remembered nostalgically by many Palestinians, these were times when the camps operated with significant autonomy and represented a community of refugees taking control of their own destiny. In both symbolic and material terms, this period represented a narrative of transition. As Nadia Latif (2011) observed amongst Palestinians in Lebanon, it marked a fundamental shift in which the figure of the pre-modern *fallah* (peasant)-turned-camp-refugee was reconfigured into the figure of the *fallah*-turned-*fida'i* (freedom fighter), the autochthonous symbol of the struggle for national liberation valorised in nationalist art, music, and other cultural artefacts. For Um Arif, the camp of today no longer reflected the spirit or character of revolutionary times. The *fida'i* had now regressed into the refugee, a figure void of the will and capacities of the past. Once spaces of revolution, the camps were today the sites of 'indifference' and 'irresponsibility' where deviant ways had settled.

My exposure to discourses about the camp were not limited to formal research encounters. Indeed, on many occasions Palestinians offered their views on the camp without any investigation. On taxi rides into the camp or while explaining my research to friends in the city, many Palestinians expressed their view of camp Palestinians through concerns for my safety: '*Deer balak feel mukhayyam ya Michael* (be careful in the camp, Michael); they would say. The camps were dangerous places. The most compelling illustration of the idea of the camp and its residents amongst city refugees, however, occurred serendipitously with a Palestinian family I knew well. Introduced by a mutual friend in

Michigan, I had spent the previous summer with them while studying Arabic at the University of Jordan. Faris was one of the family's eight children. He and I were about the same age and developed a deep friendship over time. During that summer, I spent countless hours with Faris at his shop in the Hashmi Shamali and then at home sipping coffee while watching satellite television.

When I returned to the field the next year with my wife, Faris helped us get a flat in a building near his family. Shortly after we settled, Faris shared some important news: he was engaged. His fiancée's name was Hoda. She and Faris met shortly before we arrived, and he seemed thrilled by the prospect of starting a family of his own. Before introducing us to his fiancée, Faris wanted me to know something special about Hoda. She was a Palestinian refugee. More specifically, Hoda was a camp refugee. At the time, Faris saw this as a valuable aspect of his future wife. Although Faris came from a family displaced in 1967, they had never lived in the camps. In his view, Hoda's camp background was an asset. It represented an authentic Palestinianness, something he valued for himself and for his children. In his view, marrying Hoda afforded him a more profound connection to the meaning of Palestinian identity. With origins in the camp, in other words, Hoda brought a more authentic, less distanced sense of Palestinianness to his life. As he explained to me, camp Palestinians were closer to the experience of exile and thus held a stronger sense of Palestinian culture and identity, and a stronger desire to return.

Over the next few days, Faris invited me and my wife to join him for several events scheduled before the actual wedding ceremony.⁴ As things progressed, however, problems began to emerge. One of the more dramatic issues concerned infidelity. Rumours were circulating about Hoda's relationship with another man. Faris initially rejected the allegations. While his family pressured him to reconsider the marriage, he defended Hoda's integrity and claimed that the rumours were baseless. As the days passed and the pressure continued, Faris changed his mind and cancelled the wedding. The turning point came with a dream. The previous evening, Faris had slept in his shop, seeking solitude. It was an eerie night. A sandstorm covered the area and the streets were empty earlier than usual. In the morning, Faris awoke with a newfound clarity. He dreamt that a serpent slowly climbed up his leg and bit him. The serpent, he explained, was Hoda, and the bite was her betrayal.

Several days after calling off the engagement, we were back at Faris's home, drinking coffee and playing chess. During our conversations, Faris mentioned the breakup. Now a few days behind him, he felt that he had an explanation. Hoda was a *bint al-mukhayyam* (camp girl), and it was her upbringing in the camp that explained the problem. The signs had always been there, he said. His mother, for example, noticed that Hoda's mom wore bathroom slippers around the house. For her, this was the unhygienic behaviour typical of those in the camps. Faris also mentioned that Hoda's mom was brutish and loud. Her behaviour was unbecoming of a woman, he suggested, and indicative of camp culture. But more important than the issues of hygiene and habit was Hoda's

reliability. Coming from the camp, Faris claimed that she could not be trusted. With distinct moral dispositions characteristic of camp refugees, Hoda was, in his view, surely capable of behaving inappropriately and lying about it. Faced with such possibilities, he knew the marriage had to end (before it began) and that his dream confirmed it.

The brief account given above is more than a story about the camps. In any romantic relationship, numerous factors can play a role in the making and breaking of the affair. But what mattered for this discussion is the way the camp figured into the narrative about the engagement. For Faris, Hoda's connection to the camp brought a level of ambivalence to the relationship. On one hand, it gave him a sense of pride. As a *bint al-mukhayyam*, Hoda carried an imaginary authenticity that Faris believed all camp Palestinians shared. Born and raised in the camp, she was the pure product of displacement and offered a city-born refugee like Faris an opportunity to partake in that important cultural identity. On the other hand, Hoda's camp background was also a source of danger and impurity (Douglas 2002). Again, as a *bint al-mukhayyam*, Hoda carried the threatening habits and moral characteristics of the camp in her very being.

The dual nature of this figuration (Hartigan 2005) of the camp refugee underscored a larger ambivalence in the discourse about the camp. It revealed that city Palestinians were engaged in the production of a complex stereotype of camp refugees similar to what Patricia Hill Collins (1986) has discussed in her work amongst African American women. Described as controlling images, Collins has argued that the existence of positive stereotypes does not necessarily undermine the force of negative stereotypes or their dehumanising function. Although Palestinians like Faris do not seek to dehumanise camp Palestinians in the way White stereotypes of African American women do, the duality of camp stereotypes does serve a controlling function. Specifically, it burdens camp Palestinians with the demands of an imaginary authenticity rooted in the very conditions that compromise their moral positioning in the refugee community. Thus, while Hoda's camp origins afforded her a symbolic value in Faris's identity discourse as an authentic Palestinian, it also set the stage for her devaluation, as the camp constitutes the basis of her inferior being.

The identity discourse amongst city refugees like Asad, Um Arif and Faris offers a stigmatising and controlling representation of the camp and its refugees. It is part of a social imaginary that territorialises camp refugees within a symbolic geography that upholds the idea of the camp as a space of difference and frames its inhabitants as its inferior products. At least two ideas here are critical for understanding the implications of this discourse. First, the material circumstances of the camp provide the grounds for its distinction as a particular site of destitution. Narrow streets, *zinco* roofs, poor sanitation and other structural features enable its separation from the city and specific identification as a camp. The camp, in other words, exists as a space external to the city; it is a space out of place, recognisable through its poverty and decay. Second,

the identification of the camp as a space of poverty functions to stigmatise its residents as both its effects and its cause. In other words, although camp refugees are seen as the product of the camp's conditions, they are also seen as its continuing condition of possibility. In their compromised social being, they actively reproduce the camp as an exceptional space of material and moral poverty. In this sense, camp Palestinians bear the mark of a stigma that Erving Goffman described as the 'blemishes of individual character' visible in traits like weak will, unnatural passions and untrustworthiness (1986: 4). Moreover, it is a stigma confirmed by the continuing hardships visible in its material aspects. Carrying this undesirable difference, the camp refugee is thus the essentialised 'external other' of the city refugee.

Refugees *in* the Camp

The hardships of the camp were an undeniable reality for many Palestinian refugees. Whether from the perspective of the city or the camp, both the infra-structural limitations and socio-economic challenges of camp life were used to distinguish it from other areas. For Palestinians in the camp, however, the harsh conditions of life were insufficient for the production of a distinguishable refugee. For them, the problems of poverty and infrastructure were conditions in which refugees *lived*, not the source of a distinct social being. Indeed, many camp Palestinians did not identify themselves in any way that connected their sense of refugeehood with the circumstances of the camp. Despite the poverty in the camp, the limited economic opportunities of its residents and its structural issues, Palestinians avoided language like *faqeer* (poor people) or categories that defined them in terms of camp conditions. Much as Sylvain Perdigon (2015) observed amongst Palestinians in Lebanon, many of the camp Palestinians I worked with understood themselves as a community *confronted* with poverty instead of a *poor community* – they did not assume an identification of 'I, poor'.

One of the Palestinians who made this clear to me was Abu Imran. He and I met through a mutual friend who lived in the Baqa' camp. Many of my visits to the camp included a stop at Abu Imran's home or shop near the central market. He was one of a few Shiite Muslims in the camp and passionately so. Born and raised in the camp, Abu Imran understood its challenges. Indeed, in our discussions, he did not contest the distinction between the camps and the city. Although he recognised that the city also had its problems, he felt that the camp had its own unique issues that made life harder for its residents:

Of course, there are differences [that] exist between the Palestinians in the camps and the city. Like any people, we have different classes and levels. There are people whose financial situation is very good and there are people who are *miskeen* (whose situation is unfortunate).⁵ There are educated people and there are those who are less

educated. But generally, the camps are areas with the least bit of luck in all aspects of life. That is, their educational situation is difficult, their social situation is difficult, and their material situation is difficult, for all. Definitely, these are the differences.

In this excerpt, Abu Imran is careful to acknowledge the camp's complexity. Like the city, its residents reflect different socio-economic positions. Yet for him, the camp remains distinct. It is a particular space of difficulty limited in ways in which the city is not.

After affirming the difference between the camp and the city, I asked Abu Imran about the relevance of these issues for the meaning of community. Did the camp distinguish refugees from other refugees in the city? In his view, there was no essential difference. According to him, what distinguished camp refugees from the city refugee was a matter of situation, not substance:

[There] are no differences between the refugee in the camp or the city: he is still a refugee. He remains a refugee whether he is inside or outside. For the refugees on the outside, life is a little better. Their situation is better. In the camp, the living conditions are difficult.

For Abu Imran, Palestinians in the camp and city were united as refugees by their displacement. In his view, the material differences between them did not function as a dividing line between a moral community of refugees; they were, rather, factors that one group of refugees had to confront and overcome.

Abu Imran was not alone in his perspective. Many of the camp Palestinians I met framed their circumstances as challenges or difficulties caused by displacement. They were the consequences of losing a livelihood and did not constitute a distinct refugee subjectivity. But the camp was also more than just a place of hardship. For some Palestinians, the camp was a better place than the city. The positive value of camp life for Palestinians was captured in my conversations with Hani, a young Palestinian born and raised in the Marka camp. Hani and I met through his parents, who invited me to join them for dinner. They lived in a small dwelling on the first floor of a building in the camp. On my first visit with Hani and his family, they prepared a meal with couscous and chicken. During the meal, Hani's parents did most of the talking. After we ate, however, and the coffee was served, Hani opened up about his life as a refugee in the camp.

Unlike his parents and grandparents, Hani had no experience of the camp beyond its post-revolutionary existence. Whereas his older relatives lived through the wars of 1948 and 1967 and participated in the camp mobilisations of the 1960–1970s, for Hani the camp was a more mundane space of existence. 'Life in the camp is *adee* (normal)', he told me, 'like it is for all people'. 'Some people tell me to leave the camp and go to live *barra* (outside, in the city). I don't approve. I live in the camp and I know the camp well. I know everyone here'.

Hani was aware of the stigma attached to the camps and to camp Palestinians. He knew that Palestinians and Jordanians in the city often spoke of camp

Palestinians as an inferior community. But Hani rejected those perspectives. He knew the camp differently and did not see the city as a better place to live. On the contrary, Hani took some of the very features used to critique the camp to underscore its positive value. The density of the camp, for example, played a role in shaping deeper social relations amongst its residents. According to him, the crowdedness of the camps was the basis of a unique social intimacy that was missing from the city. It was a form of familiarity that he valued and that was uncommon in the city.

Like Hani, Hassan was born in a refugee camp. Displaced in 1967, his family sought refuge in the Baqa' camp located on the northern fringes of Amman. With over 100,000 residents, Baqa' is the most populated camp in Jordan, with significant levels of poverty. For Hassan, the problems of poverty and deprivation were obvious growing up. As a child, he said he knew the camp was different from other areas of Amman. Yet Hassan saw more than the camp's problems. During our discussions, for example, he boasted of the camp's large central market and its affordable prices. Hassan also noted the importance of the social intimacy of camp life, where relatives lived close and everyone knew one another. Having spent significant time in the Baqa' camp with Palestinians, I could understand the pride Hassan took in the camp's social world. Baqa' felt like a small city unto itself. Whether at the market or walking through its many streets, the camp was always alive with social activity.

The social nature of the camp was one of the points Hassan stressed during our conversations. Much as Hani did, he emphasised its density both in terms of population size and social relations as a positive dimension of camp life. For him, the camps nurtured an intimacy that was superior to the distance between Palestinians in the city:

Socially . . . there is a distance in the city. In the camp, if you ask someone about (Hassan) at the bus station or ask where Fulan lives, the people (in the camp) will guide you to his house. People know one another in the camps. But outside [in the city], the people are on their own. It's not like this in the camp. *Yanee* (I mean), here the *rawabbit* (connections) are stronger.

The positive value Hani and Hassan assigned to the camp was not atypical. Many of the Palestinians I met in the camp offered similar accounts about its benefits. Some spoke of the stronger moral character nurtured in the camps. Much like Luigi Achilli (2018) observed in his research amongst camp residents of Amman, the conditions that city refugees used to stigmatise the camp were given a positive interpretation, especially in the development of critical national characteristics. For some camp refugees, poverty enabled valuable 'ethical and moral qualities such as steadfastness (*sumud*) and humbleness (*twad'e*)', not social degeneration (2018: 677). Others spoke of the deep social connections between its residents. Like Hani and Hassan, these framings of camp repositioned the problem of overcrowding as the source of a valuable camp intimacy. And others contrasted the familiarity amongst camp residents

with the anonymity of the city. In the camp, unlike the city, a truly communal life persisted much as it did in the homeland, Palestine.

To some extent, these representations were essentialisations much like those of the city. Yet life in the camp and the city is always more complex than any single idea can capture. For young women in the camp, for example, the social intimacy of the camp was implicated in forms of social control. Speaking from the context of the Jarash camp in the north, Amina offered mixed feelings about the density of camp relations. I met Amina at a small Canadian-funded language exchange programme in the camp. Swapping colloquial Arabic for English with young women from around the world, the job was a virtual opening to a broader world of communication and connection. During our conversations about work and the camp, Amina gave value to certain aspects of camp life. The familiarity amongst residents, she explained, gave her a sense of security that she did not feel in the city. Knowing camp residents intimately, Amina always felt safe on the camp streets. But Amina was also critical of the density of those relations. As a young unmarried woman, she said the familiarity of the camp also made her life more difficult. The intimacy between camp residents at times also functioned as a form of surveillance in which anyone in the community could scrutinise her public actions. In this case, the very intimacy that made her feel safe in the camp also brought the insecurities of gossip and rumour. Despite the complexities of the camps and the city, the idealisations of both spaces were significant for what they revealed about the social meaning of difference amongst Palestinian refugees. Grounded in ideas about the relationship between people and place, they reflected the ongoing elaboration of Palestinianness in exile.

Conclusion

In this article, the essentialisation of camp identity highlights one dimension of the social dynamics of difference constituted within the context of long-term exile. Specifically, it shows how the persistence of refugee camps across time contributes to local conceptions of a stigmatised space and identity that complicates the possibility of a unified Palestinian identity in the diaspora. The discourse about the camp and its residents amongst Palestinians in the city reveals an essentialisation of place that both externalises the camp from the city and stigmatises its existence as a unique space of degeneration. Such framings resonate in various ways with discourses about urban marginality and the ghetto (Agier 2012; Wacquant 2008). Extracted from its structural conditions of possibility, the camp, like the ghetto, emerges in the discourse of city Palestinians as a self-enclosed and self-generating phenomenon whose inhabitants represent its cause and effect.

The Palestinian camp, however, is more than a ghetto. Despite the urban logic (Agier 2012) implicit in the ghettoisation of the camp, Palestinians in

Jordan have yet to abandon its historical significance as a particular space of exile. Inseparable from its origins in the displacement of Palestinians – a fact that binds refugees in the city to those in the camps – the Palestinian camp remains an important national space and its inhabitants an indispensable political community. It is a place, however, that has and continues to occupy an ambiguous location within the Palestinian national imaginary. In its early stages, the camp was the site of destitution born of the crisis of displacement and the partition of Palestine. Here, as Latif (2011) has noted in her work in Lebanon, the figure of the displaced *fallah* became the *laji*'. Later, revolutionary struggle and resistance transformed the camp into a space of agency and nationalism. No longer the *laji*', the camp refugee became the *fida'i*. Today, decades after the revolution, for some Palestinians, the camp is once again the site of the *laji'in*. It is, however, home to a new refugee constituted by the conditions of long-term encampment rather than displacement.

The ambiguity in the identification of the camp and its inhabitants was apparent in the discourse of my interlocutors in the city. For them, the camp is the dwelling of a community of authentic refugees whose lives in the camps establishes the authenticity of their identity. We also find, however, that the camp is a site of social stigma. Destitute and poor, it is a context that carries 'the blemish of place which, much like other forms of stigma, reduces its inhabitants from whole and usual persons to tainted, discounted ones' (Keene and Padilla 2010: 1216). Camp refugees are thus a distinct community of refugees whose compromised social being reproduces the camp's inferiority vis-à-vis the city and distinguishes them from other refugees. As a social discourse of identification, the ambiguity in the meaning of the camp and camp refugees has important implications. On one hand, it provides insight into the impact of long-term encampment for the local construction of Palestinian refugee identity. On the other, it shows how these local constructions can affect social relations. Thus while Asad sees his work with orphans in the camp as a necessary service in the betterment of an inferior community, Faris can attribute the failures of his engagement to his fiancée's camp origins. Camp refugee identity here is much more than a mere identity. It is also a micro-politics of difference that depends on stigmatising discourses about the camp and its transformations, and it reveals the essentialising effects of protracted displacement for Palestinians in Jordan and beyond.

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Notes

1. The names of individuals and refugee camps in this article have been changed to protect the identity of the participants.
2. The UNRWA definition for Palestinian refugees is 'persons whose normal place of residence was Palestine during the period of 1 June 1946 to 15 May 1948, and who lost both home and means of livelihood as a result of the 1948 conflict'. All Palestinians registered with the agency acquire refugee status along with their descendants. Like Abu Asad, many Palestinians displaced in 1948 never registered with the UNRWA. These Palestinians lack official refugee status despite their displacement from Palestine and the loss of their homes and livelihoods.
3. According to one estimate, approximately 35 per cent of all Palestinians displaced in 1948 were peasants (Marqa 2004).
4. For the purposes of this article, I have excluded many details of what transpired over the course of Faris and Hoda's engagement. For a full account of these events, see Pérez 2011.
5. In this instance, Abu Imran used the term '*miskeen*', which roughly translates to 'unfortunate one' or 'poor one' in the sense of one who is in a bad situation due to some problem. It does not signify someone who is financially poor. The term in Arabic for that is '*faqeer*'.

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