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The right to return through the Palestine refugee camp

EL DERECHO AL RETORNO A TRAVÉS DEL CAMPO DE REFUGIADOS PALESTINO

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Resumen El *derecho de retorno* de la población palestina a sus hogares es un derecho legalmente reconocido desde diciembre de 1948. Más aún, se trata de un derecho concreto que las y los palestinos han trabajado para tratar de materialziarlo, mientras soportan lo que hoy es una ocupación de su tierra que dura ya setenta y siete años y un desplazamiento forzoso hacia otros territorios. Este artículo aborda el derecho más controvertido y existencial que la comunidad internacional reconoce a las personas refugiadas palestinas. Para comprender la naturaleza polémica del Artículo 11 de la Resolución 194 de la Asamblea General de la ONU, debemos adentrarnos en el campo de refugiados palestino: su formación, la producción de espacio y su funcionamiento político orientado a la consecución de este derecho. El trabajo se centra en la intersección entre el aspecto legal y el físico del derecho de retorno palestino a través de una comprensión histórica del campo de refugiados, junto con sus condiciones contemporáneas en la creación y mantenimiento de una resistencia espacial al desplazamiento forzado. Asimismo, sostiene que, desde sus orígenes, el campo palestino ha sido un espacio de resistencia antes que de refugio, lo cual explica por qué han sido también lugares de destrucción incluso fuera de Palestina.

Palabras clave campos de refugiados, derecho de retorno, desplazamiento forzado, resistencia espacial, destrucción, reconstrucción.

Abstract The Palestinian *right of return* to their homes is a legally recognized right since December of 1948. More importantly, it is a physical right that all Palestinians have been working towards achieving while enduring what is now a seventy-seven-year occupation of their homeland and a forced displacement to other lands. This paper will address the most controversial and existential right the international community acknowledges towards the Palestine refugees. To understand the polemical nature of Article 11 of UNGA resolution 194, we must investigate the Palestine refugee camp, its formation, space-making and political operation towards trying to achieve this right. The paper will focus on the intersection of the legal and physical aspect of the Palestinian right of return through a historical understanding of the Palestine refugee camp, alongside its contemporary conditions in creating and maintaining a spatial resistance to forced displacement. The paper further argues that from the onset, the Palestine camp has been one of resistance before it was one of refuge, which is why they have been places of destruction even outside Palestine.

Keywords refugee camps, right-of-return, forced displacement, spatial resistance, destruction, re-construction.

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1. The creation of the Palestine camp

> In the absence of a solution to the Palestine refugee problem, the General Assembly has repeatedly renewed UNRWA's mandate, most recently extending it until 30 June 2026 (UNRWA, n.d.).

After receiving its most recent renewal of its mandate, typically renewed every three years, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) will continue serving more than 1.4 million (out of 5.9 million) registered Palestine refugees residing across 58 official camps in five hosting fields for its 77th year. But what are those official camps exactly, and how were they created? To understand the Palestine camp, we must begin framing its creation in relation to the Zionist settler-colonial formation, and its protraction alongside the internationally proclaimed Palestinian *right of return*.

Settler-colonialism is a spatial discourse that involves a procedural practice of creation-through destruction—and continued legitimization that performs in an endless state of gyration to ensure its survival (Al Dabash, 2023a, 2023b; Masalha, 2015). Settler colonialism is a systematic application of racialised practices—racial inequality—(Piterberg et al., 2013) of one group dominating another; a feature without which the colonial project is no longer colonial, or no longer successful. Consequently, racialized spaces emerge as a conduit through which the settler colonial apparatus and its various structures of oppression funnel their violent practices of elimination through first eliminating the political-humanitarian urgency of the crisis. This is where the Palestine camp emerges, as a space to maintain a protracted violent displacement co-opted by the same humanitarianism that recognized its right to return (*haq al-'awd*a) alongside its subsequent cessation, as the camp would no longer need to exist. Since its adoption in December of 1948 as the Israeli aggression was ravaging Palestine, the Palestinian right of return has been marred with contention. Its contentious nature resides in the entanglement of humanitarianism (via the United Nations), legality (via the Universal Declaration of Human Rights) and violence (via continued Zionist occupation of Palestine and Zionist rejection of refugees returning for demographic fears) (Abu Sitta, 2004; Khalidi, 1992, p. 29). Furthermore, the UN was the first international body to adopt the concept of dispossessing the Palestinians from their homeland through their proposed 1947 Partition Plan, rejected by Palestinians at the time, making its affirmation of this right symbolically obligatory yet its application open to scrutiny (Abu Sitta, 2004). The most revealing of this nebulous nature of humanitarianism is the legal text of the Right of Return article.

The original text of the Right of Return article reads as follows:

> 11. *Resolves* that the refugees wishing to return to their homes and live at peace with their neighbours should be permitted to do so at the earliest practicable date, and that compensation should be paid for the property of those choosing not to return and for

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> loss of or damage to property which, under principles of international law or in equity, should be made good by the Governments or authorities responsible;
> *Instructs* the Conciliation Commission to facilitate the repatriation, resettlement and economic and social rehabilitation of the refugees and the payment of compensation, and to maintain close relations with the Director of the United Nations Relief for Palestine Refugees and, through him, with the appropriate organs and agencies of the United Nations. (United Nations General Assembly Resolution 194 (III), 1948)

While the right of return is widely considered inalienable, UNGA resolutions act as *recommendations*, meaning that they are not binding until they are passed through a United Nations Security Council (UNSC) vote. Two things in the Right of Return article are prominent in relation to the Palestine camp; firstly, the changing—elastic—legal humanitarian language as the article is repeatedly readopted in proceeding resolutions, changing the *operative verb* which begins the article as an act of diminution of the political urgency. Thus, *Resolves* becomes *Recognises* then *Considers* and finally *Endorses* in RES/513 (VI). For the international community, the right of return becomes one from settled and determined (i.e. *Resolves*) into one which is merely promoted (i.e. *Endorses*). As a result, the Palestine refugee and the Palestine camp are intertwined, forming an existential relationship that of a mother and her womb, whereby the camp is the material evidence and manifestation of Palestinian protracted displacement.

While the Palestine camp is one space constructed out of settler colonialism to absorb the displaced indigenous people, another space is made to absorb the incoming Zionist settlers. The new settler space would rupture the indigenous landscape through forms of forced and financed[1] new habitat. New *Jewish only* spaces would be created in the form of moshava (colony), kibbutz (gathering) and moshav (settlement). These spaces can be imagined as new spatial forms pressed forcefully over the indigenous landscape, crushing what was Palestinian and limiting what can become Palestinian in the future Salamanca, 2011).

> Our thought is that the colonization of Palestine has to go in two directions: Jewish settlement in Eretz Israel and the resettlement of Arabs of Eretz Israel in areas outside the country. (Leo Motzkin, 1917, as cited in Pappé, 2006, p. 7)

For the new Zionist settler space to settle on what is now a violently ruptured and bleeding grounds, another new space needs to be created to absorb this inflicted blood and suck it dry. Thus, the resultant new space needed to act as both relief and control. These spaces, the Palestine camps, would not only provide urgent relief, but also ensure a political problem was encapsulated within bordered areas (camp borders), set-up to become absorbed within a local spatiality of a newly created Nation-State. From the onset, host governments were acknowledged as not only partners in relief but

1. The Jewish Colonization Association – later renamed the Palestine Jewish Colonization Association – and the Jewish National Fund (JNF) were established by Zionist adherents to purchase land in Palestine for the purpose of Jewish settlement.

negotiating agents and partners for the permanent transfer of people and works into their own economies and spatialities (Cf. United Nations General Assembly Resolution 302 (IV),1949). The camp, considered a relational space[2] caused by the initial act of abandonment, is in fact an embodiment of what Agamben calls "the most absolute biopolitical space ever to have been realized" (Agamben 1998, p. 97), where it is no longer viable to distinguish between the humanistic character and basic needs of the refugee from his political status. Camps are intense spaces, preserved in them is everything refuge from the moment of the Palestinian displacement. It is a preservation of the displaced journey, of the physical and psychological rupture the refugee endured; it is a preservation of the injustice and violent force(s) inflicted on the Palestinian refugee transferring him from the *human worthy of life'* to *the human unworthy of life*. It is this lack of distinction recurrent on many layers which makes a camp-space.

It is important to stress that in all of the original forced displacement narratives I was fortunate enough to listen to directly from the refugees who endured it, they were accompanied by descriptions of panic, fear and uncertainty, urgent states of body and mind, which would play a pivotal role in refugee movement and creation of space. This state of urgency during the onset of refugee movement is very much present today in the camp's spatiality, while incorporating new elements of resistance, economy, and political empowerment. Although this state of urgency has become nebulous if one encounters the Palestine camp for the first time, as soon as one intersects with the various parts of the camp, it becomes clear that the state of urgency is found in all the aspects of inhabiting the camp. It takes shape in negotiating an accretion of everyday social and economic survival inside an ever-changing and mercurial grounds. These politically humanitarian grounds create forms of dense habitat that require refugees to constantly try and overcome socio-economic hardships as an urgent need to meet before attending to other elements of camp inhabitation.

1.1. Standardizing the camp-space

From its inception, the Palestine camp has been a product of overlapping practices and spatialities, that of humanitarian ones and refugee ones. The humanitarian practices are modelled against United Nations' service programmes designed for efficient delivery to a maximum number of people, making the nature of these programmes essentially as standards. After only five months of operation, the UNRWA realized this urgent need to "develop rules and procedures and instructions to standardize action in all areas.[3]" This would become the modus operandi of the UNRWA's operations in camps, one based on standards universally adopted across all five fields, thus establishing an efficiency of economy and performance for the Agency and its relationship to the camp. Yet, how do

2. "The difference between abandonment and exclusion is that abandonment is an active relational process. The performance of abandonment is simultaneously the production of space and relational space". G. Pratt, Abandoned women and spaces of the exception, Antipode, 2005.

3. Please refer to "Assistance to Palestine Refugees, Interim report of the Director of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East, NY, 195".

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you calculate humanitarianism? And how do you calculate a humanitarian space? Inside the Palestine camp context, *efficiency* adheres to calculations of international funding, Host Government regulations towards the Palestine refugees, and more recently the UNRWA deliverables. These objectives toward the hosting of Palestine refugees go beyond dollar numbers to include calculations of political and geo-political parameters, of which results are then translated into reformed policies, regulations and actual interventions (Abreek-Zubiedat, 2015, p. 85; Maqusi, 2021).

The onset absorption of Palestine refugees into camps, which included the creation of resolutions, definitions, standards and regulations culminated in the creation of what I term as the *relief-scale*. The *relief-scale* was created by overlapping those created regulations and standards over space, with the intention to provide aid, as well as mitigate a political crisis using spatial means. Indeed, it is this disregard and abandonment of attending to the political by the UN and the host governments that allowed the *relief-scale* to quickly reform itself into another scale. The other scale is one constructed by the Palestine refugees as a response to a protracted state of displacement, while compensating for the political abandonment of his/her right to return using spatial means. By continuously trumping relief over the political, the UNRWA and host governments have attributed to the proliferation of refugee socio-spatial acts inside the camp.

The political is a material element of living inside the Palestinian camp, resulting from the overlap of both camp as a *state* of/for protracted displacement, and space as a *material* of/for protracted displacement. Thus, the political is an emergent element of the relational camp-space, taking part in daily and event scales of negotiating social and economic behaviours, as well as always, a spatial one. The political is a constructed refugee agency; one that guarantees his/her survival within a confined and controlled space, whereby the refugee ensures that any current power relations with the host government (or even with the UNRWA) are always negotiable. The political (refugee negotiating agency) in the Palestine camp takes the form of a constructed spatial scale, built as protraction of displacement continues and continuously re-defines power relations. This is because the host governments find the spatial element/scale of the camp to be the hardest to control and penetrate. We need not look much further than the origins of creating the Palestine camp through adopted United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) resolutions that specified, in suitably elastic legal language, the approaches for implementing a settlement project for both economic and spatial integration in the respective host countries. Subsequently, UNRWA would facilitate the implementation of re-settling Palestine refugees by creating programmes and projects of economic integration and a spatialised mode of production in the name of "self-support[4]".

The translation of the programmed self-support into a spatial one would quickly become a recursive mode of existence inside the camp, originally emanating from

4. Please refer to https://www.un.org/unispal/document/auto-insert-189875/.

Figure 1

Baqa'a camp in Jordan c. 1970, showing a refugee plot with wall encroachment and quick built-up space of amenities inside the plot. Source: UNRWA Archives.

an existential need for shelter amenities to compensate for their absence in UNRWA relief architecture (Figure 1). The transition from relief tents and into self-support form required the UN and the host governments to re-arrange the camp tents' haphazard spatiality into one of regulated grid-like layouts (Figure 2). Once the camp grid layout of refugee plots was arranged, the refugees would immediately extend and expand beyond the UN allocated plots of 96 m^2 —considered acts of spatial violation— (Figure 3). Imagining a right to the camp through repositioning the concept of the right to the city, Peter Grbac observes that "In order for the right to the city to be fully realized in the context of the refugee camp, it must address the ways in which the spaces of the camp are appropriated to allow for the practice of participating in the rights discourse" (Grbac, 2013, p. 15). Appropriation and participation, therefore, "form the two principal rights that underlie and structure the inhabitance of the camp" (Ibid, p. 25). Refugees extended and expanded beyond the humanitarian space of 96 m^2 in a way to testify to the failure of humanitarian architecture to address the political. Notwithstanding the resulted conflict in social relations, these excesses–beyond 96 m^2– demonstrate refugee power and try to manifest the challenge to paralyzing time inside the camp as their forced displacement generationally protracts (Figure 4).

Yet the political in the camp extends beyond refugee acts, precede refugee acts, and gives them form through laying the material-architectural grounds upon which refugee acts of resistance are shaped. Scholars identify the first person to speak of the concept of concentrating people within a distinct and controlled space to be Commander Martinez Campos of the Spanish garrison in Cuba[5]. This was for the purpose of weakening

5. Please refer to https://www.anneapplebaum.com/2001/10/21/a-history-of-horror/.

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Figure 2

Baqa'a camp in Jordan, 1969, transforming the camp from haphazard tents into grid-layout shelter and refugee plots. Source: G. Nehmeh; UNRWA Archives.

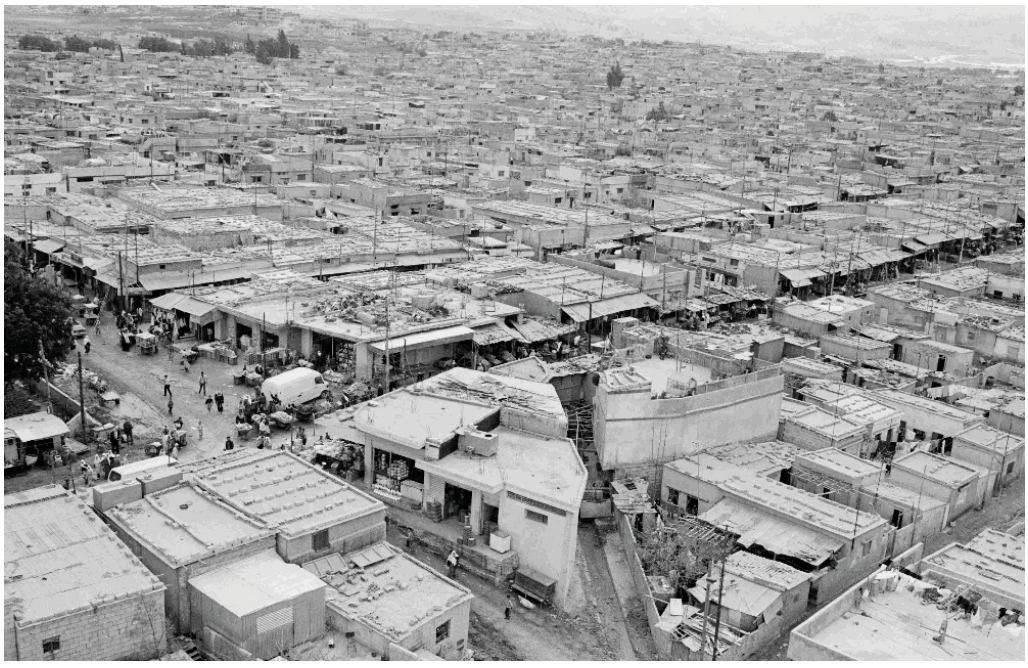

Figure 3

By 1986, Baqa'a camp in Jordan encroached beyond the 96m² refugee plot on mass scale. Source: J. Shammout; UNRWA Archives.

and exterminating not only the human life, which occurred in many cases, but more importantly the human action, and in this case, the Cuban independence struggle. By concentrating and confining a group of people, you limit their action and ensure that no supplies or support from sympathisers reach them. It is thus unsurprising that in its five-month "review of operations" after its establishment, the UNRWA's Director stated in his report that "After more than two years of enforced idleness living under uncertain and trying conditions, more than 800,000 of these refugees constitute a serious threat to the peace and stability of the Near East countries" (UN Doc. A/1451/Rev.1, para 28, 6

Figure 4

Continued refugee building up of shelter space, vertically and alongside a generational growth whereby each family member builds on top of one another and as means are available leaving gaps until means allow to build in them. A form of Palestinian generational time. Source: Author.

October 1950). The threat the UNRWA foresaw would be the possible action confined and controlled Palestine refugees could take on against their "enforced idleness" in the camp.

Fayez Abu Fardeh, a refugee from Baqa'a camp in Jordan (considered an emergency camp to shelter secondary refugees from the 1967 Israeli aggression) tells me of what he saw on the ground when he first arrived to Baqa'a camp in February of 1968, "We entered the site and there was asphalt". As he sees the confused look on my face, he continues, "this was planned for an army base, they were going to build a prison here before we arrived. The rest of the land was agricultural" (Baqa'a camp interviews, 2014). He then tells me that an existing large concrete water tank was also there when refugees arrived at the site (Figure 5). These spatial details, rarely discussed in camp-literature, or even within the UNRWA offices, imply that these mechanisms of confinement and control are/were preferred and adopted by the host governments. From the start, Baqa'a camp was meant to be a large-scale camp to absorb as many refugees as possible within one *controllable* space. Baqa'a camp's area, seen as a suitable geography of a valley surrounded by hills on the outskirts of the capital city would facilitate efficient mechanisms of spatial control

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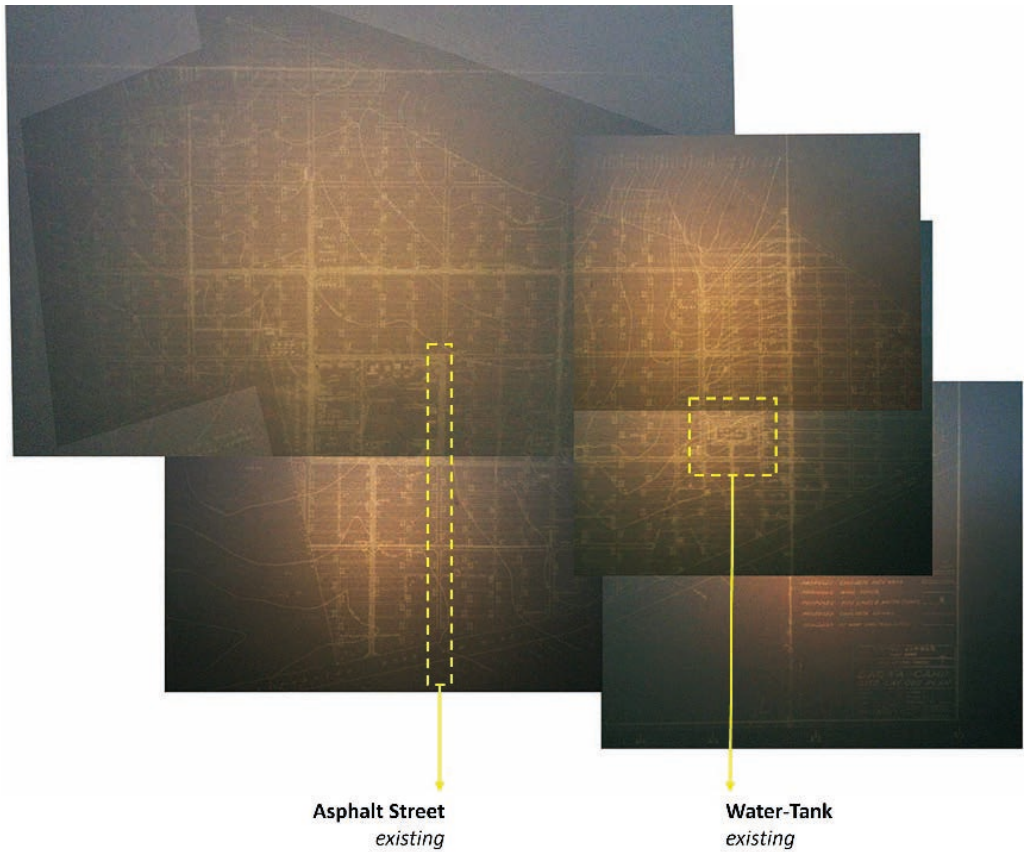

Figure 5

A plan of Baqa'a camp drawn in Vienna in 1968, showing an existing asphalt street and water-tank as evidence that the camp location was designed for a prison. Source: UNRWA Archives.≤

for the Jordanian government. For the Jordanian government, Baqa'a space whether prison or camp, would be approached with the same intent, to regulate, control and if needed punish without being exposed and away from the urban centres.

1.2. Sharing the camp

Before the 1948 violent displacement, the resulting Palestine refugees were mostly peasants living inside a village spatiality that has a communal form of social and labour sharing (Al-Qutub, 1989; Kark & Frantzman, 2012). Prominent amongst those forms of sharing is the concept of مشاع (*mashaa'*)—meaning land-sharing or common benefit; a concept active in Islamic shari'a and implemented during the Ottoman rule in Palestine. The concept of *mashaa'* entails distributing the agricultural lands of the village (without clear border demarcations) between the village families according to socially agreed upon regulations, but mostly by draw, to cultivate and accumulate profit. The lands would be re-assigned every 5-10 years, sometimes even sooner to ensure each family has a chance to benefit from the different topography of the land. During that time, the Palestinian peasant lived a spatial culture bifurcated into two states of inhabitation, the private residence and the common good; the village and agricultural land. While *mashaa'* can be understood as a common, it is an actively beneficial form of common, and one which engages in socially-based communal negotiations to ensure its common good/benefit remains performing as such. The essence of *mashaa'* is that it is not clearly divided. The Palestine refugees arriving in camps, overwhelmingly

peasants (Al-Qutub, 1989), brought with them this intrinsic sense of communal mode of inhabitation, which enabled them to quickly adapt the newly divided refuge space (i.e. the camp) into one of similar patterns.

This disruption to the architectural order the Palestinian peasant inhabited before the camp confirmed the notion that the camp is a refuge space and will never be able to replace the previous home space. In the early years of camp inhabitation, the Palestine refugees would produce similar mannerisms of previous village inhabitation, joining multiple UNRWA plots to house extended families, and cultivating agricultural lands outside camps in the form of *mashaa'* through forging agreements with host-populations to utilize their private lands. Various studies into refugee communities "show that refugees in various social and cultural contexts are pre-occupied with maintaining continuity with their pre-exilic social and physical worlds" (Woroniecka-Krzyżanowska, 2013). This replication of habitual forms was not meant to recreate a village life, or even safeguard a spatial culture suddenly seized by force, instead, they can be interpreted as know-how acts Palestine refugees carried with them and utilized to safeguard and extend an indigenous form of communal *generational time*. While the *relief-scale* subdivided the camp into regulated refugee plots, the actual grounds of the camp were/remain legally as *right-of-use*, a right extended from the host government to the UNRWA, and from the UNRWA to the refugees. Thus, while the refugee plots are numbered and designated to respective families, they are not owned but remain as right-of-use. "This means that the refugees in camps do not own the land on which their shelters were built but have the right to use the land for a residence" (unrwa.org), even after seventy-seven years of building up space inside the camp.

The campgrounds being a right-of-use is indeed another form of common although different from that of *mashaa'*. Right-of-use is best translated to the legal usufruct; use and enjoyment temporarily without changing/damaging the thing deemed right-of-use. The camp is thus an institutional common and active *commoning,* making refugee acts of spatial violation (encroaching beyond the 96 m^2 plots) as natural acts and ones which are not legally violating, but rather as acts of spatial gain. This murky state of relief and control within a condition of commoning allows the exaptation of the camp's originary function of settling the political through spatial means to one which functions as highly political on unsettled grounds.

The unsettling attempts to settle the political through the camp is clearly illustrated through the UNRWA's adoption of a definition of a camp. Originally the UNRWA would adopt the following definition of a camp, "A concentration of refugees and displaced persons which has been recognized by UNRWA as an official camp, which is operated by the Agency, and has in particular a camp leader and environmental sanitation services provided by the Agency" (UNRWA Archives). This definition changes into what is adopted today by the UNRWA as "A Palestine refugee camp is defined as a plot of land placed at the disposal of UNRWA by the host government to accommodate Palestine refugees and set up facilities to cater to their needs. Areas not designated as such and are not recognized as camps". The changing language of the materiality of the camp is very clear.

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While the camp was originally described in terms that are human-centred acknowledging a violent act of displacement and a resulting concentration of people, it changes into one of disposed space and services stripping it from its humane substance. The unsettling political entanglement of relief infrastructure (i.e. the UN and Host Governments) dictates the involution of humanitarianism and geo-politics. Furthermore, it pronounces the camp as an architectural exercise of an extraterritoriality within the larger geography, enabling both the UNRWA and the host governments to distinguish it and validate their mechanisms of humanitarian order and control. Because the camp is a distinguished space, it allows those authorities to exercise mechanisms which can be extrajudicial yet justifiable inside a territoriality deemed outside the other spaces within that host geography.

1.2.1. A camp-space

At this point, the Palestine camp must be understood as a camp-space. A camp-space is more than a camp, and more than a space. It is everything that emerges between and establishes a relationship which can exist in either agreement or disagreement. The camp represents the refuge state (now a protracted displacement), while the space represents all the material elements making refuge (now sustaining protracted displacement). In analogy to Michel Foucault's concept of the *dispositive*—apparatus (Foucault, 1980, pp. 194- 195), we can imagine the relational (-), as the material *dispositif* which ensures a balanced, yet constantly changing relationship between the camp and space as it endures a violent protracted displacement. It is the specificity of the nature of the *dispositif* which allows this balance, whereby it is flexible and elastic, to respond to changing forces which can alter the nature of the *dispositif* without ever eradicating itself, unless camp-space cease to exist as such. It is helpful to imagine the (-) as an overlap (or superimposition) of definitions, policies, parameters which define a refuge state or camp, set by the United Nations and the respective host governments, over that of refugee material manifestation of a lived state of protracted displacement within a delineated space.

This overlap of the aforementioned elements reveals the camp scale, which is a product of a symbiosis of an institutionalized mechanism of refuge over the actual physicality of it. The onset overlap of the aforementioned elements of camp and space produces what I have called the *relief-scale*. Yet, refugee acts deviating from the onset UN and host government rules and regulations, at which point if we overlap the camp and the space—produced over a protracted displacement— a new physical scale emerges which I term here the *political-scale*. This *political-scale* is different from the *relief-scale* in that it has protraction as a main element making it. More importantly, this protraction includes in it histories of resistance, armed struggle, construction, destruction and reconstruction, etc., which allowed for this agency of the refugees to re-appropriate the camp and space, whereby the refugees are now seen and approached as legitimate makers and further negotiators of this camp-space (Figure 6). Furthermore, the *political-scale* gave birth to a specific, socially-based, assemblage —*dispositif*— that ensures an existential balance enabling the camp to resist and survive the myriad violent ruptures it encounters as a collective Palestinian space.

Figure 6

The political scale of the Palestine camp built over a protraction of displacement. Showing refugee endurance in Ein el Hilweh camp in Lebanon (L), while in Baqa'a camp in Jordan (R), the political scale forced the Jordanian Gendarmes to engage in power-relations (as opposed to force) with Palestine refugees, refraining from entering the camp and staying outside camp borders. Source: Author.

The term *dispositif* as a philosophical inquiry occupied Foucault's thinking starting from the mid-1970s, to understand governmentality and the mechanisms by which men are governed. At the centre of his preoccupation with the term are the relations and forms of power, which reside inside the *dispositif*. Foucault reminds us, without relation there is no power (play or struggle), there is only force (ibid; Mouffe, 2005). Retrospectively, without the (-) – where the relational elements making the Palestine camp are respectively situated, the camp and the space would exist as separate generic entities devoid of a co-constitutive co-existence. The threatening nature of the camp *dispositif* (the (-) resides in its containment of inexorable evidence and knowledge concerning injustice and exploitation taking place inside the camp. Whenever the *dispositif* reaches the multiple scale, or the social-visible scale –through a possible creative act of countering-injustice, it has the potential to undermine, and more profoundly, negate the existing control structures (and/or mechanisms) in place. This is fundamentally worrying for the host governments and the wider geopolitical structures, in that these structures of government apply these mechanisms of control beyond the camp boundary, yet always in relation to the camp boundary. In doing so, the host government engages in creating a particular relationship between host and camp; one based on separating, exposing and covering, empowering and disempowering some elements of making the camp over others. By doing so, it ensures an enduring state of fear and ambiguity is always present in society's subjectivity in relation to the camp-space. Simply, an act of spatial subterfuge by the host government.

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2. The Palestine shelter: refuge-resistance-return

2.1. Refuge

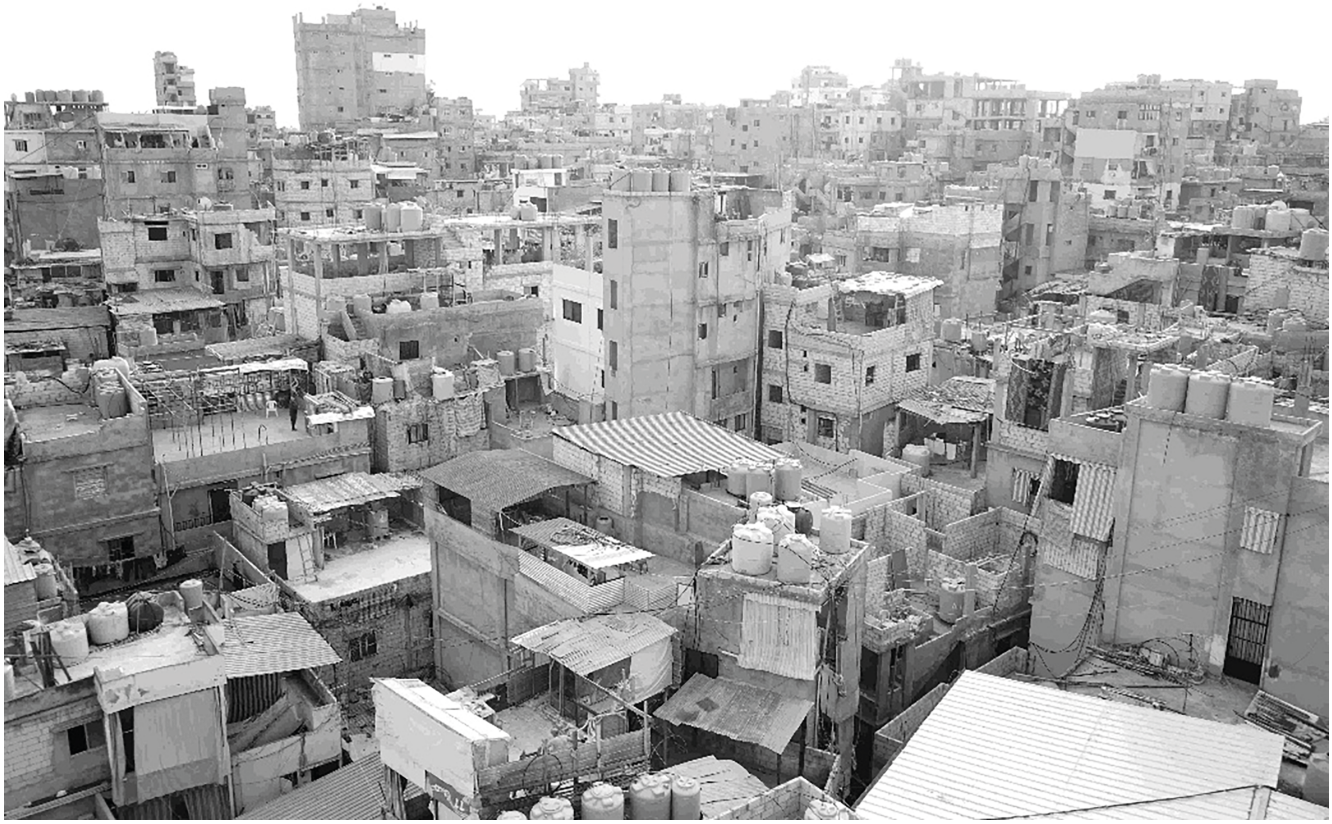
The Palestine refugees realized their inevitable protraction early on and thus opted to build up their spaces by transgressing the UN delineated lines employing what I term as acts of *spatial violation* (Maqusi, 2021). These acts, considered an official violation inside the camp by both the UNRWA and host governments, are nonetheless tolerated, and have enabled the refugees to construct a Palestinian Scale, in physical architectural terms, from their shelters outwards and upwards (Figure 7). Inside the camp, the shelter is more than a habitat, it the political space of deliberation and act. It is a dwelling, a gathering, a sheltering, an endurance, a resistance, a countering, a witness, a proof, a potential, and a safety while exposed to intrusions from government informants and forces during conflicts.

Malek (an activist refugee in Jordan and who co-organizes many of the camp's demonstrations and activities), told me during one of my visits to the camp:

> I see the best space to plan and discuss anything about Palestine and politics to be the Palestine shelter, as it's more secretive and comfortable. Deliberating displacement inside the camp is known, anything reminds you of Palestine inside the camp, therefore, I do not await the building of a creative space from the host country to let me think. Instead, I work towards the Palestinian return inside my shelter. (Baqa'a camp interviews, Jordan, June 2014).

Figure 7

Burj el Barajneh camp in 2019. The acts of spatial violation have enabled refugees to expand the camp shelters outward and upward. Source: Author.



2.1.1. Destruction-re-construction-generational

The act of building space inside the camps has always been a political one. From the moment tent material solidified, the refugees were well aware that these camps are here to accommodate a political problem and not a humanitarian crisis. It is this very moment – of material change – that refugees on mass scale began to re-define their relationship to the camp as space. Refugees would not only construct needed space for daily refuge/survival, such as the kitchen and bathroom inside their designated relief plots, but furthermore, construct space beyond the plot and sometimes beyond an immediate need to engage in active economies of transacting space (by selling and renting camp shelters enabled through camp-recognized transactions). The building up of shelter space in the camp would become both a result and a sustenance of protracted displacement. Living out the camp as simultaneously a space of refuge and a violent space would prove those acts of building up the shelter space to be prescient, in that the resulting architectural scale would empower the camp to withstand and actively resist attempts at taming the camp or outright eliminating it (ibid).

Two prominent examples clearly illustrate the operative agency of the resultant *political-scale* as a negotiating power with both the UNRWA and the host government. The first is the paradigm shift the UNRWA was compelled to undertake towards its services of the camp as a response to the built-up dense architectural scale: the *political scale*. In a 2004 Geneva conference to "plan medium-term development strategies for the 4.1 million Palestine refugees registered with UNRWA," the UNRWA would decide the "need for a planning framework to redress the situation" of the Palestine refugees. As a result, the UNRWA would transform the then Field Engineering and Construction Services Department into the newly established Infrastructure and Camp Improvement Programme (ICIP), aiming to transition "*From Relief and Works to Human Development*".[6] At this point, UNRWA would attempt to address the camp's dense spatiality through a programme approach—-which has urban participatory planning in it—rather than a service approach of ad hoc rehabilitation and reconstruction. What this fundamentally entails is a shift away from adopting minimal standards to shelter reconstruction and instead engage in a rebuilding of shelters that takes into consideration what has been built over time by refugees.

The destruction and re-construction of Nahr el Bared camp in Tripoli Lebanon would be the first application of this change in approach. In a disproportionate response to a violent episode inside the camp, the Lebanese government would engage in a brutal destruction of the whole of the camp in 2007 (Figure 8). There are various scenarios to exactly why the Lebanese government resorted to the complete destruction of the camp. While it is not the paper's aim to pin down the exact motive, one thing is certain; the elimination of the Palestine camp was always a desire inside Lebanon (Sayigh, 1995).

6. "*From Relief and Works to Human Development: UNRWA and Palestinian Refugees After 60 Years*" wat the title for the launching event of UNRWA-ICIP at the Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs at AUB in Beirut on October 8-9, 2010.

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Figure 8

The complete destruction of Nahr el Bared camp by the Lebanese government forces in Tripoli, Lebanon, 2007. Source: UNRWA Archives.

Figure 9

Nahr el Bared camp reconstruction. Architectural scale before (L) and After (R), whereby the Lebanese government demanded new spatial parameters to enable Army tanks to freely and quickly enter the camp. Source: UNRWA Archives.

The dense architectural scale the camp has evolved into meant that to control the camp can only mean to spatially eliminate it, something the Israeli forces tried to implement in Jenin camp in 2002. While the preferred aim of permanently removing both Nahr el Bared and Jenin camps failed, the reconstruction of both camps would undergo a form of re-scaling the camp (Tabar, 2012 & Figure 9). This is to ensure camps can easily be penetrated in the future by army tanks and personnel. Yet, and due to refugee spatial agency, the reconstruction of the camp would have to adhere to new refugee demands (Hassan & Hanafi, 2010). Traditionally, the reconstruction of Palestine shelters would adhere to the UNRWA minimum spatial standards ranging from about 32 m^2 to about 60 m^2 based on family size. This would change with the case of Nahr el Bared camp reconstruction, and instead, the UNRWA is now compelled to reconstruct refugee space in accordance with what refugees had built up until the moment of destruction (Barakat, 2013). Thereafter, refugee spatial investment in protracted displacement becomes a reference for reconstruction adopted by the UNRWA and host governments.

Figure 10

Palestine refugees collectively rebuilding their shelters in Ein el Hilweh camp, Lebanon, after Israel invasion of Lebanon in 1982 which left many Palestine camps heavily destroyed. Source: G.Nehmeh; UNRWA Archives.

While the destruction of Palestine camps has been recurrent in their history of existence, their reconstruction by refugee hands has also been recurrent. The history of reconstructing camps has not always been attended to by the UNRWA's comprehensive reconstruction programme, as in the case of Nahr el Bared or Jenin camps. Whenever camps have been destroyed, it was the refugees who rebuilt their spatial fabric shelter by shelter, in a similar fashion to how they built their camps in its early days. Material is usually provided by the UNRWA, and the refugees engage in a collective effort of space-making (Figures 10). But why do refugees re-build their camps when they would wholeheartedly "leave those camps furnished"[7] the moment they had the chance to return to Palestine?

The answer to this rather complex question for scholars could be unpacked through observing subsequent refugee behaviours once returning to the reconstructed Nahr el Bared camp (Maqusi, 2021). Not surprisingly, Palestine refugees would immediately engage in acts of spatial violations through extending horizontally and vertically beyond the UNRWA constructed lines as a way to gain more space. In doing so, the refugees continue to use space and architectural scale as a materiality to not only re-build their camp and shelters, but just as crucially, rebuild their political agency, i.e. refugee power. Re-building a camp-space from ruins is simultaneously a re-building of the "political community" (Arendt, 1998). The immediate refugee encroachment onto the common right-of-use is a form of building power in that "Power is always, as we would say, a power potential and not an unchangeable, measurable, and reliable entity like force or strength" (ibid, p. 200). Therefore, it becomes unassailable that the refugee reconstruction of the camp is not a way to assert the belonging to the camp as a place of home or even homing, but more necessarily, to assert a political will and agency through spatial means.

7. Interview with Abu Mohammad, Burj el Barajneh camp, Lebanon August 2018.

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2.2. Resistance

Many of the refugees who now live in Baqa'a camp in Jordan first resided in camps next to the Palestine border in 1967 being the Ma'addi and Karameh camps. It is in that town Karameh—where the two camps exist, that the 1968 Battle of Karameh occurred, fought between the Israeli Zionist forces and members of the newly formed Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO). The Palestinian *guerrilla* freedom fighters (*fedayeen*) at the time mobilized and maneuvered in and through the two Palestine camps in Karameh (Siklawi, 2017). The battle, which saw victories on the Palestinian and Jordanian sides, began a liberation geo-Palestinian movement in the Near East, where thousands of refugees crossed Lebanese and Syrian borders to join their brothers and sisters' liberation fight in Jordan. This would mark the beginning of an organized Palestinian armed presence in the refugee camps and the different host countries (ibid). Fundamentally, as PLO resistance fighters organized their attacks within and through the two camps, the Palestine camp was no longer seen as a docile site to absorb and resettle needy refugees, but very much a dynamic site of resistance and agency which can engage in organized armed acts of resistance for the sole purpose of realizing the right of return. In turn, a new relationship is formed towards the Palestine refugee in Jordan and other host countries, and a paradigm shift of how camps are planned and managed is enacted. While the Ma'addi and Karameh camps were removed after the Karameh battle and refugees re-allocated to other camps, mainly being Baqa'a camp, the PLO would establish its presence inside the camp as both manager and protector. Om Ahmed tells me that at that time "they [PLO] were everything in the camp,[8]" meaning they controlled socio-spatial, socio-economic, and sociopolitical transactions inside the camp resolving all emergent disputes. Additionally, the camps would become training sites for the *fedayeen*, men and women, developing endurance, armed combat, and guerrilla war-tactics (ibid).

Knowingly, as the PLO movement became pronounced at this point, it gathered a wide popular Palestinian admiration and support across the Arab world, including a large segment of the host populations and local political groups. Hence, Arab governments would begin to fear a large-scale Palestinian resistance that would inevitably launch its activity from their host countries that share borders with Palestine, namely Jordan, Lebanon and Syria. The PLO's very emergence inside camps was based on *armed struggle until the liberation of Palestine*. During the PLO years in the camps, materiality and space arrangement would be directly linked to armed strategies and movements, which meant that the camps had to be fortified, and space strategically built. While conducting interviews in both Baqa'a camp in Jordan and Burj el Barajneh camp in Lebanon, numerous accounts confirmed that the PLO both subsidized construction material and provided construction labour and advice. Julie Peteet confirms similar accounts from her interviews in Shatila camp in her book *Landscape of Hope and Despair: Palestinian Refugee Camps*.

8. Baqa'a camp interviews in Jordan. Summer, 2014.

2.2.1. *Attabat* about the social space in the camp

Attabat, or *kutlet esment* (cement mass), is an early architectural element forming part of the camp's spatial terminology ever since the 1948 camps. Initially, *Attabat* were constructed as a cement mass just outside the shelter door to prevent the muddy water from entering the shelter, due to shelter plots being built on a depressed ground making the pathway a higher elevation (Figure 11). This was primarily due to the UNRWA's construction methodology whereby streets were laid out first – before shelter plots, constructed higher than the land-plots themselves, eventually causing a problem with rainwater overflowing into shelters. Abu Mahmoud from Baqa'a camp tells me "When the refugees began building inside their *Numrah* (refugee plots), the first thing they would think of is to raise their shelters to street level so as to protect them". It's worthwhile mentioning here that Abu Mahmoud, informed that my research is meant to compare a camp in Jordan and one in Lebanon, continued to tell me "In Jordan we encroached on the street to protect the shelter from water, in Lebanon it could have been to protect the shelter from tanks" (Abu Mahmoud, Baqa'a camp interviews, Jordan 2014).

Those cement-masses, serving as water-protection elements, would quickly acquire a multivalence function and would turn into intimate common spaces (i.e. social spaces), called *Attabat*. The refugee families would utilise those *Attabat* to occupy and mingle with neighbours and passerby, even host those passersby intermittently for a cup of tea or coffee, or a little chat thus lingering together on *Attabat* (Figure 12). They would become the first architectural element outside the refugee shelter to be employed by various refugees making them omnipresent inside the camp. *Attabat* enabled horizontal encroachment onto the public pathway to provide an outdoor social space, at a time when refugee plots were gradually becoming saturated with additional built rooms – i.e. cement. Later on, some *Attabat* would grow into actual rooms outside refugee plot boundaries, facilitating a furthering of refugee horizontal encroachments through spatial violations.

The importance of *Attabat* extends beyond sociality and involves a real sense of camp resistance. At the outset, *Attabat* is a refugee form of claiming space. In essence, *Attabat* are excess concrete, which has overflowed from the shelter parameters and into the common (right-of-use) space, beyond the UNRWA humanitarian borders. *Attabat* take a form of a "spillage" (Abourahme, 2015) that acts as a structural block, a social interactive space, and in the events of conflict, an impediment for any outsiders entering the camp violently (Figure 13). Situated inside a bordered and ordered geography as that of the camp, *Attabat* would perform as both a space and a place, offering refugees an extension of their domestic habitat that can behave as an intimate democide (like that of the shelter interior), or a dynamic socialized camp common (like that of the camp pathways). Over the span of seventy seven years of inhabiting the camp as a harsh displaced geography that can only densify vertically, *Attabat* would cease to act as the primary social space of the camp, and instead, camp roofs become the space and place of outdoor sociality (Figure 14).

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Figure 11

Early forms of Attabat, *or* kutlet esment *in Baqa'a camp. Refugees would build these cement blocks as a way to block water seepage into shelters, but* Attabat *would also behave as public social space. Baqa'a camp, 1969-1970. Source: UNRWA Archives.*

Figure 12

Attabat *acquiring multivalence functions around intimate sociality inside the camp. Source: Left–UNRWA Archives; Right–Author.*

During my PhD field work (between 2014-2018), I designed an intervention in the form of green *Attabat* as an act of spatial violation and a way to re-introduce the act of socialization in the camp pathways, to allow for those potential social behaviours with the passerby (and strangers), and further, provide for that sense of community connectedness through familiar lingering in the dense public space (Boyko & Cooper, 2015). Something the camp roofs cannot provide. What was significantly different about the green *Attabat* as opposed to the traditional camp *Attabat* is that green *Attabat* quite simply had a green space embedded in them, in the form of a tree pit (Figure 15). In doing so, we introduce a new materiality, life and time. Ones which allow the refugee(s) to engage with the *Attabat* through new behaviours of planting, watering and pruning (horticultural practices). This would ensure a *durational* time is constructed through *Attabat* (Bergson, 2013), shared with other refugees and shelters, allowing them to morph into their own subjectivity (Figure 16). What emerged from the intervention is a speedy proliferation and

Figure 13

Image showing a bent electrical pole next to a built Attabat *inside Baqa'a camp, and which was hit by a Jordanian gendarme tank as it attempted to enter the camp tissue during a confrontation with the Palestinian refugees, 2014. The* Attabat *performed as a hindrance to the gendarmes' attempt to enter the camp. Source: Author.*

Figure 14

As the camp densifies vertically over a protraction of displacement, Attabat *would cease to act as the primary social space of the camp, and instead, camp roofs become the space and place of outdoor sociality. Burj el Barajneh camp, Lebanon, 2020. Source: Author.*

personal investment from the refugee families in their *Attabat*, adding to it, reforming it and always enhancing it (Figure 17). Indeed, the perceptual Bergsonian sense of time, that of *duration* has memories, premonitions, expectations and anticipations inscribed in it. Every time a *Attabat* is built inside the camp, its materiality and form are imbued with those memories, premonitions, expectations and anticipations constantly updated as the camp continues to endure and grow.

The obvious question revisits us here, why do refugees invest in their camps when they would wholeheartedly "leave those camps furnished" the moment they had the chance to return to Palestine? While the key element is one, we have already discussed; the camp being a space of continued spatial resistance until a justful return is achieved,

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Figure 15

Design diagram of green Attabat *which include in them a tree pit as a space to grow greenery—new materiality in the camp pathways (L).* Attabat *built in Baqa'a camp (R), Jordan, 2015. Source: Author.*

Figure 16

Baqa'a Attabat *transformation over three years. The durational time that green* Attabat *offers allow it to grow into its own form and subjectivity, one made by the refugees. Baqa'a camp, Jordan. Source: Author.*

another which *Attabat* sheds light on is the *living out* of a state of continued uncertainty. Historically, humans have survived because they socialized. Together, they innovated ways to overcome environmental challenges and natural threats, as well as found ways to cultivate earth and sustain a community presence. This is the essence of camp; an immediate sense of home without abandoning the long-term attachment to homeland.

Figure 17

Baqa'a Attabat *proliferation across camp pathways over three years. Source: Author.*

The act of home-making (which *Attabat* is an integral part of) provides the refugees with "a place of normality" while living out an aberrant state of inhabitation (Boccagni & Kusenbach, 2020). The sociality enabled through *Attabat* not only mitigates crises but creates wellbeing: a key instance of illbeing – loneliness – is characterised by a lack of feeling socially connected (Zeeb & Joffe, 2020). "What can be seen most often, when there is a passage of time and there are changes, is that a social organisation, however precarious it may be, along with population growth and its own history, develops in the place of confinement" (Agier, 2019, p. 17). Essentially, *Attabat* are about sharing time, and their continued growth inside the camp is a conspicuous testament that Palestine refugees are attached to maintaining a Palestinian connectedness through space-making that allows for meanings of inhabitation beyond displacement. A place where one continuously constructs forms of home that "attach unique meanings and functions" for the Palestine refugee while providing a space that allows continued "place-making, mobility, identity, emotion and belonging" (Boccagni & Kusenbach, 2020).

3. Conclusion

3.1. Return

Thus far, we have established the camp as being a space of simultaneous technologies of *care and control* (Hanafi, 2010; Hyndman, 2000, pp. 117-147; Malkki, 1992, p. 34; Peteet, 2005, pp. 69-70; Oesch, 2017). This care and control operates on the premise that Palestine refugee camps and Palestine refugees are a constant threat to State security and stability as they continue to forge spatial, social and political mechanisms that ensure the camp's existence through constructed forms of space and inhabitation. These forms are at once entangled in preserving camp life and demanding a return to another –original—life (Zetter, 1994; Peteet, 2005; Feldman, 2006). Thus, the notion of care and control extends beyond the host government and is employed by the Palestine refugees to ensure states of refuge and return are preserved and enacted in and through the camp. The constant contradiction camp architecture experiences with time, has ensured that any attempt

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at formally organizing the camp-space will fail, and will be met with instantaneous restructuring by the refugees inhabiting the camp. The conflict between architecture and time inside the camp-space is based on the fact that time in the camp-space always exists in simultaneity with a political question (Maqusi, 2024). This innate presence of the political in the dimension of time inside the camp, augmented the scale of time to encompass a larger spatial geography – to include other camps and the homeland. The nature of time inside the camp is one that is particularly time-endured (for a return) rather than time lived; a *Palestinian* time. We can say that time, rather than border, is the real material boundary the Palestine camps experience. The closure of camp will therefore mean the closure of *Palestinian* time (Abourahme, 2025).

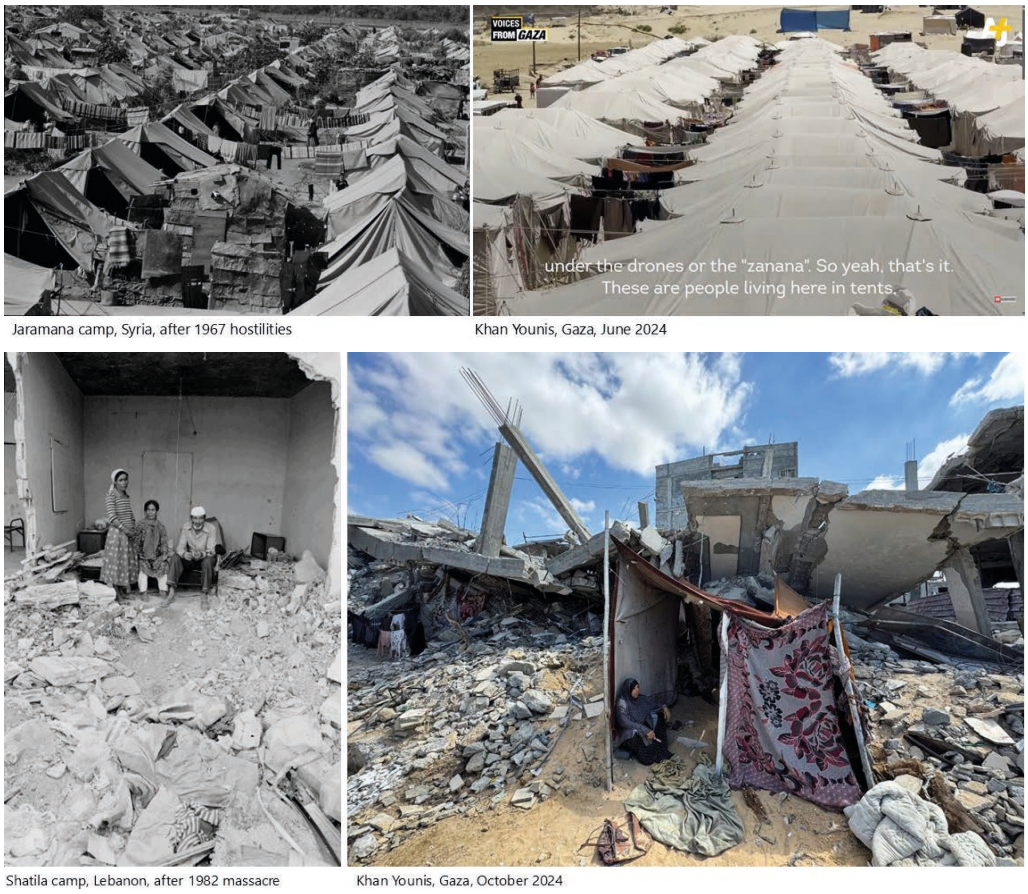
3.2. From camps to ghetto to closing camp-time

It is of great pain that I write this article while Palestinians in Gaza continue to endure a most horrific genocidal war by the Israeli settler state, now in its twenty second month without any international attempt to enforce a ceasefire. Currently, Gaza as a whole is turned into rubble; a complete annihilation of Palestinian space, people and time. The UN estimates that approximately 92 per cent of all residential buildings in Gaza have been destroyed, with resulting debris amounting to 50 million tonnes. In Gaza, rubble has replaced soil, bodies of those killed above and beneath. But, how exactly did we get to this moment in Palestinian history, where genocide as a means to end the Palestinian existence on their occupied land is enacted and upheld. Albeit the many preludes to this genocide of Palestinians (starting from the 1948 Israeli war on Palestinians with the aim of ethnic cleansing (Pappé, 2006) all the way through to the last Israeli war on Gaza in 2021), this massive attack in Gaza is no longer meant to weaken Palestinian presence and agency through destruction as has been the case in the previous violent episodes. The Zionist Israeli aim this time is to eliminate any possibility of a Palestinian presence and agency.

Gaza is a tiny strip of mostly arable land (365km^2) housing a population of approximately 2.4 million people, including some 1.6 million Palestine Refugees. Over 70% percent of Gaza's population are registered refugees, half of whom inhabit eight refugee camps, some of which are considered to be among the highest densities in the world exceeding 50,000 inh/sqkm. This makes Gaza a unique buildup with a spatial fabric being mostly camp and camp-extensions that has produced a most intractable refugee resistance for the Israeli settler-colonial state. The Palestine camps have long shaped the tactics and manoeuvres of the Palestinian resistance, evolving and reshaping in response to the camp's densifying built form. Until recently, the Palestine refugees would utilize their camp's *political-scale* creating vertical –above-ground—pathways providing them with quick movement that is difficult to intercept (Maqusi, 2021). The Israeli forces would also re-shape their repressive responses to the camp's resistance through applying increased forceful and destructive spatial means. A common tactic by Israeli forces would be to destroy (by blowing up) entire sections of the camp creating holes and gaps that interrupt refugee movement within the camp. Something the French used in Algeria

Figure 18

In Gaza today, Palestinians emulate historical ways of making space during destruction & urbicide. Source: Left– UNRWA Archives; Right– REUTERS/Mohammed Salem.



Jaramana camp, Syria, after 1967 hostilities

Khan Younis, Gaza, June 2024

Shatila camp, Lebanon, after 1982 massacre

Khan Younis, Gaza, October 2024

to combat the Algerian resistance inside the Kasbah's dense spatiality (Tabar, 2012, p. 49). This would lead the resistance in Gaza to abandon the vertical upwards (above-ground) and instead opt for the vertical downwards (below-ground). In doing so, the Palestine refugee resistance takes the camp beneath the Palestinian soil.

As already established, the Palestine refugee and the Palestine camp are intertwined, existing in an existential state of maintaining life that resists settlement and/or elimination working towards a return to the homeland. The violence that is inflicted on the camp is by-default inflicted on the Palestine refugee's right to exist, resist and return. This violence is originally innate to the moment of creating the settler colonial state of Israel, and can only increase when Palestinian resistance increases. Writing in his introduction to Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*, Jean-Paul Sartre illustrates the sheer insistence of colonial violence to de-humanize saying;

> Violence in the colonies does not only have for its aim the keeping of these enslaved men at arm's length; it seeks to dehumanize them. Everything will be done to wipe out their traditions, to substitute our language for theirs and to destroy their culture without giving them ours. Sheer physical fatigue will stupefy them. Starved and ill, if they have any spirit left, fear will finish the job; guns are levelled at the peasant; civilians come to take over his land and force him by dint of flogging to till the land for them. If he shows fight, the soldiers fire and he's a dead man; if he gives in, he degrades himself and he is no longer a man at all; shame and fear will split up his character and make his inmost self fall to pieces. The business is conducted with flying colours and by experts:

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Figure 19

Gazans returning to their homes in the rubble during the ceasefire which lasted from 19 January until 18 March 2025. Insisting on preserving Palestinian memory and time, the Palestinians innovate ways to build within the rubble on their former home sites. Source clockwise: AFP via Getty Images; REUTERS; Ahmed Ahmed; REUTERS/ Mohammed Salem.

> the 'psychological services' weren't established yesterday; nor was brain-washing. And yet, in spite of all these efforts, their ends are nowhere achieved: neither in the Congo, where Negroes' hands were cut off, not in Angola, where until very recently malcontents' lips were pierced in order to shut them with padlocks. (Fanon et al., 2001, p. 13)

Whilst the resistance moves through its spatial forms below-ground, the Palestinians face virulent Israeli colonial violence above. Despite Israel's continued annihilatory acts in Gaza, the Palestinians resist annihilation through continuing a life over Gaza's soil and making space. In Gaza today, Palestinians emulate historical ways of making space during destruction, collectively, to continue the Palestinian time and existence as a way of opposing annihilation (Figure 18). Scenes from Gaza of building within and over rubble demonstrate the retention and passing over of memories and generational displaced time of Palestinians (Figure 19). Just as bodies move in displacement, memory also moves, and each time it travels between people, generations and geographies it changes meaning (Whitehead, 2008). Memory is also localized and socialized in that it is shaped by the materiality of the cultural geography it is situated within (Terdiman, 1993).

Today, the only traces Gaza's fabric continues to preserve are time and memory. And while Gazans construct space and cultivate a sense of home within the rubble and volatile state, Gaza will be the physical orator of what comes after camp for the Palestinians, or any settler colonial state for that matter. Whether annihilation or a return, the Palestine camp and the Palestine refugee will go in history as the space and people who turned architecture onto its head and forced its discourse to confront the blatant truth it has for long tried to negate; "space is political and ideological. It is a product literary filled with ideologies. There is an ideology of space. Why? Because space, which seems homogeneous, which seems to be completely objective in its pure form, such as we ascertain it, is a social product" (Lefebvre & Enders, 1976, p.31).

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Special Note

The images of Gaza shown in this paper no longer exist as such. Israel broke the ceasefire on 18 March 2025, re-destroying what Palestinians managed to build as shelters in the rubble, and furthermore forced them to leave their homes for the fourth and fifth times. Today, Gaza is facing the worst inflicted starvation campaign in recent history by Israeli forces and government, and plans for a Gaza concentration camp have been widely and publicly shared in mainstream media.

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