

# Introduction

## Palestinian Refugees

Reem Bahdi

“Due recognition,” writes Charles Taylor, “is not just a courtesy we owe people. It is a vital human need.”<sup>1</sup> The history of Palestinian refugees is very much about the vital yet elusive quest for recognition. Palestinian refugees have struggled to be heard and understood since approximately one-half of the Palestinian population was displaced from historic Palestine in 1948. Though they remain scattered around the world, Palestinian refugees have steadfastly refused to allow their individual or collective identities to be swept into the dustbin of history.

*Refuge*'s decision to dedicate this volume to Palestinian refugees represents a scholarly landmark in Canada. To the best of my knowledge, this is the first Canadian journal to focus an issue on Palestinian refugees. With this fact in mind, the editors of *Refuge* had two goals in bringing together the authors represented in this volume. First, we sought to create a space where Palestinian refugee voices might be heard. Second, we sought to create a place where contested narratives and policies can be examined. Taken collectively, the papers that comprise this volume testify that recognition is indeed more than a due courtesy we owe people. Recognition is intimately connected to identity, narrative, time, space, power, justice, and nation.

Hillel Cohen focuses on identity, narrative, time, space, and power with his examination of the policies governing the lives of Palestinian refugees who remained within Israel after 1948. Although they eventually took up Israeli citizenship, many of the displaced who remain within Israel have not cast off their refugee or Palestinian identities. Cohen documents how Palestinian history and geography was obliterated from Israeli textbooks in an attempt to obliterate “Palestinianness” from the minds of the Palestinian citizens of Israel. He also points to ways in which the Israeli national identity is inextricably linked with denial of Palestinian identity. Such denial, however, has proven impossible in part because it has met with resistance within Palestinian communities who have demanded recognition of their complex identities.

While Cohen writes from a perspective that is external to the Palestinian refugee experience, Mahmoud Issa situates himself squarely within it. A son of Palestinian refugees, Issa's roots are in Lubyā, a small Gallilee village that was demolished in 1948 when its Palestinian inhabitants were uprooted and dispersed. Drawing on interviews with over seven hundred individuals as well as archive material, Issa documents the narrative of Lubyā's refugees. He concludes that “for teenagers, the middle-aged, and the elderly alike, Lubyā is an identical central image, a theoretical and sub-conscious point of reference, a cultural framework, and a past and present mental image that shapes, inspires, and impacts their personal lives today.” At the same time that Issa's paper documents the Lubyans' “struggle to preserve the history of the self against the ravages of time and forgetfulness,” it also clearly participates in that struggle.

Mohamed Kamel Dorāi builds on the themes of geography, identity, and history. His study reveals how Palestinian identities, developed in local Palestinian space, transcend both time and state borders to endure as transnational migratory networks. Specifically, his paper analyzes how Palestinian refugees living in Lebanese camps have used migration to develop new forms of solidarity with Palestinian communities scattered in different regions of the world. Dorāi's work identifies the extent to which local identity structures such as village and familial groupings intersect with and negotiate the increasingly complicated social, temporal, and spatial borders of our globalized world.

While Dorāi focuses on the structures that allow Palestinians to exchange information and resources between them, Catherine Burwell deals with Palestinian attempts to control the information that is conveyed about them. Taking up the theme of power, narrative, memory, and identity, Burwell explores *Frontiers of Dreams and Fears*, an independent documentary film by the Palestinian Mai Masri. This film focuses on two young girls living in Shatila and Dheisheh refugee camps. Burwell sees Masri's work as

“a radical intervention into current Western reporting on the Intifada and the experiences of Palestinian refugees.” She examines how Masri’s narrative techniques restore the lost voices of refugee children and thereby provides an essential alternative to the exploitative images of Palestinians presented by institutionalized media.

Perhaps no topic raises questions related to justice, power, history, geography, and identity like the Palestinian Right of Return. My own contribution to this volume takes up the question of the Right of Return as a way of examining the role of gender in forging recognition of the “other.” I examine the work of Jerusalem Link, a joint project between two feminist organizations, one Palestinian and the other Israeli. In their negotiations around the Right of Return, these two organizations have constructed gender as a bridge across the national divide that separates Israeli and Palestinian analysis of the Right of Return. I argue that the work of women’s groups like Jerusalem Link should be given greater attention by scholars and decision makers, especially in light of a recent United Nations Security Council resolution pertaining to women and peace-building.

Robbie Sabel also focuses on the Right of Return. He develops his analysis within the framework of international law, a contested site of Palestinian-Israeli discourse. A former legal advisor to the Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Sabel offers a particular perspective on the Palestinian right of return. He argues that no legal right of return exists for Palestinian refugees and “that implementation of such a right would be impractical” largely because it would undermine the Jewish character of the Israel as a nation.

While Sabel provides a particular legal analysis, Adina Friedman seeks to reorient the debate over the Right of Return along the axis of recognition. Rather than explicitly situating herself on either side of the debate, Friedman aims instead to explore what it means to recognize the perspective of the other through the lens of the right of return. She suggests that Israelis and Palestinians understand the issue of Return differently and identifies factors that she believes influence the different Palestinian and Israeli understandings.

Gail Boling, a senior researcher at Birzeit University in Palestine, reaches back into history to give context and depth to the question of Palestinian refugee rights. Boling examines the proposed Trusteeship Agreement for Palestine that was circulated by the United States in the United Nations in 1948. She provides a brief survey of the history leading up to the Trusteeship proposal, examines the salient features of the proposal, and analyzes the proposal in light of international legal norms. Boling notes that an analysis of the Trusteeship Agreement is more than hypothetical musings about “what might have been.” The Agreement

remains important because it consciously incorporated norms of the United Nations human rights regime in 1948 and serves as a benchmark that can be used to help map out a solution to the Palestinian refugee question as it stands today.

Like Boling, Wadie Said explores the relationship between justice, nationhood, history, and identity. Said grounds his comments on the Right of Return in an analysis of the lived reality of Palestinian refugees’ lives. He argues that the precarious legal status of Palestinian refugees in their host countries makes it clear that recognition of the Right of Return is not only viable but also crucial for the establishment of a just and lasting peace in the Middle East. Ultimately, Said insists, “Israel must not be exempt from being held accountable under international legal norms and standards for a refugee population it clearly created.”

No doubt both Boling’s and Said’s analyses will prove unsettling for some because Boling’s and Said’s work implicates the current debate over binationalism even though neither squarely addresses it. Binationalism, or the creation of a single state as home to both the Jewish and Palestinian peoples, is considered a taboo subject by Israelis and Palestinians alike. Nonetheless, it is increasingly discussed by at least some leaders and intellectuals. For example, Lama Abu-Odeh makes the case for binationalism in a relatively recent article<sup>2</sup> while Meron Benvenisti, former Deputy Mayor of Jerusalem, has suggested that “perhaps an open debate about binational arrangements, even if it’s only theoretical, will do more for reconciliation than sticking to ethno-nationalist separation.”<sup>3</sup>

Michael Lynk orients us away from questions of nationhood and the Right of Return. He reminds us that recognition of the wrongs done to Palestinian refugees across time and space raises issues around compensation as well as repatriation or resettlement. Lynk’s carefully researched and detailed analysis of the right to compensation under international law represents an important contribution to the evolving literature concerning corrective justice not only for Palestinians, but for all refugees.

Both Haideh Moghissi and Arthur C. Helton insist on the need for continuing investigation into the themes of recognition, identity, narrative, time, space, power, justice, and nation in relation to Palestinian refugees. In her contribution, Moghissi introduces the main themes that inform an ongoing study of gender relations among Islamic communities, including Palestinians. This work explores how Islamic practices and beliefs alter both religious and gender identities across time and space. It also examines how religious and gender identities are recognized and received within their host societies. A particularly intriguing and timely segment of the study will examine the extent

to which changing gender dynamics in diasporas are linked to the unwillingness of the host countries to grant due recognition to Muslim identities.

In his review of Michael R. Fischbach, *Palestinian Refugee Property and the Arab-Israeli Conflict*, Helton reinforces that the Palestinian refugee issue will be a key aspect of any settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict. Yet, he notes that relatively little attention has been paid to modeling a settlement of the refugee issue, including compensation criteria and mechanisms. Helton regards Fischbach's book as a useful work in this regard.

Clearly, the contributors to this issue of *Refuge* speak from diverse perspectives. They come from within Palestine, Israel, and beyond. They represent disciplines such as sociology, law, geography, and peace studies. While they differ in their allegiances and philosophies, they agree on one thing: finding a lasting solution to the question of Palestinian refugees is key to building peace in the Middle East. Our hope is that the papers presented in this volume will go towards creating greater understanding of the complex layers of politics, history, geography, and longing that inform the lives of Palestinian refugees. More importantly, our hope is that the papers presented in this volume reinforce that, like all refugees, Palestinian refugees cannot be regarded simply as objects of sympathy. They must be recognized as bearers of rights, makers of history, and holders of dreams.

#### Notes

1. C. Taylor, "The Politics of Recognition," in A. Gutmann, ed., *Multiculturalism: Examining The Politics of Recognition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press) at 26.
2. L. Abu-Odeh, "The Case for Binationalism: Why One State – Liberal and Constitutionalist – May Be the Key to Peace in the Middle East" *Boston Review* volume 26 December 2001–January 2002. Available online: <<http://www.one-state.org/articles/abu-odeh1.htm>> (date accessed: 9 March 2003).
3. M. Benvenisti, "The Binational Option" *Ha'aretz* (7 November 2002), available online: <<http://www.one-state.org/articles/benvenisti1.htm>> (date accessed: 9 March 2003).

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