UNRWA: Memories, Mythologies and the Palestinian Refugee Issue

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The Australian National University
Canberra Australia
This thesis is my own work. All sources used have been acknowledged.

(Robert Bowker)
12 April 2001
To my darling wife Jenny, and to my late brother Bill, with love.
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Though largely written while serving as an Australian public servant and diplomat, this study does not necessarily reflect the views of the Australian Government. As a former UNRWA official, the author wishes to add that the views expressed are not necessarily shared by UNRWA or the United Nations. The views expressed in this study and, of course, its shortcomings are the author's responsibility alone.

It is difficult intellectually, emotionally and empirically - for observers and participants alike - to distinguish between myths and realities in the Arab-Israel conflict. The struggle between the national myths of Israelis and Palestinians is a conflict between two very compelling sets of values and aspirations. It touches individuals, on both sides, in very personal ways.

Against that background, where ideas are put forward in this study on how change could happen, or should be encouraged to happen, this is done with a profound sense of humility. The author, who has been spared the experiences of many of those about whom this study has been made, would not wish to be considered insensitive to their aspirations, concerns and beliefs. He has nothing but admiration for those individuals - many of whom are his close personal friends - who are seeking, with great integrity, and with profound personal commitment, an enduring and just peace in the region.

The author would like to acknowledge with deep appreciation the contributions of many people to this
study. Amin Saikal, William Maley and Jeremy Shearmur provided skilled and much-needed advice on how to present a complex issue in what is, hopefully, an accessible form. Colleagues at the Centre for Arab and Islamic Studies of the Australian National University provided practical support and a helpful sounding board for ideas.

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There were many others in UNRWA in Gaza and Jerusalem who made me welcome, and were willing to share their insights and experience. The warmth, dignity, patience and hospitality of Palestinian colleagues in UNRWA made working with them a humbling and enriching experience. The author is grateful to them all.

In Canberra, Miranda Sissons gave valuable assistance through her appreciation of the subtleties of Arabic texts, and also with their transliteration. The library staff of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, led by Felicity Butler, were also enormously helpful. The astute insights of David Hennessy into
the Israeli-Palestinian relationship were, as always, much appreciated. The author is grateful for the permission of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade to draw on unclassified correspondence with UNRWA relevant to the 1997 crisis.

Bits the Bowker family cat remained true to his Beit Hanina origins, despite his exile and resettlement in Canberra. He contributed moral support occasionally.

Most of all, the author would like to acknowledge the love and forebearance of Jenny, Sam and Tabitha Bowker for the trials they have endured, and the sacrifices they have made during the development of this study, in Canberra, Gaza and Jerusalem over the past five years. The deepest debt is owed to Jenny Bowker, who not only provided informed criticism of various drafts, but also shared with her husband the critical perspective of an artist for whom mythologies, hope and inspiration are always connected.

Centre for Arab and Islamic Studies (the Middle East and Central Asia)
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April 2001
A Note on Sources

While every effort has been made to identify public sources for the information and comments in this study, the author has also drawn on the advice and views of a number of individuals who would prefer to have their comments treated as confidential. That wish has been respected. Where it has been absolutely essential to identify a sensitive source, the details of the individual concerned have been provided separately to the examiners of this thesis and to the Director of the Centre for Arab and Islamic Studies. For obvious reasons, such sources are not necessarily among those listed by the author.
Abstract

This study examines the relationship between the political mythologies and memories of Palestinian refugees - with associated issues of identity, aspiration and political frustration - and the way a financial crisis in the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) was handled in 1997. A basic argument of the study is that refugee political mythologies and the manipulation of those mythologies were central elements in the evolution and in the management of the crisis. The study contrasts the effects of political mythologies in shaping reactions to the crisis among Palestinians, in wider Arab circles, and in UNRWA. It also examines the response of Western donor countries to the crisis.

As background to the discussion of the 1997 crisis, the study examines the nature of Palestinian refugee mythologies, their social and political underpinnings, and the resistance to change surrounding them. It compares Palestinian and Zionist experience in dealing with mythologies as a mobilising political force.

The study suggests there are lessons to be drawn from the 1997 crisis so far as the outlook for the future of UNRWA, and for the management of the refugee issue in the broader context of the Middle East peace process are concerned. The study identifies certain measures that, if adopted, would help to sustain UNRWA's operations. It also notes the challenges the introduction of new approaches by UNRWA would entail.
unless refugee political mythologies change. The study argues that such change would be unlikely to come about through conscious effort on the part of political leaders unless refugees were to feel it would be without prejudice to their sense of identity, and that it would not disadvantage them in a material sense. Determined efforts to refocus the Agency in sustainable directions would, however, be preferable to approaches which, through failure to address the political mythologies surrounding UNRWA in a coherent way, inevitably come to see the preservation of the status quo for UNRWA as an end in itself.
## Selected Acronyms and Abbreviations

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<tr>
<th>Acronym</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tr>
<td>Cairo Agreement</td>
<td>Israeli-Palestinian Agreement on the Gaza Strip and the Jericho Area of 4 May 1994</td>
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<td>Oslo Agreement</td>
<td>Declaration of Principles on Interim Self Government Arrangements between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organisation of 13 September 1993</td>
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<td>Oslo II</td>
<td>Israeli-Palestinian Interim Agreement on the West Bank and Gaza Strip of 28 September 1995</td>
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<td>PA</td>
<td>Palestinian Authority</td>
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<td>PLO</td>
<td>Palestine Liberation Organisation</td>
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<tr>
<td>UNCCP</td>
<td>United Nations Conciliation Commission for Palestine</td>
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<td>UNDRP</td>
<td>UN Disaster Relief Project</td>
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<tr>
<td>UNDP</td>
<td>United Nations Development Programme</td>
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<td>UNESCO</td>
<td>United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation</td>
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<tr>
<td>UNGA</td>
<td>United Nations General Assembly</td>
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<tr>
<td>UNHCR</td>
<td>United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees</td>
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<tr>
<td>UNRPR</td>
<td>United Nations Relief for Palestine Refugees</td>
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<tr>
<td>UNSCO</td>
<td>United Nations Special Coordinator in the Occupied Territories</td>
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<tr>
<td>UNRWA</td>
<td>United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East</td>
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<td>UYAC</td>
<td>Union of Youth Activities Centres</td>
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This study was conceived following the publication in 1996 of a book by the same author which dealt with the outlook for Middle East security. The author argued at the time that the possibility of developing cooperative approaches to regional security would depend largely upon the willingness of Arab and Israeli leaderships to seek consciously to develop a sense of mutuality and respect, at both leadership and popular levels, based on acceptance by both sides of the limits to the politically possible.¹

The author is once again laying down his metaphorical pen, shortly after the election in February 2001 of Ariel Sharon as Prime Minister of Israel, and in the midst of a sustained period of violent confrontation between Palestinians and Israelis. The present turmoil has demonstrated the need for intensive examination of the multidimensional challenges to building a secure and sustainable peace. This study examines one element of those challenges.

Not least because of the unpredictability of the present political situation, this study cannot and does not claim to present, under a general heading of contemporary Palestinian political culture, an authoritative picture of the evolving nature of Palestinian collective memory and political mythologies. Use has been made of several of the fairly limited number of publications on Palestinian society, particularly refugee society, which emerged during the 1990s. It remains difficult, however,

to comment meaningfully about Palestinian society in very general terms.

Like other Arab societies, different elements of Palestinian society display wide variations in social status, educational attainment, economic security and political awareness. Individual refugees, who are largely treated as a collective entity in this work, can be expected to respond differently to particular events and images, according to personal experience, real and imagined memories, and the specific effects of gender, location, social status, peer group pressures and a range of other influences. Edward Said summed up that Palestinian diversity effectively, when he wrote that there are so many kinds of Palestinian experience it was almost impossible to imagine a single narrative.²

At the individual level, moreover, the Arab world since the 1990s has been experiencing a degree of intellectual and political trauma which has perhaps not been equalled since the awakening of modern Arab nationalism and the upsurge of Jewish immigration to Mandate Palestine. Evidence of strain is abundant in private discourse and in the public media where issues of identity surface.³ Among many Palestinians, there is a drive to fulfil the unmet potential of a community that has experienced - and continues to bear - a heavy burden of deprivation and human suffering. Whether that potential will be realized, and the implications of the answer to that question for


the future shape of Palestinian political culture, remain to be seen.

Finally, it needs to be emphasized that in the Middle East there are often many versions of the truth. Perhaps because perceptions, issues of identity and aspirations are so intimately related in that context, the deeper one digs into the background to any particular issue or event in the history of the Arab-Israeli conflict, the more likely one is to find contradictory explanations or interpretations. The purpose of this study is not to judge the respective merits of competing mythologies and memories. Its objective, rather, is to examine their impact in the specific situation of the 1997 UNRWA financial crisis, and their implications for the longer term outlook for the refugee issue and UNRWA.
I. Introduction

So how much myth is good for us? And how can we measure the dosage? Should we avoid the stuff altogether for fear of contamination or dismiss it out of hand as sinister and irrational esoterica that belong only in the unsavory margins of “real” (to wit, our own) history? Or do we always have to ensure that a cordon sanitaire of protective irony is always securely in place when discussing such matters? ...

The real problem ... is whether it is possible to take myth seriously on its own terms, and to respect its coherence and complexity, without becoming morally blinded by its poetic power; ... of how to reproduce the “other,” separated from us by space, time or cultural customs, without either losing ourselves altogether in total immersion or else rendering the subject “safe” by the usual eviscerations of Western empirical analysis.

Of one thing at least I am certain: that not to take myth seriously ... is actually to impoverish our understanding of our shared world. And it is also to concede the subject by default to those who have no critical distance from it at all, who apprehend myth not as a historical phenomenon but as an unchallengeable perennial mystery.

Simon Schama, Landscape and Memory

In mid-1997 a financial crisis in the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) - an agency that has provided Palestinian refugees with primary education, health and relief services since 1950 - led the management of that agency to announce a series of emergency austerity measures. If implemented, those measures would have reduced the level of services UNRWA had traditionally made available to the 3.2 million Palestinian refugees then registered with it. After about three weeks of heightened and often intense political activity between the refugees, UNRWA, the Palestinian Authority and
Western donor countries\(^1\), the funding of the Agency was supplemented, and the crisis passed.

The events were newsworthy for only a brief period, even in the Middle East. Beyond the region, they attracted very little attention. They were seen, among Western donor countries at least, as having some but not much direct importance for the Middle East peace process.

UNRWA had had financial crises before. And the financial dimension of the immediate issue - the need for additional funding to cover a projected deficit of around $20 million\(^2\) in the operating budget of the agency for that year - was modest when compared to the pledges by donors since 1993 of over $4.7 billion in support for Palestinian development.\(^3\)

What was it about those events that warrants making them the subject of this detailed study?

The 1997 UNRWA crisis is of interest because analysing it involves examination of Palestinian refugee society, history and politics; the relationship between those matters and perceptions of the Palestinian political leadership; perceptions of the objectives of host

\(^1\) UNRWA depends for approximately 95 per cent of its financing on the cash donations of governments. Governments contributing $US1 million or more are referred to in UNRWA as 'major donors'. In 1997, the 11 leading donor countries (including project funding as well as contributions to UNRWA's regular budget) were the United States $84.7m.; European Union $57.5m.; Japan $28.6m.; Sweden $18.8m.; Norway $14.0m.; Denmark $13.6m.; United Kingdom $10.7m.; the Netherlands $9.4m.; Germany $8.4m.; Switzerland $7.6m.; and Canada $7.6m. Palestine Refugee ResearchNet, The 1997 UNRWA Donor Generosity Index, FOFOGNET Digest 30 December 1998. Other major donors included France, Italy, Belgium, Spain and Saudi Arabia. Australia ranked 15th, with a contribution of $2.04m.

\(^2\) All dollar amounts cited in this study are US dollars.

\(^3\) Joseph Saba, Director, West Bank and Gaza, World Bank Economic Development in the West Bank and Gaza: The Program of the World Bank 1993-1999 and into the Twenty First Century, Paper presented at a seminar of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office London on "Israel, Jordan and Palestine Final Status and Beyond", 18 February 2000. Saba noted that the international donor community had pledged, since 1993, over $4.7 billion in support and, by end of June 1999, had committed nearly $4.2 billion and disbursed approximately $2.75 billion for Palestinian development.
CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

governments' and donor countries supporting UNRWA, and of the role of UNRWA itself. Investigation of the crisis therefore provides insight into the underlying political dynamics of the Middle East, including its political imperatives, ambiguities and dilemmas, and the constraints these impose on governments.

The events of 1997 were of additional interest because the crisis raised important questions about the role of political mythology in Palestinian society and politics. Study of the crisis provides an opportunity to examine how, in a specific situation, Palestinian refugee memories and mythologies affected and were affected by political developments. It raises the question of whether political mythologies, in the Palestinian refugee context at least, are susceptible to change or to being overtaken by new priorities. It also leads to the question of whether such mythologies can co-exist with approaches which, in important respects, seek to ignore or to contradict them.

Why, it may be asked, are those issues important? The answer lies in the argument, made elsewhere by the author, that to achieve security with others, rather than against others, Middle East leaders will be required to involve their audiences in painful processes of historical compromise. Achieving durable security is more than a matter of understanding the interests and interaction of states; it also requires mutual understanding of the ways in which leaderships, both

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HOST GOVERNMENTS (also referred to as 'host authorities') are those which 'host' substantial numbers of Palestinian refugees registered with UNRWA, namely Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon. The Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) is treated in a similar fashion to host governments by UNRWA, being included in regular consultative and information-sharing meetings (including twice-yearly gatherings known as 'Informal Meetings of Major Donors and Host Governments'). The PLO is also an Observer at meetings of the UNRWA Advisory Commission (ADCOM).
Israeli and Palestinian, view the world, themselves, and each other.\(^5\)

Underlying this study is the contention that for those processes to be sustainable, ways will have to be found to deal with complex questions of identity, competing aspirations and ideas of legitimacy that are at the heart of the political mythologies of Israelis and Arabs alike. Efforts to introduce practical or philosophical changes in approach to matters of deep political sensitivity among Palestinians, such as the refugee issue and the future of UNRWA, must recognize and relate effectively to the relationship between mythologies and power which is at the core of Palestinian political life.

This study may, hopefully, contribute - through developing insight into the role of Palestinian political mythologies among the many aspects of peace-building - to the achievement of durable outcomes from the search for security. In a region which is as impoverished in terms of security as it is rich in memories and mythologies, at least that would be a small step forward.

This study therefore seeks to examine the relationship between the political mythologies and memories of Palestinian refugees - with associated issues of identity, aspiration and political frustration - and the way UNRWA's 1997 crisis was handled. A basic argument of the study is that, in addition to the material and political interests of each of the parties to the crisis, refugee political mythologies and the manipulation of those mythologies were central elements in the evolution and in the management of the crisis. It will be suggested that there are lessons to be drawn from that conclusion so far as the outlook for the future of UNRWA, and for

the management of the refugee issue in the broader context of the Middle East peace process is concerned.

Mythology and Benefits-based Analytical Approaches

There will always be problems developing analyses of Middle East politics that are appropriately wide-ranging and detailed in scope. Appreciation of the interplay of power, communication and culture on individual and collective behaviour must also accommodate the realities of ambiguity and contradiction displayed among the parties themselves. Integrative approaches are especially important when one seeks, as in this study, to come to grips with the Palestinian refugee issue, with UNRWA, an institution arising from and organically connected to that refugee experience, and with the issues underlying the Middle East peace process. But it is also necessary to draw the research parameters before a point is reached where conceptual and analytical focus is lost.

Though informed in a broad sense by the insights and assumptions of various scholars concerning culture and identity, the study will not seek to develop a theoretical framework for the analysis of the political, social and institutional dynamics surrounding the UNRWA crisis. It would not be possible to describe adequately the political complexity of the events of 1997, or their social, historical and political context, in a work of this length and yet still undertake the development and defence of a theoretical framework of sufficient

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6 Though written from an international relations perspective, the author found particularly stimulating the constructivist analysis of the impact of internationally held norms and values, including those promoted by organisations such as UNESCO in Martha Finnemore, National Interests in International Society, Cornell University Press, Ithaca NY, 1996. See especially her theoretical discussion of structures versus agents (pp. 14-22) and the application of that framework to UNESCO (pp. 34-66). The review article by Jeffrey T. Checkel "The Constructivist Turn in International Relations Theory" in World Politics, Vol. 50, January 1998, pp. 324-48 was also insightful.
intellectual rigour to add much value to the study. It is recognised, however, that there may be benefit from making an attempt to relate the empirical evidence presented here to a wider theoretical discourse at some future stage.\footnote{Approaching a study of UNRWA through a substantive middle-range theoretical framework would presumably address, like Finnemore's study of UNESCO mentioned in the preceding note, the questions of when, how and why change occurs. It would consider the extent to which global norms and normative values specific to certain societies or social units, as well as material interests and social structures, constrain choices at both the state and individual level. Proceeding from such a framework might also provide a range of insights into the effects of institutions on perceptions of interests, community and identity, and shed light on the political, personal and organisational pathways through which states (including, in this context, the nascent Palestinian state) and institutions such as UNRWA come to define their interests. It may also add another empirical dimension to discussion of how interests and identities change, or do not change, over time.}

Like most other encounters between the Palestinians and external parties impinging ultimately upon the relationship between the Palestinians and Israel, the events of 1997 were part of a process deeply affected by the intangible influences of history, emotions, psychology, self-esteem and perceptions of capabilities and intentions.\footnote{Like most other encounters between the Palestinians and external parties impinging ultimately upon the relationship between the Palestinians and Israel, the events of 1997 were part of a process deeply affected by the intangible influences of history, emotions, psychology, self-esteem and perceptions of capabilities and intentions.} As noted above, however, certain interests-based issues, both political and financial, must also obviously be taken into account in considering the events of 1997. The balance to be drawn between those considerations warrants further discussion at this point.

Refugee responses to the UNRWA crisis were driven to some extent by exaggerated concerns about the potential consequences of the austerity measures in terms of their immediate material impact. The sealing-off of the West Bank and Gaza by the Israel Defence Forces following suicide bomb attacks in late July and early September 1997, the virtual absence of employment opportunities in those areas, and the perception that the peace process was going nowhere of benefit to Palestinian refugees
overlay a serious ongoing deterioration in the economic outlook facing refugees from 1996 onward. For many families, especially in Gaza, the prospect of additional financial burdens arising from the withdrawal of UNRWA services was therefore deeply disturbing. That concern was bound to give rise to a political reaction on the part of the refugees, and by the Palestinian political leadership, to the foreshadowed austerity measures.

The Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) under the leadership of Yasser Arafat could not afford, politically, to allow its critics to seize the running on the UNRWA austerity measures issue. As will be discussed later, the PLO leadership was already being criticised for the perceived shortcomings of the Oslo Accords. It was especially sensitive to allegations that it had failed to pursue or to defend refugee interests in agreeing to the Declaration of Principles (DOP) signed in Washington on 13 September 1993.

Western donor countries, for their part, reacted positively to the political imagery created by the refugees and by UNRWA. Those countries, which included the United States, Canada, Britain, Italy, Sweden and Norway, believed that if they allowed the crisis to continue then political destabilisation could follow which would be damaging to their interests. Perceptions of the political volatility of the situation - which were perceptions helped along by UNRWA, the PLO and the refugees themselves, but which were also of the donors own making - were key driving factors shaping their responses.

There is, on that basis, a case for interpreting the events of 1997 through examination of the political

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Bowker, Beyond Peace, p. 6.
interaction between refugees and donors over resources issues, the dynamics of the Palestinian power structure and competition within that framework over the allocation of resources, and the pursuit of specific political objectives by the various parties. It would be a mistake, however, to analyse the crisis in those largely interests-based terms without reference to the important role played in the crisis by refugee memories and mythologies, including, as discussed below, the manipulation of those phenomena.\(^9\)

That is not to deny, of course, there are problems associated with examining the role of political mythologies in a particular situation. It is difficult, perhaps impossible, to establish the degree of connection which existed in the minds of individuals during the crisis between the mobilising power of mythologies, on the one hand, and material considerations on the other.\(^10\)

Analysis of the impact of mythologies is further complicated by the fact that, while trying to make more general points about the behaviour of societies, the study of political culture often deals with the attitudes of individuals, and mythologies that ultimately relate to satisfying individual human needs. As Lucian Pye has observed, the essence of political culture is shaped on the one hand, by the general historical experience of the society and the system, and on the other hand by the intensely private and personal experiences of individuals and the patterns of action, feelings and reflections.

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\(^9\) These are defined, in Chapter II, as narratives that shape collective consciousness and national-cultural identity, and that seek to anchor the present in the past.

\(^10\) Hans Morgenthau has observed that the human mind "cannot bear to look the truth of politics straight in the face. It must disguise, distort, belittle and embellish the truth". H. V. Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1962, p. 15.
which they have made part of their existence.\footnote{L. Pye, *Politics, Personality and Nation Building: Burma’s Search for Identity*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1962, p. 121.} In the final analysis, political culture can be found only in people’s minds.\footnote{Pye, *Politics, Personality and Nation Building*, p. 124.} And there is no reason why, in that intensely private domain, rejection of imposed change for reasons of principle and rejection because of material personal disadvantage should be regarded as mutually exclusive concerns.

Despite these uncertainties and complications, there are reasons to accord considerable weight to mythological factors in analysing the balance between material and other factors in determining what transpired in 1997. It is unlikely, for example that the refugee reaction to the crisis would have been so strong, so well-organised, or so threatening in the eyes of the PLO if it had not tapped into, and been energised by, notions of Palestinian identity and rights. Those notions had their roots in mythologies peculiar to the refugees themselves. Issues of material benefit, and a sense of frustration of hopes and ambitions, while obviously relevant, also do not explain adequately the approach taken by the PLO to the political management of the crisis. As will be discussed, the PLO’s political strategy for dealing with the crisis related and responded directly to refugee mythologies concerning their rights, the obligations of others, and notions of conspiracy against their interests, as well as defending their material benefits.

Analysis focussed on the question of material benefits and deprivation also does not account for the striking disparity between public Palestinian perceptions of the nature of the crisis, and the perceptions of Western donor countries. What was, to the donors, essentially a
financial crisis, albeit one with political implications, was debated among refugees mainly in the realm of the Middle East peace process and its implications for the refugee issue. At least in the public arena, the financial issues involved appeared to be of lesser importance to refugees than the symbolism associated with the ongoing role of the Agency, and the fear that it was being starved of funds for political purposes. In short, while it was true that the crisis facing UNRWA had other, rather mundane, causes upon which the donors tended to focus, refugee mythologies shaped its perception among the refugees in a very different fashion.

Can such mythologies be changed or ignored? The American scholar Simon Schama, in the context of his review of Western art, society and the environment, has suggested the need for mythology to be acknowledged and dealt with in achieving an understanding of the 'real' world. This study generally supports that view.

The 1997 crisis, and analysis of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict more generally, would be deficient without an appreciation of the mythological dimensions of the Palestinian situation, as well as insights derived from more conventional analysis of political behaviour within the framework of the Middle East peace process. Assumptions concerning the rationality of the behaviour of states - and states within states - which are central to any interests-based analysis, carry with them a host of further assumptions about the internal dynamics of those states. In making such assumptions about domestic

14 The argument presented here is consistent with the need to study regional security as a multidimensional phenomenon. Barry Buzan has observed, for example, that understanding the relationship between governing institutions and their societies is of key importance to the development of regional security regimes. B. Buzan, People, States and Fear: An Agenda for
politics and their capacity for change, there is a risk, identified by Rosemary Sayigh in her analysis of 'Lebanese' Palestinian refugee political culture, of imposing Western frameworks on other peoples' conceptions of their own culture and history.\textsuperscript{15}

Assumptions which do not take full account of the mobilising power of mythology may be especially questionable in the Israeli-Palestinian refugee context. In some quarters at least, the core issues dividing Palestinians and Israelis may ultimately prove to be concerns to realise their ethnic identity without more than the most minimal of concessions to the reality imposed by the existence of the other, let alone the rights and needs of the other party. Rami Khouri has noted, perceptively, that the Palestinian-Israeli conflict is about land, but that the issue of land captures concepts of identity, community and nationhood, motivated by "fierce, ancient and primordial forces of human dignity, protection and survival, and expressed in the modern vocabulary of sovereignty, statehood and citizenship".\textsuperscript{16} Such ethno-nationalist discourses may have little to do with interests-based approaches to decision-making or problem-solving.\textsuperscript{17}

Among Palestinian refugees in 1997, it will be suggested in later chapters of this study, there was ample evidence of such concerns. The prospect of change in the role of


UNRWA posed important challenges to certain intensely-held political mythologies and collective memories that lay at the core of their identity. The situation that faced the refugees, the international donor community, and UNRWA in 1997 was also shaped to a very large extent by the perceptions that each held of the other parties. That included, in the case of the refugees, their perceptions of their rights and the responsibilities of others towards them.

How such perceptions flowed directly from the refugees' sense of identity and collective memory will be discussed later. It is sufficient to note, at this stage, that Palestinian political mythologies, in the refugee context at least, were proving to be highly resistant to change. For its part, the Palestinian political leadership's political calculus made it averse to any actions that might have exposed it to criticism, by or on behalf of the refugees, that it was less than wholly committed to upholding those mythologies.

Moreover, even if the leadership of the Palestinian Authority (PA) may in private have had a broadly similar (if unacknowledged) understanding of the nature of the financial crisis facing UNRWA to that displayed by the Western donors, the approach it took in responding to the crisis at the political level fully recognised that refugee mythologies were having an impact on popular perceptions of the crisis. The PA, and UNRWA were also prepared to draw upon the prospect - real or imagined - of additional turmoil among the refugee community to mobilise support from the donor community.

CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Approach

There is a degree of recognition in academic circles of the potency of political mythology in encounters between the Palestinians and Israelis, and therefore of the importance of taking mythologies into account in analysis of Palestinian and Israeli political behaviour. On the Israeli side, most notably, Yael Zerubavel has made a detailed study of the role of collective memory and the 'narrativisation' of those memories as a mobilising force.

Zerubavel stresses the role of commemorative narratives and rituals in establishing an overall sense of continuity of collective memory, and in providing moral messages, while making it possible to introduce new interpretations of the past. These 'collective memories of recovered roots', she argues, became a driving force in the Zionist experience for change, and a means of articulating new values and ideas. She points out how the selective remembering and forgetting from one generation...

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18 Analysis of domestic political and social dynamics does not always sit comfortably with the focus of more traditional scholarship of international relations. But international relations theories - especially of the Constructivist but also of the Neo-Realist variety - provide important insights into the problems associated with conveying an accurate message about one's intentions, and the tendency of states to underestimate the impact of their demands on the perceptions of others, assuming that others are aware of their (presumably) benign intentions. Robert Jervis, for example, has noted in other contexts the tendency of states to underestimate the impact of their demands on the perceptions of others and to assume that others are aware of their benign intentions. Jervis makes the point that Wilhemine Germany should have recognised that it was feared as a threat to the European equilibrium because of its size, population, geographic location, economic dynamism, "cocky militarism" and autocracy under a neurotic Kaiser. Even had Germany changed her behaviour, he concludes, "she would still have been the object of constant suspicion and apprehension by virtue of being the strongest power in Europe". R. Jervis, Perception and Misperception in International Politics, Princeton University Press, Princeton NJ, 1976, pp. 70-71. Herbert Butterfield observes that whereas one may fear another party, it is very difficult "to enter into the other man's counter-fear, or even understand why he should be particularly nervous, [when] you want nothing from him save guarantees for your own safety". H. Butterfield, History and Human Relations, Collins, London, 1951, pp. 19-20.

to another of collective memories, was used to considerable effect in reconstructing Israel’s national memories and traditions. That process involved both commemorations and popular narrative and ceremonial devices, and the interpretation, ordering and deliberate suppression and elaboration of particular information or themes.  

On the Palestinian side, Yezid Sayigh, while comprehensively documenting the historical record of the Palestinian nationalist movement, has eloquently investigated Palestinian political culture and history using mythology as a key conceptual focus. Reflecting the point Rami Khouri makes about the primordial forces underlying the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, Sayigh has described how not only the acts of armed struggle and the armed conflicts which came about in the period from 1965 onward contributed to the formation of a Palestinian identity. The idea, myth, illusion and psychological impact of armed struggle provided, according to Sayegh, the necessary mobilising theme for the Palestinians, and their instrument of liberation. It was “the defining dynamic that drove the reconstruction and reorganisation of Palestinian national politics, and that allowed the search for state to proceed.”

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20 Zerubavel, Recovered Roots pp. 3-6. In describing how memory is transformed within the historical record and tradition is drawn upon selectively in interpretation of the past, Zerubavel examines how a battle in which several settlers die and the remainder flee can become a myth of successful defence and a symbol of “no retreat” (Tel Hai); how the leader of a revolt that ends with defeat is remembered as a legendary hero who led the people to freedom (Bar Kokhba); and how a historical episode that ends with a collective suicide is transformed into a myth of fighting to the bitter end and of national renewal (Masada). (Introduction p. xviii). See also R. Wistrich, and D. Ohana, (eds.) The Shaping of Israeli Identity: Myth, Memory and Trauma, Frank Cass, London, 1995.

In short, according to Sayigh, the process of focussing on the mythology of armed struggle as a galvanising and unifying factor, and the heroic imagery and language of armed struggle, gave new substance to the imagined community of the Palestinians. It created a state framework around which nationalism could develop.  

Consideration of the dynamics of power and resource distribution have also shaped key studies of Palestinian politics and society, although there have been suggestions that political and ideological considerations may, in some cases, have limited the depth and critical quality of such studies. Salim Tamari, in an overview of research activity by Palestinian and international social scientists following the Israeli occupation, acknowledges that much of that research "suffered from the absence of a critical perspective." He notes that ten years after the intifada that began in December 1987 a critical overview of those events had yet to be written. Whereas in Tamari's view the output of commissioned research and visiting scholars have also demonstrated serious shortcomings, writings by local sociologists since 1991, he observes, "politically ... resonated with, and sometimes subordinated themselves to the needs and priorities of the national movement."  

Rex Brynen has suggested, even more explicitly, that political considerations may lie behind the observation that the exploration of patronage in modern Palestinian

23 References in this study to the intifada, unless specified otherwise, refer to the uprising from 1987 to 1993, not the disturbances (sometimes labelled the al-Aqsa intifada or Intifada II) that began in late September 2000.  
25 Tamari, "Social Science Research in Palestine" p. 29.
politics is both theoretically and empirically weak. Brynen also notes that because of the difficulty of securing detailed and systematic data on resource manipulation in maintaining social control in Palestine, neopatrimonialism "is more often noted than explored." In his discussion of the notion of neopatrimonialism, Brynen focussed, appropriately, on the interaction of both domestic concerns, including resource distribution, and external influences on the decision-making process within the Palestinian Authority.

Sara Roy and Amira Hass's respective analyses and observations of the socio-economic and political situation in Gaza, and Randa Farah's study of refugees in Jordan, provide authoritative insights into the contemporary Palestinian political and social environment from a grass-roots perspective. Their analyses are enriched by extensive use of interviews, and backed by a strong analytical focus upon the internal dynamics and contradictions of Palestinian society at various levels.

Other analysts have preferred more historical approaches. Rashid Khalidi emphasises the authenticity and continuity of the Palestinian political struggle, challenging the notion that the Palestinian nationalist movement was

26 Rex Brynen, "The Neopatrimonial Dimension of Palestinian Politics" Journal of Palestine Studies, Vol. XXV, No. 1 (Autumn 1995) pp. 29-30. He observes that despite the transfer of many millions of dollars each year to the PLO after the intifada began, books on the intifada "typically devoted less than one per cent of their analysis to the importance of patronage and external resource flows (within Palestinian nationalist politics)." And not a single article devoted explicitly to the question of patron-clientalism in the modern Palestinian nationalist movement was published in the Journal of Palestine Studies between 1988 and the end of 1994. (p. 29).

27 Brynen, "The Neopatrimonial Dimension of Palestinian Politics" p. 27.

essentially a response to the impact of the Zionist presence.\textsuperscript{29} Glenn Robinson and Graham Usher focus their respective studies on the tensions between the nation-building orientation of the Palestinian Authority under Arafat and the political and social legacy of the intifada.\textsuperscript{30} Some Israeli historians - Benny Morris and Simha Flapan prominent among them - earlier indirectly complemented such analyses by addressing, with a critical eye, the founding myths surrounding the creation of Israel and substantiating significant elements of the Palestinian counter-narrative of that period and its meaning for Palestinian society.\textsuperscript{31}

The approach in this study follows to some extent the general direction taken by Yezid Sayigh, in that it highlights political dynamics and the importance of political mythology in understanding the 1997 events. It adds to Yezid Sayigh's approach a more specific focus on the particular dynamics that applied between Palestinian refugees, UNRWA and external actors in the 1990s. It also makes occasional comparative reference to Zionist experience with the use of political mythology to bring into sharper focus the specific character of the challenges faced by Arafat and the Palestinian Authority.

The study begins by elaborating on the notions of mythologies, memories and political culture, and relates those concepts to some of the key elements of Palestinian


society and political culture. After providing background on the social and political situation of Palestinian refugees, it examines core refugee political mythologies and the linkages between those mythologies and UNRWA. It then examines the tensions between the Palestinian pursuit of nationalist political agendas through the Oslo process, on the one hand, and the ongoing popular appeal of refugee mythologies on the other. It notes that such tensions formed an important part of the political background to the 1997 crisis.

Turning to an examination of the crisis, the study describes the steps taken by UNRWA during 1997 to address its financial situation, and the responses by various parties to those developments. It notes the ways in which, during the crisis, mythology was drawn upon to mobilise political opinion and to stimulate responses in defence of the status quo, not only among refugees and host governments but also, ultimately, from among the Western donor community. The latter proved more amenable to pressure to address the immediate financial crisis than their Arab donor country counterparts, whose perceptions of the refugee issue - including the mythologies associated with it - were affected by a range of practical experiences and political concerns to which UNRWA had difficulty relating effectively.

The study then seeks, in the light of the experience of 1997, to assess the capacity of UNRWA, the Palestinian Authority and the international community to deal constructively with political mythologies in the Palestinian refugee context. It also puts forward some preliminary suggestions for approaches to placing UNRWA on a more sustainable financial basis, while reviewing some of the challenges to the political management of change in that regard. It emphasises the importance of building a new sense of certainty and empowerment.
alongside existing refugee mythologies if the role played by UNRWA is to be altered.\footnote{For a discussion of the uncertainty surrounding the future of UNRWA, see Graham Usher "The Ongoing Demise of UNRWA" Al-Ahram Weekly, 4-10 November 1999.}

II. Political Mythology and Palestinian Political Culture

Political culture, which in this study means the beliefs, attitudes and values that play a part in the shaping of societies and of which mythologies and collective memories are an important part, provides a
II. Political Mythology and Palestinian Political Culture

If scholars of International Relations are ever to gain a modicum of control over international reality, we will need to include in our studies how people's perceptions, meanings and values are shaped and changed, as it is only by changing other people's views that our own ideas may transform reality.

Among other matters, the events of 1997 underlined the need - which this study seeks to meet - to take a discerning approach to the relationship between mythology and politics in the Palestinian context. This chapter will introduce the terminology employed in this study, and identify some of the issues associated with political mythologies in the Palestinian political context of the mid 1990s. It will also provide a brief overview of the political culture in which Palestinian political mythologies operate.

**Political Mythologies**

Political culture - which in this study means the beliefs, attitudes and values that play a part in the shaping of societies and of which mythologies and collective memories are an important part - provides a

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framework for understanding relationships between individuals and their environment, including their historical and political circumstances, and their collective and personal experiences. It is connected inextricably to processes of communication, which in turn are influenced, as will be discussed later, by perceptions of power in relationships.

Mythologies are defined for the purpose of this study as narratives that shape collective consciousness and national-cultural identity, and that seek to anchor the present in the past. Because people need images that give meaning to the facts of ordinary life, and that assist them in organising experience into social and cultural contexts, mythologies are an integral part of any society. Emile Durkheim reminds us that insofar as our constructions of self, moral order and the world are formed in collective life, their continued affirmation by the group is a necessary condition for securing personal identity.

Mythologies are likely to be both dynamic - in response to changing needs; and durable, because they are so closely linked to wider frameworks of understanding of individuals regarding their social and historical context. Rationalists assume (perhaps optimistically) that ideas and principles confer meaning and order on social life. Durkheim insists, to the contrary, that

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2 In the article cited above, the editors of Millennium use a working definition of culture as "any interpersonally shared system of meanings, perceptions and values". That influences the definition of political culture used in this study.


insofar as intellectual constructions are disengaged from the actual affective and moral conditions of society, they exist as mere formalisms or abstractions and are ineffective as frameworks of identity, meaningful existence and community. ... [I]deas, beliefs and symbols are vital shared social forces only as they are rooted in and empowered by the shared affective and emotional life of the group. ... It follows that a new faith cannot be rationally designed or artificially imposed upon a people but must emerge from the evolving unconscious collective life of society. 5

The Palestinian and Israeli experience supports the thrust of that general observation. Israelis and Palestinians have drawn upon various historical experiences and images to create mythologies about themselves, and about each other, that affect fundamentally their social and political interaction. The initial Israeli-Palestinian conflict represented a defining experience which became the dominant element in the consciousness of both communities.

Palestinian Perspectives of Zionism in the Mandate Period

The diversity and complexity of the early Zionist movement makes generalisation about its initial approach to dealings with the Palestinians difficult. 6 Those dealings were also affected significantly by the political impact of rioting against the Jewish presence in 1920 and 1921, and the violence of 1929 which saw the effective collapse of Jewish support for arguments, advanced by supporters of Brit Shalom, a cosmopolitan group of Jewish intellectuals, socialists and visionary humanists, favouring the creation of a bi-national state in which Jews and Arabs would enjoy

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5 Seidman, "Modernity and the Problem of Meaning" p. 280.
equal rights.\textsuperscript{7} More significant, however, than the political failure of the bi-national approaches was the ongoing political contest between, on the one hand, the mainstream Zionist leadership under Chaim Weizmann and later, David Ben Gurion and, on the other hand, the Revisionist Zionist movement founded and led by Vladimir (Zeev) Jabotinsky.

According to Simha Flapan, most of the key decisions taken by the early Zionist leadership were either shaped by heated debate with, or sought to counteract the policies and influence of, the Revisionist Zionist movement.\textsuperscript{8} Whereas the Zionist mainstream under Chaim Weizmann had ignored the Palestinians, but comprehended the potential importance of the Arab world, Jabotinski ignored both. He left, through the Revisionist movement, an indelible mark on the Zionist attitude towards the Arab question, arguing that accommodation with Arab nationalism was neither desirable or necessary.\textsuperscript{9} Through the British presence, Jabotinsky hoped instead to face the Arabs with an ‘iron wall’ of Jewish power in control of the country.\textsuperscript{10}

Flapan observes that Jabotinsky implanted in Jewish psychology the image of the Arab as the mortal enemy, the idea of the inevitability of the conflict and of the impossibility of the solution except

\textsuperscript{7} Goldberg, To the Promised Land p. 164.
\textsuperscript{9} Writing in 1990, Benny Morris suggested that until 1977, Jabotinsky’s Revisionists, who he described as “unpragmatic, right-wing deviants from the mainstream of the Zionist experience” were placed on the fringe of Zionist and Israeli history. Since then, “their vision, albeit in diluted form, has dominated the political arena in Jerusalem”. Benny Morris, 1948 and After: 	extit{Israel and the Palestinians}, Oxford University Press, Oxford UK, Clarendon Paperbacks edition, 1994, p. 6.
\textsuperscript{10} Jabotinsky spoke of his violent dislike for the Orient: “The East: it is entirely foreign to me...mine is a Westerner’s mentality...And the mob! a sort of permanent row of a yelling rabble, dressed up in savage-painted rugs!” Flapan, 	extit{Zionism and the Palestinians}, p. 114.
by sheer force. He propagated the ‘either-or’ notion by which all and every means was justified including terror and ruthless retaliation in the struggle for survival. Attitudes of this kind could not be maintained without an appeal to the most primitive instincts of fear and self-defence, without unleashing emotions of hate and vengeance, without painting the Arab as a primitive, evil and cruel creature scheming diabolical plans, and without inflating feelings of self-righteousness to the point where the whole, absolute truth and justice were on one side only. Once such a psychological structure was erected it served as a partition concerning reality and as a blind obscuring the vision.\[11\]

The militaristic overtones of Jabotinsky's polemics, his provocation of the Arab population and the aspirations he expressed for Jewish statehood in the whole of Palestine including Transjordan put him at bitter odds with the leadership of the Zionist organisation. There was resentment of the military spirit that Jabotinsky sought to introduce, and his strong opposition to class struggle and socialist concepts that were widely supported in the Zionist mainstream.

The Revisionists brought the Jewish community in Palestine (the Yishuv) near to civil war, earning a reputation as fascists for their vicious anti-socialist propaganda and hatred of kibbutzim, their strike-breaking activity, propaganda and physical violence directed against the Histadrut labour union, and their emphasis on military education and preparedness among their youth movement. The assassination of Lord Moyne in November 1944 and of Count Bernadotte in September 1948 by members of terrorist groups originating from the Revisionist youth movement Betar were seen as dangerous and misconceived ventures by the Zionist leadership.

\[11\] Flapan, Zionism and the Palestinians, p. 117.
For their part, however, the Palestinian Arabs did not see genuinely contradictory trends in Zionism during the Mandate period, including between the Revisionists and the mainstream Zionist leadership. Nor were they impressed by the existence of other significant figures in the Zionist movement such as Nahum Goldmann, Arthur Ruppin and Judah Magnes, who rejected the militarism and chauvinism of Jabotinsky as immoral and politically disastrous both in terms of its effects on Arab opinion and for the character of Zionism as a progressive movement.  

In the absence of changes in the situation on the ground that ameliorated key Arab concerns - most notably the ongoing inflow of Jewish immigrants - the Palestinians believed that Jabotinsky's was the true face of Zionism. From the Palestinian viewpoint, Weizmann's and his colleagues' condemnations of Revisionist outrages was no more than a hypocritical cover-up. There was little reason for the Arab population to disagree with the characterisation of "socialist" Zionism by Bern Katznelson as an enterprise of conquest. Among Palestinians, Zionism never had any other objective.

The Period After 1948

Against that background, the establishment of Israel and the failure to prevent or terminate that fact, with consequent suffering for the Palestinians and humiliation for other Arabs represented a determining moment in modern Arab history. It was the starting point for a series of social, cultural and political

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12 Flapan, Zionism and the Palestinians, pp. 121-123.
13 Flapan, Zionism and the Palestinians, p. 97.
Although a sense of Palestinian identity was increasingly evident from the first decade of the twentieth century, if the Arab population of Palestine had not been sure of their identity before 1948, the experience of defeat, dispossession and exile guaranteed their identity as Palestinians. The conflict between the competing national aspirations since that period created the perception of a world that had split into two—"us and them." As Meron Benvenisti has suggested, the conflict between the two national communities became "a way of life, an endemic and organic condition." It is not possible to predict the likely longer-term effects on Palestinian society of dealings with Israelis, particularly against the background of the second major outbreak of violence between the two sides that began at the end of September 2000. Prior to that upheaval, encounters ranged from the relatively benign—including casual employment, and observation of Israeli political behaviour—at one extreme, to abuses of human rights and dignity at another.

The longer-term impact on Palestinian society of detention in Israeli prisons of large numbers of Palestinians, and the role those institutions have

17 Meron Benvenisti has noted certain common elements between the Palestinian and Irish experiences, in that the root of their respective conflicts lies, in both places, in the struggle between an immigrant community, and a local community that viewed the settlement of the immigrants as a violent and unjust violation of their territory. Meron Benvenisti, "Belfast and Jerusalem" Ha'aretz, English edition, 7 May 1998.
played in shaping political attitudes among those who have been detained, and their families, are yet to be seen. There were also, of course, groups on both sides throughout the 1990s seeking to engender a sense of mutuality between Israelis and Palestinians. But there was widespread reluctance, perhaps understandable in the light of the mythologies that will be discussed here, among both Palestinians and Israelis to grasp the importance of confidence-building gestures as a means of progressing their political goals. At the time of writing, at least, the psychological gap was too vast, and the political consequences of such activity were too uncertain, to make further engagement in peace-building programs with Israelis a serious option for most Palestinians.

For the present, as Rashid Khalidi has observed, and as anyone who has witnessed the passage of Palestinians through Israeli checkpoints in Gaza and the West Bank can attest, a range of daily experiences reinforce and remind many Palestinians of their historical background and the grievances that are part of their identity. The primary effect upon most ordinary Palestinians of routine interaction with Israelis under such circumstances is the reinforcement

19 Examples include feminist groups such as Women in Black, The Jerusalem Link and the Haifa Women’s Centre; and efforts of institutions such as the Van Leer Jerusalem Institute to foster contacts without political overtones between Israelis and Palestinians. Bar Ilan University, generally considered a right-wing institution in Israeli political terms, has a program in conflict resolution studies that focuses on both Jewish and Israeli-Palestinian conflicts.

20 Confidence in the value of such programs has also been damaged among many Israelis by the sustained violence since late September 2001.

21 Rashid Khalidi observes that "The fact that Palestinians are subject to ... special indignities, and are thus subject to an almost unique postmodern condition of shared anxiety at the frontier, the checkpoint and the crossing point proves that they are a people, if nothing else does." Khalidi, Palestinian Identity, p. 5.
of resentment.\textsuperscript{22} The interference of Israeli security forces with the routine of daily life is degrading.\textsuperscript{23} A senior Israeli official, Yuri Savir, has acknowledged that during the 28 years of Israeli occupation about one third of the Palestinian population had, at one time or another, been detained or imprisoned by Israel, and “the whole of the population had, at some time, been grossly humiliated.”\textsuperscript{24}

\begin{center}
\textbf{A POSTCARD FROM JERUSALEM}
\end{center}

I live halfway up a hill on a narrow track, paved to the width of one small car, with edges that deteriorate steadily with the wet weather. It is a track you would hardly notice as you drive past its opening on the 'highway' from Jerusalem to Ramallah at the bottom of the hill, and that is odd, because it is the border between Jerusalem and the West Bank. My house is in the West Bank; the vacant lot opposite is in Jerusalem. Every morning the narrow street is full of Palestinians as they pour down the hill to catch the 'sheroots' (minibuses) which will take them to work. They come down my hill because they have left their 'first' sheroots just short of the major Ramallah checkpoint which is 50 metres on the West Bank side of the highway, and then walked up the hill to avoid the checkpoint. None have the essential Jerusalem ID card, without which no-one can enter the city. They are 'illegals'.

\textsuperscript{22} The depth of this problem is captured well by Norman Finkelstein, writing on Palestinian attitudes based on his experiences in Beit Sahur during the Gulf Crisis of 1990-91. He writes:

“So why did you cheer the Scud missiles?”, I asked Qa'id, an agricultural engineer, again. We were speaking in Fawwar, the refugee camp near Hebron where he lived. Outside, Israeli soldiers were passing through in a jeep, announcing yet another curfew as they shot teargas cannisters and sound bombs into houses. Everyone in the room was hugging the wall. Everyone, that is, except a three-year-old standing on the window sill and shouting "Stone them!" as she shook her fist. Qa'id replied that the Scud attacks were the first time he saw panic in the eyes of the Israelis. "I wanted them to feel the same panic they caused me." Musa's six-year-old daughter, Marwa, said that she was "happy Saddam sent missiles to Israel because Israel killed many of us, sent Baba (Daddy) to prison and beat us." Musa... had served three 6-month stints of administrative detention (once apparently for keeping me as a guest) and had been repeatedly humiliated, beaten and tortured.” Norman Finkelstein, “Reflections on Palestinian Attitudes during the Gulf War” \textit{Journal of Palestine Studies}, Vol. XXI, No. 3, Spring 1992, pp. 54-55.

\textsuperscript{23} The reality of indignity and frustration is described effectively in an article by Ewen MacAskill, “Building unbearable lives”, \textit{Guardian Weekly}, 18-24 January 2001.

\textsuperscript{24} Uri Savir, \textit{The Process: 1,100 Days that Changed the Middle East}, Random House, New York, 1998, p. 207.
Periodically in Jerusalem there are major roundups. Then
the Israeli soldiers wait until people are pouring down
my street, block off both ends and truck them away.

It is Ramadan, the holy month where Moslems fast from
the time it is possible to tell a light thread from a
dark thread. They flood into the Dome of the Rock,
Islam's third most sacred site, to pray in the company
of their friends. And on Fridays now hundreds of
soldiers pour into the streets around my home in a
determined and grim jawed effort to stop them from
getting there.

The Palestinians are a mixture, the old and devout from
the villages, the poor and uncertain, children proud
beside their parents as they are brought to pray in the
main mosque for the first time, the young and arrogant,
dressed in their best and strutting for the white-veiled
girls with their shy smiles, fluid bodies and secret
eyes. Most come in in buses and are turned away at the
checkpoint, some rage, some argue, some quietly get back
into buses. Many women sit in their embroidered dresses
on the edges of the muddy gutters down the median strips
and mop up tired tears with the edges of their white
muslin holiday scarves. Many will try again next week in
a small hope that maybe, maybe, they will be allowed to
pray at Al-Aksa mosque during the fasting month.

Some though, the bold or the brave or those who have
tried and been turned away for two Fridays already, try
to duck the system. They head for the hills, and the
labyrinth of vacant blocks and dirt tracks and high
concrete walls, and half-finished buildings that offer
cover and hiding places. Many have not realised that the
hiding places are already full of soldiers, who lounge
in their bullet proof vests apparently relaxed and
smoking on grungy walls and inside ground floor puddle­
filled building sites without doors or windows, loosely
swinging their guns. They are waiting for the hunt to
start.

From the roof we can see a slow river of people pouring
up the tracks into our side of the hill. There are more
on the other side of the road. The soldiers are nudging
each other, 'wait a bit, let them get closer, close
those gaps'. Then suddenly there is tension, the air
snaps tight as a rubber band and erupts into shouts.
Panic stricken men are leaping and hurtling down the
hills, backtracking, turning and skidding and trying to
find gaps in the cordon. The soldiers hardly move -
there is no hurry for them. The Arabs are trapped, they
can't get out, let them run and get a bit tired.

Three young men have darted into our backyard. I can see
them doubled over against the woodpile, under the naked
and knotted vines which still hold the dried up raisins
of last summer's fruit. One looks up and sees us on the
roof. I can see a quick flicker of terror in the young
man's eyes. His hand goes into his pocket - is he armed
and should I be afraid? It comes out again - he is
holding out a family photo, hardly visible from here but
clearly a wife and children and his hand is entreaty me. I have covered my eyes, I hope he will know that I didn't see him, don't want to have seen him.

I see in my mind a stretched out hand, rigid with entreaty, and a snapshot of a family a long way away from me with the sun on my back on a wide flat roof. 25

In most areas of Palestinian society there are significant risks of personal and professional ostracism for participating in or supporting activities aimed at developing normal relations with Israelis that might, in time, lead to modification of current mutual suspicions and stereotyping. Opposition to such activities is particularly strong and well-organised among professional associations. Anecdotal evidence available to this author indicates, moreover, that few Palestinians feel positive about their experiences in such dealings as they are obliged to have. Even fewer would seem to care what Israelis concluded about them anyway. 26 From a Palestinian perspective, Israeli attitudes in general towards the Palestinians are a fundamental problem. As Ahmad Khalidi puts it,

beyond the material elements of power that have helped to determine [Israeli attitudes] there appears to lie a somewhat diffuse and unique combination of fear, guilt, condescension and - for want of a better word - contempt. 27

Memories and Mythologies

For the purposes of this study, mythologies and collective memories are assumed to be largely the same phenomena - but with some differences. Collective

27 Ahmad Khalidi, Gaza/Jericho and the Uncertain Prospects for Peace Royal Institute of International Affairs Middle East Programme Briefing Paper No. 8, April 1994 p. 5.
memory—described by Carl Becker as the type of history carried around in the head of ordinary people, rather than historical knowledge28—may be shaped or reinforced by deeply meaningful memories of personal or familial experience. Where related to direct personal experience, memories are perhaps more likely to be related to reality than mythologies. That is far from certain to be consistently the case, however, nor is individual memory a reliable guide to what has transpired. Indeed Benny Morris found, in researching the origins of the refugee experience, that...

... while contemporary documents may misinform, distort, omit or lie, ... interviewees recalling highly controversial events some 40 years ago ... experience ... enormous gaps of memory, the ravages of aging and time, and terrible distortions or selectivity, the ravages of accepted wisdom, prejudice and political beliefs and interests. ... Only very, very rarely have I relied on oral history to establish facts.29

In her investigation of Palestinian refugee identities and memories in Jordan, Randa Farah also found that significant differences in oral narratives and life-histories reflected the heterogeneity of Palestinian society. Farah observed that refugees were attempting to re-position fading nationalist symbols associated with camps and refugees to a central place in Palestinian discourse, accompanied by the articulation of previously submerged class issues.30 Farah also found that differences were evident on gender lines,

with women tending to be more outspoken than men on matters concerning the clashes between the Palestinian Resistance Movement and the Jordanian Army in 1970-71, and criticising Jordanian policies.°

Collective memory is not necessarily a driving force for political activity nor, in isolation, is personal experience. Both may remain latent political factors. When collective memories, real or imagined, and experiences are combined deliberately to mobilise energies in pursuit of particular political agendas, however, the result can be the creation of political mythologies of considerable potency.°

The power of collective memory, as Yael Zerubavel has pointed out, does not lie in its accurate, systematic, or sophisticated mapping of the past, but in establishing basic images that articulate and reinforce a particular ideological stance.° A leading scholar of religious symbolism, Jean C. Cooper, notes that myths

...are the fundamental responses of people to their environment, to their existential situation and experiences as well as the embodiment of their longings; some are quasi-historical, others the response to religious beliefs and to cultural, psychological urges, both social and personal. They have been handed down by word of mouth, in rituals, festivals, religious drama and in literature, becoming a creative force, perpetuating the powers of which they are an expression.°°

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31 Farah, "Crossing Boundaries" p. 280.
32 While this study is focussed mainly on Palestinian refugee political mythologies, and to some extent on the Zionist experience, it would be instructive to consider for comparative purposes the political mythologies of other distinctive Middle East groups such as the Kurds, the Armenians and the Maronites. See for example, on the Kurds, Jonathan C. Randal, After Such Knowledge, What Forgiveness? My Encounters with Kurdistan, Westview Press, Boulder CO, 1999. For an insightful and entertaining overview of the challenges facing contemporary Christian minorities in the region, see William Dalrymple From the Holy Mountain: A Journey in the Shadow of Byzantium Flamingo (HarperCollins Publishers), London, 1998.
33 Zerubavel, Recovered Roots, p. 8.
It is possible to apply Cooper’s description of mythology in general to political contexts. Stephanie Lawson, for example, has noted, in regard to ethno-nationalist movements generally, that claims to legitimacy and to sovereignty are often combined with a collective social memory which recalls past injustices and demands their rectification, especially when an injustice is seen to have laid the present foundations of what Lawson refers to as an 'inauthentic' structure of sovereignty. Like the Pacific islanders who are the subject of Lawson’s studies, there is a need among Palestinians to “demonstrate authenticity in opposition to external dominating alternatives".35

Mythologies, including political mythologies, are not necessarily either demonstrably false or harmful.36 Indeed, the lack of rigour that surrounds myths is not only typical of them, but is also one of their essential qualities as a mobilising device. Georges Sorel, in his discussion of the power of myths in strikes, makes the point that to have mobilising effect the myth has to be mysterious; and it must not be broken down into its component parts. It must be an organisation of images capable of evoking, as a whole and solely by intuition prior to any deliberate analysis.


36 In this author’s view, whether mythologies are harmful depends very much upon the uses to which mythologies are put, and the perceptions of the outcomes of doing so. Depending on their nature, recourse to the mobilising power of mythologies may prevent change in directions which some people desire - but which some other people may oppose.
the mass of sentiments which correspond to the various manifestations of the war entered into by socialism against modern society. ... Any discussion on the manner of applying [myths] materially is devoid of sense. It is only the myth as a whole that counts. 

Political mythologies, as Zerubavel’s study underlines, naturally reflect ideology and political agendas - especially when used to provide legitimisation for existing practices or to serve particular ideological interests. Because mythologies usually seek to depict the achievements and the story of one’s own group in positive terms, they also tend to encourage caution in regard to the possible motives and intentions of others.

Mythologies may be used deliberately as a mobilising agent to galvanise commitment or identification with a cause or a nation-building process. The Zionist nationalist movement from Herzl onwards, for example, would have had little prospect of success, even among Jewry in Europe, without harnessing such powerful myths as the ingathering of the exiled, the upbuilding of Zion as a model society, the creation of a new


38 The former Deputy Mayor of Jerusalem, Meron Benvenisti, for example, has criticised the bias in the displays in the Tower of David Museum in the Old City of Jerusalem. Those displays advise visitors to the museum that after the Israeli period, the city was occupied by ‘foreigners’. Only the Israeli-Jewish claim to the city is granted legitimacy; whereas the Israelite period lasted only 600 years, all the periods which followed it - Persian, Byzantine, Mameluke, Ottoman, and British - are represented as a chain of occupations. Benvenisti also points out that the word Arab does not appear even once in the display, while the only Arabic name mentioned in the entire complex is that of the conqueror, the Caliph Omar. The history being presented, he says, is the “victor’s version of history”. See Dalrymple, From the Holy Mountain, p. 334.
Hebrew or "Jewish type" and an overarching vision of national redemption.\textsuperscript{39}

In the case of the Palestinians, national aspirations have focussed on more than outcomes or achievements - which have been fairly limited to date, despite the political profile the Palestinian issue has acquired. They attach particular importance to the political symbols and processes of ethno-nationalist struggle and self-realization.\textsuperscript{40} As will be discussed in greater detail later, collective Palestinian memories of dispossession, the intifada and the mythology of struggle have provided natural corollaries to the Palestinian search for statehood.

Those collective memories have developed, like those of Israelis, without much examination of the empirical validity of the claims and assumptions that underlie them. The imagery has acquired such force that it is difficult to challenge, even when in some quarters it may be regarded as dysfunctional. And it has set political benchmarks against which, for Palestinian refugees at least, the outcomes of the Middle East peace process since 1993 will be measured. The prominence accorded to the refugee issue among efforts to find a negotiated solution to the outstanding differences between Israel and the Palestinians during the second half of 2000, and in early 2001, amply demonstrated the political potency of refugee demands.\textsuperscript{41}

The strength of individual attachment to political mythologies will be affected by peer pressures,

\textsuperscript{39} Zerubavel, Recovered Roots p. 215.
\textsuperscript{40} Bowker, Beyond Peace, p. 67.
\textsuperscript{41} See, for example, Danny Rubinstein, " 'Jerusalem is part of the homeland, the refugees are the homeland itself' " Ha'aretz, 30 January 2001, and "The PLO is rising - and the PA is sinking", Ha'aretz, 20 February 2001.
including among extended families and clans and within other institutionalised frameworks such as schools, mosques, synagogues and churches; and among professional networks. In Palestinian refugee society, as will be discussed, the impact of family affiliations and vestigal village networks continues to have particular importance.

The mirror image of that process - the deliberate use, or manipulation, of political mythology by institutions - is also important. The driving force behind the perpetuation of such imagery is political, but the imagery also draws upon the desire of individuals for the comfort and familiarity of commemorative narratives. The skill of the organisations promoting particular imagery and, of course, any material or other benefits that flow from manipulation of that imagery may be presumed to influence adherence to it. Zionist experience of using collective memory, and what Yael Zerubavel refers to as the 'narrativisation' of that memory, in the construction of a distinct national identity and culture recreated from roots in the past demonstrates the political impact of such manipulation.

Not least because the primary value of mythology among those who seek to draw upon it for political purposes lies in its ability to provide comfort - where that is possible - and reassurance to core audiences, the impact of the myth is likely to be a key concern among those who seek to preserve, commemorate or otherwise reinforce it. Concern about its strictly factual accuracy may be less evident than the need to flatter the collective consciousness. It is therefore natural, and perhaps inevitable, that historical argument will move directly into the political domain.
It is not, however, of great importance from a nation-building perspective whether, for example, the PLO Chairman, Yasser Arafat, was at Karameh in Jordan during the celebrated battle with Israel in March 1968 or, as well-informed Jordanians claim, was having breakfast in the nearby town of Salt. It does not matter much whether the Zionist political folk hero Yoseph Trumpeldor's last words following his mortal wounding in March 1920 at Tel Hai in the Galilee were that "It is good to die for one's country" or, as recounted in jocular versions of the story, a colourful Russian expletive (Fuck your mother) which sounds like a Hebrew sentence. The imagery that serves political objectives best for individuals seeking a sense of identity and belonging to a place in history, and of being able to understand and to relate personal experience within wider social and political contexts, is what ultimately matters to the commemorative narrative.

Rashid Khalidi observes that in the Palestinian case, the narratives woven around crushing failures are largely devoid of recognition of political miscalculation and questioning of what Palestinians might have done differently, or more successfully, in the same historical circumstances. Instead, according to Khalidi, there is a pattern of narration stressing heroism, success in bringing together the Palestinian people. There is also a theme of betrayal by other parties - in the case of the 1930s and 1940s, the British, Arab governments and traditional Palestinian leaders; and in later years the perfidy of external parties and Arab regimes. The core of the narrative is

42 On Arafat's alleged whereabouts, according to senior Jordanian officials Zeid Rifai and Adnan Abu Odeh, and the Jordanian role at the battle of Karameh, see John and Janet Wallach, Arafat: In the eyes of the beholder Heinemann, London, 1991, p. 310.
for challenges to have been surmounted and survived, and for the process to be portrayed where possible as triumph, or at least as heroic perseverance against impossible odds.

Khalidi observes that the retelling of Palestinian history - he cites the failure of the armed rebellion of ‘Iz al-Din al-Qassam in 1935; the failure of the 1936-39 revolt against the British; the defeat at the hands of the Jewish forces in 1947-49; the military outcomes of the much-vaunted battle of Karameh in March 1968 ("a case of failure against overwhelming odds narrated as heroic triumph"); the Palestinian debacle in Jordan in September 1970; the entanglement of the PLO in the Lebanese civil war in 1975-76 and the expulsion of Palestinian forces from Lebanon and the massacres which followed in 1982 - downplayed the actuality at various times of disorganisation, chaos and errors of judgement by Palestinian leaders from the 1930s to the 1960s. At least until a counter-narrative began to emerge after the catastrophe in Lebanon, it conveniently absolved the PLO leadership from their own responsibilities for failure. Scepticism or worse about the leadership’s record has not hindered the propagation of the official mythology through the Palestinian print and broadcast media. But it has also contributed, as discussed in more detail below, to a culture of cynicism at the popular level.

The Israeli experience has some parallels to that of the Palestinians. Israeli political mythology accorded the Zionist movement a track record of ongoing success

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63 On Trumpeldor, see Zerubavel, Recovered Roots pp. 159-160.
64 Rashid Khalidi, Palestinian Identity, p. 197. Others may wish to investigate whether such a structure of narration derives from literary traditions, as well as from political expediency.
65 Khalidi, Palestinian Identity, pp. 199-200.
in pursuing and later defending core political objectives including the creation and securing of a nation state. Although in 1999 some effort was made to reflect more closely the facts surrounding the events of 1948 in Israeli school textbooks, there was also ongoing resistance to efforts to set straight the historical record regarding the conflict with the Palestinians. 46

As was seen in the controversy within Israel around April-May 1998, during the celebration of Israel’s fiftieth anniversary, over the portrayal in a national television documentary of the events of 50 years before, there was especially strong resistance to the portrayal of Israeli history from a Palestinian perspective. Acknowledgement of an alternative historical record might have detracted, as Sorel has warned, from the totality of the myth and its mobilising power. 47

Benny Morris has made the point that the controversy between Israeli and Arab advocates has been as much about the nature of Zionism as about what happened in 1948. He writes:

If the Arab contention is true— that the Yishuv [Jewish community in Palestine] had always intended forcible 'transfer' and that in 1948 it had systematically and forcibly expelled the Arab population from the areas that became the Jewish state— then Zionism is a robber ideology and Israel a robber state. If, on the other

46 Ethan Bronner. "In Israel, New Grade School Texts for History Replace Myths with Facts", The New York Times, 14 August 1999. Bronner quotes Aharon Megged, an Israeli novelist and outspoken critic of the new history, as describing a new textbook (which observed that, on nearly every front and in nearly every battle, the Jewish side had the advantage in terms of planning, organisation, operation of equipment and the availability of trained fighters) as "an act of moral suicide that deprives our children of everything that makes people proud of Israel". See also the reported remarks of Ariel Sharon at footnote 53 below.

47 For reporting on the outcry in Israel over the "Tekuma" series exposing Israelis to more critical analysis of their history by Morris, Ilan Pappe and others, including from the perspective of Palestinians, see the report by Marjorie Miller "For Some Israelis a TV History of the Nation Airs Wrong Voices" International Herald Tribune, 1 April 1997.
hand, one accepts that the refugee exodus was essentially the result of the war, and that the war was the handiwork of the Arabs, that the Palestinian masses fled by and large 'voluntarily' or at the behest of their leaders, then Israel emerges free of what some have called original sin.48

During the 1990s even the quasi-sacred historical myths that were associated with Israel's nation-building process - such as Masada, the Bar Kochba revolt, and the defence of Tel Hai - were sometimes joked about, but were still rarely openly challenged. They may no longer have had the functional value as mobilising myths that once made them so enthusiastically promoted within Israel, and their historical accuracy in some cases (notably Masada) had long been doubted.49 Politically, however, it remained far easier to leave such mythologies undisturbed, despite public suspicions in Israel about the intentional fabrication of national traditions, and growing scepticism and cynicism in relation to state-sponsored commemorative activities.50

Mythologies are also not necessarily valued in terms of the wisdom they demonstrate, although wisdom may be displayed by participants, or a range of other virtues

49 Noted archeologist Jerome Murphy-O’Connor has commented that the account of Jewish historian Flavius Josephus, alleging mass suicide took place at Masada in 73 AD, is “utterly incredible from the moment the Romans [allegedly] retire once they have breached the wall. ... Josephus the Jewish apologist invented the speech of [rebel leader Eleazar ben Jair] to lay the blame for the war, not on the Jewish people as such, but on a minority of violent revolutionaries, the Sicarii. Josephus the rhetorical historian elaborated the suicide of some into the dramatic mass suicide of all, using motifs from the Graeco-Roman historiographical tradition. Josephus himself would have failed to recognise the radically distorted version of his story which became an important foundation myth of Israeli Zionists.” Jerome Murphy-O’Connor, The Holy Land, Oxford Archeological Guides, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1998, pp. 335-337.
50 Zerubavel, Recovered Roots, pp. 232-235.
or qualities may be ascribed to them within the narrative. To those with greater critical distance from the issue, at least, the gun and olive branch imagery used by Yasser Arafat in addressing the UN General Assembly in 1974 was not likely to be productive among Western audiences, whatever resonance it may have had elsewhere. The military option imagery, though arguably significant in the creation and sustaining of a Palestinian national consciousness, could be of no positive practical consequence in terms of securing political objectives in regard to Israel.

Arafat's approach in 1974 was always going to be problematic, if not irreconcilable, with securing American support for Palestinian concerns. It was of little help to the creation of political support for the PLO in Arab capitals either. Such considerations about the appropriateness and wider consequences of the imagery to be used on that occasion - if they were reflected upon at all - did not, however, cause Arafat to reconsider his approach. The image Arafat was seeking to project pragmatically at the popular level derived value mainly from its symbolism, and Arafat's self image probably reinforced that stance.

Ideological consistency was not necessarily a concern

51 According to a senior advisor to HM King Hussein, in a conversation with the author in Amman in June 1994 Arafat, on telling President Habib Bourguiba of Tunisia that he was going to carry a gun and an olive branch to deliver his UNGA 1974 speech, was advised by Bourguiba that it would be wiser to leave the gun behind and to carry two olive branches instead. Bowker, Beyond Peace, p. 65. Bourguiba also advocated (in 1965 and 1973) acceptance by the PLO of the UN 1947 partition plan, and he caused relations with Jordan to rupture in 1973 by asserting that the Emirate of Jordan was a British creation to satisfy Emir Abdullah, and that "Jordan is only the name of a river, whereas Palestine is a reality with a history going back to the Pharaohs". Alain Gresh, The PLO: The Struggle Within, Zed Books, London, Revised Edition, 1988, pp. 120-121.

for Arafat anyway. Arafat's Palestinian audience, at least, was unlikely to have seen much value in seeking to develop closer relations with the United States at a time when, with Henry Kissinger dominating US thinking on the Middle East, the likelihood of making political headway with Washington was low.

It will be seen later in this study that Arafat showed similar pragmatism - albeit tempered by the need two decades later to preserve what was by then a much more substantial relationship with Washington - in the manipulation of mythology in the management of the political crisis surrounding the events of 1997.

**Mythology and Change**

Mythologies change, in response to both internal dynamics and external circumstances. Precisely how and why they change is not always clear. The question of how commitment to mythologies is established and changed is important, however, because it has implications for policy choices at leadership levels. It also has implications for the processes by which such choices are developed and explained to wider audiences, and given enduring effect.

Some individuals possess greater critical distance from conventional intellectual frameworks than others. Some may be more concerned than others to establish or to verify the empirical evidence surrounding collective memories and mythologies. As noted above, the deconstruction of memories and mythology can be highly controversial, not least because it may be seen to undermine or to erode confidence in both the political and the deeper social needs that are served.

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53 That argument is strengthened by the view, in the words of the senior PLO cadre Khaled al-Hassan, that the Arafat-led PLO was “a revolution on a flying carpet”, Govers and Walker, *Behind the Myth*, p. 354.
by the particular construction of a national past, and its associated visions of a mythical future.

Direct personal experience obviously has a profound impact upon perceptions of the other party and perhaps upon willingness to change. It would seem reasonable to assume that where individuals have found practical benefit to flow from wider recognition and legitimisation of their particular world view, of which collective memories and mythologies are likely to be an important part, their resistance to alternative frameworks is also likely to be strengthened.54

Characteristically, mythologies seek to explain what has happened, and to provide a sense of historical, cultural and political location, rather than seeking to articulate a vision of the future. Being generally ill-suited to dealing with change in unforeseen directions, they tend to support scepticism rather than positive thinking where change is proposed in directions which are not, in a sense, pre-ordained. They are, in short, more likely to be retrospective than visionary phenomena.

Zerubavel has described how the Zionist enterprise, however, despite facing these constraints, was adept at extrapolating from a number of historical and quasi-historical images a series of ideas and ideals and legends which it orchestrated to match a carefully constructed retrospective narrative suited to its nation-building objectives. That process generally continued to apply in the period following statehood, especially among external audiences such as the Jewish

54 As noted at the outset of this study, the extent to which material considerations affected individual refugee perceptions of the 1997 crisis is very difficult to estimate, but it was obviously an element shaping the refugee response to that situation.
diaspora communities and Israel’s other supporters in Western countries, for whom the embryonic Jewish state represented an atonement for indifference to the Nazi death camps. While always subjected to critical analysis from within its ranks, Zionism served to unite Diaspora Jewry. And the Diaspora overwhelmingly identified with Israel as the symbol of the Jewish will to survive, even after the Holocaust. 55

The extent to which a political mythology may be linked to a sense of moral purpose—as in the situation described above—is therefore an element that should not be overlooked in assessing its potency among both domestic and external audiences. 56 In a similar vein, Zeev Sternhell has pointed out that the Zionists were convinced of their moral right to acquire Arab land—because Palestine was their only refuge from persecution, especially with restrictive immigration laws in place in the United States and elsewhere in the 1920s and 1930s, and with the rise of Hitler from 1933—and that approach was extraordinarily effective. (The alleged historical right to the land was, according to Sternhell, “merely a matter of politics and propaganda.”) 57

55 Goldberg, To the Promised Land: a History of Zionist Thought, Penguin Books, London, 1996, pp. 250-251. At least some of the energy (if not the venom) of the efforts of scholars such as Ephraim Karsh and Anita Shapira to discredit the work of the so-called New Historians, such as Benny Morris and Avi Shlaim may reflect a felt need to prevent the undermining of such imagery at this stage.

56 Marjorie Miller quotes Ariel Sharon as complaining that the Tekuma series “distorts the history of our redemption, abandoning every moral basis for the establishment and existence of the state of Israel.” International Herald Tribune, 1 April 1997.

57 Wistrich and Ohana (eds.), The Shaping of Israeli Identity p. x.; Z. Sternhell, The Founding Myths of Israel: Nationalism, Socialism, and the Making of the Jewish State, Princeton University Press, Princeton NJ, 1998, p. 338. To be judgemental about the legitimacy of such approaches is of course to enter into a difficult domain of contending needs and aspirations. It can also lead to fruitless debate about what, if any, alternative approaches might have been possible in the historical circumstances at the time. Those issues are beyond the scope of this study.
Mythologies are linked, as mentioned earlier, to wider political processes. Despite the combined strength of the factors that work towards acceptance of orthodox thinking and reinforcement of certain images, counter-narratives do emerge from time to time, graduating from being labelled as merely oppositional criticisms. Some counter-narratives have won acceptance as being more authoritative images than their predecessors; and political outcomes can turn out to be more substantial and positive than many might expect.

The dominant mythologies of Israelis, for example, demonstrated increasing signs of uncertainty during the 1980s and 1990s. That was partly due to the experience of the invasion of Lebanon and its aftermath, and of the intifada. It was partly also a result of the struggle during the 1990s to come to terms with the historical counter-narratives of commentators and analysts such as Morris, Flapan, Evron, Pappe, Zerubavel and others, some of whom questioned the contemporary relevance of Zionism and long-established mythologies as objective circumstances facing the nation changed. 58

The general tenor and direction of Israeli society appeared to remain largely intact despite such challenges. For most Israelis, the moral dimension of the state-building narrative was more durable than

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some of its critics, especially on the Palestinian side, might have wished. The Israeli narrative also continued to be conditioned by Israel’s overwhelming diplomatic and political strength in comparison to its Arab opponents, and the unremitting public hostility of the Arab media and political circles, especially below the leadership level. But evidence of uncertainty was also highly visible.

A degree of change in Israeli circles was reflected, for example, in fundamental debate about the means and ends and goals of the Zionist project. There was an upsurge in revisionist historical analysis and the demystification of Israeli history in the popular media, as mentioned above.\(^{59}\) Zionist imagery contrasting between tough, resourceful Israelis who made their own history, and the imagery of passive Diaspora Jews who went to their slaughter in the Holocaust, mutated into a more realistic and humane approach to suffering which saw the Holocaust as a dominant myth in cementing national identity. There also appeared to be an increasing impact on the Israeli collective psyche of the Palestinian issue; and the sharpening divisions between the religious and secular segments of Israeli society.\(^{60}\)

The taboos associated with mutual recognition between the Israeli and Palestinian peoples were also gradually breaking down, after a lengthy period of mutual denial, assisted by the abatement of perceptions of an existential threat to Israel.\(^{61}\) And, since the early 1990s, though some prominent figures

\(^{59}\) For a critical appraisal of Post-Zionism, as well as of leftist critics of Zionism dating back to the bi-nationalist movement of pre-Israel Palestine, see Yoram Hazony, The Jewish State: The Struggle for Israel’s Soul, Basic/New Republic Books, New York, 2000.

\(^{60}\) Wistrich and Ohana (eds.), The Shaping of Israeli Identity, p. xi.

\(^{61}\) Khalidi, Palestinian Identity, pp. 203-205.
among the ideological heirs to Jabotinski’s Revisionist Movement continued to insist that the Palestinians could never be mollified and compromise settlement with them was impossible, there was strong empirical evidence of popular support from all sides of Israeli politics for such a compromise to be reached, most recently on the basis of the Oslo accords.

As will be discussed in more detail in Chapter VI, the Palestinian leadership, for its part, also faced a difficult challenge after 1993 in identifying historical metaphors and images that could be applied to nation-building ends within the framework of the Oslo process. In terms of concrete achievements, the outcomes brought about through negotiations within the Oslo framework from 1993 to 1995, and especially in the period from 1996 onwards, had fallen well short of Palestinian aspirations.

Despite the Oslo agreements, dispossession, and in the case of non-refugees in the West Bank and Gaza, the struggle against Israeli occupation, the sense of betrayal by both the West and their fellow Arabs, and the fact of having been unable to exercise fully the right to self-determination continued to stand out as central experiences in the Palestinian historical narrative. It was those factors, rather than acceptance of UN Security Council Resolution 242, and the obligations later embraced by the PLO leadership, that drove the popular political agenda.

Most important of all, the traumas recounted in the Palestinian political mythology— all too often reinforced by direct personal experience—ultimately provided a potent source of shared beliefs and values, that strengthened and sustained the Palestinian sense of identity. Collective memory of historical injustice
and suffering blended with the fixative of political mythology to bolster the rejection of the unpalatable. Resistance to making formal and acknowledged compromises or concessions to Israel on matters of principle reflected a reluctance on the part of ordinary Palestinians to accept, viscerally or openly, that the logic of power, politics, economics and international realities had prevailed over the just settlement of their cause.

There was understandable outrage at having had the historical misfortune to be on the weaker side; to have been all too often poorly led and counselled; and to have been gradually displaced from among the prime concerns of the Arab world and the international community. That sense of injustice needed to be buffered. Mythological devices - ranging from conspiracy theories (discussed in more detail below) to millenarian notions and even references to the Crusades - helped to meet that need.

Mythologies and Power

The communication and interpretation of mythologies is closely linked to perceptions of status and political power. And because mythologies are so intimately linked to relationships defined by and often expressed in terms of political power, it seems reasonable to assume that they are unlikely to alter unless relations in terms of power change.

The earlier discussion of the limits to political manipulation of mythology in the Palestinian case suggests that even with changes in power relationships, certain mythologies may prove remarkably durable, for reasons which may have more to do with the search for identity and authenticity than with the relativities of power. And the limited
integration and weakness of communication within Palestinian society will influence the manner and the extent to which change affects different social elements. The impact of myths as an interpretive framework will have close connections to wider contexts, including the personal beliefs and experiences of individuals, in which those myths are presented.

Mythologies have starting points, as Lawson mentions, in real or imagined events. They are also a means, as noted above, by which contemporary realities are understood and explained. But the interaction between, on the one hand, mythology as an intellectual framework and, on the other hand, mythology as a device for political mobilisation and of political convenience, is complex.

If Michel Foucault is correct in his assertion that power produces knowledge, imbalances within societies in terms of political power are likely to have consequences for the sharing and interpretation of such knowledge. Robert Helmreich, taking an empirical approach, has drawn attention to the linkages between stress and the lowering of self-esteem, on one hand, and the influence, respectively, of peer groups and leaders on the other.

Helmreich argues that the evaluations individuals make of their personal worth can be lowered by stresses that reduce feelings of competence in dealing with physical and social environments. Such reactions may be associated with greater dependency on both peers and leaders, heightened 'persuadability', and impaired

performance including cheating and other behaviour consistent with low self-evaluation. 63

In low stress situations, according to studies cited by Helmreich, communication produces more attitude change when attributed to a highly credible, authoritative source than when it is alleged to come from a less knowledgeable and trustworthy communicator. Under conditions of high stress, however, the peer group tends to elicit more change than the expert. Attitudes of people with low self-esteem, under stress, are more influenced by low-status communicators than by high-status communicators. The individual needs to minimise his or her perceived deviation from the 'normative' response of peers or other low status individuals, and to augment feelings of being part of a 'normal' group.

According to Helmreich's hypothesis, agreeing with an authoritative figure, under stressful conditions, may indeed increase feelings of deviance among individuals if the authority is seen as holding views which differ from the peer reference group. Even an authority towards whom a person of low self-esteem displays great dependency (the relationship between UNRWA and refugees comes to mind) may be a less potent referent for determination of attitudes than a peer or status equal who can define a 'normative' response. 64 Thus, the perceptions of a reference group reaction may be a strong enough influence to outweigh all other considerations in determining the effectiveness of attempts at persuasion. In a conflict between loyalty to the group and loyalty to the leader ... it is probable that group loyalty will dominate. 65

The implications of this analysis when applied to the Palestinian refugee context which will be described elsewhere in this study, are obvious. Individually and collectively, Palestinian refugees faced growing economic and political pressure during the 1990s. There were strong recollections of the collective spirit of resistance which gave birth to the intifada. There was also increasing scepticism about the political orientation, commitment and capabilities of the Palestinian Authority under Arafat’s leadership.

Accordingly, a traumatised refugee population was likely to seek reassurance from adherence to the established values and symbols of peer reference groups, rather than from adherence to the stance of a high-status leadership. And traditional political sentiment among those groups was bound to have stronger appeal than programs emerging from political leaders which, whether explicitly or otherwise, were based upon compromise and change.

**Palestinian Political Culture**

Foucault’s insight concerning power and knowledge, and Helmreich’s observations in respect of stress and leadership, also underline the importance of understanding the dynamics of Palestinian refugee society in evaluating the impact of mythology upon Palestinian political behaviour in 1997. Two key features of Palestinian society and political dynamics had an influence on the course of events during the 1997 crisis. One element, discussed in more detail later, was neopatrimonialism. Another element was an elitist and authoritarian tradition in patterns of

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64 Helmreich, “Stress, Self-Esteem and Attitudes” p. 40
65 Helmreich, “Stress, Self-Esteem and Attitudes” p. 41
Palestinian leadership at all levels, including in regard to social as well as political organisation.

**Elitism**

Socially and politically, Palestinian society - like most Arab societies - is highly stratified. Differentials in access to wealth, literacy and higher education, urban versus village society, and uneven access to political influence or power have been constant themes of Palestinian political culture since the Ottoman period. A natural outcome of that situation has been the existence of wide disparities between the levels of political involvement of different parts of the society, with the most politically active segments traditionally being those with the highest traditional status and power. The degree to which elites are responsive, if not ultimately responsible, to popular political opinion and demands, however, is not easy to establish.

The elitist tradition in Palestinian society inevitably found expression, in the political context, through a high level of separation between the setting of policy direction within the PLO on one hand, and the conduct of politics by the Palestinian leadership. Despite its commitment to the Oslo process, the PLO leadership found it necessary to appear highly responsive to popular sentiment, including during the UNRWA crisis.

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66 For a brief but useful overview of the characteristics of Palestinian society before 1948, see Benny Morris, *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem, 1947-1949*, pp. 11-15.

67 In his highly critical, and sometimes tendentious appraisal of the role of Arab elites in contemporary Arab politics, Said Aburish claims that Arafat's greatest failing was "to try to manipulate the Palestinian establishment and conservative Arab governments and to take the rest of the Palestinians for granted ...". Said K. Aburish, *A Brutal Friendship: The West and the Arab Elite*, Indigo, London, 1997, p. 178.
The capacity of the Palestinian traditional, urban, educated elite to control the direction of political dialogue and struggle was not seriously challenged before the 1970s. Substantial discrepancies in literacy, economic security, and understanding of the machinery of political power remained overwhelmingly to the elite’s advantage. However, the relationship between the Palestinian elite and the wider Palestinian audience became more complex in the last three decades of the twentieth century, as traditional notables sought to find a place alongside other holders of influence who emerged from non-traditional backgrounds.

Moreover, for several decades before the Declaration of Principles was signed in September 1993, it was clear to Arab observers such as Fouad Ajami, Albert Hourani, Ahmad Shboul and others that Arab society in general, including Palestinian society, was under intense pressure, and its future direction was uncertain. Although the basic pattern of elitist and...
authoritarian approaches within political institutions and within family structures appeared in the 1990s to remain more or less intact, within some families there was pressure for more liberal approaches. This was balanced, perhaps more commonly among the Arabic-educated middle class, by movement towards greater conservatism on gender issues, especially among families under orthodox Islamic influence. 71

Change affecting traditional patterns of authority at times was driving, and at other times was being driven by, changes in the political situation and objective factors on the ground. There were at least three key areas where certain unintended consequences of Israeli and Jordanian practices that developed after the occupation of the West Bank and Gaza from 1967 onwards were to have major effects on the traditional pattern of Palestinian political authority.

First, the opening of Israel's labour market to Palestinians during the 1970s altered employment patterns and hastened the demise of the Palestinian agricultural sector. Wage-based, urbanised employment, whilst undermining the authority of the traditional Palestinian landholding class (referred to here as "notables"), had the effect, at least in respect of the agricultural sector, of "making peasants into Palestinians". 72 Confiscations of land by the Israeli authorities undermined the social and political status of the notables still further.

Second, Israeli efforts to install non-traditional leaderships in the form of Village Leagues, believing


71 Hourani, A History of the Arab Peoples, p. 399.
72 Robinson, Building a Palestinian State, p. x.
that the traditional power brokers were antagonistic on nationalist grounds to their interests, also undermined the authority of the traditional notables. Because the individuals the Israelis sought to promote to such positions were almost universally regarded as criminals, collaborators or worse, those efforts added impetus to the rise of a non-traditional secular Palestinian nationalist political elite. Israeli moves to support Jordanian efforts to retain control in the West Bank, against the growing tide of Palestinian nationalist sentiment favouring the PLO, also had little positive effect.

Third, the graduation of rising numbers of Palestinians through Palestinian universities (Bir Zeit, Al Najjar and Bethlehem), which did not exist in their present form before 1972, gave rise to a new generation of political activists from a different, witness the effect of the intifada. Stanley Reed, "Jordan and the Gulf Crisis" Foreign Affairs Vol. 69, No. 5, Winter 1990-91, pp. 21-35.

75 Israeli assistance with the appointment of pro-Jordanian mayors such as Zafer al-Masri in Nablus in November 1985, for example, rebounded when al-Masri was assassinated by the PLO in March 1986. The Jordanian position in the West Bank was irreversibly degraded, in any event, by the effects of the intifada. Judith Miller, God Has Ninety-Nine Names: Reporting from a Militant Middle East, Simon and Schuster, New York, 1996, pp. 345-346.
lower social class than that of the traditional notables.

The activists were more likely to be from villages, small towns and refugee camps than from the urban centres from which the notables, and those closest to Arafat, usually came.\textsuperscript{76} The emergence of that generation reinforced the trend, evident under Mandate and Jordanian rule, towards the growth of an educated Palestinian workforce of civil servants, accountants, teachers and administrators, which was gradually changing the traditionally high proportion of the population who earned their livelihoods as peasants, artisans and traders.\textsuperscript{77}

Scholars including Usher and Robinson have suggested that the new elite sought not just political change, but also social transformation to sustain a confrontation with the Israeli occupation. That approach involved undermining the social bases of notable power, through a process of popular mobilisation of grassroots organisations such as student blocs, labour unions, women’s committees, agricultural and medical relief committees and voluntary works organisations.\textsuperscript{78}

Notwithstanding such claims, and the external attention and support enjoyed by figures such as Hanan Ashrawi, the extent to which the non-traditional elite sought to create new political norms, or succeeded in doing so, is questionable. Sayigh insists that ultimate decision-making power often continued to be held by leaders in exile, who utilized these bodies primarily as a means to recruit new members. They

\textsuperscript{76} The five founders of Fatah, including Arafat, also came from upper middle class families "on the edge of notability". Aburish, \textit{A Brutal Friendship}, pp. 166-167.

\textsuperscript{77} Sayigh, \textit{Armed Struggle and the Search for State}, p. 54
pursued factional competition ahead of the requirements of social mobilization and economic development, and continued to stress armed struggle despite its persistent failures.\(^7\) Brynen's analysis supports the view that external, rather than Palestinian, financial support played an important part in the rapid growth of factional organization within the student, women's, and trade union movements in the period between the destruction of the PLO infrastructure in Lebanon in 1982 and the start of the intifada in late 1987.\(^8\)

According to Yezid Sayigh, during the 1980s the statist PLO leadership, while emphasising the need for steadfastness in the popular struggle, nevertheless aimed to achieve limited objectives in terms of changing Palestinian society. In his words, in aiming to exercise political power in place of Israel, the PLO viewed the population as a target audience to be co-opted through the provision of services and public goods. It strove neither for social mobilization, in the sense of assisting local communities or social groups to gain collective control over resources, nor for the transformation of social relations.\(^8\)

It appeared, in effect, that the mainstream PLO leadership shared little of the alleged concern among private voluntary bodies and NGOs to involve all

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\(^7\) Robinson, Building a Palestinian State pp. x-xi.

\(^8\) Sayigh, Armed Struggle and the Search for State p. 613. Sayigh suggests that the Palestinian Left was no more able than the PLO to construct alternative economic, social and administrative structures to those under Israeli control. He observes that the Left's stress on income-generation and empowerment was also illusory, in many cases; and that the various voluntary and non-governmental organisations, much like the paternalistic charitable societies they sought to displace, relied almost wholly on external funding, provided mainly by Western counterparts, international multilateral institutions, and a small number of Arab, Islamic and Palestinian sources.

\(^9\) Brynen, "The Neopatrimonial Dimension of Palestinian Politics" p. 29.
sectors of the population in participatory forms of political organisation. Brynen makes the point that the membership of the Palestinian Authority appointed by Arafat was not reflective of the broad scope of Palestinian society, being composed of very few members from rural and refugee backgrounds, and having a disproportionate representation of middle class professionals, and traditional elites.82

**Neopatrimonialism**

The phenomenon of neopatrimonialism - the selective dispensing of resources and social regulation through a chain of superior/subordinate relationships, in which those lower down the political hierarchy depend for their position on the leader to whom they owe allegiance, rather than possessing defined powers and functions of their own - has been mentioned earlier. Although it is not only evident among Palestinians, the use of neopatrimonialism is a key element in the functioning of Palestinian government and society and the political management of its tensions and contradictions.83 It is also important to understanding the wider context in which the UNRWA crisis unfolded in 1997.

From the 1970s onwards there was a need to avoid the effective disintegration and collapse of the nationalist effort as a consequence of the tension, discussed above, between, on the one hand, the counter-hegemonic thrust of the Palestinian Left and its focus on civil society and, on the other hand, the

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81 Sayigh, Armed Struggle and the Search for State p. 612.
83 Brynen, “The Neopatrimonial Dimension of Palestinian Politics,” pp. 23-36. The definition used here is borrowed from that used by Brynen at pp. 24-25. See also Sayigh, Armed Struggle and the Search for State, pp. 454-463.
centralising political approach of Yasser Arafat.84 Yazid Sayigh has written about the experience of the PLO in Lebanon from 1973-1982. Rex Brynen has described the transition to Palestinian self-government in the West Bank and Gaza from late 1993. Both writers underline the importance to Palestinian political management of the selective dispensation - essentially by Arafat - of resources and rewards to those who operated within assumptions of elitism and continuing authoritarian leadership.85

Although much of the perhaps half a billion dollars injected by the PLO into the Occupied Territories between 1977 and 1985 went to support needed infrastructure such as housing, education and agriculture, a sizeable amount was used as patronage money to nationalist institutions and personalities backed by Fatah.86 Despite its practical limitations as a political tool, and the corrosive impact of corruption and the maladministration associated with it on the legitimacy of Arafat’s leadership, such patronage was a means of mobilising supporters and counteracting the centrifugal political tendencies represented by the leftist challenge.

By the end of the intifada, organisations such as the medical and agricultural relief committees, and women’s and human rights groups were established and functioning along factional lines.87 At the time of the signing of the Oslo Accords, NGOs reportedly operated about 60 per cent of primary health care services, 100

84 G. Usher, Palestine in Crisis: The Struggle for Peace and Political Independence after Oslo Pluto Press in association with Transnational Institute (TNI) and Middle East Research and Information Project (MERIP), London and East Haven, CT, 1995, p. 46.
per cent of pre-school services, 100 per cent of disability rehabilitation services, and 30 per cent of the educational network in the West Bank and Gaza.\textsuperscript{88} Organisations such as the Union of Palestinian Medical Relief Committees (MRC) had independent power, both through funding links to international organisations and also through community networks.\textsuperscript{89} And, while it appeared the NGOs sought coordination with the Palestinian Authority, the Authority generally sought coordination over them. The upshot of that situation was an initial NGO stance towards the Declaration of Principles that ranged from critical to hostile, and which was in all cases deeply suspicious of the PLO’s centralising and coopting overtures.\textsuperscript{90}

The \textit{Intifada} and Palestinian political dynamics after 1990

It might also be asked what impact the \textit{intifada}, which broke out in December 1987, had upon Palestinian political mythologies, bearing in mind that by 1997 the \textit{intifada} was a more direct experience and memory to the Palestinian population at large than the disastrous refugee outflow of 1948. Although 64 per cent of the population in Gaza and 27 per cent in the West Bank in 1995 were descendants of refugees, by 1995 perhaps only three per cent of the population of the West Bank and six per cent in Gaza were first generation refugees.\textsuperscript{91}

\textsuperscript{87} Brynen, "The Neopatrimonial Dimension of Palestinian Politics" p. 32.
\textsuperscript{90} Usher, \textit{Palestine in Crisis} pp. 46-49.
The scale of suffering during the intifada was sufficiently horrendous to qualify the uprising as a landmark event in Palestinian mythologies. The respected NGO Save the Children estimated that somewhere between 50,000 to 63,000 Palestinians below the age of 16 were injured in the first two years of the uprising.92 Up to mid-December 1993, 1183 Palestinians had been killed by Israelis; and 717 Palestinians had been killed by fellow Palestinians since the start of the intifada.93 Some 80,000 Palestinians were held in Israeli detention between 1988 and 1994.94

The intifada probably hastened the breakdown of authority patterns within families, villages and camps, and confirmed the rationale for militancy among the younger generation of Palestinians. Elia Zureik has written that the active participation of young people in daily confrontations with the Israeli army appeared to rupture the traditional authority structure in the family and community. As the authority of the elders appeared to wane, anti-authority attitudes by the young spread to the schools and to society at large. Teachers, parents and older people became powerless in the face of a militant young generation.95 The level of discipline maintained in UNRWA schools during the intifada also declined, making it necessary in subsequent years to err on the side of greater control within classrooms in order to

93 Figures provided by the Embassy of Israel, Canberra.
94 Rex Brynen, "The Dynamics of Palestinian Elite Formation" Journal of Palestine Studies, XXIV, no. 3, p. 43.
rebuild appropriate standards of behaviour and social responsibility among the student population.

Sara Roy found that parents in Gaza were particularly exercised over their children's constant exposure to violence. She records the views of one woman as follows:

These children are the intifada and they have been hurt deeply. The soldiers... beat our children and kill them. Our children fear them and hate them. It is different with them than with us. If there is no solution, these children will one day throw more than stones because their hatred is great and they have nothing to hope for. If hope isn't given to them, they will take it from others. They will react with violence. We fear they will take the knives from our kitchens to use as weapons. They have no rules. They do not understand laws. They are going to be wild in the streets. If the world doesn't help us, we will be helpless to control our children.96

Despite such concerns, the intifada also produced a new sense of pride and commitment to a cause, and a new and highly effective form of decentralised popular leadership. Palestinian commentators at the time welcomed the relationships of solidarity and mutual support, proximity of political leadership to the grass roots, egalitarianism in social and economic behaviour and democratic and consensus-building decision-making.97 They looked forward to those changes persisting, albeit inevitably to a diminished degree when more normal objective conditions were expected to return.

The non-Fatah PLO factions strongly represented in the refugee camps - as well as important elements of Fatah itself - had adhered throughout the intifada to

rejectionist political agendas. They had also demonstrated determination to preserve their political autonomy within tolerated limits. But the intifada could not reverse the fact that the relevance of armed struggle to the PLO's political agenda had already become a matter of discord within the Palestinian political movement. The pride and sense of anticipation of the intifada experience was doomed, for many, to become frustration. The revolution accommodated itself to political circumstances post-Oslo; and its populist leaders in some cases adapted to new realities as the PLO took over control of the uprising. Many of the key figures during the intifada eventually became linked to the Palestinian Authority, while still others aspired to do so. 

Against that complex and often contradictory background, it is difficult to assess the extent to which the intifada had a distinct and enduring impact upon the Palestinian nationalist movement, and contributed to the development of Palestinian political mythology. It can be suggested, however, that apart from giving the clearest possible expression to the depth of nationalist feeling and the rejection of Israeli rule among Palestinians, the intifada had two key effects of relevance to this study.

First, it marked the beginning of a shift in the focus of the Palestinian issue away from the external struggle, where it had largely rested since the expulsion of the PLO from Jordan and subsequently from Beirut to Tunis. The intifada made events in the West Bank and Gaza the centre of gravity of Palestinian

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For a strong critique of the growth of alienation between the Palestinian political leadership and its mass audience, see Danny
politics, if not the exclusive focus of Palestinian politics and the Israeli-Palestinian struggle.¹

That situation held the potential for progress towards compromise outcomes and long-term stability in relations between Israel and the Palestinians. However it was to give rise to grave misgivings among those elements of the Palestinian political movement who saw their interests and aspirations threatened by the likely consequences of that shift in focus.

Second, and of particular importance for this study because it affected refugees directly, the intifada saw mobilisation of the refugee camp populations on an unprecedented scale. By the time it ended, the intifada appeared to have set the scene for an enduring contest of wills that looked likely to include, but also to go beyond, the struggle for an end to Israeli occupation. There was expected to be a contest between the centralising proclivities of the PLO leadership and the political agenda to which it was committed within the framework of the peace process, and the well-organised and politically astute groups that claimed to be the defenders of a more authentic nationalist cause than that which the PLO leadership was prepared to pursue.

In practice, however, the foreshadowed contest between the 'internal' Palestinian players and the 'external' leadership did not amount to much. Despite growing discontent with the performance of the PA, and the painfully slow progress made by Arafat towards establishing and implementing outcomes from the peace process, the level of popular support for the political opponents of the Palestinian Authority

¹ Khalidi, Palestinian Identity, p. 200.
during the mid-1990s did not appear to increase to any marked extent. It might also be noted in passing that the experience of the intifada did not appear to make substantive changes in Palestinian women’s political, economic or social power, despite the positive impact of nationalist and grassroots activism in mobilising women during the intifada for popular committees providing alternative services in agriculture, education, food storage and health, as well as for demonstrations, marches and other activities. 2

The imagery of the intifada, at its outset, as a largely spontaneous and genuinely popular Palestinian response to their situation, initially attracted a strongly positive response among both Arab and Western audiences and among Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza. That situation changed after March 1990, when the PLO in Tunis established predominant control over the uprising, with the demise of the Unified Leadership of the Uprising (UNLU). 3 External Arab support, especially in the Gulf states, also decreased

2 Rita Giacaman, applauding the achievements of women’s committees before and during the intifada in terms of developing the role of women outside the domestic sphere, was nevertheless highly critical of the movement’s inability to resist becoming mere extensions of the national political factions, which curtailed their ability to draw in “the large majority of Palestinian women who might have wished to be active ...but did not wish to ‘drown in factional politics’”. Giacaman argued that the rise towards political power “seem(ed) to carry with it the primary consideration of a struggle for power among the different factions”. Rita Giacaman “Palestinian Women in the Uprising” Journal of Refugee Studies Vol. 2, No. 1, 1989, p. 141. In contrast, but in a sense reinforcing Giacaman’s assessment of the potency of factional approaches, PFLP activist Suha Barghoui dismissed such concerns, arguing that ‘Support or opposition to the DOP has become the defining factor. It is impossible to divide the larger political situation from the women’s question’. Suha Barghoui, “Autonomy does not respect women’s rights,” Challenge, July-August 1994, quoted in Usher, Palestine in Crisis, p. 55. Further evidence in support of Giacaman’s analysis was the fact that a campaign launched in October 1993 to educate women to judge the four main PLO factions on the basis of their political and social policies for women was thwarted by factional conflict between supporters and opponents of the Declaration of Principles. Usher, Palestine in Crisis, p. 53.

3 Robinson, Building a Palestinian State, p. 97.
dramatically following Arafat’s mishandling of the popular Palestinian response to Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait in 1990.

On balance, the changes the intifada brought about in terms of the political equation or choices facing the leaderships of both Israel and the PLO were perhaps more far-reaching than the intifada’s long-term impact in terms of Palestinian political culture at the popular level. The integrating and reforming political effects of the uprising proved to be less sustainable than those who welcomed them had initially hoped. The availability of financial and other material resources, including from external sources, also encouraged an authoritarian style of leadership to emerge from the nationalist movement, in which the PLO provided the ‘state’. If anything, the intifada may have served to widen, rather than to diminish, the gap in Palestinian society between those who possessed, and those who lacked access to the benefits of power and influence.

**Mythologies, Counter-mythologies and Alternative Interpretations**

It was noted earlier that the pragmatic manipulation of imagery for political purposes has contributed to a culture of political cynicism at the popular level, among both Palestinians and Israelis. Among the factors encouraging such cynicism, especially towards the claims of political leaders, are perceived gaps between promise and performance. Widespread perceptions of corruption in PA institutions, including Ministries and government offices, the

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4 Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State*, p. 667. Sayigh also points out that the PLO did not seek to provide its mass constituency with channels for political participation until after the June 1967 war.
security forces and within the office of the President, are certain to have that effect.\footnote{See for example Center for Palestine Research and Studies (CPRS) Public Opinion Poll No. 40 dealing with the peace process, evaluation of Palestinian Authority performance, corruption and other issues 15-17 April 1999 http://www.cprs-palestine.org/polls/99/poll40a.html. See also Danny Rubenstein "Protection Racket, PA-style" Ha'aretz 12 November 1999.}

Awareness of the constraints imposed by larger agendas - and sometimes the comfort derived from objectifying politicians as self-seeking and unreliable - may also decrease the effectiveness of efforts at the government level to manipulate imagery for political ends. One astute observer of Palestinian politics has noted that among the Palestinian public there is a tendency, sometimes misplaced, to see strong criticism by Palestinian officials of Israeli policies as a prelude to concessions. According to that popular view, the more outspoken the declarations of the Palestinian side, the greater the concessions that are in prospect.\footnote{Amira Hass "The recourse of the weak" Ha'aretz, English edition, 7 October 1998. Hass writes: "(S)enior Palestinian officials often make quotable statements: either against settlers or advocating the right of return, against Israeli policy and its negotiators or advocating a new Intifada in the event negotiations fail. To understand such statements, it is not enough to merely read them or read about them, it is necessary to understand how the target audience reads them. An Israeli official involved in Israel-PA relations (various liaison committees) said on several occasions that after every joint meeting, the atmosphere is friendly, spirits are good and agreements are many - then a Palestinian will go to the press and sharply criticize the Israeli dialogue partners or the policies they are implementing. The Israeli side is already used to this and knows that the Palestinian representatives must come out with aggressive statements whose spirit is the exact opposite of what occurred in the meetings. Contrary, perhaps, to what that Israeli official thinks and what the declarers hope, the target audience is well aware of the disparity. This audience believes that the more aggressive the declarations are, the greater the concessions made by their leaders ...(and in the light of reports in the Palestinian media about Israeli actions detrimental to Palestinian interests)... conclude that under the guise of Oslo, the Israeli authorities are determined to continue the work begun in 1948 - and which has continued since 1967: dispossessing them of more and more land and making life here difficult for them, thwarting any possibility of sovereign, independent Palestinian existence. On the contrary: given
There is also a tendency among Palestinian (and Israeli) political audiences to balance formal appearances, and especially the statements of government figures, against what might be described as the 'everyone knows' alternative interpretation syndrome. The identity of 'everyone' is, of course, very imprecise. The evidence for the views held under this heading is normally speculative and inferential at best. Such interpretations can be based on rumours and gossip, and be driven by personal agendas to a very considerable degree. But such speculation is a fact of Palestinian political life. It is nourished by the limited credibility of political leaderships.

Amira Hass, for example, has observed, in relation to certain comments attributed to Abdallah al-Hurani, special adviser to Arafat on refugee affairs in the Palestinian Authority, that

(Everyone) knows that Abdallah al-Hurani ..., quoted in the Israeli press as someone who compares Israel to the Crusaders, is a refugee from the village of Samiya. Everyone also knows that shortly after Arafat appointed him as an adviser, he was relieved of any real power. He was left with words only. His words cannot even come to the aid of Samiya natives trapped in the Gaza Strip who do not receive exit permits from Israeli authorities.

In the sort of environment in which political myths flourish while access to reliable information is limited, similar remarks are made from time to time in regard to almost any prominent Palestinian political figure around Arafat. Rumours surround, for example, the alleged corruption of Arafat's wife Suha, and the

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the Palestinian Authority's weakness in the face of the effectively enforced Israeli rule, those heated remarks of senior officials are received with disrespect, pity and derision.”

allegedly self-serving efforts of Abu Al’a (Ahmad Qurei) to bring development assistance to his home village of Abu Dis.⁸

Recalling Helmreich’s comments, mentioned earlier, about the connection between the linkages between stress and the lowering of self-esteem and the influence of peer groups, widely divergent interpretations of particular events are almost inevitable. Some elements of popular mythologies will be more solidly based in facts than others. But even where the realities with which the PLO leadership and Israelis have to deal between themselves do not correspond to popular perceptions and assumptions, those perceptions may have a degree of popular plausibility. So far as wider political audiences are concerned, that means those perceptions cannot simply be ignored.

Conspiracy Theories

In the Palestinian context, where the state is weak and the power of informal networks is correspondingly strong, there is a tendency for perceptions of external parties to be rooted in myths and presumptions about the objectives of others, including Israelis, Americans and other donor countries.⁹ Some

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⁸ Numerous conversations of the author with Palestinians critical of the Palestinian Authority have highlighted such stories.

⁹ The roles played by outside parties in the region - partly in response to the Arab-Israel conflict - have not always been as benign in their effects, or as sensitive to the rights and dignity of others, as those affected by their intervention might have hoped. Bernard Lewis has pointed out that “...popular sentiment is not entirely wrong in seeing the Western world and Western ideas as the ultimate source of the major changes that have transformed the Islamic world in the past century or more. As a consequence, much of their anger is directed against the Westerner...and the Westerniser, seen as the tool or accomplice of the West and as a traitor to his own people.” B. Lewis, “Rethinking the Middle East” Foreign Affairs, Fall 1992, p. 115. For analysis of the way in which experiences of interaction with the West have shaped Islamic
Palestinians find in such perceptions, for all their improbability at times to outside observers, a form of escapist that is more comfortable to live with than the more mundane realities of routine decision-making on issues affecting them.

For Palestinians in that category, conspiracy theories provide a sense of being central to someone's attention. Even if it is usually thought to be a malevolent interest, that perception still provides a measure of reassurance to Palestinians that they are important somewhere in the scheme of things. As well as serving as the basis for popular mobilisation in support of particular interests or causes, conspiracy theories lend support to the self-image of being victims who deserve redress.  

Attachment to Palestinian mythology regarding external conspiracies is perhaps a coping mechanism for those who witness and experience what the Palestinians themselves acknowledge as the organizational weaknesses of the Palestinian political leadership. As one prominent Palestinian analyst has observed, those weaknesses include resistance to teamwork and contingency planning, a tendency to adversarial internal relations and patron-client relations, distrust of information from any but subservient perspectives, see the excellent analysis of contemporary Islamic issues in G. Fuller and I. Lesser, *A Sense of Siege: The Geopolitics of Islam and the West*, Westview Press, RAND, 1995; and comments by John Esposito regarding Islamic Jihad and other radical Islamic groups in Egypt in J. L. Esposito, *The Islamic Threat: Myth or Reality*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1992, p. 135.

Refugee reaction to the financial crisis of 1997 demonstrated this intermingling clearly. See for example "Ala' min yajib an nutilq as-siham?" (Again st whom should we aim our arrows?), opinion column by Dr Ali al Jarbawi, appearing in Al-Ayyam 30 August 1997 and in Al-Rai 1 September 1997.
sources, and disinclination to subject information to analytical processing.\(^{11}\)

The appeal of conspiracy theories at the popular level, as well as among well-educated and sophisticated interlocutors, and the 'everyone knows' syndrome, feed into the fragility of Palestinian confidence in their political institutions and leaders. They are also associated with a disposition, among many Arab intellectuals and among wider Arab audiences, to see Israel as a country with a drive for power and an instinctive will to achieve security through regional economic and political hegemony.\(^{12}\) It is widely assumed that Israel enjoys the support of key Western countries for that supposed ambition.

It has been noted above that Rashid Khalidi has criticised the tendency of the Palestinian narrative to focus on absolving the Palestinians from responsibility for their own fate.\(^{13}\) But even if both conspiracy theories and the 'everyone knows'

\(^{11}\) Sayigh, Armed Struggle and the Search for State, p. 687. According to Sayigh, in 1987 prominent Fateh Central Committee member Khalid al-Hassan described Palestinian disorganization as "a genius for failure", saying the Palestinians lean towards "monopoly, arrogance, suspicion and accusation, and so towards chaos, confusion, ignorance, failure, defeats, and further repression, jails, and intellectual and mental blockage" (Khalid al-Hassan, 'Abgariyyat al-Fashal (The Genius of Failure) Political Papers 10, Dar al Karmil for Samid, Amman, 1987, pp. 148-149, cited in Yazid Sayigh, Armed Struggle and the Search for State, p. 687.)

\(^{12}\) That perception, already in existence from the early days of the Zionist movement, was strengthened during the early 1950s when David Ben Gurion, taking the view that Israel could only find security in an implacably hostile Arab environment through the repeated and vigorous application of force, reinforced fear of Israeli intentions by harsh retaliatory actions against Jordan and Egypt, and unilateral actions against Syria. See Moshe Ma'oz, Syria and Israel: From War to Peacemaking, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1995, pp. 31-52. For a comprehensive examination of the notion of a Greater Israel among Arab countries, see Daniel Pipes, "Imperial Israel: The Nile to Euphrates Calumny" in Middle East Quarterly, Vol. 1, No. 1, March 1994, pp. 29-39. See also G. Kemp, The Control of the Middle East Arms Race, St. Martin's Press in association with the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, New York, 1991, pp. 22-25.

\(^{13}\) Khalidi, Palestinian Identity, pp. 192-201.
phenomenon can be criticised for encouraging delusions (and not only at popular levels) it is nevertheless the case that they also allow deniability of the unpalatable. They may sometimes provide reassurance, especially among those who want to believe that what they are hearing on one side is not necessarily the final position of their interlocutor or an empirically-verifiable fact. For all those reasons, conspiracy theories have been, and are likely to remain a deeply-embedded part of Palestinian political culture.

The importance of that point, at least so far as this study is concerned, is that any donor decisions concerning UNRWA were bound to be seen as projections of power in pursuit of the donors' perceived political objectives. And since, as Peter Black and Kevin Avruch have observed, power projected cross-culturally is doubly constituted - once in its projection, and again in its reception\textsuperscript{14} - the likelihood of mutual misunderstanding between donors and refugees was high.

As will be discussed in more detail in later chapters, the nature of the 1997 crisis was understood among Palestinian refugees as reflecting a malevolent interest on the part of donors, and Israel, in

\textsuperscript{14} Peter Black and Kevin Avruch, “Culture, Power and International Negotiations: Understanding Palau-US Status Negotiations” \textit{Millennium: Journal of International Studies}, Vol. 22, No. 3, 1993 p. 382. Black and Avruch assert that "...Many of the serious difficulties that bedevil negotiations can be traced to what we call 'cultural blindness', the failure of the parties to perceive the profound differences in meaning that each ascribes to important parts of the negotiations. This blindness ultimately arises from deep, if largely unconscious, ethnocentrism, especially the ethnocentrism of those with the power." (p. 385). At the same time, it is important to remember that those who study the mythologies of others do so inevitably with their own biases, including in regard to the assembling and weighting of factual information. The British historian Edward Carr once observed, on that score, that the individual apart from society would be both speechless and mindless. E. H. Carr, \textit{What is History?}, Penguin Books, London, 1961, p. 31 and p. 70.
determining the direction of political events in which UNRWA and they were a key part. The refugees themselves were not, at any stage, party to the events and decisions affecting them, and they had no reason to believe that their concerns were unfounded.

In contrast, from a donor perspective, the crisis revolved around a relatively routine or even mundane decision of whether to grant or to withhold the financial resources required for UNRWA to operate. The donors did not, and perhaps could not, engage in meaningful discussion with the refugees to address their very different perceptions of the situation.

The Preconceptions of External Parties

The impact of external parties' own perceptions and preconceptions, in this case in relation to the refugee issue and the political and humanitarian situation facing the refugees as a community, should also be noted briefly. Imagery and established notions can have a strong influence on the political decision-making process among external parties, especially where individuals are seen by external parties to rely on their resources. Palestinian refugees, in particular, have been notably successful in using the imagery of their dependency upon external assistance to exploit donor goodwill, as well as notions of moral and political obligation. A comparison may perhaps be made, on the Israeli side, with the support extended by some external parties to messianic and secular Jewish settlers and yeshiva students.

Among donors, there is a tendency to objectify refugees as well as an aversion to deliberately withholding support. Robert Park has noted that
... Everyone is always and everywhere, more or less consciously, playing a role ... It is in these roles that we know each other; and it is in these roles that we know ourselves.  

Erving Goffman has commented, in other contexts, how audiences will often cooperate by acting in a respectful fashion with such role-playing, "in awed regard for the sacred integrity imputed to performers".  

As will be discussed later, it appeared that during the 1997 crisis the decision-making processes among donors operated under a range of influences and, at least in regard to the case of the Palestinian refugees, with varying degrees of knowledge of the situation on the ground.

Ultimately, donor countries were open to influence through carefully orchestrated presentation of the refugees' case, not as statistics but as the human face of conflict in the region. Unstructured personal contacts with refugees by external political figures, especially in the emotive circumstances of often carefully selected camp environments, were capable of over-riding other, arguably more objective, considerations. UNRWA encouraged and benefited from that situation in 1997 no less than did the Palestinians.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has outlined the key terminology and concepts used in this study. It has argued that

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16 E. Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Allen Lane The Penguin Press, London, 1969, p. 60. Emile Durkheim, in a similar vein, has suggested that the human personality is "a sacred thing; one does not violate it or infringe its bounds, while at the same time the greatest good is in communion with others." E. Durkheim, *Sociology and Philosophy*, translated by D. F. Pocock, Cohen and West, London, 1953, p. 37.
Israelis and Arabs have created mythologies about themselves and each other that affect their capacity to interact. These mythologies, it was suggested, in the Palestinian case at least, tend to be more retrospective than visionary.

The chapter has also briefly outlined Zionist experience with the manipulation of mythology for nation-building purposes, and contrasted that experience with the performance of the Palestinian Authority under Yasser Arafat. It has also mentioned some of the underlying political dynamics of the 1997 crisis that will be elaborated upon later in the study.

It has also been suggested that mythologies are closely linked to perceptions of power and to processes of communication. They are shaped in some cases by personal experience and in most cases by collective memory. Their foundations may not be easily understood by others, and attempts to explain their basic elements are likely to be contested at a variety of levels, including on the basis of alternative notions of equity and natural justice, by the other party. Some aspects of particular mythologies may be challenged, sometimes with considerable vigour and emotional intensity, within their own societies.

Because mythologies are intimately linked to relationships expressed in terms of power, they are unlikely to alter unless relations in terms of power change. The conditions or processes under which those relations change will affect the mythologies as well - including the manner in which changes affect key elements of societies.
Understanding the impact of mythologies on the peace process - and on the events that took place in 1997 - therefore requires understanding of the political cultures of those societies. In particular, it requires study of their distribution of authority, their processes of communication, and the interaction between mythologies and the preservation or promotion of particular interests. The following chapters will address some of those issues, including the relationship between power and myth, and the impact of stress upon the receptivity of Palestinian refugee audiences to messages from peers and leaders respectively, before turning to an examination of the role of refugee mythology in the 1997 UNRWA crisis.
III. Palestinian Refugees

Those [Palestinians] who left in 1948, and especially those who still live in the slums that are called refugee camps, exist in an environment of intense indoctrination and political zeal whose obsession - the return - does not give way easily in a confrontation with pragmatism.

David Shipler

To write of Palestine is to write of exile

Edward Said

Understanding the impact of memories and mythologies on the Palestinian refugee issue, and on the search for politically-viable solutions to the financial crisis of UNRWA, requires understanding not only of the history of the Arab-Israeli conflict, but also of the political culture of Palestinian society and its interaction with external parties. This chapter therefore provides an overview of the key historical turning points and continuities in the Palestinian conflict with Israel until the end of the 1990s, and of the nature of Palestinian refugee society, especially among camp-dwelling refugees.

Palestinian Refugees

Over 3.7 million Palestinian refugees were registered with UNRWA in June 2000. The total number may be close to 4.9 million, of whom about one-third live in the West Bank and Gaza, slightly more than one third in Jordan, and 17 per cent in Syria and Lebanon. A further 15 per cent are spread among other Arab and Western countries. They, together with the Palestinians who were displaced by the 1967 war between Israel and the Arab states, and the descendants of that group, constitute one of the largest single concentrations of stateless persons, and one of the oldest refugee communities in the world. It is also one of the fastest growing of those communities.
The first, and most significant of the waves of refugees created by the Arab-Israeli conflict arose during the course of 1948. It numbered, according to UN estimates (which some Palestinian scholars consider too low) 726,000 people, around two-thirds of the then total Palestinian population of 1.2 million. The second wave came in the 1967 war when 323,000 Palestinians became homeless, 113,000 of whom were already refugees from 1948. Around the time of the 1997 financial crisis in UNRWA, close to 4 million Palestinians were classified as refugees and displaced persons.

Israel has so far refused to allow the return to Israel of any but a small number of refugees, mainly in the 1950s in the context of family reunification. Under the Oslo Accords 45,000-50,000 people have returned to Gaza and the West Bank as members and

This means that the West Bank and Gaza, with a refugee and non-refugee population of around 2.3 million in 1995 must accommodate a 50% increase in population over a period of 15 years, even without considering returnees. See Jill Tansley, Adaptation in the West Bank and Gaza: A Discussion Paper, International Development Research Centre, Ottawa, February 1996 pp. 5-6, citing research by Kevin McCarthy of RAND Corporation. Zureik cites a study by Kevin Kinsella Palestinian Population Projections for 16 Countries of the World, 1990 to 2010, Bureau of the Census Centre for International Research, Washington, DC, mimeographed, p. 57, which calculates that the number of Palestinians in the Middle East and North Africa will reach around 9.4 million by 2010. E. Zureik, Palestinian Refugees and the Peace Process, p. 13.

Report of the Special Representative's Mission to the Occupied Territories, 15 September 1967, United Nations Report No. A/6797. D. Arzt, Refugees Into Citizens has an excellent brief discussion of the debate over the numbers who became refugees at pp. 13-14. Arzt puts the number of displaced persons in 1967 at approximately 280,000-325,000; and suggests that perhaps 120,000 to 170,000 were persons who had also been refugees in 1948 and then fled again in 1967. It should also be noted that in the early 1990s, after the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait and the war which followed, over 300,000 Palestinians were forced to leave Kuwait. Most went to Jordan.

Zureik, Palestinian Refugees and the Peace Process, p. 25. The issue of displaced persons, which is largely outside the scope of this study, is dealt with under Article XII of the September 1993 Declaration of Principles, through the establishment of a four party ("Quadripartite") committee consisting of representatives of Jordan, Egypt, Israel and the Palestinians. See S. Tamari, Palestinian Refugee Negotiations: From
family of the security forces of the Palestinian Authority.9

Palestinians and Palestinian Refugees

Despite the fact that the Palestinian refugee experience is part of general Palestinian political consciousness, the precise nature of the relationship between Palestinian refugees and non-refugees is still inadequately understood. Mapping the political relationship between Palestinian refugees and non-refugees is made even more difficult because that relationship operates on a variety of levels and poses the problem, mentioned earlier, of communication between elites and non-elites in Palestinian society.

Palestinians, whether refugees or non-refugees, share what Bernard Lewis refers to as the primary identities of blood (family, clan and tribe and ultimately ethnic nationality), place (village, neighbourhood, city or country), and religion which, in the case of the Palestinians, is predominantly Sunni Islam.10 Accordingly, one of the constraints facing any analysis of Palestinian refugees is the difficulty of separating out their situation from that of other Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza, as well as from local populations in Jordan, Syria and Lebanon.

The relationship between refugee camp and refugee identity is also a complex and politically sensitive issue. The role that the camp environment itself has

9 Palestine Report, 25 April 1997 p. 10. If one accepts Israeli claims that 88,000 people were allowed into the West Bank under a family reunification scheme from 1967 to 1994, this would equate to allowing an average of 3,251 people to return each year. Zureik, Palestinian Refugees and the Peace Process, pp. 23-24.
played directly in the shaping of refugee identity is difficult to determine precisely, but the camps - and the provision of UNRWA services within them - are perceived to make a unique contribution to sustaining that identity. 11

Palestinian Refugee Identity: The Imagined Community

There is no generally accepted definition of who are considered to be Palestinian refugees for legal purposes. 12 The term is generally applied, however, to those Arab citizens of Mandate Palestine who fled that part of Mandate Palestine which in 1948 became the state of Israel, and who were subsequently prevented from returning there. Those who fled from the West Bank during the 1967 war are generally referred to as displaced persons, rather than as refugees, although there were of course some 1948 refugees among them.

UNRWA instructions concerning refugee registration - which were developed for operational reasons at the time of its establishment rather than as a considered attempt to deal with the legal, political and humanitarian complexities involved - define Palestinian refugees in the following terms:

Palestine refugee: shall mean any person whose normal place of residence was Palestine during the period 1 June 1946 to 15 May 1948 and who lost both home and means of livelihood as a result of the 1948 conflict. 13

Eligibility for registration with UNRWA for the purpose of obtaining services from the Agency within its area of operations was limited to those who could produce documentary evidence of being Palestine refugees, as defined above. Eligibility for registration as refugees also extended to the descendants of fathers fulfilling that definition, and to the descendants of fathers registered with UNRWA of a limited number of other special categories. The descendants of those who left in 1948 were included because the defining characteristics of refugee status in general - inability to return (except in small numbers in the context of family reunification) and lack of national protection by the government of the country of origin - also applied to them. The principle, recognised by UNHCR, of upholding family unity was also relevant.

The UNRWA definition of refugee status has been viewed among some Palestinians as unreasonably narrow in its scope. However, the definition has continued, in the words of Salim Tamari, "to capture a combination of need (though outmoded) with the basic requirement of a

14 UNRWA Consolidated Registration Instructions (Effective January 1993) Chapter 3.1.5 cited in Takkenberg, p. 368. The special categories ("Gaza Poor" in Gaza; "Jerusalem Poor" in the West Bank; "Frontier Villagers in the West Bank and in Jordan and "Members of nomadic and semi-nomadic tribes") enable the definition of refugees to include residents of the border villages in the West Bank who lost their agricultural land in the war of 1948, and therefore their livelihood, but remained in their villages; residents of the Gaza Strip refugee camps who were either relocated on the Egyptian (Rafah) side of the boundary or who found themselves separated from their families as a result of the border demarcation after the Camp David Agreement between Israel and Egypt; and Palestinian Bedouins who were forcibly removed from their grazing lands within the State of Israel, as well as those who were induced to abandon the West Bank and relocate in Jordan. See Zureik, Palestinian Refugees and the Peace Process, pp. 10-11. Among the Palestinian bedouin forcibly moved within Israel and the West Bank are the Jahileen tribe, who have been subjected to ongoing pressure and ill-treatment by the Israeli authorities.

15 Takkenberg, The Status of Palestinian Refugees in International Law, pp. 49-54.
political resolution of refugee status, while taking into account refugee aspirations.” 16

In practice, the refugee sense of self, as distinct from the formal definition of Palestinian refugee identity, is inseparable from the historical loss of homes and means of earning a livelihood, which, as noted above, are the factors accepted by UNRWA for registration purposes. Ultimately, Palestinian refugee identity at an individual level derives from consciousness of the historical environment, and from the manner through which that consciousness is shaped. 17 Social and other factors, as described below, have helped to preserve that identity.

The refugee sense of identity is further reinforced by geographic proximity to the former Palestinian homeland. According to Donna Arzt, 80 per cent of Palestinians live within a 100-mile radius of pre-1948 Palestine. 18 Palestinian researcher Salman Abu Sitta estimates that 87 per cent of Palestinian refugees live within Mandate Palestine boundaries or in the Arab countries bordering Israel. 19

The 59 Palestinian refugee camps currently recognised by UNRWA remain the most salient symbol among refugees, Palestinians and external parties more generally of Palestinian refugee landlessness and exile. Even though Palestinians dwelling in camps are

16 Tamari, Palestinian Refugee Negotiations, p. 40.
17 Hofstadter and Dennett sum up the point succinctly: "Those things of which I am conscious, and the ways in which I am conscious of them, determine what it is like to be me”. Douglas R. Hofstadter and Daniel C. Dennett The Mind’s I: Fantasies and Reflections on Self and Soul, The Harvester Press, Brighton UK, 1981, p. 9. Emphasis in original.
18 Arzt, Refugees Into Citizens, p. 49.
a majority of the refugee population only in Gaza and in Lebanon, the Palestinian refugee camps provide the public face of the Palestinian cause.

Some commentators are inclined to see the continuing existence of the camps, and UNRWA's role in them, as factors which contribute directly and substantially to the continuation of Palestinian dreams of return, rather than acceptance by refugees of integration into other Arab countries. Both Israel and, at times, Arab governments have accused UNRWA of nourishing an environment in camps conducive to political and military activism.

Refugees indirectly lend weight to that view, through attaching considerable importance to the continuation of UNRWA services in camps and in other refugee neighbourhoods, and through refusing to accept the principle of local integration. Such a perception begs the question, however of whether local integration is, or ever was, a viable option for the vast majority of the refugee population. Because this issue lies at the

author is indebted to Dr Abu Sitta for personal communication of this and other background information.

20 According to UNRWA estimates, in the West Bank, in mid-1998, of a total number of registered refugees of 555,057 or 30 per cent of the total population, 408,042 or 73.51 per cent of the refugee population lived outside the 19 refugee camps in that Field. In the Gaza Strip, of a total number of 772,653 registered refugees, 348,772 or 45.14 per cent lived outside the eight camps. The percentage of registered refugees not living in camps in Jordan, Lebanon and Syria was around 82 per cent, 45 per cent and 71 per cent respectively. United Nations Report of the Commissioner-General of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East 1 July 1997-30 June 1998, General Assembly Official Records Fifty-third session Supplement No. 13 (hereafter A/53/13), pp. 46-47.


22 See for example Shipler, Arab and Jew, pp. 55-56; S. Gazi t, The Palestinian Refugee Problem, Jaffee Centre for Strategic Studies, Tel Aviv University, 1995, p. 27.

core of discussions about the future of the refugee issue in the context of the peace process, it warrants further discussion here.

It is certainly the case that the social and political characteristics of the camps make them environments in which dreams may be preserved. As discussed in more detail below, however, the differences between refugee and non-refugee in Palestinian society, let alone between Palestinian refugees and the societies of neighbouring Arab states, make that Israeli complaint - and the associated notion that the problem can be resolved through their economic integration into the wider Arab world - somewhat simplistic.

The main studies that have been prepared by FAFO (the Norwegian Institute for Applied Social Science) in 1994 and 1997 demonstrate that refugees in camps have a very specific identity in Palestinian society.\(^24\) And Palestinian refugees in general possess a sense of imagined community, in that the community is defined not by geographic space but rather by the creation and reproduction of social organisation or networks not located in a specific place.\(^25\) That identity includes, but goes well beyond, the geographical location in camp environments of substantial proportions of the Palestinian population in Gaza and the West Bank, as well as in Lebanon, Syria and Jordan.

The sense of imagined community exists despite apparent near-equivalence in terms of living standards

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\(^{24}\) Gilen et al., Finding Ways, p. 42.
of refugees not living in camps and non-refugee communities in major urban centres in the West Bank. Its members also appear little affected by the extent to which space is shared in functional terms between refugees and non-refugees in any particular geographic location.

The essential irrelevance of economic conditions among refugees to their sense of refugee identity - and to the negative perceptions of the refugees among other Arabs - was identified well by Fred Bruhns in 1955. He pointed out that in Arab society, whose most prominent characteristic was a lack of stability and cohesiveness in social relations at all levels beyond that of the primary group comprising home, family, clan and community, the uprooting of the primary group and their dispersal as refugees was deeply damaging. Refugees, as a group, he observed, felt uprooted to a much greater extent socially than economically.

Palestinian analyst and negotiator Salim Tamari has argued that in urban areas of the West Bank such as Jerusalem, al-Bireh and Ramallah, leaving aside variables of exclusion such as class and religion which also operate within resident communities, there is almost total integration between non-camp refugees and residents. Tamari has noted that in the West Bank, the standards of living of non-camp refugees

nevertheless deeply embedded in that society, wherever it may be physically located.

26 Tamari, Palestinian Refugee Negotiations, p. 38.
28 Fred C. Bruhns. "A Study of Refugee Attitudes", Middle East Journal, Vol. 9, No. 2, Spring 1955, p. 133. Bruhns also makes the important point that to grasp the social implications of the Arab refugee problem
appear to be on a par with, and sometimes surpass, those of resident non-refugees. He suggests, accordingly, that the non-integration of refugees into host communities under those circumstances is perhaps a factor of social status, not of refugee affiliation. 29

This author's observations suggest, however, that distinctions between refugees and non-refugees are made consistently by many Palestinians, and that in Palestinian society, the attribution of social status to individuals cannot be divorced from their refugee heritage, as Dr Tamari appears to suggest. And, whereas Tamari is focussing his observations on the wealthier towns of the West Bank, the level of integration appears to be somewhat less in other West Bank towns and environments. For example in Hebron, a city of 150,000 people, there is a refugee population of around 15,000 which, in the main, appears isolated from the resident Hebronite community because of the nature of Hebron society, which has a reputation among Palestinians for exclusivity. 30 The presence of a high proportion of former residents of Hebron (al Khalil) in the suburb of al Ram, on the outskirts of Jerusalem beside Beit Hanina, is also pointed to by other Palestinians as an explanation for the supposedly more temperamental behaviour of people there.

Focussing on non-camp dwelling refugees and their non-refugee counterparts also overlooks the reality of local frictions which arise from time to time between refugee camp dwellers and neighbouring non-refugee

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29 Tamari, Palestinian Refugee Negotiations, p. 38.
30 Author's discussions with UNRWA Hebron Area Office officials, March 1998.
Palestinian towns and villages. There is ongoing tension for example, between the municipal authorities in Nablus and the refugees located in Balata camp, including over the provision of urban services. And, during the late 1990s, Jalazone camp near Ramallah caused a neighbouring village to experience ongoing environmental difficulties as a result of camp residents attaching sewage lines to waste water drainage facilities. There was, not surprisingly, a perception among those who were on the receiving end of the sewerage that the refugees were a group apart — or worse. 31

The inferior social status of refugee camp-dwellers, in the eyes of both non-Palestinians and Palestinians alike, has probably reinforced the boundaries between refugee and non-refugee populations more generally. The social distinctions and, at times, discrimination between refugee and non-refugee, and within the refugee community, between in particular fellah (peasant) and madiun (town-dwelling) families also remain strong. 32

Yezid Sayigh makes the point that the social uprooting of Palestinian refugees in 1948 through making them landless deprived the refugees of their social status, both in their own eyes and in those of neighbouring

31 Author’s discussions with UNRWA West Bank Field Office officials.
32 Hovdenak, A., Pedersen J., Tuastad Dag H., and Zureik, E., Constructing Order: Palestinian Adaptations to Refugee Life, FAFO Report No. 236, Oslo, 1997, p. 118. The bulk of the empirical information available on the Palestinian refugees inevitably relates to those who are living in the camps where UNRWA operates. See also Danny Rubinstein, The People of Nowhere: The Palestinian Vision of Home, Times Books, New York, 1991, p. 31, n. 2, citing evidence from research in 1977 that for the first 30 years, most refugees continued to marry within their clans, maintaining family blood ties as well as geographic origins. It is also this author’s experience that the dismissive terms “fellah” (peasant) or “fellah faka” (just a peasant) are frequently applied by Palestinians to low status individual refugees, irrespective of their actual occupation.
populations (including non-refugee Palestinians) and exposed them to ridicule.

The fact that their new neighbours in rural areas often belonged to other sects or social groups — Shi’ite Muslims and Maronites in Lebanon, ‘Alawi Muslims and Druze in Syria, and Bedouins in Transjordan — deepened the isolation of the predominantly Sunni Muslim fallahin in the camps. Class barriers had the same effect in urban areas, as even Palestinian city-dwellers tended to shun their peasant compatriots, both in the West Bank and Gaza Strip and in the Arab host countries. Refugees of urban origin who were compelled by destitution to live in the camps or were forcibly transferred there by the authorities set up separate quarters and avoided dealings with the other inhabitants, while often rebuilding social, commercial, and employment ties with compatriots from their towns and cities of origin.

Ghettoization reinforced the tendency of Palestinian peasants (like peasants in other societies) to conduct as much of their lives as possible within their villages, now replaced by camps in which UNRWA, rather than national governments, provided virtually all basic services and an appreciable number of jobs. It was reinforced by the resort by the refugees to traditional solidarity ties within the camps, which distinguished them further from surrounding populations. ... The refugees ... knew they were spurned and would continue to be spurned ... Being part of a broader Arab (and Islamic) culture was one thing, but losing their place of origin and resettling amidst their Arab brethren evoked deep social (even more than economic) insecurity and cemented opposition to permanent resettlement. 33

Amira Hass relates a number of examples of such social discrimination in Gaza. The following is particularly evocative:

Abu Majed’s home is in Gaza City’s Nasser neighbourhood, where refugees and muwataneen (non-refugees or citizens) live side by side. Four years ago, his daughter reached school age and was about to start at the UNRWA school for refugees. “We’ll be able to walk together”, she told a friend happily. The friend, the daughter of muwataneen, replied haughtily, “No, we won’t. You’re a

muhajera, a refugee. You have to go to school in the camp." "That was the first time she’d heard the word," Abu Majed said, "and she came to ask me what it meant. She thought the girl was cursing at her. I told her that it’s an honour to be called a refugee. ... Sometimes we feel like the Gypsies in Europe, like people without respect. If one of us wants to marry a Gazan girl, the first thing they say is that he’s a refugee. That hurts." 34

Randa Farah, studying Palestinian refugees in Jordan, has similarly found that while, in the views of refugees, the camp (al mukhayyam) had become a national symbol of the Palestinian struggle and should be a source of pride, in the eyes of others, including Palestinians who did not live in them, it was the "poorer face of society". 35

It is also important not to neglect the impact, on the prospects for successful integration, of pre-1948 socio-economic differences among the Palestinians themselves. Rosemary Sayigh has pointed out that most of the urban refugees in 1948, almost all of them Christians, and the members of the propertied classes from the villages, never entered the refugee camps. They preferred instead to live in rented properties in Gaza, Nablus, Beirut or Damascus. 36 In contrast, those who went into the camps and survived in their harsh and degrading conditions for several generations came from more impoverished and less-educated backgrounds. Rosemary Sayigh speculates that they were more likely to have fought assimilation, and to have been influenced by pan-Arab nationalism or Islamic

36 Danny Rubinstein, The People of Nowhere, p. 31.
radicalism than middle-class Palestinians "who thought of themselves primarily as Arabs".  

Yezid Sayigh argues that the emergence of the contemporary imagined community among the Palestinians was linked directly to the mythology of armed struggle. FAFO studies, however, suggest that among Palestinian refugees the imagined community is sustained by an orientation towards maintaining the symbolism of refugee status (of which living within camps and the continued holding of an UNRWA registration card rate very highly), and towards sustaining kinship ties. The latter follows, naturally, through marriage within extended families and clans (hamula) of refugees, usually from common backgrounds in terms of geographic origin, camp dwellers versus non-camp dwellers, farmers versus city-dwellers and so on.

Kinship and geographical ties (that is, preservation of links with kin and members of the same village of origin) remain strong in camps and separate refugee neighbourhoods. According to FAFO and other studies from the mid-1990s, statistics from the West Bank show a rate of marriage within the hamula of around 40 per cent, with no compelling evidence of recent decline. There is evidence from studies of female returnees to camps from the Gulf and other sources that couples tend to marry partners from the same pre-1948 Palestine locality of their parents, even though very few had been to those places.

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38 Gilen et al., Finding Ways, p. 59.

Camps have tended to evolve as segregated communities in distinguishable neighbourhoods, even though migration from camps, particularly on the fringes of urban areas is observable.\textsuperscript{40} The spatial layout of camps and the names of neighbourhoods, and the social relations among the refugees in the decades following 1948 tended to reflect the social structure of pre-1948 Palestine, in which the camps could be described as self-contained settlements, with their own social structure and stratification system.\textsuperscript{41}

A high and stable rate of endogamous marriages (that is, marriage between members of the same clan, and in particular marriage between the children of two brothers) has contributed to the reproduction of Palestinian communities, be they villages, camps or urban neighbourhoods, as distinct units.\textsuperscript{42} Citing Palestinian Ministry of Planning and International Cooperation statistics, Amira Hass confirms that the percentage of marriages between refugees and old Gazan families has been very small. In 1995, there were 8,788 marriages in Gaza of which 45.8 per cent represented muwataneen couples and 45 per cent refugee couples. Only 9.2 per cent were marriages between refugees and muwataneen.\textsuperscript{43}

The FAFO surveys of refugees have confirmed that although the nuclear family is becoming more prevalent than the traditional extended family and the hamula, the household, extended household and the hamula are still nevertheless the key decision making units in regard to matters such as marriage, inheritance, and social security arrangements, and land distribution.

\textsuperscript{40} Gilen et al., Finding Ways, pp. 79-82.
\textsuperscript{41} Hovdenak et al., Constructing Order, pp. 88-89.
\textsuperscript{42} Gilen et al., Finding Ways, p. 56.
The hamula is also an important corporate group in local politics in relation to other hamulas, and is integrated into local politics through the baladiyya, or village council where members of the different hamulas come together.  

The predominant influence of the traditional extended family seems unlikely to be true only of Palestinian refugee communities, but it is strongly characteristic of them. Glenn Robinson points out that the hamulas of wealthy and socially-prominent West Bank families (the nationalist notables, as he refers to them) and, to a lesser degree Jordan, enjoyed an alliance from 1976 onwards with Fatah. The hamulas provided a base for political recruitment in the West Bank, even while operating in some cases in a changed political environment characterised by a more egalitarian ideology.  

During the intifada, according to Robinson, the most successful neighbourhood committees in the town of Bayt Sahur were found in areas where the hamula structure among traditional residents was still intact. The structure was capable of generating instinctive trust among its familial members, even though the leaderships of the hamulas changed to accommodate the non-traditional values of the educated to some extent. Marian Heiberg observes that in Palestinian society, education seems to have done

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43 Hass, Drinking the Sea at Gaza, pp. 175-177.
44 Gilen et al., Finding Ways, p. 46.
46 Robinson, Building a Palestinian State, pp. 73-74.
little to erode ascribed status as the determinant of authority. 47

At the popular level, research by FAFO in Bureij camp in Gaza in 1994 underlined the overall paucity of a formal political infrastructure. The residents of the camp, however, were highly active politically. Intense divisions were evident before the intifada according to kinship and descent - that is, according to hamula affiliation - and during the intifada along factional lines. 48

Until the elections to the Palestinian Council in January 1996 no formal or elected representation had existed at any level in the PA. 49 However, in addition to traditional family and inter-clan rivalries, the struggle against Israeli occupation saw the growth in Gaza - and among Palestinian inmates in Israeli prisons - of three major organisational groupings (referred to by Amira Hass as the three super-hamulas) of Fatah, the Islamic stream led by Hamas, and the secular leftists represented by the PFLP and vestiges of the Palestine Communist Party. These bodies provided a secondary basis of allegiances, identities and attachments which helped to produce channels of authority and negotiation in much the same way as tribal loyalties. 50

The post-intifada period saw an intensification of internal fighting between factions, followed by the re-establishment of what was in effect the old hamula leadership but now, according to the FAFO report,

48 Hovdenak et al., Constructing Order, pp. 119-127.
49 Hovdenak et al., Constructing Order, p. 132.
50 Hass, Drinking the Sea at Gaza, pp. 62-65.
"wearing new factional dress". The control of conflict was achieved largely through kinship institutions and organisations, rather than the evolution of institutions for community development and political participation.

The predominance of traditional hamula affiliation and the secondary political status of the super-hamulas as forms of institutionalised representation did not, however, mean refugees lacked consciousness of their political potential vis-a-vis the PA, or self-confidence in dealing with it. The FAFO study mentioned above noted two occasions (one concerning the establishment of committees to provide needs assessments and dialogue between camp residents and the PA; the other concerning a conflict within the PA over the administration of sports activities) on which the PA found refugee camp mobilisation threatening and potentially irreversible once set in motion.

Other observers such as Sara Roy noted a significant increase in interclan violence in Gaza during 1998, attributed to growing alienation from the authority of the PA, and severe economic distress. Yezid Sayigh has argued that "a peculiar combination of authoritarian and pluralist traits in political management, with a dysfunctional and under-institutionalised system of government administration" have encouraged a return to traditional clan-based or patriarchal modes of political organisation and justice. According to the Palestinian human rights activist Eyad El Sarraj, rather than moving toward a common Palestinian identity, Gazans were

51 Hovdenak et al., Constructing Order, p. 127.
52 Hovdenak et al., Constructing Order, pp. 132-133.
reverting to the clan for security, identity and sense of belonging. This behaviour was reinforced by the reliance of the PA on clan politics to rule:

In order to get a government job, one has to be from a big clan or belong to Fatah ... Moreover, in an environment where security forces function above the law, ... individuals have little choice but to rely on their families for protection. 55

As discussed later, a degree of local integration has been permitted in practice in most Arab countries, although there is a wide degree of variation in approach. Palestinian refugee communities tend to share language, culture and religion with surrounding communities. The foregoing discussion suggests, however, that those affinities between refugee communities and host societies are not by themselves sufficient to ensure successful adaptation. In other words, the existence of refugee camps, and the services provided by UNRWA are arguably barriers to the integration of refugees into host countries and other parts of Palestinian society. However, there are more significant socio-economic obstacles that would need to be addressed, if bringing the refugee problem to a conclusion through their integration into host communities were to be considered a desirable objective of the peace process. Mary-Louise Weighill states firmly that no assumptions should be made about the political attitudes of refugees because of their attitudes or actions concerning housing “or indeed any form of assistance”. 56


Even in situations where the refugee population lives in areas of close historical contact such as the cultivated zones of Jordan, ongoing feelings of separateness on the refugees' side, and stigmatisation on the part of some resident communities, have shaped and will probably continue to shape the situation refugees face. The social background of the refugees and specific local circumstances will have an important bearing upon whether integration is an inevitable, or even a likely outcome of the removal of camps, or the winding up of UNRWA.

In addition to such social and cultural factors promoting distinctive identity, refugees have their own political interests and demands. And the size of the refugee population in Jordan, the West Bank and Gaza virtually ensures that the specific political agendas of the refugee community will have ongoing weight. As of 30 June 1999, there were over 1.5 million Palestinian refugees registered with UNRWA living in Jordan, almost all in or near key urban centres. According to the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, the present number of refugees in the West Bank and Gaza stands at 1.4 million, or 45 per cent of the local Palestinian population of 3.1 million. Repatriation of a further 500,000-800,000 additional refugees from Lebanon, Syria and Jordan,

organised by the Centre for Lebanese Studies and the Refugees Studies Programme, Queen Elizabeth House, Oxford University 27-30 September 1996, p. 47.

57 This conclusion contrasts with the notion, presented by critics of the role played by UNRWA, that removing the refugee camps would expedite, if not bring about the integration of the refugees into their host societies. See, for example, Emanuel Marx, "Palestinian Refugee Camps in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip", Middle Eastern Studies, Vol. 28, No. 2, May 1992, pp. 13-14.
should that eventuate, would raise their proportion to 55 per cent.\textsuperscript{58}

**Refugees in Host Countries**

As will be discussed in more detail below, the circumstances facing Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza are very different from those faced by refugees in Lebanon, where for various historical and political reasons Palestinians face a range of discriminatory practices. The situations with which the Palestinians deal in Syria and Jordan, or in the Persian Gulf Arab states, are different again. By historical accident and despite a variety of other pressures they experience in regard to residency rights, most Palestinians in East Jerusalem, including some Palestinian refugees, also have access to a range of Israeli identity cards, health services and better employment opportunities than many other Palestinians.

Adaptation strategies employed by refugees in host countries vary according to local conditions of incorporation and segregation, including the legal regulation of their presence - for example as foreigners in the case of Lebanon; and as citizens (at least in the case of refugees from the West Bank) in the case of Jordan. UNRWA education programs in the various host countries follow host country curricula wherever possible, so as to maximise the employment prospects of Palestinian students in those countries.\textsuperscript{59}

Skilled and educated Palestinian refugees have found it easier (where host government policies permit) to

\textsuperscript{58} Yezid Sayigh, "Palestine's Prospects", p. 8.

\textsuperscript{59} Using the same education curricula and textbooks as host countries also means, of course, that refugee children receive the same propaganda as their host country counterparts - to the disquiet of Israelis, who hold UNRWA responsible.
attain citizenship and geographic mobility than other, less-qualified refugees. Palestinians living in camps appear to be more involved in irregular work, day labour and employment in the informal (illegal) sector than is the case with Palestinians living outside camps. 60 Non-camp dwellers tend to engage more in the underground and informal type of economy than camp dwellers: most of the camp dwellers belong to the lower socio-economic groupings in relation to the host countries. 61

Arab states, with the exception of Jordan, have also consistently opposed resettling the refugees or granting them citizenship, on the basis that the preservation of refugee identity and maintaining their status as refugees would avoid providing Israel with an excuse to evade its responsibilities for their plight. 62 All have insisted that the future of the refugees will remain unresolved until there is a comprehensive peace settlement.

**Jordan**

In Jordan, which is a special case because of its historical position in the West Bank, there has been a stronger effort than in other host countries to make Palestinians within Jordan part of a national fabric. Palestinians of West Bank origin had access to Jordanian citizenship until 1988, and may still obtain limited validity Jordanian passports. Palestinians serve at the highest levels in the Jordanian government and, albeit at lower levels, in the Jordanian armed forces. Even so, and allowing for the

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60 Gilen et al., *Finding Ways*, p. 21.
61 Hovdenak et al., *Constructing Order*, pp. 82-83.
fact that integrative factors – such as common
education curricula, military service requirements,
and national public institutions including the elected
Parliament, the civil service and the judiciary – are
comparatively weak for the Jordanian population as a
whole, a strong sense of distinctive identity applies
between the East Bank Jordanian and Palestinian-origin
parts of the population. 63

In the Jordan Valley, anecdotal evidence and casual
observation of the populations of the neighbouring
Jordanian villages of Mashariya (largely made up of
Palestinians displaced in 1967, some of 1948 refugee
origin) and Tabeqat Fahl (composed entirely of
Jordanian families of East Bank origin) is
illustrative of this point. Inhabitants of Mashariya,
while apparently possessing fairly similar economic
conditions to their Palestinian counterparts,
nevertheless display very limited social and economic
interaction or empathy with them. 64 Conflict between
Israel and the Palestinians, and its consequences for
Jordanians (including the residents of Tabeqat Fahl)
in the form of Israeli artillery and air strikes
against Palestinian fighters in the late 1960s have
reinforced the sense of separation between the two
communities. 65

63 Laurie Brand, “Palestinians and Jordanians: A Crisis of Identity”
64 Discussions by the author during 1989-1992 with University of Sydney
archeologists residing and working at the site of Pella, adjacent to
Tabeqat Fahl and close to Mashariya in the Jordan Valley. The Sydney
teams have excavated at Pella since the mid-1970s, and in doing so have
come to observe informally the dynamics of relations between the two
village societies.
65 For discussion of Arafat’s efforts to promote conflict with Israel in
an effort to draw other Arab regimes into as war of liberation for which
they were not prepared, and at the expense of the Jordanian population
against whom Israeli retaliation was sometimes directed, see Andrew
Gowers and Tony Walker, Behind the Myth: Yasser Arafat and the
Palestinians in Jordan are not a homogeneous group and socio-economic conditions appear to influence the degree to which people identify themselves as Palestinians and/or Jordanians.66 Whereas the Palestinian middle class in many cases did not experience the 1970s clashes in Jordan, camp-dwelling refugees in both Jordan and Lebanon were prominent in the resistance, and mobilised by the symbolism associated with it, thus producing enduring effects on attitudes on both sides towards the 'other'. Randa Farah makes the interesting observation that among Palestinians in Jordan, a Jordanian 'other' is not necessarily a hostile opposition, depending on the context, but when memories of the clashes of the 1970s are recalled, the “other” is homogenised and represented as antagonistic to a similarly homogenised Palestinian community.67

The sense of differentiation between East Bank and Palestinian origin Jordanians also appears more marked than the distinctions which are made between other elements and layers of Jordanian society. Among the Jordanian security services and the beduin who provide the bedrock of the Hashemite leadership's popular support, suspicion of low status Palestinians is endemic. Middle class Palestinians tend to be seen by beduin as exploitative, and unduly advantaged (considering they are deemed to have guest status) by their perceived preferential access to opportunity.68

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66 Laurie Brand, "Palestinians and Jordanians: A Crisis of Identity" p. 49.
68 While this is naturally a difficult proposition to document, it is based on innumerable private discussions with East Bank personalities and tribal groups in Jordan during the author’s diplomatic assignment to
Lebanon

Lebanon is certainly the most restrictive of the host governments in its approach to such day-to-day issues for refugees as employment, health and education services and housing. Although 60,000, mostly Sunni, refugees were granted Lebanese citizenship in 1994, many Lebanese fear upsetting confessional balances between Lebanon’s religious groups. This has meant that the overwhelming majority of the refugees remain stateless foreigners, who have no rights of property ownership, investment or employment except through a complex and lengthy permit process. In practice, Palestinian refugees seeking paid employment are usually obliged to ignore the law, leaving them vulnerable and unprotected by labour and social security regulations.

Lebanese labor law does not discriminate against Palestinian refugees as such, but rather between Lebanese citizens and non-citizens. By being treated as non-Lebanese Arab nationals, refugees are effectively denied access to the practice of most professions in Lebanon by the professional associations or guilds concerned. They find it extremely difficult to gain access to government secondary schools, and therefore to universities, and they are excluded from public institutions for higher education. Restrictions on building and construction
in refugee camps mean that (according to UNRWA figures) in June 2000 there were over 210,000 refugees living in camps which were intended to accommodate only 50,000 refugees.\textsuperscript{71}

The Lebanese government is outspoken in its rejection of the notion of permanent settlement of Palestinian refugees in its territory (tawteen), let alone the granting of Lebanese citizenship to them. Interviewed in February 1998, Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri argued that improvement in the living conditions of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon - which he acknowledged were "extremely bad" - would lead to resettling the Palestinian refugees and their eventual assimilation. The Palestinians themselves have consistently rejected this approach so that their cause and characteristic identity might not be lost. So, basically, the Lebanese state responded positively to the Palestinians in this respect. The Palestinian refugees currently constitute a problem for Israel as they do for the Palestinians in Lebanon. Lebanon will not help Israel solve this problem. Naturally Israel would be delighted if Lebanon assimilated them under humanitarian slogans.\textsuperscript{72}

In December 1998, Hariri was even more specific about the Lebanese stance. He said Lebanon would

\begin{quote}
never, ever integrate Palestinians. They will not receive civic or economic rights, or even work permits. Integration would take the Palestinians off the
\end{quote}


Beyond the formal issues involved, there is a wealth of animosity and mutual distrust between Lebanese and Palestinians that are reflected in dealings at lower levels of officialdom. The abuses of the privileges granted to the Palestinians in Lebanon after 1969, Palestinian exploitation of internal tensions of Lebanese society for their own protection but also for their own ends, and the eventual consequences of such behaviour have all strongly affected mutual perceptions at the popular level.

The unilateral abrogation by Lebanon in 1990 of the Cairo Agreement has placed both the PLO and Lebanon in an awkward position, should there be a wish on either side to negotiate a substitute agreement. Even if there were a desire on the part of the Lebanese government to reach an agreement with the Palestinian Authority or the PLO that would alter the status of the refugees, and allow them access to employment, the issue would be highly controversial among the Palestinians themselves.

Any change in the present situation would be linked to perceptions of the likely outcome of the refugee issue in the peace process. If it succeeded in establishing rights to employment for Palestinians in Lebanon, the PLO would be accused in some quarters of accepting that the long-term outcome of the refugee issue would be integration in host countries. Palestinians in Lebanon, being almost entirely from the 1948 exodus, and already feeling abandoned by the Palestinian Authority and the Oslo process, would be even more

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bitterly divided and antagonistic toward the PLO leadership if they believed their right of return was being compromised by such a change. For its part, the Lebanese government would be accused of unilaterally addressing a final status issue outside the framework of the peace process.\textsuperscript{74}

**Syria**

In Syria, Palestinians have had almost equivalent rights with Syrians since 1956, with the main exceptions being the right to hold elected political office, and certain restrictions on property ownership. As with other minority groups, however, the Palestinian refugee population is carefully monitored for signs of dissident behaviour, and the Syrian authorities take an active interest in how UNRWA resources are allocated.\textsuperscript{75}

**Refugee Tenacity**

The approach taken on the Palestinian side to the UNRWA crisis of 1997 provides a clear demonstration of the tenacity with which Palestinians in general, and Palestinian refugees in particular, have defended their identity, perceived rights and political mythologies against real or imagined external challenges. That is by no means an isolated example of such determination. Similar responses have followed where the external evaluation of the economic conditions facing refugee populations, and the advancing of proposals to address that situation, have raised sensitive political issues.

\textsuperscript{74} Letter from Nadim Shehadi, cited above. For discussion of the tensions between Palestinians in Lebanon and the PLO leadership, see Zvi Bar'el, "A gas station, not a clinic" *International Herald Tribune*, 17 September 1997.
In general, a casual observer of Palestinian refugees has little difficulty in accepting without serious reservation Salim Tamari’s view that those refugees who remain in camps inside Palestine tend to be the urban poor, and that in recent years conditions in the camps have increasingly come to resemble those in “normal” urban slums. There were, however no comprehensive studies of Palestinian camp life written until the mid-1980s, and few case studies had been undertaken. That situation was remedied, to some extent, in the latter half of the 1990s by FAFO (Norwegian) and CERMOC (French) academic research projects, and a European Union (EU) study (the Bristol Report) conducted in the context of the Refugee Working Group (RWG) of the multilateral track of the Madrid peace process. But those studies, involving extensive, sometimes politically sensitive investigation of the economic, cultural, social and political adaptation of the refugees, encountered misgivings on the part of UNRWA and the host governments where research indicated apparent inconsistencies between official

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statistics, the statistics put forward by the PLO, and empirical investigations. 79

The EU’s Bristol Report 80, which focussed on questions of humanitarian aid to the refugees, was criticized on the Palestinian side for centering on ways to assist refugees rather than on confronting the underlying political issues of displacement and statelessness. The criticism came at a time when the Refugee Working Group was itself under attack for appearing to place the future of the Palestinian refugees at the mercy of the balance of power, and confining refugee rights to what Israel was willing to concede. 81

The Bristol Report was especially criticised for arguing - though it claimed this was without prejudice to refugees’ right to return to their homes or to receive compensation - that assistance should “transcend [the] legal status” of refugees and concentrate on socio-economic development and rehabilitation of “the whole area”. The key sensitivity of that approach lay in its recognising the virtual impossibility of servicing refugee camps or refugee areas without linking those systems to existing or planned infrastructure development for neighbouring, ‘nonrefugee’ areas. In effect, the report drew attention to the efficiencies of integrating other forms of aid for refugees (such as

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79 Whereas, for example, official Israeli data from the early 1990s placed the infant mortality rate in Gaza and the West Bank at 25 per 1000, and Palestinian researchers put it at more than 70 per 1000, a Norwegian-sponsored study put it at 50 per 1000 live births for infants under one year of age. Zureik, Palestinian Refugees and the Peace Process, p. 45.

80 Assistance to Refugees in the Middle East, report prepared for the European Union by the Office for International Policy Services and the Refugee Studies Programme at Oxford University, UK, July 1994. The report was presented to the Refugee Working Group (RWG) at the RWG meeting in Antalya, Turkey in December 1994.
health services and schools) with similar services for other, non-refugee residents.

The report aroused further sensitivity by suggesting that status-centred assistance - that is, assistance provided on the basis that the individual was within the definition of a refugee and was registered as such with UNRWA - should be replaced by needs-centred aid, governed by the notion of vulnerability. By adopting a 'non-legalistic' (that is, a needs-based rather than historical or status-based) approach to the definition of what constituted a refugee, the report was perceived among Palestinians as a challenge to refugee aspirations. Its political implications - in terms of the future direction of the peace process and the priority to be accorded to the refugee issue within that process - could not be accepted or ignored.  

Salim Tamari pointed out at the time the need for certain political conditions to be dealt with (he suggested enhancing procedures for family reunification; expediting applications of those who lost their residencies in the occupied territories, and implementing the Oslo agreement for relocation of displaced persons to the autonomous regions). Otherwise, he argued, improvements in the living conditions of refugees in host countries on the basis presented in the Bristol Report would become a formula for camouflaging schemes of refugee relocation and resettlement without satisfying their basic needs or aspirations ... [and] marginalizing and possibly excluding the political issues relevant to the future of the Palestinian refugees.  

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81 Tamari, Palestinian Refugee Negotiations, pp. 35-36. Tamari cites the views of Muhammad Hallaj, former head of the Palestinian RWG team.  
82 Tamari, Palestinian Refugee Negotiations, pp. 40-41.  
83 Tamari, Palestinian Refugee Negotiations pp. 36-37, 42.
The strength of the Palestinian rejection, on those political grounds, was sufficient at the time to cause the donor community to back away from direct pursuit of the underlying issue, from a donor perspective, of the appropriateness of the status-based approach.

The tenacity of refugee political activity is also apparent in the dynamics of politics between the refugee camp populations and the PA. Politics in that respect provides a range of opportunities for political activists among the refugee population, including UNRWA employees holding key positions such as Camp Services Officers in the West Bank, and activists among the Union of Youth Activities Centres.

Poised on local issues between the PA leadership on one hand and the Palestinian grassroots on the other, and drawing upon kinship ties, camp identity and their records as activists during the nationalist struggle, the refugee activist stratum has proven adept at maintaining pressure upon the PA and UNRWA in support (real or alleged) of refugee interests. Some activists take quite improbable opportunities to link financial stringencies and other problems to supposed wider political agendas.84

Occasionally, prominent figures associated with the PA leadership, but critical of it in their political approach, have also sought political support within the refugee camps by criticising the PLO’s handling of the refugee issue, and the Oslo process generally. One such example is that of Hani al Hassan, member of the

84 Following the dismissal of 17 of the 22 garbage collectors employed by UNRWA at Balata camp in the West Bank, the buildup of uncollected garbage caused unrest in the camp. Palestinian Legislative Council member Husam Khader described the dismissals as “part of an international conspiracy to bury our right of return”. “Palestinian Refugee Camp Drowns in Garbage” Middle East Newsline, 8 February 2000, reported in FOFOGNET Digest 9 February 2000.
Central Council of Fatah who, while capitalizing on the evident strength of rejectionist sentiment within Fatah and among the refugee camp committees, was prominent during 1997-98 in criticizing the Oslo Accords as a blow to the refugee cause.

Al Hassan also attacked the Multilateral Working Group on Refugees as being intended to bypass the refugee issue to arrive at the resettlement of refugees in host countries. Palestinian negotiators were particularly criticized for appearing to accept postponement of discussion of the political aspect of the refugee problem and its treatment as a humanitarian issue.  

Levels and coverage of UNRWA services provide a popular target for criticism, as when, for example, in 1998 local Palestinian political activists in Qalqilya in the West Bank refused to allow refugee patients to pay increased hospital charges in accordance with agreements previously made by UNRWA with the PA. At times there are also allegations in some refugee quarters that UNRWA seeks “to liquidate [the refugee] cause” by providing education but not employment opportunities, and thus contributing to the emigration of talented youth from the occupied territories in search of work elsewhere. PA officials have also sought from time to time to interfere at an operational level with the conduct of UNRWA programs — as happened in

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85 Al Ayyam, 11 February 1998, reporting on comments made at a seminar organized by the Shaml Centre in Ramallah 10 February 1998.
86 For mention of Palestinian incursions into UNRWA installations and interference distribution of flour rations in 1997-1998, see A/53/13 p. 30. A guarded reference to the problems encountered by the Agency with the Palestinian Authority and the local Palestinian political factions in Qalqilya in March 1998 in adjusting the co-payment rate to make it consistent with the 25 per cent copayment rate introduced earlier at all UNRWA-contracted hospitals appears in A/53/13 p. 3.
1997-1998 in the West Bank in regard to allegations concerning the quality of flour distributed to impoverished refugee households (known in UNRWA’s parlance as Special Hardship Cases).

On the other hand, a striking illustration of the capacity of the refugees to fend off political encroachment by the Palestinian Authority upon their presumed rights and status as refugees was the rise to prominence of the Union of Youth Activities Centres (UYAC) which, with around 20,000 members, brought together the elected executives of the Centres that were established in the 1950s by UNRWA. Insisting on upholding what it described as a non-partisan and independent social force, the UYAC reached agreement with the PA in May 1997 that refugees in the West Bank would not participate in the municipal elections called by the PA within the framework of the Israel-PLO Declaration of Principles. Refugee groups argued that to participate would have jeopardised their special refugee status in the PA areas.

The UYAC eventually secured the acceptance of the PA that refugees would conduct independent elections of camp councils parallel to the PA municipal elections. The basic position taken by the UYAC was that it wished to demonstrate "both to the people and to PA officials" that the UYAC was an independent force, able to defend refugees' rights, and to represent both the social and political interests of the refugees.88

In 1998, the outgoing head of the UYAC, Jamal Shati al Hindi, described the UYAC's role since its foundation in 1995 as the continuation of the struggle for Palestinian independence and sovereignty, the right of

return, and Jerusalem as the Palestinian capital. In al Hindi’s words,

Our refugees rang the bell of alarm to all those involved in conspiracies against refugees and their future, and confirmed the ongoing refugee demand for the implementation of the international resolutions, especially the UN Resolution 194 (right of return).”

Conclusion

Two key elements need to be emphasised from this general overview of the Palestinian refugee situation. The first is that in the late 1990s, the combined effects of ongoing characteristics of refugee society, including family structures and marriage patterns; social discrimination between Palestinian refugees and non-refugees, and the attitudes of host governments toward their resident Palestinian refugee populations virtually guaranteed the continuing potency of refugee identity as an imagined community.

The sense of being a refugee was an irreducible core element of identity among the refugee population, irrespective of where they are located. It was sustained through pressures of collective memory of historical injustice, and the hope of redress, or at least a determination not to relinquish that hope, in the face of external pressures.

As discussed above, refugee identity had deep roots in the nature of refugee society, with its orientation towards maintaining the cohesion of hamulas through marriage ties, its sense of separation from non-refugees and, in some cases, the deliberate discrimination of those societies against refugees for socio-economic, political, and other reasons. The memories and mythologies of the imagined refugee

89 FOFOGNET Digest 20-21 September 1998.
community appeared likely to be perpetuated so long as those circumstances remained unchanged.

The second issue to be noted is the preparedness of the refugees to mobilise in defence of their interests, including their ongoing insistence upon acknowledgement of their right of return to what is now Israel.

Refugee society in the 1990s was experiencing generational changes, and its aspirations and expectations could not be immunised completely against other developments, either in Palestinian society or in the peace process. Despite this, refugee society, especially in its lowest socio-economic levels and therefore, particularly, in its camp-dwelling population, had a number of characteristics which promoted conservatism ahead of change, and which encouraged both the recollection of injustice and the demand that it be redressed. There was strong resistance to compromises which could only be at the expense of those concerns.

The concern that the refugee identity should be preserved, and reinforced wherever possible, led in some cases to questioning the desirability of external economic assistance lest it dilute orthodox political stances. Salim Tamari, Critical Assessment of [the Bristol Report] Assistance to Refugees in the Middle East, September 1994, cited in Zureik, Palestinian Refugees and the Peace Process p. 51. Tamari argues, for example, that it is 'inaccurate' to claim that external assistance shall not prejudice the future status of refugees since refugees with improved social and economic status are likely to move out of camps, to migrate to other countries, and in general to relegate their refugee condition to an abstract political commitment.

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Report, this may have meant that distortion of resource allocation was occurring for the sake of maintaining a political principle.

Except where there was a reasonable prospect of protecting or promoting refugee interests in obtaining resources from them or through them, there was also little reason for refugees to see other Palestinian institutions, including the Palestinian Authority, as potential partners. There was, instead, a disposition among some refugee bodies to see such institutions as competitors - or at best, as unreliable allies - in terms of the pursuit of their political aspirations as refugees.91

Collectively, the public expression of refugee political attitudes was almost invariably rejectionist in tone and content. That applied even where force of circumstances such as the absence of any real choice, or convenience, or quality considerations, or material benefit may have lead individual refugees to take pragmatic approaches to such matters as their choice of service provider in the areas of education and health.

Some degree of acquiescence to political compromises between Israel and the PA was to be expected in practice among the refugee population. But the social and political dynamics of Palestinian refugee society, its interaction with other Palestinians and host countries and, of course, its historical and daily interaction with Israel and Israelis all served to reinforce its fundamentally irredentist orientation on core issues. That reality was reflected throughout the 1997 UNRWA crisis.

91 Randa Farah, "Crossing Boundaries" pp. 291-293.
"What can be said to someone who still holds the keys to his home in Safed, Acre, Jaffa and Haifa?" the interviewer asks Abdallah al-Hourani, Palestinian Authority Minister for Refugee Affairs (Al-Hayat al-Jadida, 15 July, 1998) "Tell him," replied the minister, "to bequeath them to his sons or grandsons, since the day will come when we, or our sons, or our grandsons, will return. The Crusaders lived in our land for 242 years, until the liberation of their last outpost, and Israel is like a tree that has flowered on land not belonging to it. No matter how much it is fertilized, it cannot put down roots, and when the fertilizer stops, it will die..."  

Against the background of the previous chapters, it is now appropriate to examine the core elements of Palestinian collective memories and mythologies. Those include the direct experience and retelling of memories of Palestine before the war, of flight and dispossession. They also include perceived rights as refugees to redress vis-a-vis Israel, including, most importantly, the right of return, and compensation. 

While not discussed in detail in this study, it should also be noted that, among Palestinian refugees, there is a perception that the international community is morally and legally obliged to support and assist them, by virtue of their historical status. That assistance is seen as an obligation, especially for the Western powers who accepted and legitimised the entry of Israel into the international community, 

until such time as their rights as Palestinian refugees have been recognised and restored in the context of a peace settlement with Israel.²

Dispossession

A basic starting point for Palestinian national mythology, which is shared between both refugee and non-refugee Palestinians, is the fact of dispossession and dispersal, and the subsequent search for a sovereign state. That process followed a struggle since the early twentieth century to prevent Jewish immigration on a scale that was considered capable of endangering the economic development, self-determination and, it was feared, even the existence of the Arab community in Palestine.³

Arab rejection of displacement by Jewish land purchases and mass immigration found concrete expression in such actions as the anti-Jewish riots and massacres of 1920-21 and most notably in 1929, as popular Arab hatred grew for the Zionist presence. The failure of efforts up to the mid-1930s to prevent further Jewish immigration provided the basis for the 1936 general strike and the 1936-39 Arab revolt against the British, as the Mandate power, and against the Zionist movement that the British were widely seen as favouring.⁴

² See for example, the erroneous claim that the much-quoted paragraph 11 of UNGA Resolution 194 of 11 December 1948 "emphasised the necessity to assist [Palestinian] refugees until they return". BADIL Resource Centre The Right of Return: Joint Statement Issued by Palestine Right of Return Initiatives in Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Palestine, Canada-USA, London 11 December 2000.
⁴ It has been suggested that the aim of the 1936 revolt was not to drive the Jewish community out, but to make it realize it that it formed part of a predominantly Arab area. After 1948, the idea of co-existence disappeared, "replaced by that of a 'return' to the lost paradise."
The UN General Assembly adopted Resolution 181 (II) on 29 November 1947 recommending the adoption and implementation, with regard to the future Government of Palestine, upon termination of the British Mandate, of a plan for partition and the creation of Arab and Jewish states not later than 1 October 1948.\(^5\)

The Jewish Agency welcomed the resolution at the time it was passed. The Declaration of the State of Israel on 15 May 1948 stated that Israel was prepared to cooperate in its implementation. Admitting Israel to UN membership, UN General Assembly Resolution 273 (III) of 11 May 1949 recalled both Resolution 181 (II) and Resolution 194 (III) of 11 December 1948 in its preamble, and "[took] note of the declarations and explanations made by the representative of the Government of Israel before the ad hoc Political Committee in respect of the implementation of the said resolutions".\(^6\)

At the Lausanne Conference in April 1949 and in subsequent international conferences, however, Israel made it clear that it regarded Resolution 181 (II) in effect as a basis for negotiation with the Arab countries, and that the refugee issue should be linked to a territorial settlement in a peace treaty. It did not necessarily accept limits to Jewish immigration and Israeli territory, and the status proposed for

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Jerusalem as a *corpus separatum*. Benny Morris has argued that Israel preferred the armistice agreements concluded with neighbouring Arab countries in 1949 to the conclusion of a full peace that would have required substantial territorial withdrawals and other major concessions. In his words, the Israeli leadership "entered the postwar era desiring peace - but not a peace that involved paying a significant price ... for something they felt should be theirs by virtue of their victory."  

Resolution 181 (II) was rejected by the Palestinian leadership, which refused to sign away the right to sovereignty over any part of the country. Most Arab states rejected it on the grounds that it violated the provisions of the UN Charter, which granted people the right to decide their own destiny. The partition plan was also deemed in Arab political circles to be manifestly unjust to the Arab population in its proposed division of Mandate Palestine between Jewish and Arab states.

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The violence which followed the passage of Resolution 181 (II) increased in intensity until on 15 May 1948, immediately following the British withdrawal, war broke out between the Arab states and the newly-declared state of Israel. By July 1948 it was clear to the Jewish community and to Arab leaderships that Israel had won the war.\textsuperscript{11}

By the end of October 1948 Israel had expanded its territory to include 78 per cent of Mandate Palestine. Of the 900,000-950,000 Palestinian inhabitants of the areas that were incorporated into the state of Israel, only 150,000 remained.\textsuperscript{12} Anecdotal evidence consistently suggests that most refugees probably believed they would only be leaving temporarily\textsuperscript{13}, even as developments on the ground changed the demographic and physical shape of Palestine, and made the possibility of a return of the refugees increasingly remote.\textsuperscript{14} Israel and Jordan together blocked the UN


\textsuperscript{12} Sayigh, \textit{Armed Struggle and the Search for State} pp.3-4. It should be noted that shortly after the passage of Resolution 181 (II), David Ben Gurion estimated the emergent Jewish state would have a population of 520,000 Jews and 350,000 Arabs; including Jerusalem, the Jewish state would have faced the prospect of having a population of one million, 40 per cent of which would have been non-Jews. See Morris, \textit{The birth of the Palestinian refugee problem, 1947-1949}, p. 28.

\textsuperscript{13} In a speech on 17 November 1958 to the UN General Assembly, chief Israeli representative Abba Eban cited remarks attributed to Msgr. George Hakim, the Greek Catholic Archbishop of Galilee, that "The refugees had been confident that their absence from Palestine would not last long; that they would return within a few days - within a week or two; their leaders had promised them that the Arab armies would crush the 'Zionist gangs' very quickly and that there would be no need for panic or fear of a long exile". Walter Laqueur (ed.) \textit{The Israel-Arab Reader: A documentary history of the Middle East conflict}, Penguin Books, UK, 1969, p. 190.

\textsuperscript{14} Benny Morris notes that “the gradual destruction of the abandoned Arab villages, the cultivation and/or destruction of Arab fields and the share-out of the Arab lands to Jewish settlements, the establishment of new settlements on abandoned lands and sites and the settlement of Jewish immigrants in empty Arab housing in the countryside and in urban neighbourhoods ...[meant] that the refugees would have nowhere, and nothing, to return to. Morris, \textit{The birth of the Palestinian refugee problem, 1947-1949}, p. 155.
plan embodied in UN Resolution 181 (II) to internationalise Jerusalem.\textsuperscript{15}

Morris notes that Syrian President Husni Za’im proposed negotiations with Israeli Prime Minister David Ben Gurion in order to reach a peace settlement, proposing that Syria absorb 250,000-300,000 Palestinian refugees (with Western countries covering the cost of resettlement and development projects for them along the Euphrates) and that Israel agree to a demarcation of their frontier down the middle of the (upper) Jordan River and the Sea of Galilee. However Ben Gurion rejected the overture, partly because of dislike and suspicion of Za’im personally, but more so because he was not willing to pursue a peace process with Syria or Jordan or Egypt that would entail substantial Israeli concessions on territory, refugees or water.\textsuperscript{16} A later Syrian ruler, Adib Shishakli also offered in 1952 to sign a ‘peace agreement’ with Israel, and absorb about half a million Palestinian refugees in the framework of that agreement. Ben Gurion refused, however, to make any territorial concessions in return for a non-aggression agreement, and apparently not even in return for a full peace treaty.\textsuperscript{17}

After the creation of the State of Israel, legal measures were taken to institutionalise the blockage of Palestinian return. These included laws and regulations for the expropriation of ‘abandoned’ Arab property, including the Abandoned Areas Ordinance of


1948, the Emergency Regulations Concerning the Cultivation of Waste Lands Regulations of 1949, and the Absentees’ Property Law of 1950. The Law of Return of 1950 and the Nationality Law of 1952 guaranteed all Jews a virtually automatic right to emigrate to Israel and to become Israeli citizens, while denying that right to others, including the Palestinians who fled in 1948. Although refugees clung to the notion that they would, indeed, be able to return, by mid-1949 it had become almost inconceivable. 18

Arab governments led the opposition within the UN to treatment of the Palestinian refugees on the same basis as refugees in post-war Europe. 19 Struggling to cope with the influx of around 720,000 Palestinian refugees, Arab countries were adamant, for obvious political and national interest reasons, that those refugees should be provided with humanitarian assistance until a solution for the refugee problem was reached and implemented based on their right to return to their homes. The Arab states rejected a US proposal at the Lausanne Conference in July 1949, reluctantly accepted by Israel, that it should take back 100,000 refugees. 20

The Arab states also insisted that the Palestinian refugees should be the subject of special United Nations attention, rather than being included in the mandate of the United Nations High Commissioner for

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Refugees (UNHCR), which was created five days earlier than UNRWA. The primary emphasis of UNHCR at the time was on local integration and third country resettlement. The objection in Arab circles against treating Palestinian refugees in that manner was largely based on their demand for special United Nations attention, and concern that the prospect of returning to their homes would be negatively affected if they were included under the UNHCR mandate.

For Arab governments hosting Palestinian refugees, support for their right to return to pre-1967 Israel or for compensation served domestic political agendas in a variety of ways. Providing such support represented a means of upholding a matter of principle. In some cases, including Jordan and Syria, it also provided a degree of political cover as efforts proceeded to find forms of accommodation with Israel on matters of more direct national interest.

Although the outcomes of the 1948 conflict posed some domestic political problems for most Arab regimes, the results were far from intolerable for them. Jordan acquired control over the West Bank. Egypt retained control over the Gaza Strip, and thereby avoided an Israeli military presence along its most important southerly access route. Lebanon, while concerned at

21 It was also decided to exclude Palestinian refugees who were assisted by UNRWA from the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees. See Takkenberg, The Status of Palestinian Refugees in International Law p.7 and pp. 65-67.

22 Takkenberg, The Status of Palestinian Refugees in International Law, p. 66.

23 Sayigh, Armed Struggle and the Search for State pp. 11-12. It is interesting to compare the approach taken at the time by Arab countries with the stance adopted by Australia in regard to receiving refugees from Kosovo during 1999. Like the Arab states at the time of the Palestinian refugee exodus, Australia stressed the temporary nature of the Kosovar refugee presence, emphasising that permanent removal to Australia would signal to the Serbian government that ethnic cleansing
the prospect of long-term settlement of Palestinians in Lebanese territory, benefitted from the re-routing of oil pipelines from Iraq away from Israel. Beirut replaced Haifa as the leading transit port on the eastern Mediterranean.  

For Palestinians, however, the description of the events of 1948 as al nakbah or the catastrophe was entirely apt. The events were totally unlike any Arab experience recorded to that point in the conflict with the Zionist movement. Population transfer had been discussed in Zionist circles as the solution to 'the Arab problem', and observed by some outsiders as early as the 1920s to be part of the Zionist objective. But the notion of mass transfer of the Arab population of Palestine was firmly opposed by the British mandate power, and had remained no more than a hypothetical scenario during the period of British rule. Ben Gurion favoured compulsory transfer of Palestinians to neighbouring Arab countries, as part of a strategic approach to sovereignty and a reduction of the number of Arabs in the Jewish state, but he preferred to avoid proposing such a policy when the British had already made it clear they would not support or implement it. He proposed that a future Jewish state worked. See comments of Australian Immigration Minister Phillip Ruddock Canberra Times, 15 May 1999.


26 Schemes for transfer were a frequent matter of discussion among the Zionists, and were raised in private in negotiations with the British, though there was no mention of them in public. Simha Flapan, Zionism and the Palestinians Croon Helm, London, Barnes and Noble Books, New York, 1979, pp. 69-70, 82.
would approach Arab states with regard to the voluntary transfer of Arab farmers, and the purchase of land for that purpose.\textsuperscript{27}

The Palestinian reaction to \textit{al nakbah} was to attribute collective responsibility for their suffering to the international community, especially the United States and Britain. Those countries, in the Palestinian view, had accepted and legitimised the entry of Israel into the international community, and yet had failed to prevent or to put right the tragedy that followed the withdrawal of Britain from its responsibilities.\textsuperscript{28}

\textbf{Historical Responsibility}

While it is not the author’s intention to review the question of historical responsibility for the refugee exodus in any detail, some brief remarks on the debate surrounding that issue may be in order. A distinction is also made here between the circumstances surrounding the departure of most of the Arab leadership (as early as September-October 1947) and the departure of around 70,000 mostly upper class Palestinians by the end of January 1948, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the reasons for the vast majority of Palestinians becoming refugees in the period that followed. Historians agree that the departure of the former category was mainly voluntary.\textsuperscript{29} The main debate is over the exodus of Palestinians from March 1948 onwards, and, in particular, whether Jewish plans existed to drive the Arabs out of Palestine.

\textsuperscript{27} Flapan, \textit{Zionism and the Palestinians} p. 263.
\textsuperscript{29} Pappe, \textit{The Making of the Arab-Israeli Conflict 1947-1951}, pp. 87-88.
Benny Morris' key conclusion, after detailed analysis, was that the events of 1947-49 were so complex, changing and varied, that a single-cause explanation of the exodus from most sites was untenable. 30 Morris concluded that the refugee problem was born of war, not by design, Jewish or Arab, and was largely a by-product of Arab and Jewish fears and of the protracted and bitter fighting and, to a lesser degree, the deliberate creation of Jewish and Arab military commanders and politicians. 31

Critics of Morris' work, who are generally sympathetic to the Palestinians, have condemned it as biased, and inconsistent with his own evidence. Norman Finkelstein concludes, for example, that a legitimate interpretation of Morris' evidence, if not his thesis, is that "a sequence of Zionist terror and Israeli expulsion" lay behind the birth of the refugee problem. 32 Edward Said, also, has described, with the aid of diary entries of a former Director of the Jewish National Fund, Joseph Weitz, how a Zionist aim was to Judaize territory "coterminously with de-Arabising it." 33

Morris has also acknowledged that he may have erred in not initially attributing enough weight to the Zionists' 'transfer' predisposition in explaining what happened in 1948, noting that

the Zionist leadership in the late 1930s and early 1940s almost consensually and persistently supported the idea of transfer, whether "voluntary" (with Arab agreement and compensation) or compulsory, as a solution to the "Arab problem"... Nor was Ben Gurion alone in the Zionist heirarchy in supporting transfer. Indeed the majority of the movement's leaders in the 1930s and 1940s went on record (at least in closed fora) in support of the idea. 34

Historians and other academics more inclined to be supportive of Israel, and, in particular, commentators from the Right wing of Israeli politics, have been no less willing to condemn Morris's historical analysis, which they regard as distortion peddled by post-Zionist cynics. 35

The Israeli official version of the events surrounding the departure of the Palestinians in 1948 has attributed the blame for that situation to the Arab states for rejecting partition and attacking the newly-established Jewish state. 36 The popular Israeli version of the events of 1948, as outlined by David Ben Gurion, was that the Palestinians left "following instructions by the Arab leaders, with the Mufti [of Jerusalem, Amin Al Husseini] at their head, under the assumption that the invasion of the Arab armies at the expiration of the Mandate [would] destroy the Jewish

35 For bitter criticism of Morris from an Israeli Right wing perspective see the report by Dan Perry, The Associated Press, 22 December 1997.
state and push all the Jews into the sea, dead or alive."  

Morris and other writers have effectively discredited that claim, pointing out that no evidence has been produced of instructions by the Arab Higher committee, or any Arab government, to Palestinians to leave the country.  

More scholarly contemporary debate centres on the importance or otherwise of the Israeli military plan known as Plan Dalet, or Plan D, to the eventual refugee outcome. Morris argues that Plan D was a military program for securing the interior of the Jewish state and the clusters of Jewish settlements outside the state's territory against the expected Arab invasion following the expiry of the UN mandate. It was not, in his view, a political blueprint for expulsions, although in practice it meant the depopulation and destruction of unspecified villages "that hosted hostile local militia and irregular forces". Morris acknowledges, however, that

in providing for the expulsion of communities and/or destruction of villages that had resisted the Haganah, [Plan D] constituted a strategic-ideological anchor and basis for expulsions by front, district, brigade and battalion commanders (who in each case argued military necessity) and it gave commanders, post facto, a formal, persuasive covering note to explain their actions.

In support of his view that Plan D was essentially a military plan, Morris also found no evidence, apart from the existence of Plan D itself, of a political decision in March or April 1948 in favour of "a blanket, national policy of driving out the Arabs".

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Nor was there any general expectation on the Jewish side that there would be a mass exodus by the Arab population. The evidence of deliberate pursuit of expulsion policies "with respect to certain key strategic districts and localities" including Tiberias and Haifa emerged from April 1948 onwards, amidst the accelerating disintegration of the situation on the ground.\(^4\)

In contrast to Morris' interpretation, the prominent Palestinian historian, Walid Khalidi, has argued that Plan D was a master plan of the Zionist High Command for the expulsion and eviction of the Palestinians in order to achieve a secure basis for the Israeli state.\(^4\) On balance, and particularly when combined with the evidence referred to earlier of Zionist attraction to the notion of transfer, Khalidi's assessment cannot be dismissed, at least insofar as the assumptions of Plan D reflected, in Pappe's words,

> an existing notion prevalent among the policy-makers of the Jewish community ... that a Jewish success in the struggle over Palestine might involve the destruction of the Palestinian community.\(^4\)

While noting that Plan D demanded the surrender of the population, not their expulsion, and that it was not the only factor causing the flight of the refugees, Pappe's own conclusion was that Jewish policy, as exemplified by Plan D, was "the principal reason for the departure of most of the Arabs of Palestine".\(^4\)

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\(^4\) For a balanced and insightful review of both Morris and Khalidi's arguments, which concludes that Plan D seemed to be an important factor accounting for the exodus, see Pappe, *The Making of the Arab-Israeli Conflict 1947-1951*, pp. 87-99.

CHAPTER IV: PALESTINIAN REFUGEE MEMORIES AND MYTHOLOGIES

The question of responsibility for the Palestinian refugee exodus is likely to remain controversial in academic circles, and a propaganda issue for both sides. The general Arab belief continues to be that the Jews expelled the Palestinian population “with premeditation and preplanning as part of a grand political and military design”. In the words of Salman Abu Sitta, the Palestinians

... did not leave on Arab orders. They were expelled or removed from their villages by force. ... 89 per cent left due to direct Israeli military assaults, 10 per cent left due to psychological war and the remaining 1 per cent left on their own initiative. ... The exodus was ... concurrent with and resulting from Israeli military operations.

The propaganda value of the issue also remains current, for both sides. Benny Morris has observed, in that regard, that

the general Arab claim, that the Jews expelled Palestine’s Arabs, with predetermination and preplanning, as part of a grand political-military design, has served to underline the Arab portrayal of Israel as a vicious, immoral robber state. The Israeli official version, that the Arabs fled voluntarily (not under Jewish compulsion) and/or that they were asked/ordered to do so by their Palestinian and Arab states’ leaders, helped leave intact the new state’s un tarnished image as the haven of a much-persecuted people, a body politic more just, moral and deserving of

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44 Takkenberg, The Status of Palestinian Refugees in International Law, p. 14 citing, among others, Henry Cattan and Issa Nakleh.
45 Salman H. Abu-Sitta, The Right of Return: Sacred, Legal and Possible Too, Version 25, February 1996, p. 23. That view is consistent with the observation of John Bagot Glubb (Glubb Pasha), the British commander of the Jordanian army, who wrote the following:

"The story which Jewish publicity at first persuaded the world to accept, that the Arab refugees left voluntarily, is not true. Voluntary emigrants do not leave their homes with only the clothes they stand up in (and) in such a hurry that they lose other members of their family ... The fact is that the majority left in panic flight, to escape massacre (at least, so they thought). They were in fact helped on their way by the occasional massacre. Others were encouraged to move by blows or by indecent acts." John Bagot Glubb, A Soldier with the Arabs, Hodder and Stoughton, London, 1957, p. 251.
the West's sympathy and help than the surrounding sea of reactionary, semi-feudal, dictatorial Arab societies.46

Responsibility and Mythology

Debate over the historical record, however, is of little importance so far as refugee mythologies are concerned. Stripped in their popular imagery of their historical complexities and moral ambiguities, the events of 1947-48 have become narratives that can be understood and managed at a personal level of experience and real or imagined memory. Palestinian memories of that period - which naturally focusses upon narratives concerning the nature of village life and the property to which they wished to return - are coloured by frustration at the British withdrawal, the traumatic flight of the refugees, and the collapse by August 1949 of international efforts to secure the return of even a modest number of refugees to their homes, in the face of Israeli opposition, and Arab rejection of an American-sponsored compromise.

At the popular level, over the course of five decades the Palestinian collective narrative has simplified, polemicised, shaped and perhaps distorted a highly complex, perhaps historically inevitable, and certainly, in the event, unmanageable conflict situation. The sense of betrayal over the events of 1948 and their aftermath continues to influence Palestinian political perspectives of their situation, and the contemporary role of the United States in the region.

The drama of the Palestinian narrative and its capacity to be related to direct family experience has caused Palestinian collective memory of the

catastrophe to be highly durable, despite the passage of over 50 years and generational changes. The mythology has withstood controversies over the nature of the historical record, the inadequacies of oral histories and individual recollections, and the increasing disintegration of the personal records that could be used to verify at least some of the individual memories of the events. Establishing the facts of what happened has not been made any easier by the absence of access to official Arab records of the events (if such records exist), censorship and argument surrounding Israeli accounts, and concern about the objectivity of various versions of what took place.

Even allowing for the likelihood that the work of scholars such as Morris, Khalidi and Finkelstein to uncover the historical facts has been as thorough and professional as circumstances permit, collective

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47 It could also be argued, as Kanan Makiya (Samir al Khalil) has done, that the specific political and intellectual characteristics of contemporary Arab society, by which he would presumably include that of the Palestinians, can render certain forms of political convention or imagery largely immune from revision. Refugee mythologies would seem to be a case in point. But the question is far from being that simple, and the author does not wish to pursue, in this work, the question of the validity or otherwise of Makiya's characterisation of the contemporary state of Arab intellectual debate as sterile. Makiya is not alone, however, in his criticism. (See Kanan Makiya Cruelty and Silence: War, Tyranny, Silence and the Arab World, Jonathan Cape, London, 1993, and Penguin Books, 1994, p. 25.) Fatima Mernissi's argument that in Arab society, freedom of thought is "demonized and associated with Kharijite rebellion and disorder" would seem to be in line with the critique Makiya advances. See Fatima Mernissi, Islam and Democracy: Fear of the Modern World, translated by Mary Jo Lakeland, Addison-Wesley, Indianapolis, 1992, p. 47.

48 The archival record of individual refugee experience, especially the documentation that was created for each of the registered Palestinian refugees by UNRWA (including records inherited from its predecessor body, the United Nations Relief for Palestine Refugees and the voluntary agencies (the International Committee of the Red Cross, the League of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies and the American Friends Service Committee (Quakers)) who assisted relief efforts in the early period of the refugee crisis) is becoming increasingly fragile and at risk of being lost altogether, despite efforts by UNRWA to raise funds for its preservation.
memory has, in effect, made other interpretation, let alone more critical analysis, of the core Palestinian narrative, including the right of return, largely irrelevant, at least among Palestinian audiences. This is also true, of course, of the orthodox Israeli interpretation of what transpired in 1948 (as shown by the Right-wing reaction to the Tekuma series on Israeli television in 1997⁴⁹) and more recent efforts to re-interpret those events from a pro-Israeli perspective.⁵⁰

On the Palestinian side, imagery associated with the events of 1948 has galvanised and sustained political energy among the refugee population for over five decades. That imagery, and additional traumas such as the massacres of Palestinian refugees during the Lebanese civil war and in the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps in Beirut in September 1982, has also had an important political and humanitarian impact upon the international community. The combination of dispossession and struggle mythology has, at different times, both sustained and frustrated wider political agendas and policy concerns held by other parties involved directly and indirectly in the Arab-Israel dispute.

Given the social background outlined earlier, with its orientation, at least in terms of camp dwelling refugees, towards social continuity rather than change, and towards the conscious preservation of an identity as refugees, it is hardly surprising that the

⁴⁹ See comments referred to in Chapter II by Ariel Sharon, International Herald Tribune, 1 April 1997.
⁵⁰ For example, in her book From Time Immemorial (Harper and Row, New York, 1984) Joan Peters alleges that the Palestinian refugees were immigrants to Palestine or the children of immigrants, and Jewish immigrants had as much if not more right to the territory. The
collective memory has been preserved. The trauma of those massive flights of ordinary people from their homes, livelihood and land, and the prevention of their return, and the shock and bewilderment that was part of the tragedy of 1948, are deeply etched into the Palestinian historical narrative.

More than any other single factor (with specific influences arising from or reflecting gender, class, origin, period of exodus and the age of different individuals) the collective memory of that experience has shaped the identity of the Palestinian refugees as a people.51 And there has been a conscious effort among Palestinians to sustain that memory, especially among younger generations, in the hope of political and financial redress.52

Rosemary Sayigh, studying Palestinian refugees in Lebanon, has noted what she refers to as the primordiality of the exodus from Palestine as the starting point of oral life histories of Palestinian women in Shatila Camp in Beirut. She found that to be

suggestion is firmly rebutted by Norman Finkelstein, *Image and Reality of the Israel-Palestine Conflict*.

51 The other core elements of Palestinian society and culture (including such factors as dialect, food, class distinctions, marriage patterns, and patterns of urban and village life) are intrinsically important to inhabitants of particular locales within that identity and are obviously relevant to a sense of national identity, especially when contrasted with the historical experience, institutional arrangements and so on of Syrians, Egyptians or Jordanians. But the socio-cultural characteristics of Palestinians are not very different to the variations that may be observed within neighbouring Arab states such as Syria and Jordan, whose own societies are highly differentiated and complex. Palestinians have tended, in fact, to stress their commonality of culture with neighbouring Arab societies, with which they share language, religion, social customs and occasionally family ties, rather than their distinctiveness. See Yezid Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State* p. xiii.

52 "In every classroom [in a boys' school near Jabaliya, Gaza] is a map of prewar Palestine, with the names of villages that have long since disappeared. A mural in the playground depicts an old man and a pigtailed girl gazing across a fence of barbed wire, the man telling the child: "My homeland is there."" "Palestinian refugees: Adrift for decades," *Philadelphia Enquirer*, 12 May 1998.
the case, not only among those who were already adult in 1948, but also among many who were too young in 1948 to have personal recollections.

The degree of detail of that terrible journey preserved in memory over four and a half decades signals not only the significance assigned to it retrospectively - as historic mistake, rupture from Palestine and historical exile, precursor of other tragedies - but also suggests processes of collective memory formation as individual stories were told and retold in refugee gatherings.53

Only those refugees born in Lebanon who grew up after the 1969 Cairo Agreement gave the Palestinians autonomy in running their own affairs in camps in Lebanon chose to structure their personal stories around national political events such as the intifada, or placed their personal political experiences in the forefront of their life experiences.54

Right of Return

Refugee perceptions of their rights, including their perception of a right to return or to receive compensation is probably less susceptible to change - certainly in regard to any public articulation of such change - than the mythologies of Palestinians from non-refugee backgrounds.

The right of return is commonly understood among Palestinians to be enshrined in UN General Assembly

54 Rosemary Sayigh, “Palestinian Camp Women as Tellers of History” pp. 43-45, 49. There are, however, conflicting views on this issue. Citing a study of Palestinian refugee camps in 1991 by Basma Kodmani-Darwish, Elia Zureik notes that by an overwhelming majority the Palestinians in Lebanon saw the intifada as the most important political event in recent times, and between one half and two thirds preferred to see it continue as an armed struggle. Elia Zureik, Palestinian Refugees and the Peace Process, Institute for Palestine Studies, Washington DC, 1996, p. 62, citing Basma Kodmani-Darwish, The Palestinian Question: A Fragmentary
Resolution 194 (III) passed on 10 December 1948 which established a UN Conciliation Commission, reaffirmed that Jerusalem should be placed under a permanent international regime, and resolved also that the refugees should be permitted to return to their homes. It was never possible to implement the resolution.

From the refugee perspective, the key part of Resolution 194 (III) is paragraph 11. That much-mentioned, but perhaps less well-understood, paragraph reads as follows:

11. [The General Assembly] 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 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.

The resolution itself was the outcome of the insistence of the UN Mediator, Counte Folke Bernadotte, "that the right of the refugees to return to their homes at the earliest practicable date should be affirmed" by the UN "notwithstanding the views expressed by the Provisional Government of Israel".


56 The principle of refugee return was mentioned nine times in Count Folke Bernadotte's first progress report as mediator. He wrote "It would be an offence against the principles of elemental justice if these innocent victims of the conflict were denied the right to return to their homes while Jewish immigrants flow into Palestine, and, indeed, at least offer the threat of permanent replacement of the Arab refugees who
Bernadotte was assassinated by Jewish terrorists on 17 September 1948, one day after submitting the report.\textsuperscript{57}

The central place in Palestinian political mythology of the right of return, based on Resolution 194 (III), has been widely noted. Don Peretz, for example, writes as follows:

Since 1948, [the right of return] has acquired emotional connotations of such significance that the term became the basis of Palestinian nationalism in much the same way that the return to Eretz Israel became the foundation of Zionism. The concept of return permeates modern Palestinian literature; it is at the core of history taught to children in refugee camps throughout the region, and is usually the first thought expressed by average Palestinians when discussing Middle East problems. To many, the right of return is an important symbol; recognition would remove the stigma of second-class citizenship imposed on Palestinians, a stigma that exists even in Jordan, where by law the refugees have equal rights.\textsuperscript{58}

Developing an estimate of the numbers of Palestinian refugees who might actually be prepared to move to a Palestinian state under various political and financial scenarios is beyond the scope of this study. The key point is that as a political issue, demand among refugees for acknowledgement of the right to return is an enduring matter of the highest political importance, irrespective of whether the intention exists to exercise that right.\textsuperscript{59}

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have been rooted in the land for centuries”. Progress Report of the UN Mediator for Palestine General Assembly Official Record (GAOR), 3rd session, supp. 11, UN doc. A/648, 16 September 1948.

\textsuperscript{57} Takkenberg, The Status of Palestinian Refugees in International Law, p. 243.


\textsuperscript{59} David Shipler, Arab and Jew: Wounded Spirits in a Promised Land, Bloomsbury, London, 1987, p. 55. For compelling evidence to this effect based on oral histories and interviews with Palestinian refugees in
While there is almost universal belief among Palestinians in the Palestinian right to return, there is an ideological barrier around the discussion of what that would mean in practical terms. Until recently at least, the sensitivity surrounding the issue of return has constrained public discussion among Palestinians about those matters.\(^6\) Salim Tamari notes that since the multilateral track of the Madrid peace conference began to address the refugee issue, the Palestinians have taken a 'principled, but static' position on the question of return. They have insisted that Resolution 194 or, more precisely, their own interpretation of that resolution, form the basis for all solutions to the refugee question, despite its systematic rejection by Israel.\(^6\)

Both Lex Takkenberg and Rashid Khalidi point out that there is, moreover, no authoritative Palestinian definition of what constitutes the right of return. That right has been ascribed a range of meanings, from the right of all Palestinians or their descendants to return to their former homes and places of origin in Palestine, to a return of some of the Palestinians currently in exile to some limited part of Palestine.\(^6\)

It is debatable whether a compelling argument exists for the interpretation of Resolution 194 as providing

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for collective and national rights.\textsuperscript{63} It is perhaps easier to argue the case for the right of return on the basis that the right of return exists on the basis of customary international law, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Geneva Conventions of 1949, UNHCR advocacy of voluntary repatriation as a solution to refugee problems, and general recognition that a state cannot legally expel a population under its control and that those who are expelled have a right to reverse an illegal act and to return to their homeland.\textsuperscript{64}

Advocates of the right of return to Israel insist, nevertheless, that agreements between Israel and the PLO cannot invalidate the right of return encompassed in Resolution 194, since international law and UN Resolutions cannot be subordinated by a political agreement whose provisions failed to grant rights equal to or beyond those defined by international law.\textsuperscript{65} There are, however, problems in sustaining that view.

The terms of Resolution 194 (III), a UN General Assembly resolution and therefore non-binding on UN member states, do not refer unambiguously to a right of return, as most refugees and many commentators assume, and as Count Bernadotte had recommended before his death. Instead, the return of refugees was placed in the context of permission being granted for that

\textsuperscript{63} Elia Zureik, however, makes that claim. See Elia Zureik "Palestinian Refugees and Peace" Journal of Palestine Studies, XXIV, no. 1 (Autumn 1994), pp. 16-17.

\textsuperscript{64} Takkenberg, The Status of Palestinian Refugees in International Law, pp. 232-242.

return; of the practicability of that return taking place; and in the context, moreover of willingness of refugees to 'live in peace' - with its strong implication that this would involve acceptance of the political outcomes of the 1948 conflict.

The overall shape of those outcomes was quite firmly established by the time Resolution 194 was passed in December 1948. They included, as mentioned above, the defeat of the Arab forces and the refugee exodus over the preceding 18 months; and the expulsions and forcible transfers of Palestinian populations by Israeli forces documented by UN mediator Ralph Bunche and other observers, as well as the measures being taken by the Israeli leadership to prevent the wholesale return of refugees.

Return to pre-1967 Israel has long since been rendered impossible, except perhaps in the very long term context of agreements permitting the movement of people and capital between Israel and a Palestinian state alongside Israel. Any such agreements would have to be based on Palestinian acceptance of the sovereign right of the Israeli state to maintain its Jewish character so long as it chose.

Forty years after the disaster, the impossibility of implementing Resolution 194 (III) en masse was implicitly recognised by the Palestine National Council when it approved the Palestinian Declaration of Independence on 15 November 1988. The decision of the Palestine National Council meeting in Algiers to

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make an unambiguous claim to Palestinian sovereignty on the basis of a peaceful resolution of the conflict between Palestinians and Israelis, based on UN General Assembly Resolution 181 (II) concerning partition, and UN Security Council Resolutions 242 and 338, carried with it an implication that the PLO could no longer envisage the right of self-determination within the territory of Israel. 69

Moreover, while saying that the historical injustice inflicted on the Palestinian people followed upon Resolution 181 (II), the Declaration characterized Resolution 181 as having called for "two states, one Arab and one Jewish". 70 Implicit in the acceptance of Resolution 181 (II) was, therefore, an acceptance of the argument that Israel's Jewishness was enshrined in international law. 71

Arafat's address to the UN General Assembly in 1974, which placed the Palestinian issue in the context of imperialism and Zionist aggression and expressed directly the "right to self-determination and our undisputed right to return to our homeland" contrasts sharply with Arafat's address to the UN General Assembly in Geneva of 13 December 1988 following acceptance of Resolution 242. In the 1988 speech,


Arafat mentioned return only tangentially. He referred instead, in the latter speech, to settlement of "the issue of Palestinian refugees in accordance with pertinent United Nations resolutions". He did so, moreover, within an undertaking to seek a comprehensive settlement with Israel on the basis of UN Security Council Resolutions 242 and 338, and respect for the right to exist in peace and security for all. 72

It was clear by the early 1990s, at least to those around the Palestinian political elite, that practical concessions would have to be made by the Palestinians to the Israeli position if at least some justice was to be realised for the 1948 refugees. 73 The PLO’s acceptance of Resolution 194 (III) coincided with its recognition of the State of Israel in December 1988, giving rise to the inference that the resolution’s application was open to negotiation, even if the PLO remained committed in principle to the rights enshrined in the resolution. 74

According to Nawaf Salam, senior Palestinian officials such as Nabil Sha’ath and Faisal al-Husseini had indicated that the Palestinian leadership was considering, as an acceptable method of implementing Resolution 194 (III), a "return" to within the borders of the "Palestinian state". Under that formula, Salam wrote,

the refugees right to return to their homeland would be substituted for the uncompromising insistence on their right to return to their homes, so long as the principle

72 For the full text of both speeches, see The Palestinian-Israeli Peace Agreement: A Documentary Record, pp. 212-231 and pp. 283-297.
73 Tamari, Palestinian Refugee Negotiations: From Madrid to Oslo II p. 45.
of an absolute right to return [was] not compromised and provided that payment of compensation would not disqualify refugees from repatriation to the Palestinian entity.  

Even by the late 1990s, however, it was politically inconceivable that the PLO could publicly have accepted Israel’s pressure to abandon insistence on the right of return. And even if Palestinian refugees, in different locations and among different social classes, were to have concluded that return was not going to be an option available to them, such acceptance would not readily have found clear and coherent political expression. Recognition by Israel of the tragedy that its establishment brought upon the Palestinian people was to many Palestinians an essential condition of true reconciliation.

**Israeli perspectives**

Israel insisted that the solution to the problem rests with the Arab states. The Israeli approach has followed the policy towards Arab refugees outlined by David Ben-Gurion on 1 August 1948, which stated as follows:

When the Arab states are ready to conclude a peace treaty with Israel this question [of refugees] will come up for constructive solution as part of a general settlement, and with due regard to our counter-claims in respect of the destruction of Jewish lives and property, the long-term interests of the Jewish and Arab populations, the stability of the State of Israel and the durability of the peace between it and its neighbours, the actual fate and position of the Jewish communities in the Arab countries, the responsibilities of the Arab governments for their war of aggression and their liability for reparation, will all be relevant in the question whether, to what extent, and under what

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76 Amira Hass, "Painful Historical Crossroads" Ha'aretz, 2 December 1988.
conditions, the former Arab residents of the territory of Israel should be allowed to return. 77

The closest that Israel has come to accepting Resolution 194 (III) was its reluctant agreement at the beginning of the Lausanne Conference to accept a French initiative, backed by the United States, to use a concise synthesis of Resolution 181 (II) and 194 (III) in the form of a joint protocol accepting the principle of repatriation and the internationalisation of Jerusalem as a basis for negotiation (base de travail). An Israeli bid for membership of the United Nations was due to be considered on 11 May, shortly after the proposal was made to both sides by the French, and Israel could not afford to jeopardise US support for its membership request. The Arab delegates also gave their consent to the document. However both sides later repudiated their actual commitment to the protocol. 78 A Knesset resolution in 1961 expressed the Israeli stance in very explicit terms:

The Knesset resolves that it is not possible for Arab refugees to return to the territory of Israel, and the only solution to the problem is to resettle them in the Arab countries. 79

The Oslo approach did not rule out the theoretical possibility of persuading Israel to allow certain categories of Palestinians to return to live in Israel, as Israeli citizens in the context of a comprehensive peace agreement between Israel and its

neighbours. An American academic, Donna Arzt, proposed, among other measures for the local integration and resettlement of the refugee populations in neighbouring countries and elsewhere, that a total of 75,000 Palestinian refugees be allowed back into Israel. There were also reports in the aftermath of the Summit at Camp David in July 2000 between Chairman Arafat, Prime Minister Barak and President Clinton that Barak was prepared to countenance, as part of a comprehensive deal, the return under family reunion provisions (that is, not as a matter of right) of up to 100,000 refugees to Israel proper.

In practice, however, even that modest Israeli concession that seemed a very unlikely outcome. Strong resistance would have arisen in Israeli political circles to bringing such a deal to fruition. Even a qualified ability of refugees to return, to live as Israeli citizens, remains unacceptable to most Israelis.

From an Israeli perspective, the claim to a right of return was flawed in formal terms by a lack of clear and acceptable definition of who should be regarded as refugees for that purpose; and debate over whether the right of return mentioned in international documents applied to displaced masses of people, and whether the

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82 The idea of returning Palestinians accepting Israeli citizenship is however mentioned by some Palestinian commentators such as Salman Abu Sitta The Right of Return: Sacred, Legal and Possible Too. (Version 25 February 1996) p. 25; and the Spokesperson of the Youth Activities Centres Union, Abed Rabbo Abu 'Oun (News from Within Vol. XIII No. 7, July 1997, p. 24.)
right belonged to individuals who had never been nationals or permanent residents of Israel. It was also argued that, even where individuals possessed the right of return, States were entitled to limit that right for the protection of national security, law and order, public health or morality. The Israeli government insisted that

the entry into Israel of masses of refugees would pose a very real threat to security, law and order, and the viability of Israel's social fabric, as well as to the demographic viability of Israel as the world's only Jewish state - an issue of no small moral import.⁸³

In practical political terms, the issue had been dealt with on the Israeli side in fairly blunt language since the 1949 Lausanne peace conference. In July of that year, under intense pressure from the United States to accept the repatriation of 200,000 to 300,000 refugees, Israel eventually offered to repatriate 100,000 refugees of the approximately 723,000 total number.⁸⁴ That offer was promptly rejected by the Arab countries at the time as insufficient and propagandist.⁸⁵ From that point on, in the words of Benny Morris, the status quo and policies on both sides "hardened and calcified".⁸⁶

In 1998, the Israeli government spokesman during the Likud government under Benjamin Netanyahu, David Bar-Illan, expressed Israel's rejection of the Palestinian position as follows:

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⁸⁴ Arzt, Refugees Into Citizens, p. 22.
There is no way that 1948 refugees can return to beyond green line Israel. ... The war in 1948 was started by the Arab states and by the Arab population of this country ... and the whole refugee problem which resulted from the assault is the responsibility of the aggressors. ... In effect a population exchange occurred in which 800,000 Jews were forced to leave Arab countries ... and were absorbed and integrated into Israel. 87

There is a degree of support, at least in some Israeli academic circles, for the view that no lasting settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is possible without a comprehensive resolution of the refugee problem. A former Director of Military Intelligence, Shlomo Gazit, for example, has argued that

a political agreement between Israel and the Palestinians that leaves the refugee problem an open wound, whether in its entirety or in part, will not last. It would only be a matter of time before Israel faced the emergence of a new Palestinian “liberation” movement that called for a real solution for the refugees and for genuine alleviation of their suffering. ... [The agreement] should offer a clear plan that prevents the refugees from becoming an irredentist element, endangering both Israel and the peace agreement ... [and] the overall timetable of the bilateral agreement must be conditioned on compliance with the refugee timetable. Israel must not allow the Palestinian leadership to shrink from its clear responsibility to declare publicly that the conflict has come to an end, to provide a new definition of the “right of return” that refers only to possible resettlement in the newly established Palestinian entity, and to sincerely urge the refugees to accept the various practical measures that are offered in order to provide a genuine solution to the problem. 88

87 Quoted in Barbara Demick, “Palestinian Refugees: Adrift for Decades” Philadelphia Inquirer, 12 May 1998 p. 1. David Bar-Illan went on to contend that any compensation for Palestinian refugees should be coupled with compensation for Jews forced out of Arab countries.

88 Shlomo Gazit, The Palestinian Refugee Problem, Jaffee Centre for Strategic Studies, Tel Aviv University, 1995, p. 33.
Even the cautious but positive approach to the refugee issue advocated by Gazit and, somewhat earlier by academics such as Mark Heller has, however, found little public support in Israel.\(^9\) Meron Benvenisti, among others, notes the widespread fear among Israelis of the return (al \(\textit{awdah}\)) of Palestinians, which could produce "messianic and chauvinistic impulses as powerful as any produced by the Zionist movement...".\(^9\) And, so far as the right of return is concerned, the Israeli political establishment is unanimous in denying that any such "right" exists.\(^9\) According to Salim Tamari,

the issue of refugees in Israeli eyes has become - or rather has been upgraded to - the \textit{bete noire} of the transitional period. In Israeli political discourse, any concession on the refugee issue has become tantamount to threatening the future security of Israeli citizens and the demographic raison d’
\(\textit{etre}\) of the Jewish state. Israeli collective fears of the refugee question have been used by the Israeli negotiating team to preempt rational discussion of this matter.\(^9\)

The removal of the legal measures that were taken to institutionalise the blockage of Palestinian return, and even minor concessions to refugee claims in regard to refugee property in urban areas, including Jerusalem and destroyed Palestinian villages in Israel proper, would require legislative changes that go beyond the political capacity of any conceivable


Israeli government to deliver. The opening up of historic claims and rights that would follow any successful moves in that direction would also raise existential questions for many Israelis.

The conclusion of a peace agreement between Israel and the Palestinians that would be sustainable within the Palestinian political context, and therefore durable for both sides, is probably beyond reach without some formal acknowledgement by Israel of the refugees’ right to be treated, with dignity, as victims of the conflict. Some refugees would need to be permitted to return, by mutual agreement and in the framework of a comprehensive settlement. It is obviously pointless, and clearly politically counter-productive, however, to seek to raise arguments about the moral legitimacy of the Israeli state more than five decades after its creation, or to question its sovereign right to determine who should now reside within its territory. The effective collapse of the Oslo process in October 2000, and the eruption of violence between Jewish and Arab Israelis have probably reduced even further the prospects of sizeable family reunion arrangements forming part of any future settlement between Israel and the Palestinians.

Compensation

For most Palestinians, compensation and the right of return are not mutually exclusive: those refugees who were allowed to return would also be entitled, in the

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93 The scale of the political problem is illustrated by Faisal Husseini reminding an Israeli audience in May 1995 that 70 per cent of West Jerusalem property belonged to Palestinian refugees from suburbs and villages that later formed the bulk of Israeli West Jerusalem. According to Meron Benvenisti, the 1967 census found that about 10,000 Palestinians living in East Jerusalem (16 per cent of the population at that time) had been born in the western part of the city. Tamari, *Palestinian Refugee Negotiations: From Madrid to Oslo II*, p. 47.
Palestinian view, to compensation. Paragraph 11 of Resolution 194 stated that compensation should be paid to those refugees choosing not to return and (emphasis added) for loss of or damage to property which under principles of international law or in equity, should be made good by the authorities or Governments responsible.

However compensation remained a lower priority political issue among Palestinians, including refugees, during the 1990s than the demand to exercise the right of return.

Some analysts have suggested that by accepting Resolution 194 (III), the Palestinians in effect accepted the principle of compensation as an alternative to repatriation if the latter should prove impossible in practice. Among many Palestinians, however, the idea of non-returnees claiming compensation tended to be viewed as a less politically and morally acceptable approach than demanding the exercise of the right of return, or the return of properties occupied since 1948 by Israel. In the words of one Palestinian participant in a seminar on the compensation issue in 1999, "the homeland [is] not for sale."

For those reasons, and possibly others - including reluctance to accept Israeli sovereignty in respect of the wider issue - and perhaps because the sums offered as compensation were not considered adequate, very few Palestinians appear to have pursued the possibility of

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94 Tamari, *Palestinian Refugee Negotiations: From Madrid to Oslo II*, p. 44.
95 Salam, "Between Repatriation and Resettlement", p. 21.
96 The author has been reminded of this view on many occasions, including by Palestinian colleagues such as Salman Abu Sitta and others who find it personally distasteful to debate possible levels of compensation.
claiming compensation from Israel under the Israeli Absentees Property Compensation Law of 1973.\(^\text{98}\)

Compensation remains an issue explored mainly in non-government frameworks by those who would wish to assist the key parties in addressing the question, if and when it should move to greater prominence in the peace process.\(^\text{99}\)

Those who have examined the question in the meantime have no illusions about its political, legal and financial complexity and how difficult it would be to address, let alone to resolve.\(^\text{100}\) In the words of Donna Arzt

> Many of these issues may not realistically ever become resolvable, due to overly complicated fact patterns, politically-charged negotiating positions, unavailability of funding sources, or the lack of exact legal standards.\(^\text{101}\)

The compensation question cannot be resolved, or perhaps even considered in detail, except as part of a

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\(^{99}\) Valuable work has been done, on a preparatory and exploratory basis, by the Palestinian Refugee Research Network led by McGill University, supported by the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) and the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office. See especially Palestinian Refugee ResearchNet and International Development Research Centre Report on the Stocktaking Conference on Palestinian Refugee Research, Ottawa, 8-9 December 1997 February 1998 pp. 25-27; and the Report of the Palestinian Refugee ResearchNet and International Development Research Centre Workshop on Compensation as Part of a Comprehensive Solution to the Refugee Problem, Ottawa, 14-15 July 1999.

\(^{100}\) For an informative and insightful overview of the debate between Israeli and Palestinian analysts over the compensation issue, see Rempel, "The Ottawa Process: Workshop on Compensation and Palestinian Refugees", pp. 36-49.

\(^{101}\) Arzt, Refugees Into Citizens, p. 97.
larger settlement of the core issues surrounding Palestinian sovereignty. Those issues include the location of boundaries between Israel and a Palestinian state; the extent of population transfer between the two states, and of absorption of refugees in their host countries and elsewhere; the future of Arab East Jerusalem, and the future of Jewish settler property in areas that would become part of the Palestinian state.  

It is far from certain whether Israel and the Palestinians could ever agree formally upon final answers to such questions. Moreover, since Israelis are unlikely to accept moral or legal responsibility for the exodus of Palestinian refugees in 1948, they will not accept efforts to impose upon Israel a financial responsibility for compensation arrangements beyond those obligations they have accepted and provided for under existing arrangements in regard to absentee property.

Israel may also demand compensation for Jews who were forced to leave Arab countries (Iraq, Syria and Egypt) which were belligerent states in 1948. The issue of compensation of Jews who left Arab countries during and after 1948 - some of whom left voluntarily while others were forced to leave, and many of whom were forced to leave their property and assets behind - is arguably a matter to be resolved between Israel and the

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countries concerned. Nevertheless, the issue of counter-claims in respect of Jewish lives and property has a degree of psychological and political impact among Israelis which the Palestinians and the Arab countries cannot entirely dismiss or ignore. If Israel were to participate in compensation arrangements, it would be no simple matter in the Israeli domestic context to reach decisions about how Israel would pursue those issues, and what level of priority they would be accorded among wider negotiating goals.

Many other questions remain unanswered which are central to the logic of compensation and the principles on which it should be based. Is compensation an obligation - legal, political or moral - and if so, for whom? In crude but realistic terms, from a donor perspective at least, if it should come to implementation of any agreed outcome, what national interests would donor governments serve by paying compensation? How could and should the burden of doing so be apportioned between them? Other questions and issues include the evidentiary basis for claims; who should receive compensation; and whether it should be distributed on the basis of individual cases, or collectively, or if both, in what proportions? The advantages and disadvantages of different possible approaches have yet to be explored.

104 Takkenberg, The Status of Palestinian Refugees in International Law, p. 341.
105 Loss based approaches to compensation (including loss of income earning potential) would appear likely to reiterate patterns of income distribution that applied in 1948. It would need to be debated whether that was a more acceptable approach among refugees and among donors than standardised per capita payments.
106 Other issues include who would be entitled to claim - 1948 refugees only, or their descendants? Host governments could demand compensation for previous and continuing costs; if so it would need to be determined whether the payment of compensation on that basis would be at the expense of the total resources available to the refugees. The PA and
It would also be necessary to reach agreement on the linkages between compensation, territorial outcomes and resettlement. It would need to be determined whether the refugees, if compensated, would be able to stay in place, if they so wished, and protected from new pressures to depart their host countries, including Lebanon. There would need to be guarantees provided for their security, including the right of non-refoulement, and agreement reached on the part the international community should play in that respect.

There appears to have been little, if any, serious donor governments would have to decide whether refugee (and host government) claims for compensation would be settled at the expense of the demands of non-refugee Palestinians, whose present economic circumstances may be as bad, or worse, as some refugees. See Marie Arneberg, *Living Conditions Among Palestinian Refugees and Displaced in Jordan* FAFO Report no. 237; and Jon Pedersen, *West Bank and Gaza Living conditions: Are refugees different? (The answer is: not very much)*, FAFO, 1998.

For discussion of possible redistribution of the Palestinian refugee population among Western countries, the Occupied Territories and the Gulf Arab countries and Israel, see Arzt, *Refugees Into Citizens*, p. 90. Judith Kipper has also suggested, in the context of a possible strategy for Iraq following the lifting of UN sanctions, that the United States should sponsor a package whose elements would include an agreement that Iraq would resettle Palestinian refugees from Lebanon, as part of the labour force Kipper believed would be required to rebuild Iraq. “It’s Time for America to Prepare An Endgame Plan for Iraq” *International Herald Tribune*, 19 March 1998.

If refugees were to be compensated collectively, decisions would have to be made regarding who would determine the form of development assistance needed, and on what basis of knowledge of refugee demands and actual needs. Consideration would also need to be given to the possibility that refugees might reject the mechanisms demanded by the host governments/PA. It is also quite conceivable that the PA would be unable to reach agreement within itself to take responsibility for dealing with what had been until now regarded as a responsibility of the international community. It also would be necessary to agree upon the part to be played by host governments in determining how compensation should be received; and what claims (including taxation) might they wish to make on the individual recipients of such compensation. The position of donors in regard to such claims would need to be established. As part of bringing about agreement to an overall approach, it would be necessary to demonstrate to host governments whether their refugee populations were net burdens or contributors, and whether their economic impact might change if permanently resettled. The absorptive capacity of the refugee community, and the PA, for compensation or other financial assistance would need to be considered, together with possible options for the provision of non-cash benefits (vouchers for education, health, housing) and soft loans, and the time frame within which such benefits might need to be distributed.
thought given to how the compensation process might be made to operate; who would administer it, for how long, and according to whose mandate.

There are wide discrepancies between estimates of possible Palestinian ambit claims. The Harvard-based Joint Working Group on Israeli-Palestinian Relations, in a paper written by Joseph Alpher and Khalil Shikaki, has suggested that individual compensation to Palestinians, largely financed by Israel, might amount to $15-20 billion. Other estimates range from $92 billion to $147 billion, according to some widely quoted authorities or even higher depending upon the formula adopted. Jordan, and possibly other host countries, would be likely to present demands for compensation for having facilitated the presence of the refugees over the past five decades, although the question of whether the presence of the refugee population in each case has been a net economic gain or loss to the countries concerned has probably not yet been critically examined.

Estimates of compensation demands running into hundreds of billions contrast sharply with total donor disbursements by the international community following the conclusion of the Oslo accords which, for the period from 1994 to 1996, amounted to only $1.49

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billion.\textsuperscript{111} Rex Brynen has suggested that unless conditions change significantly, the total amount available to finance compensation payments from all sources (including Israeli contributions, international donors, the wind down of UNRWA, and the transfer of Israeli settlements in the West Bank and Gaza) is likely to be less than $13 billion, and may be as little as $1.3 billion or less.\textsuperscript{112} In 1994-1998, in support of the Oslo process, the international community pledged $4.1 billion in assistance for Palestinian reconstruction and development, of which some $3.6 billion was committed against specific projects and $2.5 billion of which was actually disbursed by the end of 1998.\textsuperscript{113}

Having limited resources to distribute among competing global demands upon their aid budgets, donors would also need to satisfy themselves about the long term financial and political sustainability, both among the Palestinians and within the wider donor community, of assistance programmes focussed on resettlement and reintegration of refugees. Financing compensation or reparations, as such, would appear to have little prospect of winning political support among international donors.\textsuperscript{114}

\textsuperscript{111} Figures provided by a World Bank official to a conference on the Palestinian refugee problem at Warwick University UK, 24 March 1998.

\textsuperscript{112} Rex Brynen, "Imagining a Solution: Final Status Arrangements and Palestinian Refugees in Lebanon", Journal of Palestine Studies, XXVI, No. 2 (Winter 1997), p. 50.


\textsuperscript{114} Compensation would also have difficulty being accepted as development assistance, at least in the currently accepted use of that term by the OECD Development Assistance Committee. It might have a better chance of acceptance as aid if described formally as reintegration support.
Other elements of Palestinian Mythology

Two other elements of Palestinian refugee mythology during the 1990s need to be mentioned only briefly in this overview. The first is the notion that the issue of Palestine should be regarded, as some commentary in the UN context suggested, as "the most serious threat to peace with which the United Nations must contend". The second is the suggestion that the international community had accepted and continued to bear the responsibility for bringing about a peace in which the Palestinian people could exercise what the UN referred to routinely as their inherent, inalienable right of national self-determination.

The first claim could simply be dismissed, at least in the circumstances of the 1990s, as an absurdity. There were more dangerous situations confronting the international community than the situation facing the Palestinian refugees, despite the parlous situation some refugees endured.

Where wars had occurred during the preceding years between Israel and the Arab states, the sources of that conflict had reflected national interests and insecurities not related in any direct sense to the Palestinian refugee issue. Moreover, the more the national concerns of the parties were addressed on a bilateral basis, and the further the Arab-Israel conflict moved from the central concerns of major powers, the more remote appeared to be the possibility

of local disputes between the parties assuming military overtones.\textsuperscript{116}

The second claim, concerning the ongoing responsibility of the international community for restoration of the rights of the refugees was highly questionable, at best. In practice, at the political level, it amounted to little beyond the production of political and legal arguments in UN bodies - where a majority view in support of such arguments was usually readily forthcoming - concerning the need for Israel as a member state of the UN to uphold principles endorsed by the international community and reflected in UN instruments.

The processes that had actually led to the defusing of the Arab-Israel conflict to that point had little, if any UN input, beyond the establishment of the benchmark Security Council Resolutions 242 and 338 which enshrined the notion of land for peace as central to an eventual resolution of the conflict. UN observer forces (UNTSO and UNDOF) also played a useful role monitoring truce and disengagement agreements between Israel and its neighbours, but their effectiveness depended entirely on the goodwill and mutual consent of the parties.

The passage of Resolution 181 (II) by the UN in 1947-1948 was a prelude to the conflict and the human disaster for the Palestinians which developed shortly thereafter. But the UN and its local representatives were never more than a small part of the total picture that emerged in Palestine after World War II. That situation had its roots in much earlier measures and

\textsuperscript{116} For an insightful discussion of the causes of conflict in the Arab-Israel context, see Janice Gross Stein, "The Managed and the Managers:
approaches on the part of the British, as the League of Nations Mandate Power, to allow the establishment of a Jewish national homeland, as foreshadowed in the Balfour Declaration of November 1917, and in accordance with the subsequent decisions of the League of Nations on that issue. It also reflected the inability or unwillingness of Western governments to reverse that decision as its wider consequences came to be better understood.

Nor was the Arab side without fault. The inability of either the Palestinians or the Arab states to produce a coherent response to the Zionist challenge - and their resort to military intervention for political reasons - consolidated the problem. The UN failed to prevent the conflict that saw the creation of the refugee problem, but there was also a collapse of will among the Palestinian traditional leadership in the face of superior Zionist power. As hostilities spread from December 1947 to May 1948, Palestinian Arab society fell apart.\(^{117}\)

Laying the blame for what transpired at the feet of the UN - or Western governments for that matter - also ignored other key elements of the total picture. Those included the consequences of the rise of Nazism in Germany\(^{118}\); the impact upon Western, especially American public opinion of the Holocaust and the support offered by the Palestinian political leadership at the time to the Nazis; and the sustained drive, determination, opportunism, occasional


\(^{118}\) Jewish immigration to Palestine in the early 1930s stood at around 4000 per year, but increased when Hitler came to power to 30,327 in 1933, rising to 61,854 in 1935. Con Coughlin, "Of Blood and Betrayal" *The Telegraph*, London, reprinted in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, 16 October 2000.
demagogy and overall vision of the Zionist enterprise. The remnants of European Jewry emerged from the trauma of near-extinction to confront a war-exhausted Britain with neither the will nor the manpower to sustain an indefinite mandate. With Britain facing international support, including from the United States and the Soviet Union, for the Jewish community in Palestine, the political drive of the Zionist movement proved ultimately to be unstoppable.\textsuperscript{119}

The UN acted to deal with the humanitarian consequences of the conflict. It sought to address the question of the return of the refugees through the mediation efforts of Count Bernadotte, and later at Lausanne. It fulfilled its responsibilities to the extent it was politically realistic to do so. Its individual representatives, more often than not, demonstrated exemplary courage and commitment in the face of danger. Because of the limits of the politically possible, however, it was not open to the UN to reverse the changes that had taken place on the ground.

Neither the Palestinians nor the fledgling Arab states were able to master the political terrain in the UN, or in key capitals including Washington, sufficiently well to alter those outcomes. And neither the fact that the UN had a role in the events that led to the Palestinian refugee exodus, nor the fact that the UN continued to witness demands for change in the situation between Israel and the Palestinians, placed an obligation upon the UN to bring about those changes through its own intervention. Invitations from either

Israel or the United States to play an effective part in the search for a solution were not forthcoming.

In the words of Barbara Tuchman, written five decades ago but still apt at the turn of the century,

Whether the political ambitions of the Jews or the intransigence of the Arabs or the weakness of the British was chiefly responsible for the failure [of the dream of a regenerated Palestine] depends upon the individual point of view, at least while history is still smoking. Only a time-conferred objectivity can provide a final judgement. 120

It should also be noted that the United Nations and its agencies has continued to devote around 10 per cent of its total budget of $2.5 billion to consideration of the Palestine question and measures to assist the Palestinians in exercising their rights. That commitment, and the associated proliferation of Palestinian-related UN bureaucracy is far out of proportion with other nationalist causes, such as Tibet. 121 More than 20 UN General Assembly resolutions dealing with the Palestinians are considered each year, involving extensive consultation and preparation among delegations and in capitals. 122 It is ironic, from an Israeli perspective, and entirely appropriate from the Palestinian viewpoint, that the organisation

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121 UN bodies created either specifically to promote the case of the Palestinians, or which have a sizeable amount of their resources devoted to Palestinian interests, include the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People; the Division for Palestinian Rights (currently part of the Department of Political Affairs of the UN Secretariat); the UN Information System on the Question of Palestine (UNISPAL); the Department of Public Information; the Special Committee to Investigate Israeli Practices Affecting the Human Rights of the Palestinian People and Other Arabs of the Occupied Territories; the (vestigial) UN Conciliation Commission for Palestine; UNRWA, UNDP and the UN Special Coordinator in the Occupied Territories (UNSCO).
which gave international legal impetus to the creation of the State of Israel has become the largest single bureaucracy promoting the interests of the Palestinians. 123

Conclusion

This chapter has outlined the core elements in the late 1990s of Palestinian collective memories and mythologies and perceived rights as refugees to redress vis a vis Israel. Those include, most importantly, the right of return, and compensation. It was also noted that refugees maintain a belief that the international community was morally and legally obliged to support and assist them until their rights were realised.

The core mythologies discussed in the chapter are deeply-embedded in Palestinian refugee society. They remain naturally and inevitably part of the Palestinian refugee political agenda. Efforts to introduce changes in those mythologies, should any party have sought to do so in the 1990s, or in future, are bound to be constrained by the weakness of communication between political elites and non-elites in Palestinian society generally, by the ongoing strength of familial and other traditional patterns of authority and loyalty in refugee society, and by the sense of separateness that surrounded the Palestinian refugees within Palestinian society, and in host countries as discussed in Chapter III.

There was no evidence, among the Palestinians in the 1990s, of the sort of re-narrativisation of collective

123 Michael Shannon, "UNlimited Support", p. 10.
memories that had begun among Israelis. Denial of the legitimacy of refugee mythologies by Israelis did not affect the strength with which they were upheld on the Palestinian side. Nor was there much willingness among Palestinians to examine critically what such core mythologies as the right of return should mean in practice.
UNRWA has been the vehicle for international actors seeking to deal with the refugee problem, the possessor of material resources coveted by regional actors, a political symbol and tool for Palestinians, and a successful humanitarian organisation with its share of difficulties traceable to a unique mandate, structure and environment.

Benjamin Schiff

The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) is a highly successful delivery body for humanitarian aid to Palestinian refugees. It has impressive operational and political skills. It also has linkages, through the issue of Palestinian refugees, to the Middle East peace process. The Agency - as it is often referred to among its staff - is an integral but little acknowledged part of the Palestinian entity.

In addition to playing an important humanitarian role, UNRWA in 1997 represented, among Palestinian refugees at least, the embodiment of mythologies central to their aspirations and identity. In particular, the Agency was seen to represent the international community's commitment to upholding their political rights, as they understood them. It was an important source of direct support in the areas of education, health and relief and social services to which they believed they were entitled, pending the rectification of their grievances. Those factors were important to understanding the refugee reaction to the 1997 crisis facing the Agency.

**UNRWA**

The United Nations Relief for Palestine Refugees (UNRPR) was established in 1948 to coordinate the relief work of the UN specialised agencies and non-government organisations which had provided the first international humanitarian response to the Palestinian refugee crisis, as it emerged from late 1947 onwards. The United Nations had established UNRPR to oversee relief aid to the Palestinians after the International Refugee Organisation (IRO) declined to deal with the Palestinian case owing to its limited mandate, which did not extend beyond the European refugee situation.

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3 United Nations Relief for Palestine Refugees (UNRPR) was established by UN General Assembly Resolution 212 (III) of 19 November 1948. See note 6 below.

4 R. F. Gorman, *Historical Dictionary of Refugee and Disaster Relief Organizations*, International Organizations Series, No. 7, The
In General Assembly Resolution 302 (IV) of 8 December 1949, Assistance to Palestine refugees, the United Nations General Assembly established the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA). Acting under Article 20 of the UN Charter, which authorises the General Assembly to “establish such subsidiary organs as it deems necessary to the performance of its functions”, the United Nations accepted there was a need to continue to provide assistance to the refugees of 1948 “to prevent conditions of starvation and distress among them and to further conditions of peace and stability”\(^5\).

UNRWA was created, in essence, to move the emergency nature of the initial refugee relief effort onto a more sustainable footing pending a resolution of the refugee issue.\(^6\) According to Operative Paragraph 7 of Resolution 302 (IV), UNRWA was established

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\(^5\) United Nations General Assembly. Assistance to Palestine refugees: Resolution 302 (IV), 8 December 1949, Official Records of the Fourth Session of the General Assembly. Preambular Paragraph 5. Howard Adelman has argued, however, that starvation was not imminent in 1950 (unlike the situation in 1948). He suggests that allegations of impending starvation were used as a rationale, but not a reason for establishing UNRWA. The function of the Agency, he suggests, was “to foster stability among the Arab states while working to integrate the Palestinian refugees”. Howard Adelman, “Palestine Refugees, Economic Integration and Durable Solutions”, in Anna C. Bramwell (ed.), Refugees in the Age of Total War, Unwin Hyman, London, 1988, p. 306.

\(^6\) The initial UN response took the form of the UN Disaster Relief Project (UNDRP) which was set up by the UN Mediator for Palestine in July 1948 to coordinate and regularise the work initially undertaken by the American Friends Service Committee (the Quakers), International Committees of the Red Cross, the League of Red Cross Societies, the Pontifical Mission in Palestine, as well as UNESCO, UNICEF, WHO and the International Refugee Organisation that responded initially to the humanitarian aspects of the refugee disaster. It was replaced by UNRPR in November 1948 (see note 3 above). See Schiff, Refugees Unto the Third Generation, p. 14; Takkenberg, The Status of Palestinian Refugees in International Law, pp. 23-25.
(a) to carry out in collaboration with local governments the direct relief and works programmes as recommended by the Economic Survey Mission; [and]

(b) To consult with the interested Near Eastern Governments concerning measures to be taken by them preparatory to the time when international assistance for relief and works projects is no longer available;

... Plans for refugee resettlement, discussed in more detail below, were abandoned by 1956 in the face of funding difficulties and political opposition among regional countries to integrating refugees in host countries through a works program. The mandate of the Agency allowed considerable freedom, however, for creative interpretation according to changing circumstances.

During the 1950s education and skills training took over from relief activities as the Agency’s major program, with UNRWA-educated refugees providing a large proportion of the middle management of business and the professional skills of Arab countries in the Persian Gulf. Especially after 1959, the Agency expanded its self-support and vocational training programs, including through the establishment of the first technical training centre for women in the Middle East at Ramallah, near Jerusalem. The Agency continued to provide food rations and established supplementary feeding programs for the young and ill. It also expanded its health program, especially in the area of mother and child care, and created one of the best preventive health systems anywhere in the Middle East. UNRWA’s mandate was not necessarily open-ended.

7 The Economic Survey Mission was established under the UN Conciliation Commission for Palestine.
The Agency proved, however, to be no more transient than many other UN institutions and arrangements in the region whose original purpose was to stabilise the regional situation.\(^9\)

**UNRWA and Resolution 194 (III)**

Critically important for understanding both the initial orientation of UNRWA and the mythologies surrounding it are the references in Resolution 302 (IV) to UN General Assembly Resolution 194 (III), the resolution now widely (though as discussed in Chapter IV, not necessarily correctly) seen as establishing the right of return of Palestinian refugees to their homes in what was by that time Israel.\(^10\) Equally important in that regard are the somewhat contradictory references, firstly in the second (less often cited) part of paragraph 11 of UN General Assembly Resolution 194 (III), to resettlement, economic and social rehabilitation and compensation; secondly, in Resolution 302 (IV) to pursuit of the implementation of direct relief and works programs recommended by the Economic Survey Mission, and thirdly in the foreshadowing in Resolution 302 (IV) of discussions with "interested Near Eastern Governments" concerning measures to be taken in preparation for a time when international assistance for relief and works projects was no longer available.

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\(^9\) Another UN institution which has remained in existence serving largely symbolic functions but which the Arab states are loath to see disappear is the UN Truce Supervision Organisation (UNTSO) which continues to patrol in the area of the Suez canal, and to be represented in Jordan, despite well-established peace agreements between Egypt, Jordan and Israel.

The first preambular paragraph of the Resolution 302 (IV) recalled UNGA Resolution 212 (III) of 19 November 1948 (which established the United Nations Relief for Palestine Refugees, the predecessor of UNRWA) and Resolution 194 (III) of 11 December 1948 affirming in particular the provisions of paragraph 11 of the latter resolution ...

Operative Paragraph 5 of Resolution 302 (IV) then Recognize[d] that, without prejudice to the provisions of paragraph 11 of the General Assembly resolution 194 (III) of 11 December 1948, continued assistance for the relief of the Palestine refugees was necessary to prevent conditions of starvation and distress among them and to further conditions of peace and stability, and that constructive measures should be undertaken at an early date with a view to the termination of international assistance for relief;

Resolution 194 (III), paragraph 11 was again referred to in Operative Paragraph 20 of Resolution 302 (IV), where UNRWA was instructed to consult with the United Nations Conciliation Commission for Palestine (UNCCP) that was established by UN Resolution 194 (III) in the best interests of their respective tasks, with particular reference to paragraph 11 of General Assembly resolution 194 (III) of 11 December 1948.

Resolution 302 (IV) establishing UNRWA therefore contained three separate references to Resolution 194 (III) of 11 December 1948. Despite that fact, Resolution 302 (IV) was remarkable for its lack of precision concerning the objectives of the Agency, and its relationship to the search for a solution to the refugee problem.

The references made in Resolution 302 (IV) to Resolution 194 (III), paragraph 11 obviously were
intended to set a political backdrop or frame of reference for the operation of the Agency. But apart from directing the Agency to consult with the UN Conciliation Commission for Palestine, the General Assembly gave no specific guidance as to the Agency's role in the search for political solutions to the humanitarian issue. It is difficult to argue that those references had - then or now - a binding effect on the character of the Agency, or that they determined the duration of its mandate.

The references did not directly relate the future of the Agency to any specific form of settlement of the refugee issue - with or without return to Israel, comprehensive, just or otherwise. They did not set out criteria by which it could be concluded that the refugee issue was in fact resolved. Indeed the fact that the same resolution directed the Agency to consult with the UN Conciliation Commission for Palestine (UNCCP)

suggested that there was to be separation between the search for a political solution, through UNCCP or directly, to the refugee problem on one hand; and the conduct of relief and works programs through UNRWA, including preparation for the cessation of international assistance for those programs, on the other hand.

The interpretation that there was to be an ongoing separation between the humanitarian and the political aspects of the refugee issue was strengthened by the fact that Resolution 194 (III) assigned the political aspects of the overall conflict, previously handled by the UN Mediator, Count Folke Bernadotte, including
presumably the refugee problem, to the UNCCP.\textsuperscript{11} It was also consistent with the earlier UN General Assembly decision in establishing UNRPR, which relieved the Mediator of the humanitarian relief functions, and enabled concentration of his efforts upon securing truces which in 1949 became formal armistices.\textsuperscript{12}

Rather than being intended to continue functioning until refugees were able to secure the implementation of their right of return, UNRWA, as Benjamin Schiff has pointed out, was geared by the United States and Britain to transform the region economically and thereby facilitate the refugees' "reintegration" into the Middle East; behind UN declarations that the refugees were entitled to return to their homes, international planning focussed on their resettlement.\textsuperscript{13}

To avoid admitting that resettlement had replaced repatriation as the goal of the exercise, however, the Economic Survey Mission (ESM) report avoided using those words. It referred instead to vaguer concepts such as reintegration and rehabilitation of refugees.\textsuperscript{14}

\textsuperscript{11} General Assembly Resolution 194 (III) Operative Paragraphs 5 and 6 refer. Although it does not refer directly to the refugee issue, Operative Paragraph 5 of Resolution 194 (III) calls upon "the Governments and authorities concerned ... to seek agreement by negotiations conducted either with the Conciliation Commission or directly, with a view to the final settlement of all questions outstanding between them."

\textsuperscript{12} Takkenberg, The Status of Palestinian Refugees in International Law, p. 24.

\textsuperscript{13} Schiff, Refugees Unto the Third Generation, p. 4. The Economic Survey Mission (ESM), headed by Gordon Clapp, chairman of the Tennessee Valley Authority, had been established by the United Nations Conciliation Commission for Palestine (UNCCP) to examine the economic situation in the countries affected by the hostilities. The report, which it submitted in November 1949, recommended an integrated programme to enable governments to overcome economic dislocation, to facilitate the repatriation, resettlement and economic and social rehabilitation of the refugees, and to reintegrate them into the economic life of the region on a self-sustaining basis. Takkenberg, The Status of Palestinian Refugees in International Law, pp. 25-26.

\textsuperscript{14} Schiff, Refugees Unto the Third Generation, p. 20. The fact that UNRWA was established specifically "to carry out in collaboration with local
But the intention of the ESM report was clearly to establish public works projects, afforestation, road construction and the development of water resources along the lines of the work of the Tennessee Valley Authority "to give refugees an opportunity to work where they now [were]." 15

When Resolution 302 (IV) was adopted, moreover, Israel had already rejected two formal calls from Count Bernadotte for the return of the refugees. Bearing in mind that the initial mandate of UNRWA was to have a duration of only one year, the strongest implication of Resolution 302 (IV) was therefore that the Agency was not to be more than a means to alleviate the worst of the conditions facing the refugees, pending their local integration. 16

By the time of the Suez crisis in 1956, however, the grand vision of peace through economic development and resettlement had been thwarted by opposition from refugees who wanted to return to their homes, and by the political conflicts among the regional states whose cooperation was essential to the large-scale projects to operate. The focus for UNRWA shifted to governments the direct relief and works programmes as recommended by the Economic Survey Mission" supports Schiff's assessment, quoted above, that the Agency was to focus upon refugee resettlement. So too does the fact that UNRWA's Advisory Commission (ADCOM) was established under Resolution 302 (IV) "to advise and assist the [Commissioner-General] in the execution of the programme". 15 UNCCP, 'First Interim Report of the United Nations Economic Survey Mission for the Middle East' appended to UNCCP, 1949, part I, pp. 14,19 cited in Takkenberg, The Status of Palestinian Refugees in International Law p. 26.

16 Count Bernadotte made suggestions to the Israeli government for the return of a limited number of refugees to their homes, which Israel refused. In a report to the Security Council on 1 August 1948 and once again in his progress report of 16 September 1948 (UN doc. A/648) Bernadotte stated that the right of the refugees to return to their homes should be reaffirmed. His mediation efforts ended with his assassination by the Jewish terrorist group, the Stern Gang, on 17 September 1948. Takkenberg, The Status of Palestinian Refugees in International Law p. 23.
one of pragmatic humanitarianism, servicing longer-term and more programmatic needs in areas of education, health and relief services.\textsuperscript{17}

Against that background, of course, it is hardly surprising that among the refugees whose humanitarian needs UNRWA was established to serve, there was an initial disposition to see the creation of UNRWA as part of a plot to liquidate their cause through assimilation and resettlement schemes.\textsuperscript{18} Efforts from the earliest days of UNRWA to implement resettlement schemes, including in regard to irrigation projects; to trim inflated refugee rolls, especially in Jordan, and to depoliticise Agency schools fostered refugee suspicions. There was also perhaps a tendency for the Agency to become a surrogate target for its clients’ frustrations and anger at the perceived responsibility of the Western countries for their fate.\textsuperscript{19}

While such suspicions linger, and the level of service provided by UNRWA is frequently criticised\textsuperscript{20}, perceptions of the Agency have become generally more positive over the past three decades. The reasons for that change are discussed below. It should be noted at this point, however, that UNRWA’s disavowal of any suggestion that it could or should be involved in the political outcomes of the refugee issue has probably helped in that regard. In a 1996 discussion paper on the issue of harmonisation of its services with those

\begin{enumerate}
\item[18] Schiff, Refugees Unto the Third Generation, p. 274.
\item[19] Schiff, Refugees Unto the Third Generation, pp. 274-275.
\item[20] See for example IPCRI (Israel/Palestine Center for Research and Information) The Future of the Palestinian Refugee Issue in Final Status Negotiations, Dr Adel H. Yahya, Project Director, Final Status Publications Series, Jerusalem, 1998, pp. 67-73.
\end{enumerate}
of the PA and host countries, for example, it took the view that

the agency which was created to provide relief and other services to the Palestine refugees until the problem was resolved, cannot be part of the political resolution of the problem, but only of the technical and programmatic one. ...[T]he Agency has to remain sensitive to refugee perceptions and concerns and not be perceived as adopting a strategy which could be misinterpreted.21

At the same time, the Agency, and its Advisory Commission22 which was also established by Resolution 302 (IV), have taken it for granted that the Agency's role will continue until such time as the refugee issue is resolved.23 UNRWA’s perpetuation has been informally institutionalised, for political reasons, through the ongoing renewal of UNRWA’s mandate by the General Assembly. It is almost inconceivable now that the UN General Assembly would withdraw its support for the Agency except in the context of a comprehensive peace settlement between Israel and neighbouring Arab states.

Other Elements of Resolution 302 (IV)

Three elements of Resolution 302 (IV) were consistently or largely disregarded, in the light of regional developments and in accordance with the

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22 The Annual Report of the Director of UNRWA covering the period 1 July 1952 to 30 June 1953 (A/2470) said that the Advisory Commission "limits its concern to the provision of over-all guidance on Agency policy. It does not deal with the Agency’s functional operations." The Advisory Commission meets annually, around September, to review the Commissioner-General's draft annual report.
political concerns of key countries. The first such element was the mandate to carry out the works programmes referred to in Operative Paragraph 7 (a) of Resolution 302 (IV). As discussed earlier, those programmes did not materialize because of political resistance among host countries and refugees to the notion of resettlement.

Externally-inspired notions of integration could not surmount the political realities of the region, including the fundamental fact that the refugees demanded repatriation, not resettlement, and were supported in that stance by regional Arab governments. The refugees were not repatriated because that was unacceptable to Israel; they were not resettled because Arab states other than Jordan had little incentive to absorb them; and Palestinian nationalism - as well as the social factors described in this study - militated against integration outside their traditional lands. 24 Resettlement schemes, which included regional water management plans, small-scale training and employment-creating projects, works projects such as road building and tree planting, and subsidisation of resettlement in such places as Libya and Iraq to set up small businesses or farms, all failed. 25

The second element to be disregarded was the clear intention of Resolution 302 (IV), as reflected in Operative Paragraph 5, that the relief activity of the Agency was to be wound back in favour of development ('works') programmes. Operative Paragraph 6 of Resolution 302 (IV) noted that direct relief "should be terminated not later than 31 December 1950 unless

24 Schiff, Refugees Unto the Third Generation, p. 5.
25 Schiff, Refugees Unto the Third Generation, pp. 19-20.
determined otherwise by the General Assembly at its fifth regular session". In practice, however, a focus on humanitarian assistance in various forms prevailed from the early 1950s onward even though, as will be discussed in more detail shortly, for a brief period after the conclusion of the Oslo Accords, donors seeking to establish a 'peace dividend' for the Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank found it convenient to sponsor capital works projects through UNRWA's Peace Implementation Programme (PIP).

The third element that remained largely ignored by UNRWA was the mandate in Operative Paragraph 7 (b) to consult with 'Near East Governments' concerning measures to be taken by them when assistance for relief and works was not available. The reasons for not pursuing that element of its mandate were essentially political: there could be little interest among, or benefit to, either donors or host governments in addressing the hypothetical possibility of the Agency's funds running out.

The Agency was not inclined to pursue the question of long-term financing with host countries unless there was a serious prospect of insolvency. But insolvency could, in theory at least, be avoided by reducing services to whatever level the Agency was able to deliver. Despite recurrent financial crises, the Agency stopped short of instigating formal discussion on the possibility of financially-induced cessation of its overall role, nor was the matter seriously considered in the periodic renewals of the Agency's mandate by the General Assembly.

Prior to the conclusion of the Oslo Accords, none of the other parties concerned, including the major donor countries, would have wished UNRWA to raise the subject of its own demise, given the wider political
issues and sensitivities involved. The political circumstances that applied in 1949 changed dramatically over the following decades, and the Agency's financial situation deteriorated. But regional governments were not prepared to address the hypothetical situation of the Agency being abandoned by the donors.

Key donors, for their part, had a particular incentive during the 1990s not to set that hare running, for fear of affecting the handling of the refugee issue in the negotiations between Israel and the PLO. There was scope for broadening the focus of those negotiations, as agreed under the Declaration of Principles signed in September 1993, to encompass the situation of the refugees and the displaced persons in Jordan, with Egypt engaged in that process as well. Raising questions about the longevity of the Agency and the durability of the assistance provided in Lebanon and Syria would also have complicated the bilateral negotiating process between those countries and Israel, for no obvious purpose or benefit to any party.

Although the Agency's mandate has been regarded as something to be treated pragmatically to meet changing demands for assistance, only two enhancements of UNRWA's original mandate seem to stand out as important. The first was the development by UNRWA of initiatives to provide safety and protection to Palestinian civilians under Israeli occupation, especially the Refugee Affairs Officer (RAO) program.

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26 Schiff, Refugees Unto the Third Generation, p. 252. See also Takkenberg, The Status of Palestinian Refugees in International Law, p. 298, note 55.
during the intifada.\textsuperscript{27} That development was transitory, being overtaken in effect by the end of the intifada and, after 1993, the establishment of the Palestinian Authority under the Oslo Accords.

The second enhancement was the acceptance by the General Assembly, after the signing of the Oslo Accords in September 1993, that the Agency would contribute to efforts to support the peace process, by contributing to socio-economic improvement among the Palestinian refugee population, including the aid coordination activities facilitated by the Office of the United Nations Special Coordinator in the Occupied Territories (UNSCO). On 10 December 1993, the General Assembly noted that the new context created by the Israeli-Palestinian accord of 13 September 1993 will have major consequences for the activities of the Agency, which is henceforth called upon, within the framework of strengthened cooperation with the specialized agencies and the World Bank, to make a decisive contribution towards giving fresh impetus to the economic and social stability of the occupied territories, and notes also that the functioning of the Agency remains essential throughout its area of operations.\textsuperscript{28}

The resolution endorsed the Peace Implementation Program (PIP) which UNRWA had already instituted with donor support, in October 1993, as a major effort to improve services and infrastructure for the Palestinian refugees.\textsuperscript{29} In addition to its regular

\textsuperscript{27} The Refugee Affairs Officer (RAO) program which UNRWA established during the intifada to monitor the human rights situation of the Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank however was particularly resented by Israel, which considered the monitoring of Israeli security operations to be a departure from UNRWA's mandate. See Schiff, Refugees Unto the Third Generation p. 251, and Takkenberg, The Status of Palestinian Refugees in International Law, pp. 296-301. The Refugee Affairs Officer (RAO) program is described in detail in Takkenberg, The Status of Palestinian Refugees in International Law, pp. 291-301.

\textsuperscript{28} UNGA Resolution 48/40 A, adopted 10 December 1993.

\textsuperscript{29} Takkenberg, The Status of Palestinian Refugees in International Law, pp. 32-33.
programmes, UNRWA implemented over $215 million in PIP projects.30

UNRWA's Record

By 1997, UNRWA had a remarkable record. In terms of manpower it was the largest UN operation in the Middle East, employing some 22,000 persons and operating or supporting some 900 facilities. It was among the most operational agencies within the UN system, directly providing services to beneficiaries, planning and executing almost all of its own projects and activities, and building, administering and running or sponsoring its facilities.32 Voluntary contributions by donor governments, which financed almost 95 per cent of the Agency's programmes, seldom kept pace with increasing demands and needs, but the Agency carried on.33

In 1997 UNRWA had provided high quality elementary and preparatory education to at least three successive generations of refugees. UNRWA's 643 schools accommodated 436,000 students, whose success rate was consistently above that of non-refugee students of

30 In practice, PIP projects were concentrated overwhelmingly in Gaza and the West Bank. Projects included construction and social development, business loans, and upgrading of schools, clinics and women's program centres. Funds provided by donors to PIP in 1997 were only $11 million, compared to over $68 million in 1994, as the absorptive capacity of the PA for such assistance grew. The contemporary significance of the extension of UNRWA's mandate to cover PIP activities (which in some ways may be seen as refocussing the Agency on its original resettlement objectives - albeit in a radically different political context to that which applied in 1949) is yet to be determined.


33 The top 10 contributors to UNRWA in 1997 (US$ million) were the United States 87.4, EU 57.5, Japan 28.6, Sweden 18.8, Norway 14.0, Denmark 13.6, UK 10.7, the Netherlands 9.4, Germany 8.4, Switzerland 7.6, and Canada 7.6. The 1997 UNRWA Donor Generosity Index, PRRN, FOFOGNET Digest, 30 December 1998.
host countries undertaking the same curricula. It provided advanced training to Agency teachers and, when donor funding was available, university scholarships to promising students. It had graduated over 50,000 students from its vocational, technical and teacher training centres.

UNRWA had met the basic health needs of the refugees consistent with the principles and concepts of WHO and standards achieved by host governments for their citizens. It provided good basic health care service with emphasis on mother and child care, and helped combat disease and eliminate epidemics through mass immunization. Infant and child mortality rates had been reduced by two-thirds among Palestine refugees.

UNRWA provided family planning services, hospitalization subsidies, food assistance for the most vulnerable population groups, and environmental health services in the 59 refugee camps in which it operated. The per capita annual budget of the UNRWA health program was only $11.3, compared to the equivalent per capita annual budget of host country health ministries of $31 in Jordan, $19 in Syria, $54 in Lebanon and $37 in the case of the Palestinian Authority.

UNRWA's relief and social services programme ensured that those Palestinian refugees who suffered the greatest socio-economic disadvantage were able to meet

34 In 1996-1997 UNRWA students achieved a success rate in Syria of almost 90 per cent, compared to the national figure of 57 per cent; and the success rate among UNRWA students in the Baccalaureate II State examinations in Lebanon was 82 per cent, compared to the national average of 64 per cent. Address by UNRWA Commissioner-General Peter Hansen to the Sub Committee on Human Rights and Humanitarian Aid of the Bundestag 24 September 1997, (unpublished ms).

35 Address by UNRWA Commissioner-General Peter Hansen to the Sub Committee on Human Rights and Humanitarian Aid of the Bundestag 24 September 1997.
their most basic needs for food, shelter and other essentials. It was successful in encouraging self-reliance among refugees through poverty alleviation schemes including support for small-scale enterprise, training schemes, and small loans and grants for businesses.

UNRWA provided food, shelter and medical aid to Palestinians in emergencies, and fostered programmes for women, youth and refugees with disabilities through 127 Agency-sponsored community centres, which were increasingly community managed. The special hardship programme in 1997 assisted 46,000 refugee families which were unable to support themselves.

UNRWA was, in effect, a quasi-state institution, whose responsibilities extended to areas of education, health and social services that would otherwise be handled by national governments.\(^\text{36}\)

In achieving these remarkable results, UNRWA proved itself to be more than an aid agency. The peculiar character of UNRWA, including the political significance of the organisation, was summed up by Benjamin Schiff in 1995:

For more than 40 years UNRWA has labored under its "non-political" label, all the while saturated by politics. Barred from the high politics of regional and global conflict, it was irrelevant to peace efforts or conflict strategies, but its operations shaped the context in which high politics were played out. Changing international alignments and sympathies governed agency fund-raising; relations with the host states dictated maneuverability on the ground. UNRWA helped Palestinian refugees individually to survive their statelessness, to prosper in regional labor markets, and thus to survive as a political force. And as a symbol of the United Nations' declaration of the Palestinian right to return and compensation, UNRWA was inevitably recognised as

something other than a purely humanitarian organisation."

UNRWA’s Operational Character

The operational needs in 1947-48 of the refugee crisis meant that the Agency inherited a largely reactive, rather than pro-active and strategic operational approach. The short-term focus of the bureaucratic infrastructure (such as annual budgets) was firmly entrenched, reflecting both Arab political sensitivities that are discussed in more detail below and, as mentioned earlier, the misplaced optimism in some donor quarters, especially in the United States, that a solution to the refugee problem would be found within a few years through continuing relief and resettlement schemes linked to the regional economic development programs envisaged by the Economic Survey Mission of the UNCCP.38

The Agency’s operational orientation also reflected the political concern of the Arab countries and the refugees alike that nothing should be done by the UN which suggested that the right of return was beyond realisation. Even as the situation for refugees on the ground grew more routine and predictable, modification of the Agency’s established governance, financial and fund-raising structures would have been, in Benjamin Schiff’s words, political dynamite.

... Formally admitting that the agency needed permanent, ongoing funding would have tarnished it as a symbol of the temporariness of the refugees’ condition and the

37 Schiff, Refugees Unto the Third Generation, p. 270.
38 Conversely, from the Palestinian perspective, the emphasis on resettlement meant it was seen from the outset as a creation of the Western powers which intended to “liquidate the refugees’ rights through socioeconomic means”. Al-Husseini, “UNRWA and the Palestinian Nation-Building Process”, p. 52.
General Assembly’s position that the refugees should be repatriated.39

The Arab member states of the UN were reluctant to acknowledge domestically or in the UN context that the dispossession of the Palestinian refugees was likely to be ongoing, and therefore requiring long-term strategies to deal with the requirements of that situation. They insisted that the mandate of the Agency would have to be subject to annual renewal (later made three-yearly).

The strengths of the Agency were always most evident in emergency situations. Those situations ranged from providing shelter, rations and education and medical care amidst the traumatic conditions throughout the region of the early 1950s, and in the turmoil of Lebanon after the 1982 Israeli invasion, to the delivery of emergency supplies of medicine and laundry to hospitals and other refugee centres during periods of closure and other emergencies in the West Bank in the 1990s.

The highly pragmatic and politically sophisticated, emergency-oriented operational ethos of the Agency was reinforced from 1967 to 1987 by the need to respond to two international wars (1967, 1973), two civil wars (Jordan 1970, Lebanon from 1975), two invasions by Israel into Lebanon (1978 and 1982), and attacks by Israel and the South Lebanon Army against both Palestinian and Shia targets in South Lebanon that destroyed Palestinian shelters and UNRWA facilities. The emergencies in the West Bank and Gaza following the outbreak of the intifada in December 1987, and in Lebanon, enabled the Agency to raise special funds in addition to its regular budget to expand maintenance

39 Schiff, Refugees Unto the Third Generation, p. 114.
and construction programs delayed by lack of resources.  

UNRWA remained little-known within the UN system, with its work in regard to refugees overshadowed by UN agencies more in the public eye. It was acknowledged as the primary party involved in representing the interests of the international community on the Palestinian refugee issue, but the General Assembly had created UNHCR as the general United Nations agency for refugees five days before it established UNRWA.  

UNRWA was not even the lead UN agency on Palestinian development assistance matters, after the surge in donor assistance that followed signing of the 1993 Oslo Accords. That task resided with UNSCO, which was created for that purpose.  

UNRWA provided a long term, though supposedly interim, response to the humanitarian aspects of the Palestinian refugee issue. It presented itself as providing, through the ongoing delivery of basic services to refugees, a degree of predictability for all parties in an otherwise volatile environment. As discussed in more detail below, UNRWA was also a key contributor to the sense of imagined community among Palestinian refugees in particular, and by extension, among Palestinians in general at a time when the PLO was no longer capable of providing such a space for

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41 UNHCR was established by UNGA Resolution 319 (IV) of 3 December 1949. Takkenberg The Status of Palestinian Refugees in International Law, p. 30.  
the 1948 refugees. UNRWA became, in effect, part of an enduring management approach to the refugee problem.

As the vision of being an instrument for resettlement of refugees faded, UNRWA’s senior management proved adept at working within the complexities and ambiguities of the regional political situation. The fulfilment of its objectives as a humanitarian agency required it to exercise high levels of political skill – at both the Headquarters and at the Field level – in the delivery of its regular and emergency programs. UNRWA’s operational character was highly attuned to the implications of functioning in a relatively well-educated, articulate and politically-active Palestinian social and political environment, as well as dealing with the intricacies of relations with Israel and Arab host countries.

The dynamic interaction between refugees and UNRWA helped to shape the character of each. UNRWA was a United Nations agency, and an instrument of the General Assembly. It was also, however, a Palestinian institution in terms of its employment: of around 20,000 employees in 1997, only around 1 per cent – albeit mostly in key decision-making positions – were “international” staff. The remainder – known as “area” staff – were exclusively Palestinian refugees.

The Agency’s mandate did not require it to deliver its own programmes, though it generally adopted that


\[44\] In June 1999 UNRWA had 21,600 Area (Palestinian) staff posts and 109 International posts, of which 53 were in HQ Gaza and 19 in HQ Amman.
CHAPTER V: UNRWA AND ITS PLACE IN PALESTINIAN REFUGEE MYTHOLOGIES

approach. Although there had also been profound changes and improvements in the capacity of institutions in the region to undertake such functions since UNRWA commenced its operations in 1950, the winding down of UNRWA to allow for the creation of alternatives for providing humanitarian services to the refugee community was considered unthinkable by the refugees, the host countries, and most of the donor countries. The implementation of Agency decisions remained almost entirely a Palestinian affair, both through the work of salaried Palestinian staff and also through refugee voluntary support and self-help projects.

The Agency was formally no more than a service provider in the refugee camps which, in a legal sense, were host government facilities. There were no policy impediments from UNRWA to the involvement of NGOs or other parties in the camps. The relationship, however, between the Agency and most other potential providers of services, apart from a limited number of mostly international non-government organisations, often remained wary.

UNRWA was concerned to avoid interference from host governments with the delivery of its programs, fearing the possibility of a lowering of service standards, and the misallocation or worse of UN funds if its own control was not guaranteed. As will be discussed later, there was also an underlying tension between the PLO and the Agency in those areas where the Agency’s absolute commitment to probity led it to take a sceptical, if not critical, private view of the behaviour of certain Palestinian institutions. Some

UNRWA in Figures Public Information Office, UNRWA Headquarters (Gaza), August 1999.
PLO officials, for their part, tended to see the Agency as patronising and insensitive to their political needs.

Alongside the influences of extended families and clans, social status, geography and other factors, UNRWA was in practice part of the framework through which Palestinian experience and perceptions evolved. UNRWA services in education and the employment opportunities that its education program created, and its health and humanitarian relief programs made camp life and life as a community in exile sustainable. It also provided a basis for rebuilding shattered lives within a structure not too unlike village society.

The fact that UNRWA facilities provided a socio-economic basis and institutional framework for the preservation of refugee identity naturally had political consequences. UNRWA facilities provided the institutional means, including pockets of civil society, through which refugee political aspirations were preserved. Those aspirations, and the Palestinian refugee political culture of which they were part, emphasised the distinctiveness - or at least the particularity of interests and concerns - of refugees from other Palestinians. There were other factors at work in that process, of course, but the central place of UNRWA in the Palestinian refugee experience was undeniable.\footnote{Yezid Sayigh has noted that the loss of land strengthened attachments among refugees to social structures that were on the decline under the pressure of market forces before 1948; but the advent of the refugee situation "drove an almost obsessive striving for education, that offered itself as a new source of identity, dignity, and material security." Sayigh, Armed Struggle and the Search for State, p. 47. See also Fred Bruhns "A Study of Arab Refugee Attitudes" Middle East Journal, No. 9 (1955) p. 85.}
The refugees themselves were in control of political activity within the camps, as well as the day to day decisions of community centres. Although the Agency provided a platform for such activities, it kept a discreet formal distance from them. So far as possible, UNRWA avoided fallout for its own operations arising from dealings and encounters between refugees, Israelis and the PLO and, after 1994, the Palestinian Authority. The Agency’s position was often invidious, however, particularly when Agency staff were alleged to be involved in activities posing a threat to Israeli security. 46

UNRWA schools were entitled to use the same textbooks and to follow, so far as resources allowed, the education curricula of local host government schools. 47

The overall aim of the UNRWA/UNESCO Education Programme was to provide within that framework

general education, teacher and higher education and vocational and technical education for Palestine refugees in accordance with their educational needs, identity and cultural heritage... 48

From the mid-1960s onward, for the second and third generation refugees, UNRWA schools were an important site of mobilization for the nationalist movement through teachers’ fostering of nationalist ideas. 49

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46 UNRWA was deeply embarassed when evidence was uncovered in 1982 that the PLO made use of UNRWA’s Siblin Vocational Training Centre near Sidon in Lebanon for storage of arms and equipment and for military training. For a detailed account of the Siblin affair, see Schiff, Refugees Unto the Third Generation pp. 105-108.

47 In March 1998 the PA approved the new Palestinian curriculum to replace the Jordanian curriculum in the West Bank and the Egyptian curriculum in Gaza. GAOR A/53/13 p. 9.

48 UNRWA-Gaza Fact Sheets, UNRWA Gaza Field Office, August 1997. UNRWA HQ Fact Sheet June 1997 notes that UNRWA “offers quality education in accordance with the needs, identity and cultural heritage of the Palestine refugees.”

Jalal al-Husseini notes the Palestinian "touch" given by UNRWA teachers to curricula taught in UNRWA schools, such as informal references to Palestinian history and geography, became an important part of UNRWA education. The PLO, which benefitted from the role of the camps as bastions of Palestinian nationalism, organised classes wherever it could (mainly in Lebanon) for refugee children after UNRWA's regular classes.\footnote{Jalal Al-Husseini, "UNRWA and the Palestinian Nation-Building Process", pp. 54-56.} UNRWA's education system led, in effect, to the emergence of a new and more politically-aware generation of refugees.\footnote{Jalal Al-Husseini, "UNRWA and the Palestinian Nation-Building Process," p. 53.}

That process was reinforced by an understandable determination among refugees to preserve the memory of the 1948 catastrophe, including through narratives, photographic displays (for which UNRWA's photo archives were an unsurpassed source of material) and cultural celebrations commemorating refugee origins in Mandate Palestine. School celebrations invariably included displays of cultural heritage, including the wearing of Palestinian costumes from villages and towns in what is now Israel.

Inevitably, alongside such activity, there was vigorous political debate and activity, as there was in non-UNRWA Palestinian educational institutions. From the mid-1990s, especially during student elections in the men's vocational training colleges, support for violent actions directed against Israel, including celebration of the 'martyrdom' of Palestinians engaged in acts of terror, usually found
graphic and vocal expression.\textsuperscript{52} Palestinian security authorities entered UNRWA training centres from time to time, in violation of their UN status, to search for weapons held by students. UNRWA itself conducted occasional ‘audit inspections’ of its own facilities, to underline its concern to meet accepted standards of behaviour for a UN institution.

UNRWA’s role as a source of resources was also critical to sustaining Palestinian patronage systems. UNRWA officials privately estimated that perhaps eight to ten individuals directly benefitted from the salaries paid to each UNRWA employee. Job opportunities within the Agency were highly sought after, despite competition, especially after 1994, from better-resourced UN and other international bodies.\textsuperscript{53} In Gaza and the West Bank, an UNRWA job was traditionally looked on as security for life, and jobs were often secured (or just as important, believed to be secured) through friends, relations or political connections.\textsuperscript{54}

UNRWA provided a bridging framework between traditional village society and thinking on one hand, and the demands and challenges of a changing, more politically-sophisticated and market-oriented society on the other. The Agency’s institution-building programmes and other initiatives - and the fact that during the 1990s the Agency lacked sufficient

\textsuperscript{52} Observations by the author, especially of the presence of posters honoring the ‘martyr’ Yehya Ayyash, aka The Engineer, assassinated by the Israelis in January 1996, and the death of Hamas member Muhieddin Sharif in disputed circumstances in March 1998. (On the latter, see \textit{Journal of Palestine Studies} Vol. XXVII, No. 4, Summer 1998 p. 171.)

\textsuperscript{53} Author’s own observations and discussions with UNRWA area staff.

\textsuperscript{54} "Palestine refugees protest cuts", \textit{Palestine Report} 29 August 1997 p. 6. See also Randa Farah “Crossing Boundaries” p. 289. The author is indebted to Marie-Louise Weighill for her advice on this point, based on her experience with refugees and UNRWA in Gaza.
resources to fund them itself - meant, for example, that more than 60 per cent of women’s programme centres, as well as all community rehabilitation and youth activities centres were managed by local committees. Those facilities also played, though indirectly, a part in the growth of political activity among the refugee community within the broader Palestinian political context.

UNRWA was very successful in its encouragement of the establishment and empowerment of refugee women’s group-guaranteed savings and credit schemes, and its technical and financial support to women’s microenterprise retail outlets. The Agency - along with other Palestinian organisations such as the General Union of Palestinian Women (GUPW) - also helped to provide both a degree of security and more practical forms of assistance to the process whereby Palestinian women preserved and adapted traditional Palestinian costume and embroidery. Among Palestinians, the preservation of cultural identity had deliberate political objectives, including as direct expressions of nationalist sentiment and the rejection of cultural appropriation by Israel of that heritage. 55

UNRWA Financial Crises before 1997

As noted earlier, UNRWA was seen from its inception as a temporary institution - albeit for entirely different reasons according to whether one was a donor government, a host country, or a refugee. Created on the basis of a voluntary funding system which avoided

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increasing UN members' financial obligations, UNRWA continued to depend upon the annual voluntary contributions of sympathetic states. UNRWA's budget was kept separate from the UN regular budget and, as an instrument of the General Assembly rather than the UN Secretariat, the Agency was required to report to the President of the General Assembly, rather than to the UN Secretary-General.

While the General Assembly repeatedly voted to extend the Agency's mandate and to congratulate it for the services it provided, reaffirmations of support for the Agency from the General Assembly were not usually accompanied by commensurate levels of financial commitment by individual donors. Assistance from the UN itself was limited mostly to the funding of a modest number of international staff posts.

Host countries, for their part, were content to insist that the funds had to be found by the donor countries to meet the Agency's needs. Declining to enter into discussion of the financial issue on the donors' terms, they pointed out that their own contributions to the refugees through services provided to their populations as a whole were already substantial. 56


56 Jordan, in particular, defended its own level of assistance to refugees through the provision of municipal services, and access to
Contributions were driven by donors’ interest in the Agency which, as Benjamin Schiff points out, rekindled during regional emergencies. But the Agency’s ability consistently to avoid collapse, coupled with the inability of the Agency’s budgetary and planning systems to provide an accurate picture of the Agency’s finances to either donors or, for that matter, the Agency’s own senior executives, also engendered a degree of scepticism among donors about the actual state of the Agency’s financial situation.

The outbreak of the intifada in 1987 gave renewed energy and, for a while, some international prominence and additional financial support to the Agency, but its organizational culture remained overwhelmingly operational, rather than reflective and strategic, in its thinking. It was not a direct participant, for example, in any of the key negotiating fora that surrounded the peace process from 1991 onward. It took a low key part in the multilateral discussions on refugees established under the Madrid framework from 1992.

Until 1996, financial stringencies on UNRWA’s part were generally focussed on areas that did not directly affect services, such as travel costs, maintenance and supplies. Much of the time, UNRWA was also able to

Jordanian health and education facilities which it assessed amounted to over $300 million per year.

Crises prior to the 1990s are dealt with in some detail in Schiff, Refugees Unto the Third Generation, pp. 111-137.

Schiff, Refugees Unto the Third Generation, pp. 111-112.

For background on the multilateral tracks of the peace process launched at Madrid in 1991, see Joel Peters, Building Bridges: The Arab-Israeli Multilateral Talks, Royal Institute of International Affairs, London, 1994. See also Chapter VI of this study.

Statement by Mr Peter Hansen, Commissioner-General of UNRWA to the Special Political and Decolonization Committee UN New York 24 November 1997 p. 4. Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Canberra.
draw down its reserves or "working capital" which, in 1955, amounted to a little more than one year's expenditures. The Agency remained unable to borrow money, but it was prepared to use funds provided by the donor countries for projects under the Peace Implementation Programme (PIP) which were not part of the Agency's regular budget to meet recurrent costs and to juggle its cash flow requirements.

**UNRWA After Oslo**

The launching of the Madrid process in October 1991 meant that the refugee issue was eventually to be addressed, albeit in a limited manner, in the peace process. More importantly, the inclusion of the refugee issue in the final status negotiations envisaged under the Oslo Accords meant that it was possible, for the first time since 1949, to see on the horizon that the UN General Assembly would eventually decide upon the end of the Agency's mission and its dissolution.

At a time when most Western aid budgets were overstretched - from 1992 to 1997, total Western development aid fell by 21 per cent in real terms -

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61 Schiff, Refugees Unto the Third Generation, p. 118.
64 Rex Brynen, Financing Palestinian Refugee Compensation, Paper presented at a PPRRN/IDRC Workshop on Compensation as Part of a Comprehensive Solution to the Palestinian Refugee Problem, Ottawa, 14-15
UNRWA nevertheless maintained steady support from most of its traditional donors. The following table shows the percentage of total net Western official development assistance (ODA) in the years leading to the 1997 crisis, and demonstrates that UNRWA did not decline as a relative priority for Western donors after Oslo.

Table 1. UNRWA Funding as a Percentage of Western ODA

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>UNRWA regular program funding as a percentage of total Western ODA</th>
<th>UNRWA regular program plus Peace Implementation Program (PIP) funding as a percentage of total Western ODA</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1992</td>
<td>0.403%</td>
<td>0.403% (prior to start of PIP)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1993</td>
<td>0.414%</td>
<td>0.496%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1994</td>
<td>0.405%</td>
<td>0.527%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td>0.412%</td>
<td>0.509%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>0.446%</td>
<td>0.546%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1997</td>
<td>0.449%</td>
<td>0.470%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Rex Brynen has also noted that in 1997 Palestinians already received more assistance per capita than any other developing country - around $225 per person per year compared to an average of $12.72 for the South as a whole. UNRWA received around $78 per registered July 1999. The estimate is based on OECD Development Assistance committee (DAC) figures.

65 Rex Brynen, "UNRWA funding and global aid" POFOGNET Digest, 6 November 1999.
refugee, compared to only $55 per UNHCR 'person of concern'.

With the signing of the Declaration of Principles between Israel and the PLO in September 1993 UNRWA's operating environment changed, probably irreversibly. Although overall financial support for UNRWA did not decrease, after Oslo the international community increasingly shifted its aid and political focus to the state-building needs of the Palestinian Authority.

With the winding down of the intifada, the Palestinian refugee issue was less the subject of media interest than refugee situations in other conflicts, including in Bosnia and Africa. Outside emergency situations, donors were inclined to give a higher priority to development assistance ahead of relief. Discussion developed within the aid bureaux of some donor governments about the respective merits of using UNRWA or dealing directly with the PA for the delivery of aid, or using other UN institutions such as UNDP. The Agency's structural budget deficit worsened as expenditure per refugee fell.

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68 Author's discussion with a senior diplomat, Jerusalem, 14 August 1997. Confidential source no. 1.
## Table 2: UNRWA Expenditure from 1987 to 1997

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Regular budget total actual expenditure ($)</th>
<th>Total number of registered refugees</th>
<th>Regular budget expenditure per refugee ($)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1987</td>
<td>181,142,128</td>
<td>2,201,123</td>
<td>82.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1988</td>
<td>188,746,621</td>
<td>2,268,595</td>
<td>83.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1989</td>
<td>201,816,373</td>
<td>2,334,637</td>
<td>86.44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>229,860,825</td>
<td>2,422,514</td>
<td>94.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td>231,700,221</td>
<td>2,519,487</td>
<td>91.96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1992</td>
<td>256,679,308</td>
<td>2,648,707</td>
<td>96.91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1993</td>
<td>219,790,061</td>
<td>2,797,179</td>
<td>78.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1994</td>
<td>247,633,868</td>
<td>3,006,787</td>
<td>82.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td>247,383,380</td>
<td>3,172,641</td>
<td>77.97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>243,256,900</td>
<td>3,308,133</td>
<td>73.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1997</td>
<td>245,610,557</td>
<td>3,417,688</td>
<td>71.86</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

At the same time, in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, real per capita Gross National Product (GNP), a measure of potential living levels, declined 36.1 per cent between 1992 and 1996 as a result of falling aggregate incomes and rising population growth. Per capita GNP in the West Bank and Gaza Strip declined an

69 Schiff, "UNRWA's Bureaucratic Evolution 1950-2000" p. 25. According to UNRWA, average expenditure per registered refugee fell 29 per cent from 1992 to 1996, from $110.4 to $78.2, not taking into account the effects of inflation. UNRWA GAOR A/52/13 p. 3.
estimated 8.5 per cent in 1996. The declines were mainly attributable to the loss of employment in Israel, which particularly affected Gazans; and a decline in trade flows, which particularly affected the West Bank since access to Jerusalem was of considerable importance to commercial activity, following Israeli-imposed closures of the West Bank and Gaza in the aftermath of terrorist attacks.

The issue of sustainability of UNRWA’s core programmes - which continued to expand to accommodate an ever-increasing number of beneficiaries - emerged as a key dilemma for the Agency. The unique, public sector-like nature of the Agency’s functions and universal access to its services meant that it not only had to present project proposals to donors that were generally aimed at improving available infrastructure, or constructing new facilities to keep pace with demographic growth, but it also had to find the resources to meet recurrent expenditure - for salaries, maintenance, materials and other running costs - that would sustain those projects after their initial establishment.

Donor responses to the Agency’s needs for project funding after 1993 were largely positive, often drawing on funding lines within aid budgets that were different to those which funded ongoing programs through UNRWA’s regular budget. Donor willingness to support recurrent expenditure, however, in UNRWA or in any other context, was less forthcoming. The end result was a growing structural imbalance in the Agency’s budget whereby, for example, the Agency received funds to construct additional classroom space, or clinics, but did not always have the funds

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70 UNSCO, Quarterly Report on Economic and Social Conditions in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, 1 April 1997, Executive Summary.
to employ the teaching or nursing staff to make full use of those facilities.\textsuperscript{71}

UNRWA remained reluctant to acknowledge directly that it was reducing its services to the refugees, being acutely concerned by the wider political and managerial implications of such moves. Although the Agency continued to experience financial crises, with four consecutive years of budget deficits from 1993 onward, the political issues which had tended to shape the management approach of the Agency over preceding decades remained essentially unchanged. Agency management had no intention to address, under the guise of prioritisation of UNRWA's functions, the existential questions that the other interested parties - including the United Nations General Assembly - preferred to leave unasked.

Refugee Attitudes to UNRWA

In 1997, the relevance of the UN presence in the daily lives of Palestinian refugees through UNRWA appeared to vary according to the location and socio-economic situation of individual refugees. Since Palestinian society is far from homogeneous, moreover, depending on the context in which it was considered, the importance attached to UNRWA as an expression of Palestinian identity and national aspiration was also likely to vary.

Most refugees, and certainly those from the camp-dwelling part of the refugee population appeared, however, to regard the symbolic role of UNRWA as a critically important manifestation of international support for their status and their political aspirations. Because for the Palestinian refugees

\textsuperscript{71} UNRWA, UNRWA and the transitional period, p. 8.
UNRWA was a welfare agency whose origins lay in the injustice suffered by the Palestinian people and whose support for them remained the moral responsibility of the Western donors, resistance among refugees to change on the part of the Agency was strong. Such resistance was especially obvious among those whose lives were focused around the camps serviced by the Agency.  

Randa Farah found that among the refugees she studied, UNRWA remained a significant international organisation, seen to be bound by UN statutes calling for the right of return. It represented an “extra-territorial space” through which refugees could negotiate their political, economic and legal claims. It was therefore not surprising, she concluded, that the refugees expressed anxiety at the possibility of UNRWA’s dissolution, and fear that the transfer of its services and activities to local authorities, whether in the host countries or in the areas under the Palestinian Authority, would be accompanied by their permanent resettlement and not their repatriation.  

The refugees themselves appreciated and used assistance from UNRWA but could also, in Benjamin Schiff’s words, “be aggravatingly demanding, suspicious of, and at times outraged by, the agency”. The sense of insecurity and frustration arising from their situation in relation to Israel, the PLO and their relationship with the agency was exploited by various politically active elements, including activists among UNRWA’s Palestinian staff. At the same time, however, UNRWA’s status as an international body...  

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72 IPCRI, The Future of the Palestinian Refugee Issue in Final Status Negotiations, pp. 71-73.  
73 Randa Farah “Crossing Boundaries” p. 263.  
74 Schiff, Refugees Unto the Third Generation, p. 9.
which was created in recognition of, and in response to, their dispossession was increasingly widely appreciated among refugees. They welcomed the Agency’s role in providing services and employment, and the protection it provided within the limits of its capacities vis-à-vis Israel, through the Refugee Affairs Officer (RAO) program during the intifada. For each of those reasons, UNRWA came to represent a psychological and, in some cases, a practical safety net for the refugee community.

UNRWA and the Palestinian Authority

Apart from the political sensitivity associated with memories of UNRWA’s origins as a UN body aimed at resettlement of the refugees, some individuals in the upper echelons of the PLO/PA were inclined to hold negative perceptions of the Agency in its contemporary form. In part, this was because the Agency’s senior management was sometimes seen in Palestinian nationalist organisations such as the Palestine Red Crescent Society in Lebanon in the 1970s, and in the nascent quasi-state institutions of the Palestinian Authority, as patronising and insensitive to Palestinian political concerns. The Agency, for its part, had genuine concerns about the probity of some proposals for cooperation presented to it, sometimes with donor country support.

Jalal al-Husseini notes that UNRWA’s refusal, usually on technical or financial grounds, “to represent Palestinian political interests” gave rise to considerable resentment towards the agency, including by refugee committees and by PLO member organisations.

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UNRWA was accused of having a patronising attitude and of "conspiring" against the refugee cause; both international staff and the few Palestinians who secured high positions in the Agency were criticised in that regard.\textsuperscript{76}

Over and above those factors was an instinctive orientation in the PLO towards seeking control over, rather than cooperation with, any potential rival among the Palestinian population. UNRWA's control over substantial financial and human resources was at odds with that proclivity. For the most part, however, PLO influence on major UNRWA decisions was fairly weak - it was unable, for example, to prevent the transfer of UNRWA headquarters from Beirut to Vienna in 1978, or the suspension of UNRWA's basic ration program in 1982.\textsuperscript{77}

The relationship between UNRWA and the PA, which represented a nation-building body rather than the politico-military movement the PLO embodied, was more complex. The Palestinian Authority did not necessarily regard UNRWA as having more to offer to Palestinians in general than other UN bodies such as UNESCO, UNICEF, UNDP and the World Bank, all of which strengthened their linkages with the PA after the Oslo accords.\textsuperscript{78}

It served PA interests, in regard to the refugees, to maintain generally constructive relations with the Agency, including by offering it practical support through representations (by the PLO Department of

\textsuperscript{76} Jalal Al-Husseini, "UNRWA and the Palestinian Nation-Building Process", p. 56.
\textsuperscript{77} Jalal Al-Husseini, "UNRWA and the Palestinian Nation-Building Process", p. 55.
\textsuperscript{78} Author's discussion with a senior PA official responsible for international cooperation, May 1998. Confidential source no. 2.
Refugee Affairs) to key donors. That more strongly interests-based approach was also tempered at times, however, by other political interests. As discussed in Chapter III, those interests included the concern of some senior to middle-ranking figures within the PA and PLO to be seen to be vocal in defense of refugee interests, and to be supportive of demands advanced in the name of the refugee community. 79

UNRWA was generally robust in response to such attempts at interference by the PA, but more inclined and better equipped, in terms of local political intelligence and contacts, to be firmer at the operational level than in dealings between the Agency Headquarters and the Palestinian leadership. 80 UNRWA Headquarters remained highly sensitive to PA wishes in regard to the conduct of its activities, for both

79 See for example the discussion in Chapter III concerning the role of PA officials during the efforts of UNRWA in 1998 to collect higher fees for patients serviced by the UNRWA hospital at Qalqilya in the West Bank.

80 Below Arafat, the PLO department responsible, inter alia, for relations with UNRWA was the PLO Department for Refugees and Displaced Persons, headed by As'ad Abdul Rahman. In practice, dealings between UNRWA HQ and the Palestinian leadership on political or politically sensitive issues were conducted mainly through that channel by the Commissioner General. On operational matters in the West Bank and Gaza, and on matters affecting the Programme Departments (Education, Health and Relief and Social Services) UNRWA Field and Programme Directors routinely dealt with relevant Palestinian Authority Ministers, Deputy Ministers and senior officials, as well as camp committees established by the PLO in the West Bank and Gaza and members of a committee for refugees and displaced persons within the Palestinian Legislative Assembly. Schiff has noted concerns within UNRWA that its Commissioner General had very little contact with Arafat, despite requests from the PA and from field officials that closer liaison be established. He has also observed that in the latter half of the 1990s Field Directors "had less latitude to make contact with political authorities, and UNRWA headquarters [were] not actively protesting the kinds of infractions against agency immunities that previous administrations pursued vigorously through legal and diplomatic channels”. Schiff, "UNRWA’s Bureaucratic Evolution 1950-2000" p. 35.
practical operational reasons as well as for political ones.\(^{81}\)

Where the PA was unwilling to countenance change in UNRWA’s activities affecting refugees - as in an attempt in 1996 to have the PA take over responsibility for a clinic previously run by the Agency at Biddo in the West Bank, UNRWA generally heeded such concerns. It was also a matter of ongoing concern to the Agency that it was unable to afford to introduce the tenth school year in the West Bank and Gaza in accordance with the PA curriculum.\(^{82}\)

UNRWA was able in some situations to encourage the PA to take on additional financial responsibilities by arguing, on pragmatic political grounds as much as any other, that it was in the PA’s interests - as well as in the interests of the refugees collectively - for the PA to do so. In that vein, the PA agreed in principle to assume responsibility for the management and running costs of the European Gaza Hospital whose construction was completed by UNRWA in 1997, but which had remained unoccupied because of a failure on the part of its sponsors, the European Union, and the PA to agree on who was to take responsibility for its recurrent expenditure.\(^{83}\)

\(^{81}\) Despite ongoing problems for UNRWA of attempted interference by PA officials in its operations, the Commissioner-General in his report for 1997-1998 said the Agency “appreciated the Palestinian Authority’s ongoing efforts to preserve the integrity of the Agency’s headquarters and field operations and respect its privileges and immunities as a United Nations body, notwithstanding the continuing concerns over problems relating to Palestinian Authority capacity-building, including the establishment of the rule of law and accountable administrative structures”. GAOR A/53/13 p. 5.

\(^{82}\) GAOR A/53/13 pp. 3-4. An NGO eventually took over the Biddo clinic.

\(^{83}\) After protracted discussions, the PA came to the conclusion that it could not allow a central component of the Palestinian health service system in Gaza and the second largest hospital in the Gaza Strip to remain a white elephant. It may also be be assumed that irrespective of the final outcome of discussions with the EC on the issue of financial
Other Perceptions of UNRWA’s Role and its Mandate

UNRWA generally enjoyed a positive image among both host countries and donor governments. That image derived essentially from the fact that it was highly effective operationally, relative to regional governments, and was seen as making a vital contribution to helping refugees deal with their situation, to find jobs and other economic opportunities, and (to those who saw that as important) to survive as a political force.

UNRWA was an effective, relatively efficient and generally reliable vehicle for the delivery of assistance to the Palestinian refugees. As will be discussed later in the study, UNRWA chose to emphasise to donors that its services were having a stabilizing influence on regional politics, though without seeking, or being called upon, to present evidence for that contention.\textsuperscript{84}

On the other hand, as will also be discussed in more detail later, there were concerns among some key donors about the Agency’s management of its finances, reflecting and reinforcing a deeper concern to be reassured that the Agency had a clear strategic vision and was working towards achieving it. Donor frustration with the Agency’s management grew during the 1990s because of what many donors perceived (not

\textsuperscript{84} In Australia, the first attempt to make a formal evaluation of UNRWA from a developmental perspective took place in 1999.
always correctly) as unwillingness on UNRWA's part to modify its approaches.

To the Agency's staff, and their extended families, work for the Agency represented a secure livelihood and, for many, a professional commitment that carried with it important personal attachments. For some, as noted above, the Agency was a platform for political aspirations. In that regard, its alleged or perceived shortcomings were a fertile source of political ammunition, and a more popular subject of political discussion than were the Agency's achievements. Area (ie Palestinian) staff were among the strongest areas of resistance to change in the status quo.

Among the regional media, the Agency was little understood in terms of donor perspectives. It was portrayed frequently as party to, or the victim of, political agendas designed to weaken the Palestinian refugees. Those agendas included the perceived shortcomings of the Oslo process, and the role of the PA in fostering and adhering to it. That perception was particularly evident during the 1997 crisis.

To Israel, UNRWA was a body whose commitment to the refugees was problematic at times for Israeli interests, but one whose services had helped to avoid extreme reactions to economic hardship. In general, it had proved possible for Israeli governments to maintain a low-key, largely positive and constructive relationship with the Agency. For the most part, and especially in the aftermath of the intifada, the Agency found its personal and professional dealings

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85 These issues are discussed in Chapter VI and Chapter VIII of this study. For comment on Palestinian complaints that the Oslo process was nothing but a 'conspiracy' against Palestinian national aspirations, see The Economist, 11 December 1999.
with Israeli officials reasonably cordial, especially so far as UNRWA’s international staff were concerned. The Israeli approach was, however, generally unsympathetic to UNRWA’s operational needs, and somewhat cavalier at times in regard to UNRWA’s rights as a UN body, especially when Israeli security concerns were allegedly at stake. While both sides acknowledged the ongoing problems of matching their respective operational prerogatives, and made a genuine effort to address their respective needs, the fact remained that the Palestinian staff of the Agency were subjected to discriminatory treatment by the Israeli authorities. In particular, the Israeli authorities did not accept their status as UN employees, and therefore routinely obliged them to endure the time-consuming procedures applied to other Palestinians seeking to cross between the West Bank or Gaza and Israel. Certain other restrictions were also applied to UNRWA Palestinian staff, apparently on security grounds.\footnote{GAOR A/53/13 pp. 27-29 provides an extensive account of the operational constraints imposed on UNRWA by Israeli measures, particularly the system of permits regulating the travel of local staff, checkpoint controls and searches of Agency vehicles, occasional closures of the West Bank and Gaza Strip and other measures “not always consistent with [UNRWA’s] legal status ... [in] the framework of the 1946 Convention on the Privileges and Immunities of the United Nations, and with reference to the 1967 Comay-Michelmore Agreement [between Israel and UNRWA]”.}

Whereas some Palestinians were apt to charge UNRWA with collaborating with the “Israeli enemy”, Israelis and their supporters tended to charge the Agency with becoming the refugees’ advocate.\footnote{GAOR A/53/13 pp. 27-29 provides an extensive account of the operational constraints imposed on UNRWA by Israeli measures, particularly the system of permits regulating the travel of local staff, checkpoint controls and searches of Agency vehicles, occasional closures of the West Bank and Gaza Strip and other measures “not always consistent with [UNRWA’s] legal status ... [in] the framework of the 1946 Convention on the Privileges and Immunities of the United Nations, and with reference to the 1967 Comay-Michelmore Agreement [between Israel and UNRWA]”.

UNRWA: MEMORIES, MYTHOLOGIES AND THE PALESTINIAN REFUGEE ISSUE}
commitment to fulfilling its responsibilities as a UN agency. There was resentment among many Israelis and pro-Israeli commentators arising from a perception - reinforced, as reflected in the comments made earlier, by refugee perceptions of the Agency, and the evidence of political and other activity within training and other institutions considered to be within UNRWA’s overall responsibility if not control - that the Agency’s facilities were used primarily to engender or to sustain antagonism towards Israel. 

Although in 1997 the prospects of achieving a final settlement of the refugee issue between Israel and the PA appeared remote, Israel was clearly expecting the role of the Agency to be wound up, or to become an instrument contributing to the integration of refugees into the socio-economic and political framework of the West Bank and Gaza, or to be replaced in those areas by a different body capable of serving that objective. Israeli views of the future role of the Agency in its other fields of operation were likely to depend upon the manner in which the refugee issue was dealt with in those countries.

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87 Schiff, Refugees Unto the Third Generation, p. 11.
88 See for example, the Israeli statement on UNRWA at UNGA 55, Agenda item 84, in which the Israeli representative expressed appreciation for “the valuable humanitarian work” of UNRWA, and called upon donor countries to continue to provide financial assistance “to this worthy cause”, but said that UNRWA’s efforts were “undermined by the inclusion of hostile anti-Israel propaganda contained in textbooks used by UNRWA schools. These books, which are purchased and presumably approved by UNRWA, deny Israel’s right to exist and, as such, constitute a gross violation of the spirit and letter of the peace process itself.” Statement by Mr David Zohar, Representative of Israel to the Fourth Committee on UNRWA, Permanent Mission of Israel to the United Nations, 30 October 2000.
89 By July 2000 it appeared that the Israeli approach, as apparently outlined in the negotiations with the PLO and the United States at Camp David, had shifted toward acceptance of the continuing existence of UNRWA so long as the refugee issue remained unresolved.
To the host governments, UNRWA was a key employer and provider of core services for which they could not afford, financially or politically, to assume responsibility. No regional government would have welcomed a resolution of the refugee issue on the basis of their permanent settlement where they now resided. Nor were they attracted (with Jordan a special case because of its historical link to the West Bank) to suggestions—such as that made by Donna Arzt—of extending their citizenship to the refugees, even if refugees were willing to accept such arrangements.90 Rightly from host governments’ perspectives, and wrongly from those of Israel, UNRWA services were an important factor cushioning host governments from the full implications of their stance.

As well as being a significant United Nations agency, whose institutions paralleled many of the public service institutions of its host countries, UNRWA in 1997 was probably the largest employer outside government in Jordan, Syria and Lebanon, the countries where it operated, and the West Bank and Gaza. By virtue of those factors alone it had the political capacity, in theory at least, to act virtually as a state within a state. In reality, UNRWA was careful to avoid any public discord, and to minimise private dispute with the governments among which it operated. UNRWA’s primary focus was invariably the maintenance of its operational role.91

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91 Management issues ("pathologies") within the Agency, which are not discussed in this study, are addressed in Schiff, "UNRWA’s Bureaucratic Evolution 1950-2000" pp. 30-38.
Conclusion

UNRWA in the 1990s was a multifaceted institution. Sometimes conflicting or contradictory perceptions of the Agency among refugees, donors, Agency staff and host governments presented unusual problems for policy development and changes in established approaches to programme delivery. There could be no single measure of the Agency’s success, nor could it expect to receive coherent advice from among its various audiences concerning what its role, objectives and performance indicators should be.

The task of defining the Agency’s objectives and measuring its success against them was extremely complex, and politically demanding. UNRWA could expect to be forever the subject of competing demands and expectations. It would, like many other UN agencies, be forced to choose between, on the one hand, the pursuit of opportunistic, essentially donor-driven approaches and, on the other hand, those strategies that it defined for itself but then had to persuade other parties to accept and support.

With such a record, it is hardly surprising that neither the Agency, nor the UN General Assembly, nor the refugees, nor the PA, nor the host countries nor the donor governments would have been much attracted to the Agency reviewing its goals and asking itself whether those remained as appropriate to changing political circumstances in the region as they were 50 years before. That was certainly the situation when the financial crisis of 1997 was being confronted.

Over and above those considerations, however, was the fact that UNRWA, despite its origins, had become a symbol for the Palestinian refugees of international acceptance of responsibility for their situation, and
a concrete affirmation of the justice of their claims for redress. The blend of imagery and practical benefit provided by the Agency played a part alongside family structures, collective memory, direct experience and political factors in preserving Palestinian refugee political mythologies. The consequences of that situation became evident during the Agency’s financial crisis in 1997.
VI. The political context of the 1997 crisis: Palestinian refugees and the Palestinian leadership

The right of return is sacred. However, we are ready to discuss the conditions of its application...

Yasser Arafat

Did you exchange a walk on part in the war for a lead role in a cage?

Pink Floyd

This chapter discusses the political challenges posed by refugee mythologies for the nationalist agenda of the Palestinian leadership during the 1990s. It has been argued that because the fulfilment of Palestinian refugee demands can only be addressed in the context of the creation of a sovereign Palestinian state, in which the Palestinians would be free to determine their own movements and place of abode, the Palestinian refugee problem and the Palestinian struggle for self-determination have been, in effect, two sides of the same coin. Palestinian refugees perceived in the lead-up to

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2 Lyrics by Roger Waters, Wish You Were Here from the Pink Floyd album of the same name, Columbia, 1975.

3 Lex Takkenberg, The Status of Palestinian Refugees in International Law, Oxford University Press, London, 1997, p. 351. That approach is also
the 1997 crisis, however, that the peace process was proceeding in directions which were prejudicial to their rights and aspirations.

The following discussion highlights the determination of Palestinian refugees to achieve, if not necessarily to exercise, the right of return to what is now Israel. It reviews the Palestinian leadership’s political management of that concern in the multilateral track of the peace process which was launched in 1992, as an adjunct to the bilateral negotiating process initiated by the United States in Madrid in October 1991, following the Gulf War. It then examines the impact of mythologies on refugee perceptions of the Oslo process of bilateral dealings between the Palestinian Authority and Israel. Finally, the chapter discusses the relationship between the Palestinian political leadership and its popular audience after 1993.

Refugee Issues in the Multilateral Track of the Madrid Peace Process

The multilateral track of the peace process which followed the Madrid Peace Conference of 1991 was intended to create avenues toward regional cooperation that would facilitate bilateral negotiations and agreements. In the words of Joel Peters:

While the bilateral talks would address the political issues of territorial withdrawal, border demarcation, security arrangements and political rights of the Palestinians, the multilaterals would provide a forum for the participants to address the range of non-political issues extending across national boundaries, the resolution of which is essential for the promotion of long-term regional development and security. Whereas the bilaterals would deal with the problems inherited advocated by Mark Heller and Sari Nusseibeh in their visionary work, No Trumpets, No Drums. A Two-State Settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict, I.B. Tauris, London and New York, 1991.
from the past, the multilaterals would focus on the future shape of the Middle East.\(^4\)

The Refugee Working Group (RWG) was established during the first round of the multilateral negotiations held in Moscow in January 1992. With Canada as its head (or 'gavel holder') the RWG held eight plenary meetings between 1992 and 1995. Plenary meetings ceased in 1997, after the Arab League called for a boycott of the multilateral negotiations in protest at the policies of the then Israeli government of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.\(^5\)

Although the PLO succeeded in securing a focus on the refugee issue under the auspices of the multilateral talks, it was unable to include a "political" dimension in those discussions. The PLO leadership was unwilling to concede the point of principle involved, but successive Palestinian delegations to the RWG and intersessional meetings held under RWG auspices failed to overcome Israeli resistance, within that consensus-based and supposedly non-political framework, to discussion of the right of return.\(^6\) In the words of Elia Zureik, a member of the Palestinian negotiating team, "refugee compensation, modalities of return, and resettlement were left unarticulated at the official level."\(^7\)


\(^5\) Palestine Liberation Organisation, *The Palestinian Refugees Fact File*, PLO Department of Refugee Affairs, Ramallah and Jerusalem, April 2000 p. 20. Contact was maintained, however among key participants through what were described as 'intersessional' meetings and other Track Two activities. There were supposedly six regional parties to the negotiations (Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, the Palestinians and Syria) but Syria and Lebanon maintained a boycott on the entire multilateral process from the outset.


\(^7\) Zureik, *Palestinian Refugees and the Peace Process*, p. 89.
The concerns of Palestinian commentators about the way in which negotiations in the RWG focussed on assistance, rather than on confronting the issues of displacement and statelessness, were heightened when the United States pointed out that Resolution 194 had no place in the RWG’s deliberations. Israel, too, countered Palestinian efforts to raise the issue of resolution 194 with admonishments not to “politicise” the meetings. During a round of RWG meetings in Cairo in May 1994 the head of the Canadian delegation, who was also the chair of the Working Group, had to be forced to retract a reference to the right of return as a "myth".8

Determined to keep the refugee issue on the multilateral framework’s agenda, even if its political dimension was unable to be addressed, Palestinian delegates accepted discussion of assistance to refugees and the preparation of a range of related studies - an approach which was deemed appropriate by the United States, other participating Western countries and Israel.9 PLO representatives insisted that discussion of the conditions of the refugees in the Occupied Territories was without prejudice to final status deliberations on their political future.10

Nevertheless, from the Palestinian refugee perspective, both in the RWG context and in the interests of pursuing

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9 Seven main themes were identified, each with a lead country or ‘shepherd’. The themes, and respective shepherds, were data bases (Norway), family reunification (France), human resources development (United States), job creation (United States), public health (Italy), child welfare (Sweden), economic and social infrastructure (European Union), and, since 1995, ‘human dimension’ (Switzerland). The Palestinian Refugees Fact File, p. 20.
10 Although Palestinian representatives insisted on referring to Resolution 194 (III) in opening statements highlighting the right of return, the formal summary records of the discussions always diluted these as a more general reference to “re relevant UN resolutions on refugees”. Salim Tamari, Palestinian Refugee Negotiations: From Madrid to Oslo II, Institute for Palestine Studies, Washington DC, 1996, p. 7.
a bilaterally-negotiated settlement within the Oslo framework, the PLO appeared to have accepted the shelving of the UN resolutions dealing with the status of the refugees, particularly the right of return based on Resolution 194 (III). It was feared, accordingly, that the PLO had effectively agreed to confine the realisation of refugee rights to what Israel might be willing to concede, thereby forgoing the right of the refugees to a resolution of their demands on the basis of moral and legal standards accepted by the international community.\footnote{Graham Usher, "Oslo's harvest" al Ahram Weekly, 17 September 1998. Marie-Louise Weighill, Palestinian Refugees in Lebanon: The Politics of Assistance Paper presented at the Palestinians in Lebanon Conference organised by the Centre for Lebanese Studies and the Refugees Studies Programme, Queen Elizabeth House, University of Oxford, 27-30 September 1996 p. 45. For a more recent reaffirmation of that view, see A Palestinian State Cannot Replace the Refugees' Right of return! Call for Protection of Palestinian Refugee Rights BADIL Resource Centre, 26 April 1999, FOFOGNET Digest 27 April 1999.}

More specifically, the PLO was alleged to have become mired in debates with Israel over the numbers and modalities of return of those people displaced in 1967, at the expense of the principle that all refugees, by virtue of being refugees, were legally entitled to return and to be compensated. The fact that Syria and Lebanon were boycotting the multilaterals for reasons relating to the lack of progress in their bilateral negotiations inevitably opened PLO negotiators to criticism.

Refugee Perceptions of The Oslo Process, the PA and UNRWA

Randa Farah has observed that the articulation of Palestinian identity among camp-dwelling refugees in Jordan, including the political symbolism attached to "the camp" and "refugee", and the right of return, was at odds with the "homogenizing nationalist discourse" of the Palestinian Authority and its neglect for the interests
and rights of the refugee diaspora. And, in that situation, UNRWA was clearly identified with the sustaining of popular identity in opposition to threatening alternatives, including that represented by the Palestinian Authority.

Farah has also noted that the dream of return had been "jolted" by political negotiations. It was in the process of being "re-imagined" or reconstructed, in a way that replaced the older nationalist discourse that associated return with Palestinian self-reliance, armed struggle and liberation under the leadership of the PLO. She found that the oral narratives of camp-dwelling refugees pointed

... to an even more distant "Return", imagined through global events, such as the demise of the United States, religious prophecies and in some cases a faith that somehow justice will be done through History.

In addition to scepticism about the value and direction of the multilateral track of the peace process, at least as far as their interests were concerned, refugees generally had deep misgivings about the Oslo process that began with the signing of the Declaration of Principles between Israel and the PLO in September 1993. The bottom line, so far as the right of return issue was concerned, was that the prospects of Palestinian refugees as a distinctive interest group in the peace process had been largely overlooked by both the Madrid and Oslo processes.

In 1948 the language and the substance of UN Resolution 194 (III), though non-binding, had at least dealt directly with permission to return and with compensation. The Lausanne Conference of 1949 had sought, albeit

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12 Randa Farah "Crossing Boundaries", pp. 262-263.
13 Randa Farah "Crossing Boundaries" p. 263.
without success, to deal effectively with the refugee issue. By 1967, however, UN Security Council Resolution 242 merely mentioned the need to achieve "a just settlement of the refugee problem". Resolution 242 did not go into detail of what that problem was, what a settlement might comprise, or how it might be implemented. It did not identify which categories of refugees (1948 refugees, 1967 displaced persons, or both) were to be its beneficiaries.

Even the notion of a 'just settlement' referred to in Resolution 242 had taken a turn for the worse, from a refugee perspective, by 1993. The Oslo Accords simply recorded an "understanding" that the final status negotiations would...

... cover remaining issues, including: Jerusalem, refugees, settlements, security arrangements, borders, relations and cooperation with other neighbours, and other issues of common interest.

Refugee interests and concerns were not given any particular status ahead of other issues, including even the catch-all mention of other issues of common interest. Like all issues nominated for negotiation under the Oslo framework, there was no direct linkage made between negotiations and anticipated outcomes - nor even an explicit statement that there would be outcomes on final status issues from the negotiations.

Key advisers to the Palestinian side warned of the dangers to the refugee political agenda should the PLO be willing to accommodate the wider Palestinian national political agenda in that way. Elia Zureik, for example, contended that by their acceptance of the Madrid formula for the Middle East peace talks, which excluded the United Nations as the vehicle for resolving the Palestine refugee problem, the Palestinians had seriously weakened their demand for the implementation of the right of
Once the PLO had recognised the right of Israel to exist, moreover, the exercise by the Palestinians of the right of return would have to be undertaken in conjunction with a process of self determination, and not within the territory of the State of Israel. In that sense, therefore, the silence of the Madrid process and the Oslo Accords on the principles that would apply to resolving the refugee issue had effectively diluted Resolution 194 (III) as the basis for negotiations, if not ruled it out altogether.

As discussed in Chapter IV, Palestinian political thought at the leadership level had slowly evolved. From visions of redressing injustice through liberation and return - in effect seeking the establishment of an independent Palestinian state through the dismantling of Israel - it had moved to calls for a solution based on a democratic secular state accepting a Jewish society in Palestine (though not a Jewish state) as a fact to be addressed through reconciliation and partnership. After 1974 the PLO had adopted a new political programme that identified the political objective of Palestinian nationalism as the establishment of a Palestinian state in any part of Palestine that was 'liberated'. By the end of the 1980s, the PLO had progressed to acceptance of the reality of Israel, culminating in December 1988 in the acceptance by the PLO of Resolution 242 and Israel's right to exist.

From the refugee perspective, however, the focus upon bilateral dealings between Israel and the PLO had the effect of diverting attention by both Arafat and the international community away from the political issue of

14 Elia Zureik "Palestinian Refugees and Peace" pp. 16-17.
refugees, which was eventually postponed to the final status negotiations. Also, after 1993, the Oslo process gave an incentive to donors to divert aid flows to the task of state-building in the West Bank and Gaza, rather than helping to meet the needs of refugees in the diaspora where over 60 per cent of the refugees were to be found.

Those concerns were aggravated by the establishment, through the Cairo Agreement of 4 May 1994 covering the Gaza Strip and Jericho area, and the Israeli-Palestinian Interim Agreement on the West Bank and Gaza Strip of 28 September 1995, of a formal constituency in the West Bank and Gaza to which Arafat was now politically accountable. Only those 1948 Palestinian refugees and their descendants who had the misfortune to be displaced for a second time, in 1967, might have believed they stood to gain from any changes in their situation flowing from the Oslo process. The Palestinian diaspora, in general, had no reason to see the Oslo process as working to their advantage.

Palestinian refugees therefore overwhelmingly rejected the basis of separation that lay at the heart of the acceptance of Resolution 242 and the principle of land for peace. The creation of a Palestinian state to be located only in the West Bank and Gaza Strip was, in the words of Jalal al Husseini,

by no means wholly accepted as a substitute for the right of return; when asked about their reluctance to accept reintegration on these parts of the Palestinian soil, and under Palestinian leadership, most refugees answer that those parts are not their Palestine.17

As Clovis Maksoud has observed,

The refugees perceive[d] the Oslo agreements as detrimental to their legal, national and human rights... [T]he absence of any reference to a possible solution to this problem reinforced their sense of dispossession and disenfranchisement, increasing their fears about their destiny. 18

In a similar fashion, Salim Tamari observed that the refugee problem was becoming part of a dichotomy within Palestinian politics between the contingencies of state-building on one hand and the demands of the diaspora for representation and repatriation on the other. The return of refugees [was] dealt with not primarily as the culmination of decades of yearning for a fulfilment of dreams, but as part of a series of compromises between the absorptive capacities of the Palestinian economy and the ability of Palestinian negotiators to wrest concessions from Israeli bureaucratic and political forces opposed to refugee repatriation. 19

On the Palestinian refugee side, it continued to be argued, including but not exclusively by critics of the Oslo process, that the right of return could not be given up by any state party. It was a universal human right, and the PLO should not therefore discard it in the interests of negotiating expediency. Against that point of view had to be balanced the arguments for seeking an attainable, forward-looking settlement whose elements would represent the best overall outcome achievable under the circumstances. Israelis needed to be convinced, and Palestinians would have had to be persuaded to accept, that this represented a durable settlement, if not a permanent one.

Israeli and Palestinian positions were diametrically opposed on the question of responsibility for the refugee problem. Some commentators, such as Donna Arzt, suggested that the issue be avoided in favour of a forward-looking

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18 Clovis Maksoud "Peace Process or Puppet Show?" Foreign Policy, No. 100, Fall 1995, pp. 117, 120.
19 Tamari, Palestinian Refugee Negotiations: From Madrid to Oslo II p. 2.
approach. But others, such as Rashid Khalidi insisted, with justification, that the issue of responsibility was so central to the self-view of the Palestinian people that it had to be addressed. A symbolic response, at least, needed to be found to a real grievance that was beyond the possibility of compensation to resolve. Despite public references to accelerating the final status negotiations, on many of the key final status issues - including refugees in particular - by 1997 there was not yet a sufficient degree of consensus within either the Palestinian or the Israeli camps for meaningful negotiation on that issue.

Just as the creation of Israel in the crucible of conflict was part of the Israeli political narrative, so too for the Palestinians was the dispossession and flight of 1948. The PA, let alone wider Palestinian opinion, was not yet able to move beyond the issue of responsibility to explore the possibility of compromise on other, albeit related issues. Palestinian political dynamics - including the positions taken by such populist figures as Hani al-Hassan and Jamal al-Hindi - reinforced that inclination towards immobility, as well as the reluctance of the refugee population to countenance departure from familiar approaches.

Nor was there much evidence outside academic circles of willingness on the Israeli side to concede ground to the Palestinians on the political or humanitarian aspects of the issue. To do so would have required Israelis to undergo a process of collective self-criticism that would have been against current political trends. That would have been strongly resisted, not only by opponents of the peace process.\(^20\)


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In addition to overcoming internal divisions on the substance of its negotiating objectives, there was a need for the PLO leadership to choose where to focus among refugees and other final status issues; and to decide in what sequence they should be addressed. Those were problematic matters for both the Palestinians and the Israelis alike. For the Palestinian leadership, the timing of focus on the refugee question was critical. It could not be too late, but it also needed to be part of a final trade-off process on a wider range of issues including Jerusalem, settlements and borders.

By the end of the 1990s, the PA and Israel had yet to make assessments of their political capacity and willingness to make such trade-offs, under various scenarios. Limited progress had been made, mostly through the efforts of academics and officials in their private capacities towards acquiring and disseminating basic data concerning both needs and demands, and in devising options for negotiators to evaluate. A strategy for development of public discourse on the refugee and other issues, however, had yet to be found. 21

Israel and the Palestinians could not expect to resolve the refugee question bilaterally, or with Jordan alone. There were regional dimensions to the refugee issue that had yet to be addressed with Syria and Lebanon. Lebanon was certain to react negatively to outcomes that failed to address the refugee issue in accordance with its perceived national interests.

In the case of Syria, although the refugee issue had not been raised as a bilateral matter between the two sides, the Syrians were unlikely to acquiesce readily to any Israeli-PLO deal if the Golan was not returned.

21 It appears substantive negotiation on the issues themselves did not begin until the Camp David II negotiations in July 2000.
Agreements over water and economic empowerment for the Palestinians (including labour mobility, trade and investment, and security arrangements) would also affect the capacity of the Palestinian state to absorb returnees.

Some studies suggested that in a similar manner to the Israelis, there was growing willingness among Palestinians to differentiate between a felt need to adhere firmly to long-held beliefs, on one hand, and for flexibility and compromise in the pursuit of political objectives on the other. Research by Sara Roy in Gaza during 1988, for example, indicated the emergence of a new political paradigm among the Palestinian community, characterised by a desire for political compromise with Israel, based on a dilution of the Palestinian claim to all of Palestine.

Roy found that the overwhelming majority of her respondents acknowledged that any notion of reclaiming their original homes now inside Israel had to be abandoned if a political resolution to the conflict was to be achieved. In Gaza, the reasons for this approach included prolonged deprivation and suffering, threats to the family unit and societal cohesion, fears for the future of Palestinian children, a reassessment of internal power relations between Palestinians and Israelis and the subsequent unworkability of historical approaches to the Palestinian state, loss of faith in the Arab states to act on their behalf, acute psychic stress, and a desperate need for self-determination on part of historical Palestine.

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Roy’s analysis concluded that by renouncing the exclusivity of their claim to homes inside Israel, Palestinian refugees in Gaza had accepted the legitimacy of Israel, albeit as an enemy state. For Gazan refugees the Palestinian-Israeli conflict was “no longer viewed as a zero-sum game, but as a negotiable dispute”. Roy’s findings largely coincided with this author’s casual observation and discussions with refugees in Gaza. Amira Hass made a similar assessment that, while the Palestinians would not renounce their longing to return to what was once their land, they were capable of separating that wish from the need for a political solution. Occasional press reports were also made to that effect, though perhaps without the benefit of serious research.

In marked contrast to those findings, however, was evidence that attitudes were hardening against compromise in general, especially among the younger generation of Palestinian refugees. So far as the right of return was concerned, the notion of returning to somewhere other than pre-1967 Israel generally attracted a strong negative reaction among refugees. According to a survey in 1995,

(fully 66 per cent of those who were born after 1967 opposed forfeiting the 1948 lands for an independent state with Jerusalem as its capital, compared to 55 per cent of those who were born before 1967. ... Those between fifteen and eighteen years of age expressed the greatest opposition to relinquishing claims to the 1948 lands. Around 70 per cent

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26 See for example “Palestinian refugees: Adrift for decades” Philadelphia Inquirer, 12 May 1998, claiming that whereas Arafat routinely guarantees Palestinians the right of return to Palestine, most Palestinians “have accepted political reality”; and quoting a Lebanese writer, Elias Khoury, as asserting that “after Oslo the Palestinians already are switching from the consciousness of refugees to the consciousness of the diaspora.”
opposed the proposition, 26 per cent approved it, and the
remaining 4 per cent had no opinion on the subject.27

According to a survey undertaken by the Israel-
Palestinian Centre for Research and Information (IPCRI)
in 1998, 107 (92.2 per cent) of 116 interviewees insisted
that granting refugees the right of return to their
original homes was the only way of meeting their
expectations. When refugees were asked if compensation,
resettlement and rehabilitation would solve the refugee
problem if implemented, 66 out of 83 interviewees (79.5
per cent) said no. Asked if compensation, rehabilitation
and resettlement in an independent Palestinian state
including the return of refugees from abroad was seen as
a just solution, 59.8 per cent of interviewees rejected
that approach, only 13.6 per cent supported it and 22.1
per cent were unsure.28

A separate survey in 1997, among 1200 West Bank refugees
living in refugee camps, by among others the BADIL
Alternative Information Centre, the Union of Youth
Activities Centres/West Bank and Al Quds Open
University/Refugee Studies Centre found that when asked
what a just solution to the refugee problem was perceived
by them to mean, 74.9 per cent said return; only 15.6 per
cent said compensation, and 6 per cent said return and
compensation.29

27 Zureik, Palestinian Refugees and the Peace Process, Institute for
Palestine Studies, Washington DC, 1996, p. 64, citing a study by the
Jerusalem Media and Communication Centre (JMCC) Poll: The Year of Autonomy
28 IPCRI The Future of the Palestinian Refugee Issue in Final Status
Negotiations: Palestinian Refugees: Their Past, Present and Future, Adel
Yahya, Project Director, IPCRI Final Status Publications Series, Jerusalem,
29 BADIL Alternative Information Centre, Press Release, 15 January 1998,

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The Palestinian Authority and Palestinian Politics After 1993

With the establishment of US and Israeli acceptance of the PLO as a legitimate international political actor in its own right after the Palestinian acceptance of Resolution 242 in 1988, and certainly after the signing of the Declaration of Principles in 1993 and the establishment of the Palestinian Authority, the Palestinian leadership faced the prospect of having to revise its patterns of political behaviour even further. To be consistent, at least, with the basis upon which it reached agreement with Israel to bring a peaceful end to their conflict, the Palestinian leadership was under an obligation to end its reliance upon the imagery of armed struggle, and to concentrate upon state-building.

A fundamental problem for the PA, however, was that the building of a peace with Israel would, as a matter of political necessity, be based upon the irrevocable compromising of Palestinian political aspirations, long-standing political mythologies and collective memories. And, despite his formal acceptance since 1988 of the framework of a peace settlement based on acceptance of the legitimacy of Israel as a Jewish state, and respect for its sovereignty and security, Arafat was under pressure, from his domestic audience at least, to support the same basic positions and goals that applied before the political circumstances of the Palestinians had changed so significantly after 1993.

The Palestinian Authority had little to offer as a substitute for the founding myths of the PLO. It also had to bear the political costs associated with the shortcomings of its economic, political and social performance as well. Writing in 1999, respected Palestinian academics Yezid Sayigh and Khalil Shikaki noted that it was imperative for the PA, in its own interests,
CHAPTER VI: THE POLITICAL CONTEXT OF THE 1997 CRISIS

to address the flaws and gaps in its institution-building and to strive constantly for improved performance and more effective and accountable governance ... [and] to see and acknowledge its own shortcomings and to take ownership of the reform process by leading it.  

The peace process - as a general concept - continued to enjoy a large measure of popular Palestinian support, with polls suggesting endorsement by around 70 per cent of the Palestinian population. It appeared, however, that at the popular level the required outcomes of the process remained the established demands for return, redress, statehood with Jerusalem as its capital, and an end to Israeli occupation and Jewish settlements. There was no suggestion from Arafat that a morally-defensible approach could be based on acceptance of anything less than those demands.

Meanwhile, Arafat had set about the political task of effecting control over a society he did not fully trust. As discussed in Chapter II, the PLO leadership generally operated quite effectively, through mixtures of persuasion, backed at times by coercion and selective cooperation, in minimising the potential threats from other centres of influence and ideological rivals. Political control remained reasonably secure in Arafat’s hands, and the elite surrounding him had an ongoing interest in maintaining the system.  


31 Public Opinion Poll No. 40 conducted by the Center for Palestine Research and Studies (CPRS) on 15-17 April 1999 showed 70 per cent support for the peace process, and opposition 26 per cent; support was strongest among farmers (86 per cent) and housewives (79 per cent) and those with least income (73 per cent) and weakest among students (61 per cent) and among those with the highest income (57 per cent).

32 In July 2000 the PA admitted having secretly maintained a $354 million holding company, the Palestinian Commercial Services Company, which received
centralising strategy threatened the interests of a range of parties on the Palestinian side. But traditional patterns of authoritarian political behaviour and factional tendencies prevailed as he proceeded to deal with dissent and alternative political entities, including those to be found within the refugee camps.

The emergence of the PA affected Palestinians in different ways, not least according to whether one was affiliated with the mainstream of the PA. For individuals in that category, there was a prospect of standing to benefit from the patrimonial orientation of Arafat, and associated opportunities for corruption and extortionate behaviour. Outside that category, one stood to lose as the process of state-building along centralised lines began to gather momentum.

There was, however, no serious challenge to Arafat’s leadership, despite bitterness in some quarters towards the benefits acquired by the ‘outsiders’ arriving from Tunisia and elsewhere. Nor was there reason to expect a significantly different approach among his potential successors. Power in Palestinian politics continued - as it had done for decades - to revolve around Arafat’s leadership.

To the chagrin of some elements of the local leadership which had emerged during the intifada, the political base Arafat proceeded to build had four pillars: the security forces; a patronage network of new PA bureaucrats; members of the old notable social class, and his own

the majority of the funds collected for the PA by Israel and, instead of transferring them to the PA’s financial institutions, supposedly invested them in commercial operations in the West Bank (including the Jericho casino), Gaza and abroad. AFP report 6 July 2000.

33 For a description of the role of the PA security forces, including the General Security Service and the Protective Security Service as well as Military Intelligence in systematically extorting money from Palestinian
Fatah cadres (except those too independent to control adequately). A strategy of fragmenting the non-traditional elite was adopted. Some were co-opted into positions of authority, others were intimidated, and most were marginalised by being prevented by the PA from actively participating in the political process.  

Fatah continued in an uneasy, but generally workable relationship with its traditional secular predecessors and remained dominant despite its relatively conservative political image. Though often critical of Arafat — not a frequent visitor to refugee camps — and at loggerheads with the PA security services, Arafat’s Fatah organisation nevertheless could generally be relied upon by him for support when challenged by Islamist and leftist nationalist groups.

Key activists grew attached to the privileges and the perks of their position that proximity to power invited. Highly detailed reports by the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC)’s Monitoring Committee of executive authority graft, nepotism, and mismanagement, including the identification of Ministers involved in activities ranging from kickbacks for protecting monopolies to the granting of customs exemptions for the import of luxury cars were ignored by Arafat. Instead of dismissing the ministers charged with corruption, Arafat reconstituted his cabinet, retaining the ministers concerned, and

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35 One Palestinian friend, who would prefer to remain nameless, insists that Arafat has visited the White House more often than he has visited a refugee camp.

36 Hass, Drinking the Sea at Gaza, p. 329.
received a vote of confidence from the PLC for the new body. 37

There was little evidence of alternative power structures emerging, or of coherent and effective opposition to Arafat's policy directions. Irrespective of whether the peace process was going forward or likely to remain in limbo, Palestinians appeared to be consolidating a stable, post-revolutionary elite which insisted on a Palestinian state, which preferred peace and economic development, and would fight against a militant Islamic takeover or any external Arab threat. When Israel was ready for a compromise peace, there was likely to be a Palestinian leadership beyond Arafat ready to make such a deal. 38

That approach did not provide, however, a comprehensive or sound basis for dealing with the political challenges posed by accommodation to the peace process based on the Oslo Accords. The traumas recounted in the Palestinian political mythology and collective memory of historical injustice and suffering - all too often reinforced by direct personal experience - continued to provide a potent source of shared beliefs and values. That mythology strengthened and sustained the Palestinian sense of identity in ways which worked against the possibility of popular acceptance of compromise solutions.

Nor could Arafat ignore the political opinion of his wider Palestinian audience, for whom traditional political mythologies provided comfort and a degree of reassurance. The focus on historical injustice and the deficiencies of contemporary Palestinian political life

under the PA encouraged popular rejection of the unpalatable, rather than the mobilisation of Palestinian political opinion for the exploration of new approaches.

Arafat and the Palestinian Opposition

In Chapter II it was also described how new middle class Palestinian activists had emerged during the 1980s, grounded in the student movements of the Palestinian universities, frequently having shared experience of time spent in Israeli prisons and seeking to supplant the traditional notable elite and helping to modernise and mobilise Palestinian society. From 1994 onward, some were willing, like former youth leaders Mohammed Dahlan and Abu Ali Shaheen, to be part of the new order in the West Bank and Gaza. Others, like militia leaders Marwan Barghouti in Ramallah and Hussam Khader in Nablus, were destined to have an insecure relationship with, and to be confronted occasionally by, a Palestinian Authority determined to curb their potential challenge to its authority. 39

Under self-rule, the underground political organisations of the past were disintegrating. 40 Many of Fatah’s supporters in the West Bank and Gaza who were active during the intifada, but who had been largely unable since that time to share in the neopatrimonial spoils of the PA, also became members of a group known as Tanzim. Under the leadership (in Ramallah but not in other parts of the West Bank such as Hebron and Nablus) of Fatah Secretary-General Marwan Barghouti 41, Tanzim sought, from

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38 See Barry Rubin, “The new PA elite” Jerusalem Post 19 February 1998, p. 6
39 For a report on attitudes of Mohammed Dahlan and Marwan Barghouti to Arafat and the PA, see The Bulletin/Newsweek, 12 December 2000, pp. 87-88.
40 Hass, Drinking the Sea at Gaza, pp. 325-329.
41 For a comprehensive account of Tanzim and the roles, respectively, of Marwan Barghouti and Jibril Rajoub, the commander of the PA’s Preventive Security apparatus in the West Bank, see Pinhas Inbari, “Who Can Control the
within Fatah, to present itself as an effective counterweight to abuses of power by various elements of the security forces of the PA. But during the 1990s Tanzim lacked political impact, at least so far as Arafat’s approach to the peace process was concerned.

The Palestinian opposition was largely unable to find an effective political response to the reality that there was now an effective buffer - in the form of the PA and its security apparatus - between the Palestinian population and the Israelis. Nor did it have an answer to the fact that that buffer was exercising its autonomous power to secure its domestic control, or at least to silence criticism within its limited domain. At the same time, the limited effectiveness of opposition voices, mass arrests and the workings of the State Security Court widened the gap between the Palestinian leadership and its mass audience.

Two events typify the assertion of control by Arafat, and the growing alienation between the PA and its popular audience after 1994. The first was the violence with which, in November 1994, the Palestinian Authority police quelled a demonstration in Gaza by Islamic Jihad and Hamas activists following the assassination, probably by Israeli security and Palestinian collaborators, of the Islamic Jihad terrorist, Hani Aabed, and the suicide attack on Israeli soldiers which followed.

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42 Marwan Bargouthi’s status in Fatah provided his power base in Ramallah in the West Bank. He was actively embroiled in a major confrontation with the PA security forces in October 1998 as a result of a power struggle between the PA and Fatah. See Danny Rubinstein “Is Ramallah Burning?” Ha’aretz 28 October 1998. Tanzim also played a leading part in unrest during May 2000 over the non-release of Palestinian prisoners held in Israeli gaols, and achieved widespread international media attention during the disturbances that broke out between the Palestinians and Israel in October 2000.

43 Hass, Drinking the Sea at Gaza, pp. 87-88.
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After disturbances began with Aabed’s funeral (during which Arafat was ejected from the al-Omari mosque by Aabed’s supporters), Palestinian police intervened to prevent a procession in memory of the suicide bomber. Losing control of the situation, the police began firing into the crowd which had gathered for the procession at the Falastin mosque, killing 13 people. It was never made clear whether the order to fire had come from Arafat, or was the result of inexperience and fear on the part of the police. Whether the killings were intentional or not, the message they conveyed was that Arafat’s regime was determined to draw unequivocal limits to opposition and to eliminate anyone posing a serious threat to its authority.  

A second example, still widely discussed in Gaza during 1997, was Arafat’s alleged refusal to pay compensation to the families of the 59 Palestinians who lost their lives in the rioting which followed the re-opening, in September 1996, of the Hasmonean tunnel beside the Haram al Sharif in Jerusalem. According to UNRWA staff, since the rioting had not been endorsed prior to the event by Arafat (although he quickly embraced it after it broke out), it represented a challenge to his authority. For the first time in recent memory, even families generally supportive of Arafat and Fatah were unable to obtain the financial benefits usually provided to the immediate relatives of ‘martyrs’.  

Though Islamic and secular competing alternatives to Fatah displayed superior organisational skills at times -

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44 Hass, *Drinking the Sea at Gaza*, pp. 78-84.
45 For a detailed account of the rioting and the circumstances surrounding it, see *Time*, 7 October 1996, pp. 27-31.
46 Based on author’s discussions with UNRWA Palestinian and international staff in Gaza during 1997. Amira Hass mentions rumours that the rioting in Gaza was organised by Fatah on Arafat’s orders (*Drinking the Sea at Gaza*, p. 351) but that was not the view of this author’s contacts.
especially in refugee camps - the Islamic opposition, for its part, had proven to have appeal only when the direct target was Israel. And its terrorist actions had to be balanced, in practice if not in theory, against the political costs to the Islamicists of the effects of closures upon ordinary Gazans. Attempts to build a national-Islamist bloc were frustrated by organisational wrangling and incompatibility of political aims. Hamas, for its part, remained ambivalent about the fate of the PLO, and the possibility of peaceful co-existence with Israel, and was unable to negotiate terms to operate formally under the PA’s umbrella.

Arafat enjoyed less than complete success in imposing his will where the Islamic movement also enjoyed independent access to funding, including from the Gulf states. He was prepared however to use Fatah’s predominance for political ends - as for example in regard to bodies such as the Council for Higher Education, where he sought to starve the Muslim Brotherhood’s institutions, such as the Islamic University in Gaza, of funds.

However both Arafat and his secular critics - who in most cases took care to remain within the political playing field - gained from the neopatrimonial system, provided it was used with care. As discussed earlier, although there were interests-based clashes from time to time - such as over the corruption and monopolistic practices of the PA and individuals close to Arafat such as Khalid

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47 Amira Hass records the following instructive anecdote:


Salaam and the Palestinian parent company known as al-Bahar\(^49\) - there were few who stood to gain by challenging directly the overall basis on which the system operated.

Neopatrimonial practices were not incompatible with the advocacy of central elements of Palestinian mythology, nor with the pursuit of particular political objectives in regard to Israel. Indeed the system drew heavily upon the business connections established between Arafat and those around him with prominent figures in the Israeli security establishment such as Yossi Ginossar, a former Shabak senior official who worked alongside Khalid Salaam as an Israeli liaison point.\(^50\) Recourse to political mythology and a degree of responsiveness to popular demands for support arising from it was, in fact, politically essential, even though the political decision-making process on issues of resource allocation was more likely to be driven primarily on a day-to-day basis by the pragmatic concerns of the neopatrimonial system.

Arafat’s secular critics also did not, in most cases, wish to be accused of departing from political orthodoxy where mythology was concerned. Their main line of attack, upon Arafat and the PA was, after all, that Arafat could not be trusted to be orthodox enough. Secular political agendas, instead of responding directly to the implications of the Oslo framework for the future direction of the political struggle, related mainly to reform of the PLO and removal of Arafat’s leadership.

\(^{49}\) For background on al-Bahar and on Arafat’s economic advisor, Khalid Salaam (also known as Muhammad Rashid) see Hass, Drinking the Sea at Gaza, pp. 301-306.

\(^{50}\) Hass, Drinking the Sea at Gaza, p. 302.
Opposition politics generally were "marked by theoretical poverty and organisational paralysis." On policy issues, the leftist and other groups which made political headway during the intifada in the refugee camps, and which were later subjected to a process of recentralisation of power upon the PLO leadership under Arafat, had little incentive to accommodate the nationalist political agenda advanced by the PA under Arafat. The PFLP and DFLP were unable to resist the political realities arising from self-rule. Where the nationalist agenda was perceived to put refugee demands and interests at risk, the leftist groups had a strong incentive to position themselves, like Fatah, in ways which allowed continued capacity to criticise, without however severing potentially rewarding patrimonial relations with the PA leadership. The PA, for its part, continued to pursue its centralising course, but without allowing tensions arising from that process to reach a point where new approaches would have to be found.

Opposition figures from the NGO movement such as Mustapha Barghouti argued that the PA remained under the direction of Israel both politically and economically, and that "real commitment" to peace necessitated ignoring the Oslo and Cairo agreements and building "an unshakeable front on the basis of the Palestinian national aims". No coherent alternative to the direction of Arafat's policies was evident, however, among opposition circles.

Writing in 1995, Graham Usher summed up the situation in 1994 as follows:

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51 Graham Usher, Palestine in Crisis: The Struggle for Peace and Political Independence after Oslo, Pluto Press in association with Transnational Institute (TNI) and Middle East Research and Information Project (MERIP), London and East Haven CT, 1995. p. 50
52 Mustafa Barghouti, Palestinian NGOs and their Role in Building a Civil Society, Union of Palestinian Medical Relief Committees, Jerusalem, June 1994.
Even more culpably, the PLO opposition had yet to formulate a coherent political programme outlining its positions vis-a-vis the Palestinian self-government. When pressed to construct a positive political alternative to Oslo, the opposition's official line was that 'it is not our job to create a new alternative, but to guard the original agenda of the PLO, which the PLO relinquished in the agreement.'

There was little evidence to suggest significant change in that situation over the following few years. That did not mean that the intensity of Palestinian political life was to moderate, or that there was to be a tendency towards convergence among competing alternatives. But by regional standards, Palestinian politics remained remarkably free from the temptation to use force to repress internal opposition - though the Palestinian movement had to pay a price for that in terms of bureaucratic weakness, corruption and political and ideological aimlessness.

There were well-understood limits to the conduct of political behaviour, both in regard to other factions and in regard to dealings with the central authority. The political mechanisms that developed in the Palestinian context were essentially constructed around, and were therefore likely to reinforce, presumptions that no party would seek irrevocably to exclude the other from the benefits, including the material benefits, that flowed from the possession of power. That was provided, of course, that they did not bring differences to the point of outright confrontation.

All disputes, and indeed all decisions, were presumed to be negotiable. And it was assumed that negotiation was more likely to achieve outcomes that all sides could tolerate than any outcome that might have been achieved through attempts at coercion. Key to the stability of

that approach, however, was the continuation of access across a fairly wide spectrum of the political and bureaucratic elite to the material benefits that it offered. Overall, the system demonstrated a high level of capacity to maintain apparently contradictory stances between competing elites in reasonably functional, if usually far from harmonious, equilibrium.

There was abundant evidence across the Palestinian nationalist movement of ideological factionalism, intellectual eclecticism and political fragmentation. In part, this was the result of geographic separation between the dispersed refugee populations, and the adoption of strategies of survival based on individual or family needs, rather than national community or class needs, to cope with the political and other demands and pressures of Arab host societies. In part it was a result of intellectual differences concerning the desirable direction or even the tactics of Palestinian political activity.

Whatever the underlying reasons, the net effect of the historical and institutional context of the Palestinian struggle was to underline a lack of genuine ideological depth and cohesion among the major Palestinian political organisations. It was correct to argue, in Yezid Sayigh’s words, that it was armed struggle that eventually turned the Palestinian ‘idea’ into an organised mass phenomenon, by offering a powerful symbol of the ‘imagined community’ and providing the impetus to focus it on a common structure.  

It was also true, however, that beyond the intifada, the limited practical and political utility of armed struggle against the Israeli occupation became increasingly obvious. Armed struggle was therefore largely eschewed within the secular side of the

\[54\] Yezid Sayigh, Armed Struggle and the Search for State, pp. 56-57.
Palestinian political spectrum until the collapse of the Oslo process at the end of 2000.

At the elite level of political activism, the collective memories of dispossession, and of struggle in the years of the intifada could be taken as common ground between the parties. But with the declining relevance of struggle mythology there was no longer a device to convert contests for power over the allocation of resources, in the course of which references to refugee mythology continued to be drawn upon as a political weapon, into a forward-looking framework that would be capable of nation-building.

The situation in 1997

By 1997 there was an inevitable tension between refugee mythology and the orientation of those Palestinians around Arafat - and, for that matter, those Israelis - who, for whatever reason, had become committed to establishing peace based on compromise. It remained to be seen what priority would be accorded to the refugee issue in the Palestinian nationalist political agenda if refugee aspirations should have to be balanced against the attainment or consolidation of other political outcomes at the national level.

While closely related to each other and often overlapping, Palestinian national objectives as represented by the leadership of the Palestinian Authority, and the political agendas and the mythologies of Palestinian refugees had separate dynamics. They would not necessarily be co-terminous. Indeed there was a strong likelihood that the areas of commonality between refugee aspirations and the nationalist Palestinian political agenda would exist in practice only up to the point where the limit of the politically possible was reached, in terms of national Palestinian political
objectives and the flexibility of the neopatrimonial system.\textsuperscript{55}

The more the peace process witnessed significant reversals after 1995, the more difficult it was for the Palestinian nationalist movement to find more powerful, yet relevant, symbols than those which had applied before Oslo, including those that had underpinned the imagery of armed struggle. The message that was clear to the Palestinian political audience, including refugees, about Israel under the Likud government of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu (1996-1999) was that their concern to see outcomes from the Oslo process that met their aspirations were at constant risk of being degraded.

Unilateral measures taken on the Israeli side in regard to such matters as settlement activity, including in and around Jerusalem; periodic closures of the Green Line and occasional internal closures within the West Bank itself; and the confiscation of Jerusalem ID cards were seen as an indictment of the political processes at work between the Israeli and Palestinian leaderships. As one would expect in such a situation, there was ample scope for those concerns to be drawn upon by critics and opponents of the peace process, and by rival parties to the PA in ongoing exchanges of claims and counter-claims.\textsuperscript{56}

\textsuperscript{55} The outbreak of the second intifada in late 2000 may have changed that situation, inasmuch as the failure to come to an agreement before the 6 February Israeli elections for Prime Minister appeared to be due, at least in part, to both sides refusing to make concessions to the other on the refugee issue.

\textsuperscript{56} Constant reminders from critics of the Oslo process that the process had brought about the effective abandonment of the right of return by the PA (see for example such claims by Rosemary Sayegh in "A Right to Return" Palestine Report 8 January 1999) inevitably drew statements to the opposite effect from the PA; see for example comments attributed to Abu al-`Ala in al-Hayat al-Jadida, 28 December 1998, in which he stated that the PA "will insist on the refugees return and we stress there can be no peace unless this is achieved." FOFOGNET Digest 1 January 1999 - 4 January 1999, No. 1999-3.
Israeli elevation of the issue of return to non-negotiable status was rejected by the Palestinians, quite understandably, as a strategy of psychological intimidation and, perhaps less accurately, as a violation of the Oslo accords.\textsuperscript{57} The idea of compromise on the issue of return encountered strong and vocal resistance, even though it was alleged to be more or less accepted by a number of leading figures within the Palestinian political elite such as Nabil Shaath, Faisal Husseini and Ziad Abu Ziad.\textsuperscript{58}

Arafat’s private position on the question was widely assumed to involve a willingness to compromise on the implementation of the principle of return, although in public he insisted that the right itself was sacrosanct. In 1990 he had stated that the solution of the issue lay in mutual recognition and the commencement of negotiations; whereas the right of return was ‘sacred’, Arafat said, he was ready “to discuss the conditions of its application”.\textsuperscript{59} That tension – and the underlying popular concerns described by Randa Farah – was a constant background factor in the debate which unfolded in 1997 between the PA, the refugees and the international donor community over UNRWA.

Though important parts of an overall equation, refugees, and UNRWA itself, were not regarded consistently among key players as vital to the interests of the peace process negotiations. There was evidence of

\textsuperscript{57} Tamari, Palestinian Refugee Negotiations: From Madrid to Oslo II, p. 49.

\textsuperscript{58} Shlomo Gazit, The Palestinian Refugee Problem, Tel Aviv University, Jaffee Centre for Strategic Studies, 1995, p. 6. Palestinian Legislative Council member Ziad Abu Ziad was also reported in \textit{al-Ayyam}, 2 July 1999, as stating that “the Palestinians don’t insist on the right of return, but are looking for a middle solution (haal wasat) and they will not ask Israel to commit suicide.” \textit{FOFOGNET Digest}, 5 July 1999-6 July 1999.

disconnections in terms of information flows and policy concerns between the negotiators and those areas of their governments or authorities that dealt with the refugee issue. Many of the players in the peace process appeared focused on the achievable, rather than or perhaps at the short-term expense of the morally demanding but less than compelling case for early attention to the refugee issue.

Such disconnection was evident, for example, in the terms of the Labour and Likud Knesset members ‘National Agreement Regarding the Negotiations on the Permanent Settlement with the Palestinians’ of 22 January 1997. That document, which recognised the right of Israel to prevent the entry of Palestinian refugees into its sovereign territory, left open to negotiation the administration and limits to the entry of refugees into the Palestinian entity. It also referred to the disengagement of UNRWA from the situation of refugees within the boundaries of the Israeli and Palestinian areas, the repealing of refugee status, and the arrangement of housing and employment with international aid.

The Abu Mazen-Beilin document which served as the basis of the ‘National Agreement’ reportedly accepted that the Palestinian state would not be limited in absorbing refugees within its area. In return, the Palestinians would commit themselves to forego the right of return of refugees to areas within the Green Line (that is, Israel). It also reportedly agreed that a new international body would be established, “headed by Swedes”, which would take the place of UNRWA.60

60 Ma’ariv 11 October 1996. It was also reportedly agreed that the Palestinian state would not be limited in absorbing refugees within its area, and in return the Palestinians would commit themselves to forego the right of return of refugees to areas within the Green Line (that is, Israel). Palestine Report, 9 August 1996, p. 10. The full text of the Beilin-Abu Mazen-Beilin document which served as the basis of the ‘National Agreement’ reportedly accepted that the Palestinian state would not be limited in absorbing refugees within its area. In return, the Palestinians would commit themselves to forego the right of return of refugees to areas within the Green Line (that is, Israel). It also reportedly agreed that a new international body would be established, “headed by Swedes”, which would take the place of UNRWA.
Significant gaps continued to exist between levels of political awareness and sophistication in political technique of Palestinian political elites on one hand, and their audiences, on the other. This was generally in line with the experience of other Arab societies, where the petite bourgeoisie eventually asserted its political leadership and came to dominate the state-building process. Refugees tended to be less politically active than residents, and more inclined to migrate in pursuit of economic opportunity. They were also less likely than residents to join parties espousing formal ideologies and social programmes. They tended to have higher expectations of their leaderships to produce outcomes than was probably warranted.

Amidst the hard-headed sophistication prevailing at the leadership level, however, there was an even more significant failure on the part of the Palestinian political leadership to deal with perhaps the most fundamental political fact in regard to the refugees. The Palestinian elite failed to acknowledge the depth, and the intensity, of resistance among Palestinian political audiences, in particular the refugees, to abandoning or...
modifying the mythologies that they had sustained, and that had sustained them, over the preceding five decades.

While the PA leadership avoided building awareness among refugees of limits to what could be considered politically realistic, there was no shortage of Palestinian political figures anxious to remind their audiences of their commitment to supporting refugee aspirations. Those figures sought, moreover, to underline the abstract commitments embodied in UN resolutions dealing with the refugee issue, without producing a strategy through which to bring about the concrete realisation of such principles.

An interview with Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC) member and Chairman of the PLC Refugee and Diaspora Committee Jamal Shati Al-Hindi in March 1998 illustrates this point. An interviewer pointed out that Yossi Sarid, Shulamit Aloni and other prominent members of the Israeli Left, who were clearly sympathetic to the Palestinian nationalist case, refused nevertheless to accept the return of refugees to their 1948 homes in Israel. The interviewer suggested to Al-Hindi that allowing the right of return within the peace process would be likely therefore to "wreck the whole exercise".

In response, Al-Hindi insisted that return was a right of the Palestinian people for two thousand years ("They lived in their land and lived in their homes. Why shouldn’t they return to their homes? ... The UN allowed Israel membership [of the UN] so that it could fulfil 194 and Israel can’t take this away"). The interview continued as follows:

64 The political ineptitude on the Palestinian side was arguably matched, however, by repeated Israeli proposals, mostly emanating from Prime Minister Netanyahu, to proceed to final status talks without either side having paid detailed attention to the intricacies of the refugee issue.
Al-Hindi: It may take much time for us to return to our homes. We want to live in our villages.
Q.: So there can’t be peace without this?
Al-Hindi: May be there will be peace if the Palestinians get the right of return.
Q.: And if they don’t?
Al-Hindi: Then there won’t. There are four million Palestinian refugees who want to return.
Q. Israelis may say that they are willing to have a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza but only if the Palestinians give up on the right of return of the refugees to Israel. Don’t give up on the right of return and the negotiations fall apart. Are you ready to have the negotiations fail just because of the right of return?
Al-Hindi: Israel didn’t give us houses in Israel. They are Palestinian houses. Why can’t we return to our homes. Would the Jews agree to the Arabs getting their homes?
Q. I am asking a practical question. If there is a way for you to get now a Palestinian state it is at the price of giving up on the right of return. Are you willing to pay this price?
Al-Hindi: No. I won’t agree to this. Nor will all the Palestinian refugees.65

Conclusion

By 1997 it appeared virtually inconceivable, unless there was an actual degeneration of the Israeli-Palestinian situation into intense and sustained armed conflict, that the Palestinians would ultimately be denied a sovereign state, no matter how small and constrained it might have to be. For the Palestinians to attempt recourse to sustained violence would have been a futile and potentially unmanageable move that would have set back, perhaps indefinitely, the prospects for fulfilling even minimal Palestinian political demands. The consequences of conflict would have been felt by Israel, but would not have been seen among Israelis as a more existential threat than the dangers posed by succumbing to such pressure.

It was therefore key to the interests of Arafat and those around him to avoid placing at risk the short-term gains extracted from both Israel and the Western countries through the Oslo process. There was an overriding need to show some gains, and to avoid confrontation developing at the expense of the political standing of the pro-peace camp in Israel, or the PA leadership's credibility with its Palestinian audience; or with Washington. A declaration of principles on final status issues appeared to be possible in 18-24 months, especially if it were pursued under relatively benign political conditions.\textsuperscript{66}

All key parties on the Palestinian side were operating within a political playing field shaped, at the elite level, by considerations of neopatrimonialism, and at the popular level by competing demands for adherence to the core elements of refugee political mythology. With an ever-present backdrop of coercive behaviour at grassroots level on the part of the PA towards its critics and opponents, the political balance between Arafat and his critics during 1997 was sustainable. It was also evident, however, that it would need careful management if the peace process were to move forward.

That situation heightened Arafat's sensitivity to any suggestion that the financial crisis in UNRWA in 1997 was linked to outcomes supposedly intended for the peace process. Arafat not only had to relate to such concerns, but it was also essential for him to contain them.

It was within that complex political framework that the UNRWA financial crisis of 1997 was played out. There were tensions arising from the need to weigh issues of principle and ideological commitment at a popular level.

\textsuperscript{66} This view was put to the author at the time by political commentator Ehud Yaari. It appeared to be widely shared on the Israeli side, as well as among several Palestinian academics.
among Palestinians against, at leadership levels, a focus on the realisable and the practical. Forces for political mobilisation at the popular level were strengthened by frustration with the limited achievements of the peace process, and concerned to resist further encroachment upon their autonomy and political prerogatives by the PA. Concerns on the part of the PA for state-building had to be tempered by its understanding of the limits to the politically possible among the Palestinian community in the West Bank and Gaza.

The PA leadership was already suffering from suspicion from among the refugee community that it was prepared, under pressure from Israel and the United States, to accept the irrevocable compromising of refugee political aspirations central to their political mythologies and collective memories. The PA was also perceived among refugees to lack key qualities of authenticity and legitimacy as it gradually increased its level of political control under the framework provided by the Oslo Accords.

In effect, a relatively stable political situation came at the expense of the capacity of Arafat to lead the wider Palestinian refugee public, which mostly lacked access to the fruits of his neopatrimonial behaviour. The refugee audience was not prepared to see change, or to accept central direction, without a great deal of consultation, debate and bargaining. Change apparently brought about through external intervention which would impose added financial burdens upon the refugee population relying upon UNRWA services was bound to encounter resistance. And concern regarding the likely consequences of change for the mythologies to which the refugees were firmly attached was likely to be firmly and vocally expressed.
VII. The 1997 Crisis: UNRWA, Western and Arab Donor Perceptions

Unfortunately, I am compelled to introduce cuts and reductions because of the inadequate financing of UNRWA's budget and the $20 million deficit in the last quarter of 1997.

Peter Hansen, Commissioner-General of UNRWA
19 August 1997.

The 1997 financial crisis in UNRWA had its origins in the situation discussed in Chapter V. In large measure it arose, like previous such crises, because of the need for UNRWA to find its own funds from among the donor community; because of the ongoing pressure on UNRWA's budget as the number of registered refugees increased; and because of UNRWA's refusal to prioritise among its functions or to differentiate between the eligibility of individual refugees (apart from those facing special hardships) to have access to its services. This chapter will outline the factual background to the 1997 crisis, and UNRWA, Western and Arab donor perceptions of it, ahead of a more detailed discussion of Palestinian reactions to the crisis in Chapter IX.

Lead-up to the 1997 crisis

Though it lurched from one financial crisis to another, UNRWA survived because so long as the situation of the Palestinian refugees was not resolved, it was generally accepted by Western donors that the Agency fulfilled humanitarian needs that would not otherwise be met - for political, financial and technical reasons - by host countries and the Palestinian Authority. Moreover, since refugees, host countries, and the PA were not willing formally to accept that a more satisfactory permanent
solution to the refugee issue was beyond reach, the international community as a whole, as represented through the UN General Assembly, had no objection to the continuation of UNRWA's role. Most member states welcomed it.¹

Chapter V described how, so long as the growth of funds generally matched needs, the Agency was not under pressure to initiate questioning of the relevance and appropriateness, in relation to its original mandate, of the activities it was undertaking. There were also strong political reasons for not raising such questions, especially within the Agency itself, within the refugee community and with host governments, among whom the Agency was often the object of ongoing suspicion, and at times outright hostility.² The developments which took place in 1997 highlighted that ambivalence.

In 1997, concern over the deteriorating financial situation facing the Agency was combined with uncertainty within the Agency and among the refugees about the direction and timing of further developments in the peace process. The peace process, though largely stalled since 1996, was widely expected to have far-reaching effects on the Agency's role in the West Bank and Gaza, and uncertain implications for its role in other fields. Among refugees, whose notions of identity, as described in the preceding chapters, were closely associated with the memory of lost villages and the dream of return, and who clung to UNRWA services as both a symbol of their political rights and a key sustaining factor in their

¹ Although the United States has abstained in recent years on the main UN resolutions dealing with UNRWA, in response to Congressional pressures, it has remained the largest single financial donor to the Agency (to the tune of around $89 million in 2000).

² Benjamin Schiff, Refugees Unto the Third Generation, Syracuse University Press, Syracuse NY, 1995, p. 274.
daily lives, the fear of marginalisation and its consequences was strong.³

Like its predecessors, the underlying cause of the 1997 financial crisis was a combination of rising need as a result of demographic developments in the refugee population, and insufficient funding for the Agency to meet those needs at levels it considered appropriate.⁴ That situation was not uniformly the case in all five fields of the Agency’s operations.⁵ In Jordan, for example, increasing numbers of the refugees were opting for education services provided by the host country government, since fewer Jordanian schools were double-shifted and, unlike the UNRWA school week, the Jordanian school week matched the hours of government employment.

In the West Bank, around half the refugee population was enrolled in PA elementary and preparatory schools, mostly where it was more convenient for the refugee population for that to happen (bearing in mind that in the West Bank 73.51 per cent of the registered refugees lived outside camps).⁶

⁴ UNRWA’s projected budgetary needs for 1995-1999, as presented to the donor community, were based on the position that each year the Agency’s expenditures had to increase 5 per cent to keep pace with a 3.5 per cent population increase and inflation. The projections also included the cost of making the minimum necessary adjustments to Area staff salaries to reflect, at least partially, pay increases to civil servants in host countries and the PA. UNRWA and the transitional period: a five-year perspective on the role of the Agency and its financial requirements, Discussion paper distributed to donor countries, UNRWA Headquarters Vienna 31 January 1995 p. 9; Harmonization of UNRWA services: challenges and progress, Discussion paper, UNRWA Headquarters (Vienna) 10 April 1996 p. 8.
⁵ UNRWA refers to its operations in Gaza, West Bank, Lebanon, Syria and Jordan as its Field operations.
In contrast, especially, to the situation facing UNRWA in Jordan, the situation in Gaza deteriorated markedly. After 1995 the numbers of new starters in UNRWA elementary and primary schools rose in Gaza alone to over 11,000 per annum. That reflected the combined effect of the population growth rate of around 4.1 per cent and the influx of families following the conclusion of the Cairo Agreement between the PLO and Israel in May 1994, which established self-rule for the Palestinians in those areas. In practical terms, that situation meant UNRWA had to find the funds to construct six new schools each year, and to find the salary and other funds to operate them on a double-shift basis. Donors could generally be found for the construction of new school buildings, but the recurrent costs associated with new schools and the maintenance of existing schools were hard for UNRWA to meet.

The critical situation facing the Agency in Gaza had to be addressed. Diversion of funds to Gaza from UNRWA programs in other Fields, while possible in theory, would have raised significant and politically sensitive questions about the strategic direction of the Agency and the principle of uniform treatment between the Agency’s Fields of operation, an issue which host governments monitored closely. As noted above, all parties preferred to avoid those issues.

In 1996, as in most previous periods of financial crisis, the Agency was able to avoid insolvency through additional pledges, at an extraordinary meeting of donors and host countries in September 1996, of $14.3 million, including $12.3 million towards the Agency’s 1996 regular budget; and through the maintenance of previously imposed
austerity measures and the introduction of some new ones.\textsuperscript{7} Despite those measures, the Agency began 1997 with a working capital of only $5.0 million, compared to its monthly average expenditure of $22 million.\textsuperscript{8}

Following the financial crisis of 1996 pressure grew from key donors (especially the United States, but also Canada, Australia and Switzerland) for the Agency to propose solutions to its financial crisis by allocating priorities among its programmes. In June 1997, shortly before the informal meeting of major donors and host governments held in Amman, the United States Consul-General in Jerusalem, Ed Abington, formally advised the UNRWA Commissioner-General Peter Hansen that it appeared increasingly unlikely to the United States that significant new contributions to UNRWA would be forthcoming in the near future, and that difficult choices needed to be made. Abington pointed out that while such decisions could be made together with the Agency by the United States, UNRWA was in a unique position to offer informed judgements on what the costs and benefits of any prescribed course of action would be.

According to Abington, the United States needed to know UNRWA’s recommendations about possible programme reductions, with details of anticipated savings, and the possible introduction of user fees for activities such as school tuition and health care. Acknowledging that any combination of options presented operational, managerial and most certainly political problems, the United States emphasised in strong terms the need for additional information if it was to consider potential alternatives.\textsuperscript{9}

\textsuperscript{7} UNGA Fourth Committee Press Release GA/SPD/125 21st Meeting (AM) 24 November 1997. See also GAOR A/53/13 para. 82. See also UNRWA News No. 349 UNRWA HQ Vienna 2 October 1996.

\textsuperscript{8} GAOR A/53/13 para. 84.

\textsuperscript{9} Based on notes provided by US Department of State, used with permission.
Although the United States was increasingly insisting upon a stricter ordering of the Agency’s priority activities, not all major donors were prepared to push the Agency on that issue. Canada and the United Kingdom, while supporting the idea of prioritisation, tended to focus more heavily on the possibility of achieving administrative efficiencies and greater transparency in budget processes and, in the case of the UK, improved planning capability, rather than overhauling strategic thinking. Sweden, Denmark, Norway, Germany, Japan and France did not seek to put pressure on UNRWA to prioritise.  

Canada and Switzerland expressed interest in examining the governance of the Agency, apparently with a view to giving donors greater say in its management, but without explaining how that could be brought about without first engaging in an extended and distracting debate within the UN system. Nor was it clear how such changes could be introduced in cooperation with the host countries, who appeared quite satisfied with their existing role and influence over the Agency. It appeared that all major donors preferred to avoid direct engagement with host countries and the PA on the political implications of changing UNRWA’s role.

UNRWA insisted that it was the responsibility of the international community, not the Agency, to fulfil the assurances given to the refugees that their interests would be protected, or to tell the refugees that their expectations would have to be adjusted to a new reality. UNRWA senior management took the view that it was up to the donors, not UNRWA, to decide to raise significant

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10 Denmark pushed, however in 1997 for early handover to the PA of vocational training at UNRWA’s Ramallah Womens’ Training Centre (for which it was a major sponsor).
political questions about the strategic direction upon which the Agency was embarked.

An informal meeting of donors and host governments in Amman in June 1997 highlighted the basic conundrum neatly, without resolving it. There was agreement by the various parties on the importance of partnership (a term actively promoted by the Agency at the meeting) without any of them, including UNRWA, spelling out what was meant by the concept. Instead, the key outcome of the meeting was expressed in the following terms:

The donors requested the Commissioner-General to provide host governments and donors with options for possible programme reductions, by way of contingency planning, in time for further informal discussions prior to the formal meetings of the Advisory Commission and the General Assembly. The Commissioner-General rather emphasized that the Agency would be willing to provide factual information on Agency programmes and associated unit costs as a basis for advising the donor countries and host governments. The Agency would provide information on the consequences of the gap between income and expenditure but it would not make recommendations on reduction of programme or field operations, on the grounds that these were matters for the international community to address. The host governments emphasized that there should be no reductions.\footnote{Informal Meeting of host governments and major donors, Amman 10-11 June 1997 final document p. 4. paragraph 20. Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Canberra.}

The Agency responded to financial pressures in 1997, as with crises of earlier years, not by cutting its programs but by reducing the quality of its services, reflected in overcrowding of classrooms\footnote{The overall occupancy rate of Agency schools was 42.5 students per class in 1996, but in Gaza 60 per cent of classes had occupancy rates of over 40. 16 per cent of Agency schools were in rented premises, with classrooms too small to take increased classes. 479 of the total of 643 Agency schools were double-shifted. Figures provided by Field Education Office, UNRWA West Bank Field Office, Jerusalem.}, ever-higher patient to staff ratios for Agency doctors\footnote{The overall occupancy rate of Agency schools was 42.5 students per class in 1996, but in Gaza 60 per cent of classes had occupancy rates of over 40. 16 per cent of Agency schools were in rented premises, with classrooms too small to take increased classes. 479 of the total of 643 Agency schools were double-shifted. Figures provided by Field Education Office, UNRWA West Bank Field Office, Jerusalem.}, the over-burdening of Agency social workers, cuts in maintenance, and freezing...
recruitment. Unlike previous years, it turned, increasingly, to the use of contracted employees. 14 Concerns among the Palestinian staff about loss of job security rose, and programme and field directors expressed growing concern about the impact of these changes on Agency performance, especially in the education area.

August-September 1997

The crisis was eventually brought to a head - for reasons which were not seriously questioned by any of the parties on the donor side, or by the host governments - by the Commissioner-General exercising his responsibility of due care in the management of the Agency.

The Commissioner-General had been warning since April 1997 that UNRWA was “technically bankrupt”. 15 By mid-year the Agency had drawn down its working capital to unsustainably low levels of less than one week of salary cover for the Agency’s employees. It faced the prospect of a $20 million deficit in the budget required to sustain an acceptable minimum level of Agency services, and the added prospect of a cash shortfall of some $10 million before the end of the year. The Agency acted because it was facing the prospect of financial insolvency and a consequent suspension of its operations.

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13 In 1997 UNRWA claimed it had an average number of patient visits per doctor per day in Gaza of 118; for the West Bank the figure reported was 89. The average for the Agency was 100. *UNRWA Fact Sheet June 1997.*

14 UNRWA’s international staff was reduced 24 per cent between April 1997 and May 1998 as part of a major restructuring effort. In March 1998 it confirmed the approach it had taken in the previous two years of relying on contract teachers to meet teacher requirements, an approach that effectively halved the cost per teacher. *UNRWA UNRWA’s Current Financial Situation and Funding Priorities for 1998: Briefing Paper Prepared for the Informal Meeting of Major Donors and Host Governments, Amman 28 May 1998 UNRWA Headquarters, Gaza, 11 May 1998,* p. 2.

15 This advice was conveyed to donor government representatives in Jerusalem by the UNRWA Commissioner-General on 3 April 1997, at an informal briefing at UNRWA HQ Jerusalem.
On 19 August 1997, citing "the inadequate financing of UNRWA's budget and the $20 million deficit in the last quarter of 1997" the Commissioner-General announced that certain steps would be taken "to avoid technical bankruptcy". Those measures included a 15 per cent reduction in international staff (which, as mentioned above, was largely happening already). There was to be a general freeze in recruitment, including of 249 additional teachers needed Agency-wide to cope with the growth in the student population (although the Agency also announced it had also decided 'exceptionally' to recruit in the Gaza Strip and West Bank double the number of budgeted number of replacement teachers but on a contract basis).

The Agency also announced the discontinuation of the Agency's contribution to the provision of university scholarships (henceforth scholarships would only be extended if donors provided funding specifically for that purpose); the discontinuation of allocations from the UNRWA regular budget for shelter rehabilitation and emergency cash assistance, and the cancellation of non-emergency hospitalisation services in November and December 1997. Special Hardship Cases were exempted from the freeze on hospitalisation, and it was announced that "emergency life-saving interventions" would "of course" continue to be made.

It was also announced that, for the first time in the Agency's history, it was "reviewing school charges as levied by the host authorities, with a view to adopting

16 UNRWA Press Release 19 August 1997 "UNRWA Forced to Make Cuts". See also GAOR A/52/13 p. 5 paragraph 16; and GAOR A/53/13 pp. 1-4. Although these cuts and reductions would, the Agency said, "guarantee that the core of UNRWA's basic services survive[d] intact" the Agency also said that the amount saved by the measures that were announced was expected to be only around one-third of the anticipated $20 million deficit.
similar ones".\textsuperscript{17} It was later mentioned that the Agency had in mind, in that regard, the fees charged by the authorities in Jordan and the Palestinian self-rule areas.\textsuperscript{18} UNRWA made, for the second consecutive year, an extraordinary appeal to donor countries for additional contributions to complete the year without a disruption in basic services.

Amidst considerable turmoil among refugee populations in Gaza and elsewhere, donor countries responded at an informal meeting in Amman on 9 September 1997 by increasing contributions to the regular programmes of the Agency by US$21 million. That enabled UNRWA to announce it had decided to revoke the measures that had given rise to most opposition, namely those relating to restrictions on access to UNRWA-sponsored hospitalisation arrangements for refugees, and the foreshadowed introduction of charges for refugee children attending UNRWA elementary and primary schools. The controversy then subsided.\textsuperscript{19}

On careful examination, the moves made by the Agency consisted largely of an announcement of measures it was already undertaking, or that it was considering undertaking if funding was unavailable. Only the cessation of selective cash assistance to Special Hardship Cases by the Relief and Social Services Department had a direct additional impact on the refugees themselves. That affected only a small (albeit highly vulnerable) group of around 25 per cent of the total

\textsuperscript{17} UNRWA Press Release 19 August 1997 "UNRWA Forced to Make Cuts".
\textsuperscript{18} UNRWA Press Briefing Notes 10 September 1997 p. 3.
number of Special Hardship Cases Agency-wide (including about 1000 cases in Gaza).\textsuperscript{20}

The freeze on the establishment of any new international or area posts, other than those specifically authorised on an ad hoc basis by the Commissioner-General, was hardly a new departure. Staff employment had been very tightly controlled since 1996. The move of UNRWA Headquarters from Vienna to Gaza had allowed the Agency to dispense with the services of around 20 of its Vienna headquarters staff, mostly Palestinians who were unwilling to return permanently to the region. UNRWA had already begun the process of integration of functions and rebuilding, using area (that is, Palestinian) staff recruited and employed at much lower cost in Gaza. The number of international staff was reduced 24 per cent Agency-wide between April 1997 and May 1998.\textsuperscript{21}

Since it suited the Agency to move toward greater use of contracted employment, it proceeded (with funding provided by the Australian Government) with the engagement of teachers on contract to fill the anticipated requirement in the education programme in Gaza and the West Bank. Contract-based recruitment was also used to replace teachers from the permanent staff who were retiring.

The freeze on shelter rehabilitation made no difference to the existing situation facing the Agency, in which there was no funding available anyway for such work from the regular budget. The freeze on hospital referrals was not to include life-threatening or special hardship cases, and it was in any case not to apply until November 1997. Though the Agency ceased to pay for university

\textsuperscript{20} The cash assistance averaged around $200 per family, and was disbursed to assist families facing particular distress to purchase warm clothing, heating fuel and other necessities and for special emergencies.
scholarships, those scholarships were marginal to the Agency's core education programme, which was focussed on elementary and preparatory education, and vocational training. In the event, students continued to receive support to complete their courses through the use of accumulated savings under the Japanese and Swiss governments' programmes of assistance to the Agency.

The public announcement of planning to introduce school charges was probably the measure which attracted greatest refugee reaction. The Agency only said, however, that it would review school charges as levied by the host authorities, with a view to adopting similar ones. In his letter to donors of 14 August 1997, the Commissioner-General had elaborated slightly on that point, saying that the measures he was compelled to take included the introduction of charges similar to those levied by the host authorities themselves, with special dispensation for special hardship cases, for example a fee for textbooks, where applicable.

The Agency did not mention that refugee pupils attending PA schools in the West Bank routinely paid such fees without objecting on the specific grounds of their refugee status. Nor did it mention the obvious doubt over the practicality of the possible introduction of such a step by the Agency. UNRWA had no means of enforcing such

21 GAOR A/53/13 p. 4.
23 Letter from the UNRWA Commissioner-General to major donor countries, 14 August 1997. Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Canberra.
24 The cancellation of free distribution of textbooks to students was estimated to save around $2.8 million in 1998. School charges akin to those of the PA, if they could have been collected, might have raised a further $2.5 million. Weighed against that would be the likelihood that some of the voluntary assistance provided to UNRWA schools by local communities, including maintenance, canteen assistance, gardening etc. would diminish. There would also be the operational costs of strikes, boycotts and other turmoil to consider.
a move if the PA objected, which it was certain to do, and for obvious humanitarian and political reasons it was not in a position to turn refugee children away from the Agency's classrooms.

If there were sound technical reasons to explain why UNRWA focussed on the idea of school charges - which were certain to provide significant scope for vocal and organised popular objections, and which marked a departure from the established practice of free education for refugee children attending UNRWA schools - rather than possibly less politically-charged options such as imposing fees for clinic visits, the Agency did not seek to provide them. In fact, the Agency made no public comment on the rationale for any of the individual steps it mentioned it was considering.

UNRWA Perceptions

There appeared to be no doubt in the minds of the Agency's senior management that the crisis was genuine. Projections of the Agency's regular cash budget presented to donors strongly suggested that its financial situation was unsustainable.

It was open to the Agency management in the lead-up to the 1997 crisis to respond to the demand of the United States, mentioned earlier, that it address existential questions that most interested parties traditionally preferred to leave unasked. There may have been scope for UNRWA to debate during the crisis what the appropriate minimum level of its services should have been.

It would, however, have been a major challenge for the Agency's leadership to define a strategic vision for UNRWA to deal with the changing realities of its financial situation. It would have been an even greater challenge to communicate that vision to its key

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audiences, especially the refugee audience and its own Palestinian staff, in order to secure, perhaps, a more predictable and yet politically-acceptable footing for the Agency. There was also a firm conviction on the part of the Agency’s senior management that UNRWA was entitled, as a UN institution whose programs had repeatedly been endorsed by the General Assembly, to receive the resources it required to fulfil its objectives.

Those factors lead the Agency to stand its ground. By doing so, UNRWA placed strong political pressure upon the donors to come to its assistance without more strategic issues being seriously addressed on the part of the donors, host governments or UNRWA itself. Instead of being pushed into a new approach, the choices made by the Agency enabled the crisis to be managed largely without significant additional direct impact upon existing programs.

The thrust of the Agency’s handling of the situation also appeared, in general, to be directed towards the political management of the crisis from a standpoint which was directly in line with political sentiment in the UN General Assembly. It was, therefore, strongly sympathetic to Palestinian political concerns in general and to refugee concerns in particular.

The Agency’s press release announcing the measures began by invoking the image of consultation with the PLO Chairman. It mentioned that Arafat had referred to “the great socio-economic hardship being faced by the Palestinians as a result of the closures” and that Arafat had promised he would immediately write to certain donors to assist UNRWA. It made no mention of the approximately $14 million owed to UNRWA at that stage by the PA for
outstanding reimbursement of VAT and customs charges incurred by UNRWA on its behalf. Rather, it left the impression that Arafat was active on the Agency’s behalf, while placing the responsibility for resolving the situation upon the donor community.

The press release also alluded to the Commissioner-General’s concern, like that of Arafat, that the Palestinian refugee population was already “experiencing severe socio-economic hardship and ... tight restrictions on economic activity and mobility in certain fields”. It implied a high level of empathy with the refugee population, and referred to meetings the Commissioner-General had held with mukhtars, camp committees and area staff union representatives ... to explain the context in which the Agency [had] been forced to introduce these measures, which in any case covered only one-third of the 1997 deficit.

UNRWA was prepared, as in previous crises, to highlight to donors the risks associated with a cutback in UNRWA’s role. In writing to donors (and to the Foreign Ministers of host governments) shortly before the announcement of 19 August, the Commissioner-General alluded to the possibility of a violent reaction to the measures:

UNRWA is being forced by circumstances beyond its control, in particular the inadequate financing from the international community, to take ... drastic measures. I would invite you to consider the possible consequences of a reduction in services to a refugee population which is already experiencing severe socio-economic hardship, is subjected to tight restrictions on economic activity and mobility in certain fields, and which is increasingly losing faith in the ability of the peace process to bring about an enhanced quality of life. The possibility of a violent reaction to these measures cannot be excluded.

25 By June 1998 the Agency was awaiting reimbursement by the PA of payments made by UNRWA against value-added tax and port and related charges which had a cumulative value of $19 million. GAOR A/53/13 p. 5.

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For differing reasons, ranging from desperate socio-economic need to the political importance for the Palestine refugees of the commitment of the international community, expressed first and foremost through the financing of services via UNRWA, the 3.4 million Palestine refugees cling to UNRWA services as a symbol of their "rights" and as a matter of international obligation. Cuts or reductions in services are seen not only in quantitative terms, but also as a concomitant drop in international recognition of the Palestine refugee issue.

With the stalled peace process in a fragile condition, with the Palestinian Authority strapped for cash as its revenue transfers are blocked in the aftermath of the 30 July double suicide bombing in Jerusalem, with host Governments unable or understandably reluctant to assume any additional burden, the only option is additional contributions. The Agency cuts are already the maximum, and will expose the region to unrest. 27

While maintaining that theme of impending unrest throughout the crisis, in its public comments UNRWA made no attempt to present the reasons underlying the crisis or its potential consequences in a manner which reflected an appreciation of the financial realities facing donors. And, while it referred to the impact on the refugees and unspecified possible implications for stability in the region of any direct cuts in services, UNRWA did not offer any serious analysis of what connection, if any, there may have been between regional stability and the making of cutbacks in services along the lines foreshadowed.

In the lead-up to the 9 September 1997 meeting, Agency officials privately insisted to donor country representatives that the impact of the proposed cuts in the West Bank and Gaza would be felt by youth who grew up during the intifada and whose children were now being threatened with loss of access to schools; whose children were being crowded into classrooms in buildings that were not being adequately maintained; whose families could not be referred to hospitals except in life-threatening
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situations; who were unable to receive the financial support needed to live in conditions of normal human decency, and whose alienation from all forms of authority was growing. It was argued that their anger could be turned against the PA at a critical time in the peace process, and that the costs of restoring that situation would vastly outweigh the relatively modest sums the Agency was seeking.²⁸

From a human development perspective, the Agency pointed out that one immediate impact of the imposition of fees for many families would be that girls would be more likely than boys to be denied formal education. As a result many would marry earlier and would remain functionally illiterate for the remainder of their lives. Agency officials privately pointed out that not only would such an outcome be a contradiction of the important aid goals of most donor countries and the UN, including concern for the protection and empowerment of women, but it would also place the health of children at risk as medicines were improperly used, nutrition needs inadequately understood and simple written instructions would not be followed. Younger marriage would also increase fertility rates and thereby spur population growth above its existing high levels. It would deepen the cycle of dependency among the poorer refugee population, contribute especially in camps to environmental problems, and raise questions about the sustainability of infrastructural development, including basic services. UNRWA also emphasised that its position was attuned to the wishes of the General Assembly, and underlined its commitment to management reform.

²⁷ Letter from the UNRWA Commissioner-General to major donors, 14 August 1997. Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Canberra.
²⁸ The author, who was Director of External Relations and Public Information of UNRWA at the time, made representations along these lines to donor representatives.
In short, UNRWA approached the crisis as a genuine threat to the services it believed it was obliged to provide, and which it was committed to delivering. At the same time, in UNRWA’s dealings with the donor community, it was prepared to be robust in defending its stance and the measures it had announced.

In a press conference in Geneva on 26 August 1997, the UNRWA Commissioner-General said that the austerity measures ("these cruel measures") could still be avoided if donor countries came up with the "relatively small sum" of $20 million at the donor meeting in Amman in September. He noted that the measures had not been received well in the region, mentioning that a joint statement by various Palestinian groups had called it a policy of "starvation and humiliation" and that protest actions would continue.29

There was no evidence to support allegations that emerged from the refugee community during the early stages of the crisis that the Agency was party to a conspiracy against their interests. For its part, the Agency focussed its lobbying effort on encouraging the major Western donors to realise the linkages between UNRWA programmes on one hand, and the political interests and priority policy concerns of the donors themselves on the other hand. The Agency chose, in effect, to turn to the court of political opinion rather than to succumb to pressure to revise its strategic approach by prioritising. The fact that the most active proponent of prioritisation, the United States, eventually announced an additional contribution of $7.5 million to UNRWA demonstrated, moreover, that the Agency’s strategy was effective.

Western Donor Perceptions

The perceptions of the Western donor countries were very different from those of UNRWA so far as the origins, nature of the crisis and desirable responses were concerned. As mentioned earlier, elements of the Western donor community had been concerned, after 1996, to see a more transparent approach on the part of the Agency to its management of their funds. Most of the major non-Arab donors had insisted that the Agency embark upon a series of management reforms aimed at producing greater efficiencies in its overall performance, and the Agency had launched that process.\textsuperscript{30}

Beyond those factors, however there was little common ground between the Agency and the donors, or among the donors themselves regarding the desirable functions and future role of the Agency. Perceptions varied most markedly between Western donors and their Arab counterparts, whose reactions are discussed later in this chapter.

To the limited extent that they were seeking reform within UNRWA to place it on a more sustainable footing, the Western donors were focussed mainly on administrative efficiencies, budget transparency and, in a very preliminary fashion, governance questions. A focus on management practice was probably a more comfortable option for Western donors and UNRWA alike to pursue than more politically-sensitive questions touching upon the core mythologies of the refugee community and the future of the refugee issue in the Middle East peace process.

\textsuperscript{30} The centrepiece of that process was a Business Process Review prepared for UNRWA in December 1996 by Arthur Andersen and Co. The report, focussing on procurement and inventory management, budgeting and financial systems, human resources management and management information systems, was developed in conjunction with recommendations made in a separate review of the relocation and reorganisation of UNRWA Headquarters performed by John Rhodes.
The donors emphasised that the Agency needed to present a business plan, which would outline in which ways the Commissioner-General intended to rationalise support services, assuming additional savings could be made. In contrast, UNRWA officials sought constantly to impress upon donor representatives the drain on the UNRWA budget of the non-regular programme components such as the European Gaza Hospital, and the cost of the unfunded costs of the move from Vienna.

The Agency also questioned the utility of donors focusing heavily upon seeking savings in the area of administrative services, or on the issue of governance. It pointed out that in a number of instances of administrative reform proposed by the donors - such for the improvement of the Agency's information technology - the Agency would have had to spend substantial amounts before it would reap the benefits of additional savings; and it remained to be seen whether the donors would be willing to meet such costs.

Since UNRWA’s administrative overhead costs were actually less than 10 per cent of its total expenditures, the Agency argued, with considerable justification, that there were likely to be only limited savings to be harvested in that area. The Agency stressed that the process of achieving further increases in the Agency’s efficiency and effectiveness had to be first and foremost through institutional strengthening, including the development of research capabilities and training, rather than through budget-driven measures.

The Commissioner-General also reminded the donors that whereas it took the United Nations several years to accomplish the shift from expenditure to programme-based

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31 Author's discussion with a senior Western diplomat, Jerusalem 14 May 1997. Confidential source no. 3.
budgeting, UNRWA had made a major strides in that direction during 1997 in only three months. The draft budget was not perfect, but it corresponded to much of what had been asked of the Agency, except in regard to the demand that the Agency prioritise among its core programme activities.

The Agency expressed willingness in principle to meet requests for additional information, such as quarterly income and expenditure reporting, and information regarding the implications for the General Fund budget of extra-budgetary items, provided it received specific advice as to what was required. It insisted that no comparable United Nations agency had more frequent contact with the donors than did the Agency.

A more critical and informed analysis of refugee needs and of the political basis for the protests might have led to the questioning of some of UNRWA’s arguments. It might also have encouraged greater insistence on the part of the Western donors that a more strongly reformist strategy should be developed by the Agency.

In the West Bank, for example, substantial numbers of refugee children attended PA schools, for practical reasons, despite the fees imposed. Despite overcrowding in some schools, UNRWA students continued to score very highly compared to their national counterparts, posing the question of what should be the appropriate standards of tuition for the Agency to meet. The rationale behind the fact that UNRWA teachers in Gaza were receiving tax-free salaries approximately double those paid by the PA might have been investigated more closely.

Donors could have investigated the anecdotal evidence that a substantial proportion (perhaps around 30 per cent) of refugees in the West Bank had a preference for private health care - even at considerable expense -
because it was seen as better quality than that provided free by UNRWA. They could also have pointed out that notwithstanding the validity of the arguments UNRWA was making between education and development, young Palestinian women were often required to leave school and to marry by family pressure, rather than because they were inadequately educated.

As will be discussed later, careful evaluation of the growing financial capability of the PA, looking beyond the short-term challenges presented by security incidents and Israeli closures, might have led decision-makers on the donor side to press for changes in approach by UNRWA and the Palestinian Authority (PA) to help secure the Agency's financial viability. The PA was gradually improving its capacity to address its recurrent expenditure needs on a sustainable basis.32

Some donors might have asked whether meeting growing levels of demand upon UNRWA in education and health on the basis of universal eligibility among registered refugees, irrespective of income or access to alternatives, was either sustainable or appropriate, or consistent with the rationalist economic principles in vogue among most donor countries at the time. Support for UNRWA's regular budget also represented recurrent expenditure which would, depending on how particular aid budgets were structured, reduce the amount of funding available for humanitarian or development programs elsewhere.33

In particular, donors might have made a more careful analysis of the likelihood or otherwise of the situation

32 The issue of PA financial support for UNRWA is discussed in Chapter IX.
33 Rex Brynen notes that one unnamed Western aid official said in June 1997 the cost of increasing support for Palestinian refugees was "more dead children in the Congo". Rex Brynen, Financing Palestinian Refugee Compensation.
on the ground rebounding significantly against their political interests and objectives. That risk was probably quite low in practice. The PA and the host country governments had the will and the capacity to retain control of the situation. Despite the high visibility of the financial crisis, its political volatility was of a lesser order of magnitude than the politically-driven disturbances of 1994 and 1996, discussed elsewhere, which the PA managed to keep under control. Despite concerns frequently expressed by host governments, and by Agency staff, there was probably little likelihood that the PA or the domestic stability of any regional regime would have been seriously challenged by refugee discontent over the introduction by UNRWA of school fees. Nor would any regional government have been likely to adopt a markedly different approach to Israel or the United States, so far as their national interests were concerned, because of refugee discontent.

Only perhaps in Gaza, where abnormally high proportions (74%) of the total population were registered refugees; where a high proportion of refugees (55%) were concentrated in camps; and where the refugees may have been able to concentrate protests against an identifiable, unpopular and accessible target (the institutions of the PA) might there have been the possibility of extended disturbances and some physical damage to PA and UNRWA facilities. Such disturbances would have been unlikely, however, to have had any significant effect on the overall outcome of the peace process. In other words, the assumptions about the linkage between regional stability and the interests of various parties in sustaining that stability, on one hand, and the situation of the Palestinian refugees, on the other hand, were highly questionable.
Given its relatively sophisticated understanding of the politics on the ground of the refugee situation, the United States might, of all the donors, have been expected to seize the opportunity for reform presented by the crisis. It had been widely understood that following the signing of the Cairo Agreement in May 1994, State Department officials had urged UNRWA to address the question of its own demise.34

The United States had taken that approach, however, based on two premises. The first premise was that a fully-fledged peace treaty between Israel and the PLO would be in place by May 1999, the end of the interim period allowed for under the Oslo accords. That approach was reportedly based, in turn, on a second premise, namely that the final solution to the refugee issue would be resettlement in their host or other third countries, together with the return of a limited number of refugees to the emerging Palestinian entity in the West Bank and Gaza.35

By 1997, with the Oslo-based peace process virtually frozen, the assumption that a peace treaty would be in place by 1999, at least, appeared increasingly unlikely to be achieved. The prospects for returning some refugees to a Palestinian entity and resettling others in situ had scarcely improved either. A wider review of UNRWA’s role under those political circumstances was bound to be more problematic than if undertaken while the peace process was moving ahead, at least in areas apart from the refugee issue.

Moreover, it was by no means certain that by 1997 the peace process strategy (as distinct from the refugee

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34 Graham Usher “The Ongoing Demise of UNRWA” Al Ahram Weekly, 4-10 November 1999.
35 Graham Usher “The Ongoing Demise of UNRWA”.
strategy) of the United States Government included more than a passing interest in, or awareness of, the refugee issue and UNRWA. Although there had been ample prior warning from UNRWA of the need to make spending cuts, officials around US Special Envoy Dennis Ross were apparently taken by surprise by the Agency’s announcement in August 1997. Some complained privately about UNRWA cutbacks exacerbating tensions among the Palestinians while Ross was on a mediating mission in the region.36

In sum, it appeared that although Western donors in general wanted the refugees and host governments to appreciate the budget-driven realities facing them and the Agency, most of them were more concerned - indeed were primarily concerned - to avoid the perceived prospect of deepening political unrest within the refugee community. No Western donor was prepared to welcome the steps UNRWA had announced in August as moves in the direction of achieving greater sustainability in its approach, or disposed to insist that UNRWA prioritise its functions and live within its means. There was no serious questioning during the crisis of whether the Agency should be asked, as it could have been, to address issues relating to its own future role. There were no moves by the donors to make UNRWA downsize, or otherwise change the nature of the Agency, as part of a wider approach to the Middle East peace process.

Even among those donor countries which were encouraged by the crisis to be still more vocal concerning the need for UNRWA to reform its management approach, the imagery of the refugee protests was sufficiently compelling to mobilise additional resources before there was much evidence that reform efforts had made headway. An

36 Private conversation with a US State Department official familiar with UNRWA, April 1998. Confidential source no. 5.
important opportunity to lay the foundations for the introduction of serious reform was, in effect, foregone because of its perceived political consequences.

Arab Donors

In marked contrast to the concerns held among the Western donors, discussed earlier, about the financial situation of UNRWA and the political implications of a reduction in the services it provided, at no stage in the 1997 crisis was there much evidence of concern among the Gulf Arab states about the issue of long-term financial viability of the Agency. Nor was support expressed for revisiting the Agency’s role.

The Gulf states appeared mainly concerned to keep a low profile throughout the crisis, and to wait to see the outcome of the application of political pressure upon the Western donors before deciding on any particular course of action on their own part. Beyond a general sense of obligation to uphold a steadfast Arab political rejection of the detested Israeli government of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, the emotional impact of Palestinian refugee mythologies clearly had little impact beyond refugee circles in Gulf Arab countries. The historical and practical, as well as political reasons for that situation are discussed below.

In response to recommendations by consultants appointed in 1996 to review the Agency’s financial management, the Agency had set out in the first half of 1997 to expand the Agency’s donor base and engage traditional and new donors in the Persian Gulf from one per cent to five per
cent. In dollar terms, this represented an increase from around $3 million per annum to $15 million per annum.\(^{37}\)

That decision tended to obscure the fact that the Gulf Arab countries had been relatively generous donors to UNRWA since 1993. While total Gulf contributions amounted to only $8.5 million of the $297 million received by UNRWA from donors in 1997, when measured as a proportion of donor Gross National Product the contributions of Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and the UAE were between two and ten times more generous than those of the United States. Kuwait was, in relative terms, by far the most generous UNRWA donor in 1997.\(^{38}\)

Unlike most Western donors other than the Nordic countries, those Arab countries providing more than token support for UNRWA (that is, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates) already came close to meeting the level of contributions they would have been expected to make according to the UN assessed scale of contributions. Most of the Gulf states also provided financial assistance to Palestinian and other Islamic humanitarian causes. And, despite the Gulf states’ misgivings about the Palestinian leadership in the aftermath of the Gulf War, there was still a significant residue of interest and support in Kuwait and most other Gulf countries for the Palestinians as a people.

The United Arab Emirates, though it had failed to make its payment to UNRWA’s regular budget in 1996, made up

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\(^{37}\) Expansion of UNRWA’s Traditional Donor Base: Briefing Paper prepared for the informal meeting of major donors and host governments Amman 10-11 June 1997 UNRWA Headquarters Gaza. Efforts extended to Indonesia, Malaysia and Brunei to discuss the role they could play and to present proposals for funding. The Agency also sought to obtain the active diplomatic support of the Gulf states for UNRWA in a number of regional and international bodies, such as the Arab League, the Organisation of the Islamic Conference, and the Gulf Cooperation Council, with a view to reinforcing its claims for international support and, where resources existed to pursue them through such bodies.
for that oversight in mid-1997 when reminded by the Agency. Saudi Arabia made only a slight increase in the level of its support to UNRWA's regular budget in 1997, but it had come to the financial rescue of the Agency in 1996 by allocating $4.6 million for projects under the Peace Implementation Program (PIP). Even Kuwait, despite ongoing anger at the betrayal it felt it had suffered at the hands of some of its Palestinian residents during the Iraqi invasion of 1990, had continued to pay its contributions to UNRWA each year. Kuwait also provided substantial project funding to the Agency.

In presentations by senior officials from the Agency in regional capitals during the first half of 1997, the Gulf states were encouraged by UNRWA to attach importance to a sustained role for the Agency, in terms of their own interests in regional peace and stability, and in terms of the humanitarian and human resources development needs of the Palestine refugees. The Agency's presentations stressed the distinct roles and responsibilities of the PA and UNRWA, the situation of the Palestine refugees since the 1993 Oslo Accords, and the significance of UNRWA's role until an agreed settlement of the refugee issue was achieved. The Agency's contribution to self-reliance of the refugees and the process of sustainable development were also highlighted.

When approached for additional assistance to UNRWA, however, the responses of the Gulf countries were either negative (in the case of Kuwait), evasive or ambivalent. Apart from the fact that they were already being generous by the standards of other donors, the reasons for that outcome, among Arab oil producers at least, appeared mainly to be linked to compassion fatigue.

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UNRWA found it was ploughing a well-tilled field, in which its case was not accorded a high priority among incessant requests from the PA, from individual Palestinians seeking additional financial support for their particular causes, and similar requests from a wide range of humanitarian and other Islamic causes, few of which had direct relevance to Arab or national interests. The ongoing weakness of oil prices at the time already made it highly unlikely that significant additional funding would be available on a routine basis from Gulf states.

Gulf leaders also had difficulty in distinguishing between the case for supporting the PA on one hand, and the case for supporting refugees, through UNRWA rather than the PA, on the other. Reflecting a misconception (in UNRWA’s eyes at least) that the refugee issue had been solved de facto through the establishment of the Palestinian Authority, the stock response from Gulf governments to proposals for additional funding was to the effect that generous assistance was already being provided to the PA.

Consistent with its stance in response to Western donor demands, the Agency was unwilling to present Arab donors with an indication of the steps it was prepared to take to reduce its programmes to match the limited resources available to it - though it may have added considerably to the credibility of its case to have taken that approach. In the absence of specific indications of what its next steps were likely to be, should support not be provided, generalised appeals to governments in the Gulf

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39 The Kuwaiti government in exile in London maintained its annual contributions to UNRWA throughout its occupation by Iraq.
40 The Commissioner-General’s visit to the UAE in 1997 was preceded within a few days by separate visits seeking funding by Faisal Husseini and Farouk Kaddoumi.
for funds to alleviate the Agency’s financial situation tended to be met merely with equally general statements of support.

Surprise was sometimes expressed by UNRWA’s interlocutors at the alleged severity of the situation facing the Agency, but little else. There was also a commonly-held view that UNRWA had managed to overcome past financial crises, and therefore the Agency would manage somehow to ride the storm again.

As a UN institution, UNRWA was generally viewed in a more positive light than the PA. It therefore stressed the financial accountability of its operations. It held out the prospect of projects being completed on schedule and of their donors being duly recognised (something which several donors felt had not been well-handled by the PA). UNRWA officials were reluctant, however, to labour these advantages among Arab interlocutors lest it appear to be indirectly criticising the PA or the PLO.

UNRWA’s Arab interlocutors were often quick to complain about alleged corruption and a lack of transparency within the PA, including a lack of accountability and an apparent ingratitude for financial assistance provided to it. The compromises Arafat was seen as making to maintain relations with the United States and to seek a modus vivendi with the Likud-led government in Israel in the course of the peace process were widely regarded, in private, as unacceptable.

The PLO, for its part, claimed it was making every effort to assist UNRWA, including sending messages from Arafat to the countries concerned, delivered by the senior PLO official responsible for refugees, As’ad Abdul Rahman. As Gulf countries insisted on keeping their dealings with UNRWA and the PLO separate, however, the precise content of the messages was never established. A prominent and well-connected Palestinian businessman in a Gulf country told the author, however, that the messages were seeking to maintain support for the PLO, rather than increased support for UNRWA. Confidential source no. 6.
It was also argued that the West was responsible for the creation of the refugee problem, and should therefore pay for the Agency’s budget. Moves to increase Arab donor contributions, it was felt, would come at the expense of the principle of international responsibility for resolving the issue on the basis of the right of return. Comment critical of UNRWA’s efforts to seek contributions from Arab countries appeared in the Arab media along those lines.

While expressions of sympathy for the plight of the refugees were commonplace, there was also, in parallel, a strong undertone of antipathy towards the Palestinians in general among some interlocutors in the Gulf states. In the words of one leader with a strong personal record of support for humanitarian causes, the Palestinians were “like worms moving through the ground: you never know where they might come up.”

Distrust of the PLO’s accountability was translated into a reluctance to provide budget support, regardless of the supposed identity of the institutional beneficiary. Flowing from this distrust was a strongly emphasised preference for funding infrastructure projects, whereby the donor country could micro-manage the project, transfer funds directly to the contractor or payee, and be accorded due recognition for the support provided.

42 A senior Arab official, in a discussion with the author, after expressing deep concern for the situation of the Palestinians, said that it would be ‘no bad thing’ if the refugees were to resume the conflict with Israel as a consequence of their deteriorating economic situation. He added that the matter was, in any case, something which would affect the security of Israel and its neighbours, not the Gulf states. Confidential source no. 7.

43 An article by Dr Nafe’ al Hassan claimed that UNRWA’s success in convincing the Arab League to approve a resolution calling on Arab states to finance UNRWA programmes would “free the donor countries, especially those which made the tragedy of the Palestinian refugees from their responsibility for the problem and from their financial commitments to the refugees.” Al Dustour, 27 July 1997.

44 Confidential source in the UAE, conversation with the author 8 March 1997. Confidential source no. 8.
UNRWA, in contrast, was mainly seeking core budget support for its recurrent expenditure, based upon the Agency’s own clearly defined priorities.

UNRWA sought to present itself as an effective multilateral service provider possessing expertise in human resources development programmes that could be delivered without encountering insurmountable political obstacles – in contrast to the experience of some Gulf states in their dealings with the PA and certain other Palestinian institutions. It was far from clear, however, whether UNRWA’s emphasis on probity and accountability necessarily made it a preferred vehicle at the operational level of some potential donors for the delivery of project aid. 45

Responding to suggestions that the Agency should put forward projects for consideration by Gulf donors, the Agency produced a number of targeted submissions of detailed and costed proposals. But establishment of a follow-up strategy to translate general statements of support into financial assistance for the Agency’s programmes and activities would have required more active and ongoing diplomatic engagement on the part of Agency in the Gulf states than the Agency was willing to make. That was especially the case when there was an urgent need to preserve existing levels of support from larger European donors, such as Germany, that were under pressure to reduce aid allocations to meet the budget targets of the Maastricht Agreement.

45 Agency officials came to suspect the existence in some instances of informal linkages between the principal providers of funds and NGOs operating in the Agency’s area of activity that presented themselves as aid delivery mechanisms. It was certainly the case that transparency and accountability were not always uppermost in the minds of decision-makers. Some officials proved to be especially prone to allocating funding for food aid to unheard-of Palestinian NGOs, including at times when there was no obvious need for such assistance, and despite being aware that UNRWA was
The local diplomatic representatives of the Western donor community in the Gulf states were invariably helpful, and other UN agency representatives assisted with representations on UNRWA's behalf. But effective fund-raising in the Gulf would have required the Agency to invest substantial time and patience in the establishment of close connections with senior members of the different ruling families to obtain access to the relevant councils, to expedite the decision making process on funding requests and to raise the profile of the Agency. Without the patronage of a member of the ruling family in each of the key Gulf states, the Agency was unlikely to cope with the intricacies of local political manoeuvring. In the small ruling societies of the Gulf, relations between government and prominent community figures associated with major local NGOs were usually intimate, and NGOs would not move without direct or implicit government approval of their activity.

The Agency was able to draw upon the assistance of members of Palestinian Welfare Association, a Geneva-based NGO of wealthy Palestinian benefactors, and it developed links with the Palestinian diaspora in the Gulf and elsewhere. Members of the Welfare Association expressed willingness to support UNRWA's activities and to give advice on UNRWA's approach, including the development of vocational training facilities. In general, however contacts with the Palestinian Diaspora in the Gulf had to be handled as a low-key affair given the often sensitive position of the Palestinian communities in their countries of residence.

In sum, UNRWA found that Arab donor countries were disinclined to do more for UNRWA because of their
existing engagement with the PA and other Palestinian and Islamic bodies, as well as with the Agency. They had limited knowledge of UNRWA, and saw little reason to differentiate between support already extracted from them for the PA and support provided for the refugees. In addition, their priority was to extend aid directly wherever possible, and in any event to support projects, rather than to support recurrent expenditure.

Sharing, as Arabs, the political mythologies surrounding the refugee issue, the Gulf Arab leaderships were inclined to regard the search for accommodation with Israel under Prime Minister Netanyahu as a retreat from the principles upon which a just settlement to the conflict with Israel should be based. And, while sympathetic to some extent to the plight of the Palestinian refugees, the Gulf states were not inclined to see their situation as deserving special and separate treatment, or priority over other demands being made of them to support Palestinian and other Arab and Islamic causes.

Having explored the funding outlook as requested, UNRWA decided that it could not afford to pursue the Arab donors more actively while support from more traditional Western donors was at risk of diminishing. The end result was that the Gulf Arab states did not become heavily involved in the resolution of the 1997 crisis, nor did they represent a potential source of strength for any efforts that could have been made to refocus the Agency.

Other Reactions in the Region

Among those countries hosting the refugees, as well as within the Palestinian Authority, there was nervousness especially helpful.
at the prospect of coming under pressure to accept a larger share of the financial burden of supporting the refugee population, and of course the political consequences of doing so.

Fear among Lebanese of Palestinian refugee settlement in Lebanon led to an upsurge in attacks on UNRWA in the Lebanese media, as well as expressions of concern that any reduction in UNRWA services in Lebanon would exacerbate an already precarious economic situation. Lebanese Foreign Minister Fares Boueiz said a reported decrease in UNRWA’s budget for Lebanon was an attempt to pressure Lebanon and other host countries into accepting “certain conditions for peace” whereas the Palestinian refugees were an international responsibility.2

The Director-General of the Jordanian Department of Palestinian Affairs, Ibrahim Tarshihi, rejected any reduction in UNRWA services and said Jordan would raise the issue with donor countries and other host governments.3 Opposition political parties, as will be discussed in Chapter VIII, also accused UNRWA of being part of a plot to settle the refugees and to eliminate the refugee problem. They called for UNRWA to be linked to UNHCR, mistakenly believing that this would provide a clearer focus on the repatriation of Palestinians as displaced peoples, rather than their rehabilitation or employment where they were located.4

4 Jordan Times, 4-5 September 1997. Lex Takkenberg’s authoritative study of the status of Palestinians under international refugee law makes it clear that such a view of the role of UNHCR is misplaced. According to Takkenberg, the protection function of UNHCR seeks to ensure that refugees are identified and accorded an appropriate status and standard of treatment in their countries of asylum, and ensuring with and through national authorities, the safety and well-being of refugee groups and individuals in asylum countries. The protection function also includes promoting measures to remove or attenuate the causes of refugee flight so as to establish
Conclusion

The 1997 financial crisis had a quantifiable, empirically-verifiable basis. The reasons for the crisis were, above all else, the growing gap between the rate of increase of donor contributions to UNRWA on one hand, and the rate of growth of the registered Palestinian refugee population on the other, and the Agency’s determination to continue to provide equivalent levels of service to all but a handful of special hardship cases among the registered refugee population.

The crisis was devoid of the sorts of political agendas on the parts of UNRWA or the donor countries which were ascribed to those parties by elements among the refugee population. In fact, UNRWA and the donor countries each had their own, quite distinctive, concerns which manifested themselves in ways which helped, on balance, to maintain the Agency on its pre-crisis policy trajectory.

UNRWA was more inclined than under its previous Commissioner-General to find ways of modernising its management systems, and to broaden its base of donor support. Commissioner-General Hansen stressed he was committed to making headway on both counts. UNRWA’s approach was basically shaped, however, towards continuity rather than change through a combination of political circumstances, UN institutional factors and a commitment by UNRWA’s senior management to fulfilling conditions that would permit refugees to return safely to their homes and, when this becomes feasible, facilitating, assisting and monitoring the safety of voluntary repatriation. If safe return is not possible, it involves “promoting and implementing the other durable solutions of resettlement or local integration”. Lex Takkenberg, The Status of Palestinian Refugees in International Law, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1998, p. 304 citing UNHCR ‘Note on International Protection’.
what it saw as the Agency’s appropriate role. That role included seeking to have other parties provide levels of financial support for UNRWA that were commensurate with the affirmations of support for UNRWA that they regularly provided at the political level in the UN General Assembly, when UNRWA was discussed.

When its financial circumstances approached crisis point UNRWA found that instead of rethinking its strategic approach, it could turn, as in previous years, to political pressure upon the Western donor community to secure the financial relief it required. Although the Gulf Arab states were largely unmoved by the crisis, when UNRWA shifted the terms of the debate to the political context, it assessed, correctly, that it had a stronger hand to play than did the Western donor countries.

UNRWA emerged from 1997 with its underlying financial problems still far from resolved, but with its own political culture and priorities virtually unchanged. In doing so, UNRWA demonstrated its skills in managing donor perceptions, and its relations with both host country governments and refugees. It did not take up the more politically demanding challenge of coming fully to grips with its financial dilemmas through prioritisation of Agency functions, and seeking to shift a larger portion of its recurrent costs onto the PA.

The end result of the crisis was the continuation, in all essential respects, of the status quo. The injection of additional financial support from Western donor

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5 According to Benjamin Schiff, in an assessment of UNRWA’s leadership since 1995, UNRWA’s top management needed to be “overhauled” because it was “unable to focus on the challenges of the future implied by the Israeli-Palestinian peace process”. See Graham Usher “The Ongoing Demise of UNRWA”, Al Ahran Weekly, 4-10 November 1999.
governments meant that existing policy approaches by UNRWA remained essentially unchanged. By mid-1998, the Agency's financial situation was again precarious, with the Agency advising donor countries that it faced a core deficit in funding for its regular budget of $21 million for 1998, and a cash shortfall of $17 million in the third quarter of 1998.\(^6\)

The apparently irreconcilable differences between the perceptions of the Agency’s role and responsibilities among refugees, Western donor governments, Arab donor governments, host governments and the Agency’s management were not addressed. The causes of the financial crisis were identified by the Agency, but left untreated. The remedies that could have been suggested were left mostly unthought of. It suited a range of interests, and refugee mythologies, for that to be the case.

VIII. The Palestinian Politics of the 1997 Crisis

President Arafat and other Palestinian officials, in addition to popular committees and groups, have requested UNRWA to retract the decision to reduce its services and employees. It has become extremely difficult to convince the man on the street that what has happened is not the result of a "well-woven plot" to dissolve UNRWA, ending its role of sole caretaker of the refugees, and bring an internationally dishonourable end to the refugee issue and bring the question of Palestine to the final negotiations table with no legal stand on the status of refugees.

As'ad Abdul Rahman, member of the PLO Executive Committee in charge of the Refugees and Displaced Portfolio, at the UNRWA meeting with Major Donors and Host Governments, Amman 9 September 1997.

[UNRWA’s] moves are aimed at settling the Palestinians in Arab countries, as provided for in the peace agreements with the Zionist enemy, in the course of liquidating the Palestinian problem and cancelling the Palestinian people’s right to return to their homeland as stipulated in UN Resolutions 194 and 237.

Statement of 11 Jordanian opposition political parties

Jordan Times 4-5 September 1997

UNRWA declares war on refugees!

Journalist Adnan Abu Amer Al-Resalah 21 August 1997

Although the 1997 crisis was devoid of the sorts of political agendas on the parts of UNRWA or the donor countries which were ascribed to those parties by elements among the refugee population, Palestinian refugee mythologies caused the 1997 crisis to be understood among Palestinian refugees in very different
terms. They saw it as reflecting a malevolent interest on the part of donors, the Palestinian Authority, and Israel, in determining the direction of political events in which UNRWA - and they - were a key part.

This chapter outlines and examines the Palestinian reaction to the UNRWA crisis, focusing mainly upon the role of refugee mythologies and refugee perceptions of external parties, the Palestinian leadership and UNRWA. It examines how those factors influenced the approach taken to the crisis by the Palestinian leadership. It also examines the outcomes of the 1997 crisis, and some of the lessons that may be learnt from the part played by refugee mythologies in the dynamics of the crisis.

Refugee Reactions to the Crisis

There was an immediate political response among the Palestinian refugees to the UNRWA announcement of 19 August 1997. UNRWA classes were boycotted in schools in Gaza. Well-organised demonstrations and occasional sit-ins were held against the introduction of the announced measures.

The PLO response to the crisis was the lead item on Palestinian radio and television for several days. There was extensive comment on the crisis by Palestine Legislative Council and Palestinian National Congress members.²

Delegations of refugee representatives, mukhtars (traditional notables at the village, now camp, level) and UNRWA staff sought to make their concerns known.

¹ UN Security Council Resolution 237 dealt with the return of Palestinians displaced by the 1967 War.
² Prominent individuals from those bodies such as Palestinian Legislative Council Refugee Committee (PLC) member, and Head of the PLC Refugees Committee, Jamal Shati al-Hindi, commentators, such as Naji Jarrar and Said
directly and through petitions to UNRWA management in all Fields and at Headquarters. There was some stone-throwing directed at the Agency’s Field Headquarters and the Headquarters building in Gaza, and plenty of noise and agitation, especially in Gaza.

The Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC) held an emergency meeting in Gaza to discuss UNRWA, highlighting the negative effects of the cutbacks. The PLC Refugees Committee chairman, Jamal Shati al Hindi, said that UNRWA had cried wolf in the past, but this time the crisis was genuine. The head of the Palestinian National Congress (PNC) Refugee Committee called for a program of action to deal with the situation. Suha Arafat, wife of the PLO Chairman, and the PA Minister for Social Welfare, Umm Jihad, stressed the added burden the measures would place on the refugee population. As discussed in more detail below, Hamas and UNRWA staff union representatives denounced the moves as a conspiracy.

Some Jordanians sought to use commentary on the crisis to develop electoral support in advance of parliamentary elections due to be held in November 1997. Attempts were reported in Jordan to link opposition political parties, refugees and UNRWA staff unions to resist the introduction of the Agency’s measures. While fairly restrained in its tone, Jordanian press coverage focussed primarily on the nature of UNRWA’s announced measures and official reactions to them. There was extensive coverage of the lead-up to the informal donors meeting of 9 September 1997.

Reactions in Syria were muted, reflecting tight Syrian security controls over any unsanctioned political

Siam, and columnists in Al Quds and Al Ayyam all focussed almost exclusively upon the perceived political dimension of the measures.
activity. A demonstration protesting the UNRWA measures was held at a health centre at Yarmouk camp in Damascus on 2 September, and Palestinian opposition groups in Syria denounced the UNRWA measures. As in Jordan, delegations of refugees lodged protests with the UNRWA Field Office. A hunger strike began in Beirut among a group of about 15 refugees on 2 September, as well as strikes and sit-ins in UNRWA installations in refugee camps.

The most visible reactions to UNRWA's measures were centred in Gaza and the West Bank. In general, the reaction in the West Bank was the more measured of the two. In contrast to Gaza, UNRWA schools and institutions in the West Bank operated with only token protests, and students in West Bank schools attended classes throughout the crisis.

There was an overwhelming disposition among the Palestinian refugees to maintain their sense of collective dignity under pressure. That perception was also reflected in the concerns expressed during meetings between UNRWA officials and representatives of camp committees and mukhtars respectively.

The refugee response at one meeting with mukhtars in Gaza, held by the Agency to explain the reasons for the deepening financial crisis and to warn of the possibility that additional stringencies would have to be instituted, was to declare that they would rather see the Agency wound up than have to suffer ongoing humiliation. They

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3 Fara’aneh, a columnist in al-Dustour who wrote two articles about UNRWA cuts was expected to run in the elections.
4 Tishreen, 4 September 1997.
5 Jordan Times, 27 and 29 August 1997; Al-Quds, 28 August 1997. The involvement of political aspirants was, in a sense, a departure from the tendency before 1997 for opinion in refugee camps in Jordan to be represented largely by self-appointed ‘notables’.
were opposed, they said, to pleading for assistance from those who were seeking to close the refugee file anyway, and while the services provided by UNRWA to refugees continued to be eroded away.  

There were also some moments in Gaza of wry humour. UNRWA school buses were used in Gaza to move students to and from demonstrations against the Agency. A major demonstration was planned for 9 September at UNRWA Headquarters Gaza to coincide with the meeting of donors in Amman that day. The sand track in front of the UNRWA Headquarters building was graded. A marquee was constructed for VIPs from the Palestinian Authority who were to address the demonstration. Street vendors (many of whom were sponsored under UNRWA's very successful micro-enterprise program) set up shop early to sell refreshments to the expected crowd. In the event, since the positive outcomes of the meeting in Amman were known before noon, the crowd and the vendors drifted away before lunchtime and the marquee disappeared. The track remained ungraded thereafter.

From the outbreak of the controversy, two key themes were evident in refugee reactions. First, the measures announced by the Agency were generally portrayed as an attempted abandonment of the international community's responsibilities towards the refugee community which would place additional burdens upon needy families. The foreshadowed introduction of school fees was especially resented, given traditional Palestinian preoccupation with education as the means for securing a better future. Many Palestinian refugee parents of students attending UNRWA schools were naturally concerned at the prospect of additional financial burdens. They were uncertain what

7 Author's notes from the meeting, held at the UNRWA Gaza Field Office on 18 August 1997.
response they should make if the Agency went ahead as it had foreshadowed.

Second, the measures were widely interpreted in the Palestinian media and among Palestinian refugee political figures as being part of a more extensive political conspiracy. The measures were announced at a time when the Israel Defence Force had imposed a strict closure of the West Bank and Gaza following suicide bomb attacks in Jerusalem on 30 July. A further attack on 4 September spelled real economic disaster and produced even greater popular pessimism about the peace process.  

As discussed earlier in this study, the Palestinian leadership was already suffering from suspicion among the refugee community that it was prepared, under pressure from Israel and the United States, to accept the irrevocable compromising of Palestinian refugee aspirations central to their political mythologies and collective memories. The financial crisis was seen accordingly, and quite determinately, by Palestinian refugees to be a manifestation of plans by the United States and other donors, with the presumed support of the Agency, the PA and Israel, to bring about the phasing out of UNRWA prior to the just resolution of the Palestinian refugee issue.  

The perception that the financial crisis was supposedly aimed at bringing an end to the refugee issue by the forcible integration of refugees into the populations of host countries was in line with refugee reactions to UNRWA financial crises dating back to the earliest days

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8 The full economic impact of the closures of August-September 1997 is outlined in United Nations, Office of the Special Coordinator in the Occupied Territories (UNSCO) and the World Bank Closure on the West Bank and Gaza Fact Sheet, 8 September 1997. See also UNRWA Information Update 11 August 1997 on the same issue.

of the Agency. Many refugees refused to accept the reality of the Agency’s financial problems, believing that the budget deficit either did not exist, or had been fabricated as part of the political plot mentioned earlier. The practical concerns of demography, running costs and rising expectations which increasingly called into question the future of UNRWA as a functioning institution were largely dismissed by refugees. They insisted these issues were the responsibility of the international community to deal with, if such concerns were genuine. The PA was placed under pressure to see, at a minimum, that the international community did so.

Although it was not clear which concerns – the material or the political – were generally uppermost in the minds of individual refugees, political interpretations of the crisis clearly received the widest airing in public commentaries.

In reality, as discussed in the previous chapter, historical levels of donor support extended to UNRWA, both relatively and in dollar terms, had been sustained. It was also obvious to anyone dealing with the donors that there was no coherent political program lurking among them to wind up the Agency and to bury the refugee issue. The tenacity of the conspiracy theory advocates was all the more remarkable because of the absence of any

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10 The Chairman of the Conference of UNRWA Staff Committees had written to the then Commissioner-General on 2 October 1973 that the critical financial deficit confronting the Agency that year was “nothing but a mere fabricated or concocted pretext for political aims”. Cited in Bernard Schiff, Refugees Unto the Third Generation, Syracuse University Press, Syracuse NY, 1995, p. 111.


12 It is a pity, from a research perspective, that no-one made an effort at the time to establish whether a particular interpretation could be linked to relativities of income, location or social status.
evidence of pressure from the donors to use the financial crisis to press for significant re-evaluation of the basic mandate of the Agency.

The nature of the refugee reaction can however be understood in the framework of the factors discussed earlier in this study. When the UNRWA crisis emerged, it fuelled a situation in which the Palestinian refugee audience, with its distinctive collective memories and political mythologies, was under serious economic and political stress. Refugees were concerned, in the face of external pressures, to cling to those mythologies—particularly about their rights as a people, the responsibilities of others towards them as symbolised by UNRWA, and their entitlement to return and to redress for the suffering they had endured. Those beliefs were central to their sense of identity, and to their sense of hope.

With a Likud government firmly in place in Israel, and with the ascendance of the PA’s political agenda over their own, satisfying refugee demands for return and for compensation appeared to be a virtual impossibility in the foreseeable future. Rather than having to face directly that reality, it appeared to suit both the refugees and the Palestinian leadership to sustain the core elements of refugee mythology in general terms.

The crisis also fitted naturally into the Palestinian predilection for conspiracy theories, as discussed in Chapter II. The refugees were not party to the making by UNRWA, or the donors and host governments, or the PLO, of the decisions affecting them. The disparity in power between themselves, the PLO leadership, and the donor countries was obvious, and affected communication between them. The influence of peer group attitudes in a situation of intense collective pressure was likely to be stronger than any contrary influence the Palestinian
leadership could expect to exert. That was even more so when concerns about personal material costs were added to the political sensitivities of the individuals affected.

The gap in political interests and perceptions between the Palestinian leadership and its refugee audience has been discussed in Chapter VI. Even if the Palestinian leadership had decided to convey an accurate appreciation of both the financial realities facing UNRWA and the attitudes of donors to that situation, it would have laid itself open to charges of being part of the wider conspiracy as discussed earlier. Arafat appeared determined to avoid such a situation.

Moreover, examining and confirming the financial situation facing the Agency and demonstrating understanding of the pressures facing donors was not going to produce political results that satisfied the collective aspirations of refugees. Doing so would not have lessened the material impact upon refugees of the Agency’s foreshadowed measures either. There was a greater political need instead, for both the Palestinian leadership and for the refugees, to sustain the belief that their situation would eventually be rectified. Conspiracy theories helped to sustain that belief in core mythologies.

**Palestinian Authority Reactions**

The 1997 crisis presented the Palestinian political leadership with clear issues (notably the prospect of school payments) on which to focus its political rhetoric. It was able, with minimal political risk, to demonstrate concern to protect refugee interests.

The PA was quick to announce that refugee children should attend classes, that there was no need for fees to be paid, and that the PA and PLO officials would resolve the
CHAPTER VIII: THE PALESTINIAN POLITICS OF THE 1997 CRISIS

issue with UNRWA. The Palestinian leadership was not only obliged to take a clear position on those issues, but it could also be secure in the knowledge that UNRWA, if it was serious about collecting the proposed payments, had no means of enforcing its decision if the PA would not cooperate.

While the Palestinian leadership was obliged, so far as possible, to demonstrate responsibility and restraint in pressing its concerns, activists within the camps and the teachers' union were under less obligation to do so. The critics of the Palestinian leadership were well placed to effect the mobilisation of students, especially in UNRWA facilities and Youth Activities Centres where rejectionist political streams were strongly represented. They had ready-made audiences which could be - and were - assembled and transported directly from classrooms into demonstrations and other protest activity.

Failure to be closely in touch with the popular mood, and as responsive as possible to it, presented a significant risk for the Palestinian leadership of being lambasted by its critics. At the same time, the Palestinian leadership could not ignore the wider consequences for its relations with the donors, and with UNRWA, if the refugee political reaction got out of hand. The crisis also unfolded just as the 1997-1998 school year was beginning. That factor lent urgency to the resolution of the situation, for the leadership and rejectionist elements and UNRWA alike. It also helped to increase pressure for an early response from the donors.

Earlier in this study it was noted that as the PA gradually increased its level of political control under the framework provided by the Oslo Accords, there was growing dissatisfaction among refugees with its performance. That situation heightened Arafat's sensitivity to any suggestion that the financial crisis
in UNRWA in 1997 was linked to outcomes supposedly intended for the peace process by the United States. The material impact of a breakdown in UNRWA services would have been a serious additional political embarrassment for the PA, given the frustration and fragmentation mentioned above.

The Palestinian leadership response to these circumstances, not surprisingly, was to lend a degree of credence, at least initially, to the conspiratorial interpretation of the crisis. It sought, however, to highlight the need to defend UNRWA, rather than to criticise it. It did not seek to cast doubt upon the mythologies fundamental to the refugee position, but neither did it allow a situation to develop whereby its own record in regard to the upholding of those concerns became a major issue. And, by responding swiftly, and making it clear that it would not be party to additional financial burdens upon the refugee population, the leadership was able to avoid being outflanked by rejectionist Palestinian political elements.

The Palestinian leadership managed to avoid any serious embarrassment to its relations with the donors as well. At least partly, it seemed, this was because some of the donors were not strongly or critically focussed on what was happening on the ground. All seemed largely to ignore what senior Palestinian political figures were saying about the supposed role of donors in the crisis. Leading Palestinian figures were able to be reasonably confident that, if challenged, their own performance could be explained to the donors as representing a wake-up call, and the minimum that was politically necessary under the
circumstances to maintain their own credibility among the refugee population.\textsuperscript{13}

The Palestinian leadership was not in a position to defend the measures announced by UNRWA. Indeed it emphasised consistently that it would defend refugees from the financial burdens those measures entailed. It was able to say to UNRWA, however, that it remained committed to supporting the Agency.

In effect, through taking an activist political approach to the crisis, the Palestinian leadership skilfully moved the focus of the Palestinian refugee reaction towards blaming the donor countries for the situation that had arisen. It also discouraged the view that either the PLO leadership or UNRWA itself were parties to a donor conspiracy. And, as noted earlier, it made full use of the willingness among refugees to perceive their situation in terms of a conspiratorial political dynamic among the donor countries to avoid having to focus on the more challenging issue of whether the traditional role of the Agency was in fact sustainable.

Riding the wave of public sentiment, Arafat and those around him sought to guide the course of events in both the Gaza and West Bank initially through the Refugee Affairs Department of the PLO, and, after 27 August, through the formation of a Central Emergency Committee (CEC) in Gaza. Arafat astutely appointed as CEC head the populist PA Minister of Supply, Abdel Aziz (Abu Ali) Shaheen. A long-standing critic of UNRWA, Shaheen had lambasted the Agency for allegedly undermining the sovereignty of the PA and for displaying arrogance in refusing to accept his intervention in the Agency’s food distribution program. Viewed against the background of

\textsuperscript{13} Author’s discussions with senior PA and PLO officials reflected this viewpoint. \textit{Confidential sources 2 and 10}.
the Supply Minister's modest level of competence in handling his portfolio, such attacks on UNRWA had the hallmarks of a diversionary political strategy from the shortcomings of his performance. Nevertheless, Shaheen had a degree of personal political credibility because of his activist role in the youth wing of Fatah during the intifada, and he could be relied upon by Arafat to avoid exacerbating the situation.

Under Shaheen's leadership, the CEC adhered to the approach taken by the PLO Refugee Affairs Department in the West Bank. The establishment of a National Dialogue Secretariat, of which Shaheen was a member and which was representative of all Palestinian factions, further strengthened the role of the CEC. Shaheen emphasised that the donor countries were to blame for failing to meet their financial obligations, not UNRWA. ("UNRWA" he said, "is not a perceived hostile target.")

From the outset of the crisis, Camp Committee members in the West Bank had largely gone along with the PLO line urging restraint so far as UNRWA itself was concerned. That was, in part, a reflection of the level of influence already enjoyed by the PLO Refugee Affairs Department among that group. It also perhaps reflected the fact that around 50 per cent of refugee children in the West Bank attended PA schools anyway, and were therefore not disadvantaged by the measures UNRWA was proposing in the education sector.

In Gaza, the decision to boycott classes - despite the appeals of the PA's deputy minister for Education, Naim Abu Houmous for students to suspend their strike and go back to classes - had been taken before the creation of

14 Confidential source 4.
CHAPTER VIII: THE PALESTINIAN POLITICS OF THE 1997 CRISIS

The People’s Committees of Refugee Camps in Gaza Governorates, which was also under the influence of the PLO Refugee Affairs Department, had called on 21 August for exchanges of views to establish a working plan to force UNRWA to retract its decisions and continue providing services to all the refugees until the Palestinian problem was ‘justly solved’.

The People’s Committees noted that the measures UNRWA intended to take were against the refugees in the Gaza Strip in particular and the other areas in general [and coincided] with the siege imposed by the Israeli Government within a wider conspiracy aiming at humiliating our people ...

The People’s Committees also announced a program of measures including suspension of study in all UNRWA schools until further notice and until UNRWA retracted its decisions. It foreshadowed sit-ins in UNRWA installations from 26-28 August and demonstrations (‘massive popular festivals’) from 30 August until donors met on 9 September.

The communique issued by the People’s Committees on 22 August (which was released by the PLO Refugee Affairs Department) maintained the theme of a conspiracy against the refugees.

This plot which aims at obstructing the educational process and reducing UNRWA services to the Palestine refugees is considered a serious indication which will affect the future of the Palestinian cause and aims to exercise pressure on the Palestinian people to give further concessions in the coming negotiations. The UN is not satisfied that it helped the establishment of the state of Israel and its prosperity and

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16 Al-Ayyam, 28 August 1997; The Jerusalem Times, 29 August 1997.
17 Bernamij muwajamatan istaqataa’at wakalat al ghuth al dowliyya al akhira (A program for countering the recent cuts to [UNRWA]). Press release by the People’s Committees for Refugee Camps in the Gaza Governorate, 21 August 1997. The circular concludes “Together for the sake of return, self determination and the establishment of the independent Palestinian State with Jerusalem independent as its capital”.
18 People’s Committees for Refugee Camps in Gaza Governorate circular, 21 August 1997.
participated in making the Palestinian exodus, but it also now seeks with malicious insistence to abandon the Palestinian refugees as if their problem were solved. We, in the People's Committees in Gaza Governorates, call on the PA, headed by Abu Ammar, the international community, and the free international institutions to exercise pressure on UNRWA to meet its commitments until the refugee problem is finally solved. We also call on all national and popular masses to participate in the activities and protest marches which will be organised by the refugee People's Committees to pressure UNRWA to retract its unjust decisions against the Palestinian people.19

UNRWA employees followed the trend of popular criticism of the Agency. The Chairman of the UNRWA Local Staff Union (LSU), Abdelkarim Joudeh, issued a statement outlining contacts the LSU had maintained with UNRWA management since the news of the UNRWA measures. He said he had conveyed the message to the UNRWA Commissioner-General that

1. The coincidence of the UNRWA measures and the Israeli practices puts a big question mark around UNRWA's role in participating in carrying out the policy of pressure and siege on the Palestinian people.
2. There is a reaction on the Palestinian street which will push people to move and escalate the situation as a feeling of disapproval and anger prevails among them.
3. We, in the LSU, are part of this people and bear a part of the suffering and hope we will not have to take escalating steps in the future.

We confirm our proposal, already submitted, that UNRWA should continue rendering services normally until the funding problem finds a solution.20

Rejectionist Group Activities

The PLO Refugee Affairs Department initially had less political weight among the highly politicised camp committees in Gaza than its rejectionist critics. It was

19 Communique issued by the People's Committees of Refugee Camps in Gaza Governorates, 22 August 1997. The communique was almost totally erroneous in its listing of actions supposedly undertaken or intended by the Agency.
20 Taharrukat ittihad al muwathafeen al arab howla ijra'at wakalat al ghuth ad dowliyya (Activity of the Union of Arab Employees against the measures of [UNRWA]), circular issued by Engineer Abdelkarim Joudeh, Chairman of the Executive Council, UNRWA Local Staff Union, 21 August 1997.
already under fire from Fatah activists opposed to Oslo. In Gaza, Hamas, Islamic Jihad, DFLP and PFLP activists formed the Higher National, Popular and Islamic Committee to coordinate protest activities outside the PLO framework. Under the heading 'No to the Policy of Starvation and Humiliation” the nationalist/Islamicist grouping released a statement on 23 August saying that UNRWA had taken

an unjust decision to reduce its services within an international conspiracy against our people and their national rights, for the purpose of ending the refugee issue to serve political objectives...

It called on all “national and Islamic groups” to take a firm stand against “this conspiracy which hurts our people’s rights and dignity”. It supported the decision to suspend study in UNRWA schools until it retracted its decision, and concluded by calling for UNRWA to be preserved - “Make all efforts to foil the project of liquidation of UNRWA” - without adding markedly to the discussion of practical steps.21

The themes pursued by the nationalist/Islamicist grouping were broadly similar to those of the People’s Committees discussed earlier. And, since the PLO was very swift to react to the onset of the crisis, and as its public position also emerged slightly before that of its critics, the PLO leadership was able at least to keep pace politically with the nationalist/Islamicist grouping, while using its breathing space to develop a considered response to the situation.

Efforts exerted by the Union of Youth Activities Centres, traditionally among the most politically active in

21 La li-siyasat at tajwiyya' wa at tarkiyya' (No to the policy of starvation and subjugation/humiliation). Joint press release of the Islamic Resistance Movement (Hamas), Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP) and Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), Gaza, 23 August 1997.
approach of the non-PLO bodies, and by the Committee to
Defend Refugee Rights (launched with fanfare but with
little follow-up activity by another PLC Refugee
Committee member and prominent figure among refugees
around Nablus, Hussam Khader), to create a popular
platform outside the influence of the PLO Refugee Affairs
Department were largely sidelined. Although the Union of
Youth Activities Centres sought to arrange protests,
there was little organised protest activity evident in
West Bank camps and UNRWA installations.

Later management of the crisis

By early September it was clear that the extent and the
nature of refugee reactions in both Gaza and the West
Bank were generally being decided by the PLO. The
Palestinian leadership maintained a dual role throughout
the crisis of guiding and promoting protest activities by
refugee groups, while at the same time acting to ensure
that such protests remained within acceptable limits and
posed no serious danger to Agency installations or staff.
The main area of uncertainty was the likely course of
events should the meeting between UNRWA, donors and host
country representatives on 9 September fail to produce
additional financial contributions for the Agency.

There were relatively few public statements on the
political aspects of the crisis by PA and PLO officials
other than the head of the PLO Refugee Affairs
Department, Asa’d Abdel Rahman, and Radio and TV
Palestine. In the early stage of the crisis Asa’d Abdel
Rahman attributed the budget deficit to the dereliction
of Western and Arab donors since the Madrid Conference of
1991. He said that some donor states had refrained from
providing promised funding for UNRWA in order to reduce
its role gradually. That, he said, was to the benefit of
Israel and affected the final status negotiations on refugees.\textsuperscript{22}

Asa’d Abdel Rahman also argued that the protests of refugee committees, which he insisted were partly spontaneous and partly coordinated by the PLO, should have been welcomed by UNRWA because they would help the Agency in its fund-raising efforts with the donor states. He said the PLO had no solution except broadening the donor base for the Agency and appealing to Arab states to increase their contributions. Asked if the PA would take over UNRWA schools if the situation deteriorated, Asa’d Abdel Rahman said that the PA would not assume the functions of any UNRWA installations so long as there was no just and permanent solution to the refugee problem. For any party to do so would be, he said, “an act of treachery”.\textsuperscript{23}

Both Arafat and Asa’d Abdel Rahman said they would contact representatives of the donor countries urging them to meet their financial commitments to UNRWA.\textsuperscript{24} Both highlighted their concern over the introduction of the measures at a time when the Palestinian population was suffering severe economic difficulties and the effects of a prolonged closure.\textsuperscript{25}

A variation later developed on that argument, to the effect that UNRWA was becoming a tool of the major donors (that is, the United States) and was being used for political ends. The Agency therefore needed to be protected and supported as the symbolic and actual articulation of refugee rights. Its property and installations, accordingly, were not to be vandalised or

\textsuperscript{22} Al-Resalah, 21 August 1997; Al-Ayyam, 21 August 1997.
\textsuperscript{23} Al-Resalah, 21 August 1997; Al-Ayyam, 25 August 1997.
\textsuperscript{24} Al-Ayyam, 20 August 1997.
\textsuperscript{25} Al-Ayyam, 20 August 1997.
destroyed during protest activities. The theme of UNRWA as the victim of a donor-driven political agenda was expressed with particular eloquence by Dr Ali Jarbawi, head of the Political Science Department at Bir Zeit University and a noted columnist. Jarbawi argued that

[Our] arrows should be directed at the donor states and not at UNRWA, since it is the organisation that receives funding and it is not the source of the funding to the refugees. ... We and UNRWA should work together to expose the political reasons behind the reductions in services. ... While it is our duty to support the Agency due to its international character and dimensions, the continuation and improvement in its services should not be the sole responsibility of the Palestinian people. ... We must be equally careful that this does not become an Arab responsibility by constantly asking the Arab states to increase their contributions to UNRWA’s budget. ... If the Arab states start playing that role, soon they will be asked to find an Arab solution to the Palestinian refugee problem [which] is what Israel always proposed and worked for, supported by certain Western states. ... The Palestinian issue remains in all its aspects an international issue for the international community to find a solution to, and in a fashion acceptable to the Palestinians themselves.26

By early September, following intensive lobbying by the PLO Refugee Affairs Department, the tone of commentary from Radio and TV Palestine tended to focus increasingly on lamenting the UNRWA cuts, calling on traditional and Arab donors to increase their contributions, and highlighting the PA’s role in efforts to solve UNRWA’s financial problems. While coverage continued to be given to conspiracy theories, media comment focussed mostly on the need to defend the Agency for both political and humanitarian reasons.

The PLC Refugee Committee also increasingly reflected the Palestinian leadership line that criticism of the measures announced by UNRWA should not be directed at the Agency, but rather at the donor countries. The PLO-

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26 “Ala’ min yajib an nutliq as-siham?” (Against whom should we aim our arrows?). Opinion column by Dr Ali al Jarbawi, appearing in Al-Ayyam 30 August 1997 and in Al-Rai 1 September 1997.
orchestrated protest activities and statements had effectively averted any possible discussion about change rather than continuity, and had channelled popular debate mostly into a discussion about the importance of supporting UNRWA, an area where the Palestinian leadership was quite comfortable about defending its record.

Outcomes and Lessons of the 1997 crisis

The events of 1997 were remarkable on several counts. The crisis showed how refugee perceptions were linked directly to underlying issues of identity and a fierce concern for the preservation of aspirations, notions of equity and resistance to what was perceived to be a step towards an imposed, unbalanced outcome to the refugee issue.

The donor countries, for their part, failed to outline, let alone to establish any recognition of, the facts of the financial situation and the reasons underlying their approach. Instead, there was an overwhelming predisposition among the Palestinian refugees to see the crisis as a manifestation of plans by the United States and other donors, with the presumed support of the PA and Israel, to force the refugees to accept the limitations inherent in the Oslo framework. A conviction that the Western donors, and possibly UNRWA itself, had specific political objectives in mind for the refugees remained central to Palestinian perceptions of the crisis.

A further key outcome was that the Palestinian leadership made effective use of the willingness among refugees to perceive the crisis situation as a conspiracy, thereby positioning itself to ride out the crisis largely unscathed. The mythologies of the refugees were used by Palestinian political leaders to explain or to legitimise their own position, rather than to risk losing the
political initiative to their critics. The possibility of constructive change in UNRWA's approach, in order to improve its financial sustainability, was not seriously contemplated by the Palestinian political leadership.

In taking that approach, and through responding firmly to the perceived threat, the Palestinian leadership reinforced the mythologies of the refugees, and added to the rigidities of the political environment surrounding the Agency. An important opportunity existed for the Palestinian leadership to communicate to its audience the inevitability of change, and the need to engage constructively with the donors to secure, at a minimum, the protection of the most vulnerable of the refugee population from added financial pressures on the Agency. Instead, the PA chose to protect the aspiration among refugees to maintain their distinctive identity among other Palestinians, as well as within those countries hosting the majority of their number.

The 1997 crisis demonstrated that there were bodies with larger interests at stake in preserving, rather than in changing, the political and mythological status quo so far as the refugee issue and the role of UNRWA was concerned. It proved possible for most of the key parties to use mythologies, and the impact of perceptions among refugees of external parties, and the imagery of the refugee situation, so effectively that a need to create alternative refugee mythologies was never felt.

Mythologies that were fundamentally opposed to change were allowed to dominate discourse on the refugee issue and UNRWA, thereby inviting stalemate. The politically expedient course that was adopted in 1997 by all sides overlooked the issue of the sustainability of that approach in the face of demographic realities and in the absence of a resolution of the refugee issue, or
continuous increases in donor support to meet the needs of a growing refugee population.

Instead, the outcomes of the 1997 crisis showed that it was still possible to bring about sufficient pressure upon the donor community to succeed in preserving the status of refugees, and to maintain the assistance they believed should be provided to them as a matter of right. That did not, however, secure their future, or that of UNRWA. Refugee mythology - including certain assumptions about the obligations and commitment of the international community to upholding refugee interests - may have been validated by the outcomes of the crisis, but only the symptoms of the underlying problems from which the financial crisis arose were treated.

The crisis showed that bringing about durable change in attitude towards the Agency by design, rather than by default, would require far-reaching measures within refugee societies which were already severely stressed. The deliberate introduction of change in UNRWA, if it were to come about, would have to be initiated and shaped in the political arena. 27 An underlying message to the international community from the 1997 crisis was that placing UNRWA on a more sustainable basis through the donors' preferred approach - prioritisation among its functions - was bound to be problematic while the refugee issue remained unresolved with Israel, at least so far as the refugees themselves were concerned.

27 Judith Kipper and Harold Saunders argue, in reviewing the prospects for the Arab-Israel peace process, that "Negotiation does not initiate change. Change is initiated and shaped in the political arena. Negotiation may define, capture, crystallise and consolidate change already begun. But until political leaders have transformed the political environment, negotiators are unlikely to succeed. Or, if they do reach a technically sound agreement, it may not be fully implemented or have the intended consequences." J. Kipper and H. Saunders, The Middle East in Global Perspective, Westview Press, Boulder CO, 1991, p. 13.
It was obvious from the refugee reaction to the prospect of quite modest changes in their material situation, but changes nevertheless that would be directly at odds with refugee mythology, that far-reaching changes in regard to UNRWA would be strongly resisted. In particular, strategies for change would have to be designed to address refugee insistence on their distinctiveness within the Palestinian situation generally, and on their special status as a responsibility of the international community, rather than the Palestinian Authority. The polarising effects of the mythologies held by refugees on one hand, and the political program to which the Palestinian Authority was formally committed on the other, would be likely to constrain the possibility of fresh approaches being taken by the Palestinian side to dealing with UNRWA financial crises in the future.

Strategies for the introduction of change would also have to recognise, and deal with, the range of political benefits that flowed to several key parties from sustaining refugee mythologies. Even where those mythologies presented problems for the parties concerned, including the PA, they also provided a key mobilising and integrative force at the popular level. It also was clear that the challenge of presenting alternative mythologies was bound to be increased where material benefits from existing mythologies were significant, unless it could be shown that those benefits could be preserved in some way. The experience of 1997 indicated that the principle of ongoing international responsibility for their support, which was directly linked to refugee mythology, was no more likely to be formally abandoned by the refugees than other claims central to the framing of Palestinian national identity.

The crisis also underlined the complexity of the connection between memories and mythologies and political
decisions. Each of the key parties affected by or involved in the 1997 crisis - the refugees, the Palestinian Authority, donor countries and countries hosting the Palestinian refugee population, and UNRWA - had different perceptions of the nature of the crisis and of the appropriate responses to it. Those perceptions were embedded in specific and contrasting political cultures, institutional norms, ideas and values.

The imbalance of power in Israel's favour clearly added to feelings among ordinary Palestinians of suspicion, frustration, and defiance against what were presumed to be issues linked to the ultimate outcome of the peace process in regard to the refugees. Those reactions were shaped, in turn, by the cultural and historical framework through which Israeli and Western actions regarding the peace process were perceived at popular levels.

In the particular case of the Palestinian refugees during the events of 1997, the issues of perception were especially complex. As was discussed earlier in this study, they were interwoven with collective historical memories and dreams of redress; with ongoing negative experiences of interaction with Israelis; and with a complex set of assumptions and beliefs about themselves as refugees that together have helped to shape the modern Palestinian refugee identity. 28

During the 1997 crisis, among Palestinian refugees, the emotional importance of key imagery linked to personal experiences, emotions, collective memories (real or imagined) and sense of individual worth appeared to be of overriding political significance. Mythologies that provided comfort at the individual level received organised political support. Facts as observed from

greater critical distance by the Western donors, in contrast, barely entered the political debate. On issues involving questions of personal identity and self-esteem among Palestinian refugees, upholding the consistency of a political image appeared to matter deeply to many individuals, at least as a coping device.

The potency of the tensions on the Palestinian side was magnified by the complex relationship between the refugees and the donor community. The presumed agendas of external parties provided a rallying point for opposing change, however justifiable or necessary change might have appeared to some of the Western donor countries. The outcome of the crisis demonstrated that changes to established narratives would be firmly contested where they were perceived to flow from external pressures, or to have originated with parties linked to external elements whose interests and objectives were perceived to be contrary to the values, rights and beliefs of the wider society, or peer groups within refugee society.

Refugees were inclined to see the donor countries as seeking to undermine the Agency and by extension, the legitimacy of their political aspirations. Whereas refugee mythology provided a framework for anchoring the past, and at least held out the notion of entitlement to redress, external parties failed to produce alternative visions that offered comparable psychological and material comforts.

Concern to avoid allowing the crisis to undermine the political credibility of the Palestinian Authority in the wider context of the peace process was also a key factor shaping responses among Western donor countries. Arab donor countries, in contrast, privately possessing a negative view of the Palestinian Authority and its political orientation, were more inclined to argue that the refugee issue was the moral responsibility of key
Western countries to resolve, and one that should remain an international, rather than an Arab issue so far as funding UNRWA was concerned.

Finally, the 1997 experience highlighted the limited level of integration and effectiveness of communication between refugees, the Palestinian Authority, external parties and UNRWA. It left unanswered the question of whether mythologies could be changed without changes occurring in the power structures through which they are conveyed. It strongly suggested, however, that disparities of power would continue to affect the perception of the motives and credibility of those proposing change.

The crisis showed that both donor governments and the Palestinian leadership would have little choice but to work gradually through such challenges, taking careful account of the political impact on Palestinian refugees of the decisions they might wish to take, for national reasons, in regard to UNRWA. In theory at least, success in securing the future of UNRWA, if not resolving the refugee issue, would require integrative approaches that went beyond addressing the material and psychological needs and concerns of popular audiences.

Such approaches would also need to be linked to changes in wider political frameworks to provide a sense of empowerment among refugees, and thereby make it possible to reduce the perceived relevance of established mythologies and narratives to current experience. Only the empowerment of refugees through more effective democratic practices on the Palestinian side would be able to open the way politically to revisions of those mythologies. The events of 1997 showed that in the absence of a sense of empowerment, among a Palestinian society lacking cohesion and under stress, and with diverse material interests and evident political
differences, such changes to mythologies were bound to be interpreted as undermining the foundations of that society, with attendant political consequences.

Even with change occurring in the wider context, including within the context of the peace process, the emergence of alternative mythologies did not necessarily make them more likely to be acted upon during the period on which this study has focussed. There was a sufficient gap in practice between refugee mythologies on one side, and the Palestinian Authority's public and private positions on the peace process on the other, for the two phenomena to co-exist, so long as the system was managed in a manner which produced benefits to key players on both sides. Despite their apparent contradictions, neither the PA nor its critics appeared to see their dealings with each other in zero-sum terms.

The Palestinian Authority, for its part, had nothing new or better to offer its refugee audience as an alternative vision for their future, because the core factors shaping refugee mythology to that point were essentially unchanged, and the peace process was virtually at a standstill. The issue of the financial sustainability of UNRWA - which from the refugee perspective was largely a responsibility of the international community to deal with, and for the PA to see that it did so - was almost irrelevant to refugee mythology, except to the extent that the financial crisis could be placed in the context of wider mythologies about conspiracies against the refugee cause.

The gap that applied between the refugees and the Palestinian Authority was not the only one involved. The international community in 1997 was also unwilling to acknowledge openly, let alone to address, the facts of political life that applied to the refugee situation in terms of the peace process. Donor countries continued to
provide substantial humanitarian support to the refugees, mainly through UNRWA, and to reaffirm without serious debate the ongoing role of the Agency. They did so, however, without questioning the relevance of UNRWA’s role as perceived by the refugees, or to the implications for the peace process of sustaining refugee mythologies more or less unchanged.

In doing so, whether for well-considered humanitarian and political reasons, or because supporting UNRWA was simply an attractive means of delivering support to the Palestinians in an accountable and non-controversial manner, the international community was reinforcing refugee mythology concerning their rights and the responsibility of the international community to support them.
Palestinians view the "refugee problem" as the heart of the Israeli-Arab conflict, the anchor of their memory and political motivation. ... Any settlement which does not directly address this problem is therefore inconceivable. 

On the other hand, it is equally inconceivable that Israel will agree to the return of Palestinians to their original homes or those of their parents, even in the context of a peaceful settlement. To do so would be to undermine the Jewish character of the state - i.e. to contradict Israel's very raison d'être. 

A settlement is therefore possible only if the Palestinians can somehow transcend almost completely the central reference point in their national memory and instead focus on replacing a tragic past with a hopeful future. How can this be done? 

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The 1997 crisis provided a stark illustration of the political resistance that changing UNRWA's functions would encounter, unless refugee mythologies were also changing, or unless the direction of impending change was seen by the refugees to be non-threatening to their core aspirations and material needs. Developments in the situation facing Palestinians since 1997, including the second intifada that broke out at the end of September 2000, and the effective collapse of support on both sides for the Oslo-based peace process have served to underline those fundamental issues.

At the time of writing, a comprehensive solution to the refugee issue is not in sight. As envisaged in UN
Resolution 302 (IV) that established the Agency, the need continues to avoid starvation and distress among the refugees, and to contribute to regional security and stability. The importance attached by Palestinian refugees to the symbolism of UNRWA’s presence, and to the Agency’s practical assistance, has not diminished.

The uncertainty that surrounds the outlook for future peace negotiations could continue for several years. That could, in turn, promote a political climate in the region that underlined the need for ongoing support to UNRWA. It could also make it even more difficult to explore possible scenarios for the evolution of the refugee issue, and the role UNRWA might play in that regard.

However, as will be suggested below, the sustainability of UNRWA will remain in doubt unless it changes its approach. Viable answers to the financial challenges facing the Agency will have to be found, irrespectively of the degree of progress achieved in peace negotiations and associated concerns regarding the refugee issue.

Against that background, and bearing in mind the challenges discussed earlier in this study to the introduction of alternative approaches to securing the future of the Agency, this chapter briefly examines some possible steps that would perhaps improve the financial sustainability of UNRWA. It also discusses some of the political strategies that would be required to bring about the changes suggested.

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CHAPTER IX: CONTESTED MYTHOLOGIES AND REORIENTING UNRWA

UNRWA's financial outlook

The experience of 1997 underlined the need for the international community to take a fresh look at UNRWA and its relationship with the Palestinian refugees and the Palestinian Authority (PA), as well as with other governments hosting Palestinian refugees on their soil. Despite the short-term respite provided to UNRWA by the Western donors, the 1997 crisis highlighted the need to find a means of absorbing the growing gap between the resources made available to the Agency by donor governments (including indirect support from some host governments) and the targets the Agency sets for itself in terms of meeting refugee needs.

As discussed in the preceding chapter, however, events during 1997 also demonstrated that Palestinian refugees, and other critics of the peace process since the Oslo Accords were adopted, are adept at mobilising political resistance to change. Those parties will continue to insist upon the preservation of their vision of UNRWA as one of their central political concerns. To seek, therefore, to treat Palestinian refugee mythologies as irrelevant, either to the future of UNRWA or to the pursuit of the Palestinian nationalist agenda, would clearly be unwise, if not politically impracticable.

Even were agreement between Israeli and Palestinian leaderships on a wider package deal of mutual concessions on core issues to become possible in the context of peace negotiations, it would be politically risky for the Palestinian Authority to take a course of action that was in direct conflict with refugee demands. Refugee mythologies have been shown to have the power to galvanise support for their advocates that the national Palestinian leadership, already vulnerable to a range of **UNRWA: MEMORIES, MYTHOLOGIES AND THE PALESTINIAN REFUGEE ISSUE** 316
internal pressures, increasingly has very limited capacity to manage.³

The 1997 crisis showed that UNRWA could continue to function along present lines, if deftly managed, as wider political developments proceed. That approach would be certain, however, to give rise to further bouts of financial instability for UNRWA and anxiety among the refugees. Such a situation seems likely to lead, at some stage, to traumatic events for the Palestinian refugees, host governments and UNRWA. The revenue outlook for the Agency over the coming five years, though not hopeless, is generally bleak, in terms of both traditional donors and those countries identified as warranting special attention during 1997.

Among traditional donors, UNRWA could perhaps continue to benefit from political pressure to assist in the management of the refugee issue in coming years, particularly in the event of regional political upheaval and ongoing Palestinian-Israeli violence. But UNRWA could also come under greater pressure to influence refugee opinion in support of peace, or risk criticism in political circles in Washington. Although he did not single out UNRWA for criticism, the US Special Envoy to the Middle East, Dennis Ross, commented in an interview at the conclusion of his appointment that the Palestinians "need[ed] to do much more to prepare their public for peace ... about what's possible and what isn't possible." He added that more needed to be done to avoid incitement and "the socialization of hostility".⁴

UNRWA could argue, of course, that it has been obliged to adhere to the curricula and the textbooks of host

governments and the Palestinian Authority, and has had the support of UNESCO for that approach. UNRWA would undoubtedly have created serious operational difficulties for itself, and thereby harmed refugees relying on its services, and would have caused severe political embarrassment for host governments, if it had sought to develop an active role for itself in regard to peace building. But such arguments may not be sufficient to defuse entirely criticism of its role.

The willingness of individual donors to set aside additional funds for the Agency rather than for the Palestinian Authority, and for relief purposes rather than for development, is also problematic in most scenarios for the Agency. The Agency could benefit to some extent from increased non-government support, including from existing benefactors such as the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (a foundation linked to the German Social Democratic Party), and from new bodies such as the Turner Foundation. It could continue to seek Palestinian philanthropic assistance through the Geneva-based Welfare Association. But compared to the scale of its needs, such support, on its own, would make little difference to UNRWA’s financial bottom line.

If the financial outlook were less serious than it appears at present, the Agency might survive with measures to restrain the growth of demand. It could move more rapidly towards cost recovery; and generally lower the quality and attractiveness of Agency services compared to host country-provided services, where those were available. Doing so might be no more than a reinforcement of actual practice among the refugee population in some places, including in the West Bank where some refugees are willing to use non-Agency

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services, even at a cost. The overall effect of such an approach, however, would be to run down the performance of the Agency, and its morale, to unacceptable levels. Such a trend would ultimately serve only to erode the likelihood of sustaining donor financing.

It would be more appropriate, therefore, to develop an approach which recognised, and dealt with, the political sensitivities involved in change. Those challenges are substantial, but they do not necessarily rule out creative approaches, as discussed below, which could rebase UNRWA's approach to attune it to changing circumstances.

**UNRWA and the Peace Process**

Although only the UN can withdraw or amend its mandate, the Agency cannot operate without the direct support of the major donors and acceptance of its role by Israel and the host governments. Furthermore, the international community is capable of accepting de facto an outcome on the refugee question that leaves the refugees largely where they now reside. A consideration in any analysis of the sustainability of UNRWA is therefore the outlook for the peace process itself.

For the next few years, the prospect of progress towards a final settlement seems limited, but the perceived interests of both sides are likely, in due course, to bring about a resumption of negotiations. At some stage, perhaps, a settlement may be reached between Israel and the PA on the issues of sovereignty and Jerusalem, which are of primary concern to both of them. And, despite the rhetoric employed by some Palestinians, and the renewed political prominence of the issue since late 2000, those concerns do not necessarily include among their highest
priorities the resolution of the refugee issue on the basis of return to what is now Israel.\(^5\)

The problem of providing for the needs of the refugees under those circumstances would fall to the host countries and the PA, if UNRWA were unable financially to fulfil its core functions. Host countries would be obliged to find resources for that purpose from among their other domestic priorities. There is little evidence that the implications of such an outcome have been examined to date by host countries, UNRWA or the PA at an executive level. Very little work appears to have been done on the issue among donors, although informal contacts on the question are increasing.\(^6\)

In the event that there were no early movement towards resolving the final status of the refugees, and that the other final status issues similarly were left effectively in abeyance, the education, health and welfare services provided by UNRWA and its symbolic role would nevertheless remain important to refugees. The continuation of those services would also be considered to be important to the interests of donors, and the PA leadership, in reducing the potential for confrontation between Palestinians and Israelis on the one hand, and between refugees and the PA on the other.

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\(^5\) Details of the Beilin-Abu Mazen plan were published in *Newsweek* 25 September 2000. Negotiations between Palestinian representatives and Israelis at Taba in the weeks immediately before the election of Ariel Sharon appeared to have made little progress towards securing the return of refugees to Israel proper, although it was claimed that formulae were discussed whereby some refugees might have been able to return to a Palestinian state whose boundaries in a desert area near Gaza would supposedly be enlarged to compensate for the annexation of Israeli settlements in the West Bank. For a comprehensive account of conflicting Israeli and Palestinian versions of the Taba talks, see Middle East Media Research Institute (MEMRI), Palestinian Reports on the Taba Negotiations, *FOFOGNET Digest*, 30 January 2001-31 January 2001 (2001-38).

\(^6\) The prime movers on this issue are Canada and the UK, but the focus has been on Track 2 contacts among academics and officials acting in their personal capacities.
Although its mandate derives from UNGA Resolution 302 (IV), UNRWA will probably continue to exist in a formal sense until the UN General Assembly declares Resolution 194 (III) of 1948 fulfilled or superseded. Even in such an unlikely event, the United Nations might still determine that assistance to the Palestinian refugees was appropriate. The question then would be to determine the mechanisms through which in future those services now provided by UNRWA to the refugees in host countries such as Lebanon would be made available, and who would provide the resources required.

Should the Palestinians and Israel resume serious negotiations on final status issues, following the collapse of mutual confidence between the two sides in October 2000, the re-negotiation of the refugee issue would be protracted. And even with serious and productive engagement, there would be no reason for the PA to seek or to agree to an early departure of the Agency from its traditional roles in the West Bank and Gaza. The practical and symbolic roles of the Agency would remain important.

**UNRWA in the context of Palestinian Statehood**

The restricted size of a Palestinian state, whenever established, would make it unlikely that there could be more than a token number of returnees absorbed from among the Palestinians displaced in 1967. UNRWA would be expected by host countries, as well as by the PA to continue to provide services on behalf of the international community to those refugees who remained outside the reach of the Palestinian state. There would seem likely to be no politically-acceptable alternative.

The ideal solution to the refugee issue would be the establishment, through negotiation, of a Palestinian state on the West Bank and Gaza that was economically
sustainable and politically secure. Such an outcome would allow the government of Palestine independently to determine who its nationals were, and under what conditions Palestinian nationals in the diaspora, including the refugees, would be able to 'return' to the country. The provision of identity documents and internationally-recognized passports would end their status of stateless persons and restore their access to national protection.

Statehood, together with a peace treaty between Israel and Syria, would also be likely to foster further normalization of relations between Israel and most Arab countries. That process would in turn open the way to greater international cooperation and flexibility concerning the rehabilitation, reintegration and possibly the migration of the refugees. A multifaceted approach, in the context of Palestinian statehood, would allow the refugees in principle to return to the newly-established Palestinian state, but would also keep open the option of continued residency in the Arab and other host countries where desired by the refugees themselves. It would seem reasonable to assume that under such circumstances, apart from those in Lebanon, most, perhaps virtually all, 1948 refugees would probably prefer to remain in situ, in Jordan and Syria, if they were not required to leave by their host countries.

A Jordanian-Palestinian federation or confederation might further facilitate the solution of the refugee problem if the federation’s economic capacity to absorb 'returning' refugees were significantly larger than a state limited to the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. Bearing in mind the

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7 The author's views on this issue are substantially in accord with the thoughtful and scholarly analysis provided by Lex Takkenberg. See A. (Lex) Takkenberg, The Status of Palestinian Refugees in International Law, Oxford University Press, London, 1997, Chapter IX pp. 321-347.
political sensitivities that apply among the East Bank Jordanians and the West Bank Palestinians, however, a more easily attainable goal might be the conclusion of an agreement allowing virtual freedom of movement of labour and capital between Jordan and a Palestinian state. Even under such an arrangement the Jordanians would be wary of facilitating the flow of Gazan refugees into Jordan. Support for trilateral solutions between Israel, Jordan and the Palestinians, while making considerable economic sense, command little interest outside Israeli and Western academic circles. They appear to have virtually no political support among either Palestinians or Jordanians.

Should Palestinian statehood in parts of the West Bank and Gaza become a reality, the role of UNRWA could be focused mainly on leading and facilitating the process of transition of refugees and returnees into citizens of the Palestinian state, through the establishment of a comprehensive plan of action. The division of authority between the Palestinian Authority, UNRWA and other UN bodies such as UNDP and the World Bank with skills and experience relevant to supporting that process would be complicated and sometimes difficult. UNRWA would have a particularly strong claim to undertake that coordinating function, however, because its mandated responsibilities would continue to extend also to refugees who remain in situ, except in the most unlikely event that host countries agreed to assume that responsibility on behalf of the international community.

Agreement between Israel and the PA based on autonomy without full sovereignty, even with geographic and functional expansion of the powers of the Palestinian Authority during the interim period, would hamper the achievement of a durable settlement of the refugee
problem. Unilateral separation by the Palestinians would be even more problematic from that perspective.

Lacking full sovereignty, the PA would be unable to take full responsibility for the refugees residing outside the autonomous area, as it would not be in a position to provide them with Palestinian citizenship and, accordingly, the right to reside in the autonomous areas. Although Israel might agree to include matters concerning the return of refugees in the self-rule arrangements, host countries would be unlikely to be willing formally to absorb refugees in their territories in the absence of the creation of a Palestinian state. Palestinian residents of the autonomous areas would continue to be stateless persons. Under such conditions there would be no basis for winding up the work of the Agency.

Seeking Sustainability

As mentioned earlier, however, it is possible - as will be discussed below - to envisage arrangements to provide a much higher level of stability and predictability for UNRWA programs. Such arrangements would not be to the detriment of the economic situation of the refugees themselves, if a revised approach to burden sharing were adopted by the PA and the donors with the Agency’s support.

Assuming no net increase in the resources becomes available to the Agency, UNRWA could aim to arrive at a situation in which there was a gradual increase in the extent to which refugees in the West Bank and Gaza turned to the PA and community-based organisations to meet their needs. At the same time, UNRWA could seek to accord highest priority in its programs to assisting those

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8 Takkenberg, The Status of Palestinian Refugees in International Law, p. 333.
refugees who were most vulnerable to economic pressures, irrespective of their location.

The challenge, of course, would be to introduce such changes in a positive and constructive manner, and without engendering a major political crisis. Feeling under threat from a peace process being pursued by fellow Palestinians and external parties including Israel at the likely expense of their aspirations, many Palestinian refugees would remain unwilling to countenance changes from status-based to needs-based entitlements.

Despite the possibility that, in practice, most refugees need not be materially disadvantaged in terms of the quality and cost of the services provided to them under different approaches, many refugees would question the motivation of those who advocated such changes.

Especially in the aftermath of the election of Likud leader Ariel Sharon as Prime Minister of Israel in February 2001, which may have set the stage for a brutal contest of political will between the Israeli and Palestinian sides, any proposals for change in UNRWA emanating from external parties would be bound to be viewed with even deeper suspicion by the refugees.

The capacity of the Palestinian leadership to lend support to changes in regard to UNRWA would be further constrained by the ongoing erosion of its authority as local figures see opportunities to pursue their interests. The effectiveness, especially in the West Bank, of neopatrimonial devices as instruments of discipline, if not central control, seems likely to weaken over time.9

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9 See Georges Marion, “Arafat losing his grip over the West Bank”, Le Monde 2 February 2001.
Possible Approaches

Despite these difficulties, there is scope for the Agency to respond effectively to the financial challenges it faces without departing from the humanitarian purposes for which it was established - including socio-economic assistance to the refugees whether they remain where they are at present or return to a Palestinian state.

The key to a revised approach is that the Agency would become, over time, a service manager rather than trying to deliver all its programs itself. UNRWA’s traditional preoccupation with that approach was perhaps justified in the context of the early 1950s, especially in view of the lack of viable alternatives then. It is now out of step with contemporary government philosophy and practice in most donor countries. It is also financially unsustainable, and it is contrary to the need to convince key donors that the Agency is concerned to deal creatively with the realities of its situation. New approaches need to address the problem of recurrent costs.

The proposals mentioned here cover three basic, interrelated ideas. They may be summarised in the following terms.

The first is the secondment of staff from the PA to UNRWA schools. As part of that approach, the PA would be given additional financial assistance from the donors, and UNRWA would be responsible mainly for senior level management and training.

The second is the outsourcing of education and health services. That would involve accreditation of PA schools in West Bank and Gaza, so that refugee children could go wherever there was capacity to absorb them. This would need to be accompanied by a major program of construction
of new schools for the PA, and refurbishment of existing schools.

Subject to it being economically viable, a third element would involve outsourcing medical services to the PA, the private sector and NGOs. Those medical services could include cardiology, gynecology, diabetes, dentistry and pathology services. UNRWA could pay NGOs and the PA to run non-camp clinics on UNRWA’s behalf.

Other ideas and suggestions could be addressed in conjunction with those listed above. UNRWA could institute Agency-wide movement towards alignment of UNRWA remuneration packages with those of the PA and host governments. All replacement staff would be employed on contracts reflecting that approach. Employment of teachers on such contracts in the West Bank would save $200,000 per annum; in Gaza closer to $1m per annum.

The issue should not be, of course, whether such actions would be sufficient, from a financial perspective, to save the Agency from bankruptcy. The real issue is whether the steps the Agency would take would be appropriate in terms of the overall measure of donor, refugee and host government interests. Although the actual impact of the proposals on the budget situation might be slow to emerge, by demonstrating to donors that UNRWA was prepared to take the initiative in devising creative responses to its situation, the Agency would be in a better position to request time, and continued financial support, while more far-reaching ideas were developed and implemented. Leaving aside the possibility of additional funding as a result of renewed regional crises, the Agency’s capacity to secure higher levels of financial support will increasingly depend upon satisfying donors that it is willing to think strategically about its role, and to adopt constructive approaches to its financial problems.
UNRWA could also argue, in that regard, that directing a proportion of donor support for UNRWA towards institution building for the PA in the education and health sectors would complement UNRWA activities. It would enable UNRWA to press ahead with meeting priority needs in camps. It would be a means of providing a durable contribution to the future of the refugees in West Bank and Gaza, without calling into question the ongoing interests served by the Agency, or prejudging the outcomes of final status negotiations. It would also assist in developing an approach to the delivery of services that host governments and the PA could hope to sustain, when such services become their sole responsibility.

The tensions between UNRWA and the PLO over their respective roles and prerogatives would not disappear overnight. Any concerns among donors about the efficiency and effectiveness of support delivered through the PA to UNRWA could be addressed, however, as part of an institution-building process. The donor approach should require the PA to take full responsibility for setting its overall priorities, including its relations with the donor community, UNRWA and the refugees.

Similar arguments could be made about the case for extending support through UNRWA to Palestinian NGOs, which under the approach being suggested could be expected to assume growing responsibility for meeting priority needs beyond the reach of the PA’s resources. The strengthening of the service sector of the Palestinian economy through the outsourcing of some UNRWA functions would be broadly in keeping with the World Bank’s concern to support movement in that direction.  

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10 The World Bank was conducting (in mid-1998) a review of the capacity of the NGO sector to work more effectively in conjunction with the PA in regard to the Palestinian population generally.
A key to moving in these directions, as noted above, would be the political management of the exercise, particularly in regard to UNRWA's relations with the donors, refugees and the PA. These would each be major challenges. The problems would not be insurmountable, however, if approached in a strategic manner, in cooperation with the PA, and with carefully-orchestrated and substantial donor support, both financial and political.

**Dealing with the Donors**

Crucial to any reform agenda would be the preparedness of donor countries to provide a financial commitment to supporting new approaches. Some donors would point out, of course, that the proposals canvassed above do not seem to hold out the prospect of significant savings - or perhaps any savings - to donors. Determining the extent of likely savings would require careful analysis of, among other matters, how many staff were to be employed in UNRWA and PA schools; what would be the cost of the 'sweeteners' for refugees affected by the changes proposed; and how many positions would be transferred to the PA, over what period.

Some of the proposals would require supplementary funding for the PA to cover staff costs and training. Donors might be concerned that untangling such support from the regular budget of the PA, and preventing it being siphoned off to other programmes, would be very difficult in practice, for both administrative and political reasons. While acknowledging those concerns, the Agency could argue that most major donors have indicated they are prepared to maintain their support for the refugees, and the interests that have guided donor decision-makers to sustain their financial support for UNRWA until now have not altered.
The proposals outlined above would not be presented to the donors as savings or cost-cutting measures. To take that approach would be to suggest that there exists significant scope for savings, whereas the reality is that the needs of the refugee community overall remain unmet. Any far-reaching cutbacks by UNRWA would have to be matched by donor assistance delivered in other forms, unless donors radically altered their assessments of their interests in the wider regional picture.

It would also be important for the Agency to avoid being drawn into a diversionary debate with donors about the feasibility of new economy measures. Savings, if they could be found at all, would only be very minor in comparison to the overall financial situation facing the Agency, unless it were to alter its programmes fundamentally. That is not in prospect, nor are such changes being sought by the donors at this stage.

Finally, any proposals advanced by the Agency would need to demonstrate clearly to donors that they were more than schemes to perpetuate UNRWA, and that they warranted continuation of their financial support. Inevitably, despite the controversy that would be running in the region, there would also be some officials in donor capitals who would ask why the Agency was not moving more quickly to withdraw from the delivery of certain services. They would need to be presented with a politically compelling argument for the mobilization of additional resources, at a time when donors are reluctant to supplement their development assistance budgets, and there is evidence of fatigue in regard to relief assistance.

It would be important for UNRWA, in making its case, to attract support from donor budget lines that cover both relief and development programmes. Preservation of its status as a relief provider puts UNRWA within the range
of most donors' humanitarian programmes, and that should remain central to its image. UNRWA is not in a strong position to compete with other UN Agencies for development funds, given its traditional role as a relief agency and the problems it has faced in meeting donor reporting requirements in some instances. However there are arguments that can be made on developmental grounds to sympathetic donors that may tap, for the benefit of refugees, an element of donor funding largely outside the reach of the Agency at present. This would include the funds set aside for building and strengthening the institutions of the PA, and Palestinian NGOs, for the benefit of Palestinians generally.  

Dealing with the Palestinian Authority

The Agency would have to persuade the PA that, despite UNRWA's record of securing support from donors towards its recurrent costs, the PA has to accept greater responsibility for dealing with the growing deficit facing the Agency. Such an argument would not be unreasonable, at least in a situation of reasonable stability and cooperation between Israel and the Palestinians.

The revenue outlook for the Palestinian Authority prior to 2000 was showing signs of strengthening, and the PA was gradually improving its capacity to meet its recurrent expenditure needs on a sustainable basis.  

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11 Norway and Switzerland, for example, are willing to consider funding the Unified Registration Scheme/Family Files project because it is being presented to them in those terms.

12 The severe decline that the Palestinian economy experienced after 1993 had direct linkages to the political and security measures taken by Israel. Loss of earnings through closure significantly depressed local consumption and demand, and required a diversion of about 25% of donor disbursements into emergency budget support and employment generation schemes - a loss to the investment programme. It also reduced Palestinian export competitiveness and made efficient public administration very difficult. The losses from closure were estimated by the World Bank to amount to at least $2.8 billion between
Since that time, the economic damage caused by the closure of the West Bank and Gaza from Israel has been severe, and the political outlook for the immediate future is rather bleak.

Nevertheless, a financially stable Palestinian entity is more likely to provide a secure environment for Israel than a failing Palestinian Authority struggling to prevent the erosion of its control over volatile political elements in the West Bank and Gaza. Once that conclusion is again established as a fundamental operating assumption among Israelis, there seems little doubt that the PA will proceed place its financial management on a firmer basis. As it does so, the Palestinian leadership will inevitably acquire greater capacity to extend financial support to the Agency.\(^\text{13}\)

In addition to the political sensitivities involved, the task of persuading the PA to accept burden-sharing with UNRWA would have to address the fact that most donors are exerting strenuous efforts to end their support for recurrent costs within the PA budget. On the other hand, it is possible that some key donors, including the EU,

1994-1996 (a sum equal to a year’s GDP or $1500 per inhabitant). And yet, despite these constraints, and a range of other contributing factors to the economic downturn, until October 2000 the PA was making fiscal progress. Revenues were at around 20% of GDP; and recurrent expenditure was being brought under better control. Financial and procurement control mechanisms were being established with World Bank assistance; the finalization and implementation of a series of commercial laws was moving ahead, and constraints in the financial sector were being dealt with - including through such measures as a program of land titling and moveable capital assets registration. An easing of closure, and specific steps such as the opening of Gaza airport and port facilities, the introduction of safe passage between the West Bank and Gaza, and the upgrading of border infrastructure and the streamlining of clearance and transshipment procedures would all have made a measurable positive impact, both on revenue prospects and on investor confidence. In late 1997 the World Bank reported that the PA was likely to achieve a recurrent fiscal deficit of only $50 million, despite the negative fiscal impact of Israeli closures, mostly because of a strong domestic revenue collection effort. World Bank Group, West Bank and Gaza Update, December 1997, p. 5.

\(^{13}\) The PA Minister of Finance, Zuhdi Nashashibi announced in December 1999 that there would be “no budget deficit if matters go naturally” in the PA budget for 2000. Fatah Newsletter, Gaza, 10 December 1999, p. 3.
would continue to assist the PA in that area rather than face the perceived political and other consequences of withdrawal of such support.

To have any real impact upon the PA's approach, UNRWA would first have to secure agreement in principle to a new tranche of donor support for the PA that could underpin the shifting, over time, of responsibility for meeting additional needs away from the Agency to the PA. Since UNRWA would be most unlikely to be able to reverse the general policy aversion of the key donors to covering recurrent costs, rather than development, it would have to persuade the donors that their interests - including their humanitarian relief objectives, their political objectives and their development policy objectives - would be served best by supporting a transitional financing arrangement, probably for a specific period. Such a program, which would resemble the support provided for the PA in the period immediately following the conclusion of the Oslo Accords, might also extend to the provision of support for the Palestinian NGO community.

Having secured agreement in principle to that approach, the second step would be for UNRWA to persuade the PA to accept that, in principle, establishing a transitional financing package, despite the awkward questions it would raise for the PA about priorities and the sharing of responsibilities, would be better than having to face the certainty of a breakdown or effective cessation of UNRWA services in Gaza and the West Bank. Coordination with the key donors on that issue would be essential; and that coordination would need to be handled by both sides in a manner that did not unduly arouse Palestinian sensitivities.

The third step would be for UNRWA, the donors and the PA to establish the details of a package deal, including the identification of needs, the priority areas to receive
support, the duration of that support, and the nature of the inputs that UNRWA and the PA would make respectively to the overall outcomes.

Without reaching a point of handover of relevant functions to the PA, it should be possible to achieve a higher degree of convergence and complementarity between its activities and those of the Agency. Where a role for the PA would not be a serious possibility, outsourcing to Palestinian NGOs, or partnerships between such NGOs and international NGOs, might still provide significant savings for UNRWA. As noted above, it might also allow access to revenue from development as well as relief budgets of some donor countries.

The sustainability of the recurrent expenditure that would be involved in the approach outlined here would have to be addressed by the donors with the PA as part of the wider question of securing the financial future of the PA. It would be inappropriate to examine the future programmes and strategic direction of UNRWA in isolation from that fundamental issue. The provision of government infrastructure for all Palestinians ultimately will hinge upon the capacity of the nascent Palestinian economy to generate the revenue - through taxation, aid and other income flows - that it needs. In the short term, whatever solutions are devised to address the PA's recurrent financial dilemmas would also need to take account of the problems facing UNRWA. More active efforts by the Agency to make donors focus on that linkage would be desirable.

Dealing with Refugees

The most vocal political reaction to such proposals as these would be likely to come from the refugees themselves. There would be claims along the lines that such ideas represented a fairly thick edge of the wedge so far as the ultimate resolution of the refugee question
is concerned. Cynicism about the PA and the now-discredited Oslo process, and the fact that UNRWA was unable to continue along its traditional lines, would be translated into the denunciation of proposed changes as part of a political conspiracy among the donors.\textsuperscript{14}

The election of Likud leader Ariel Sharon as Prime Minister of Israel in February 2001 seems likely to add to such concerns among the refugees. In the current political climate between the Israeli and Palestinian sides, any proposals for change in UNRWA emanating from external parties would be bound to be viewed with even deeper suspicion by the refugees. Meanwhile, the capacity of the Palestinian leadership to lend support to such changes is being increasingly constrained by the ongoing erosion of its political authority as local figures see opportunities to pursue their interests. As mentioned earlier, the effectiveness, especially in the West Bank, of neopatrimonial devices as instruments of discipline, if not central control, in the Palestinian political context seems to be weakening.\textsuperscript{15}

For all the reasons mentioned above, the PA leadership would be most likely to resist being seen to be party to changes in UNRWA’s approach.\textsuperscript{16} If the peace negotiations were stalemated or moving backwards, the political dynamics of the Palestinians would make the PA leadership even more determined in its resistance. Should the PA agree to go along with the changes in regard to

\textsuperscript{14} For an account of refugee doubts about the capacity of the Palestinian Authority to provide a practical substitute for UNRWA, see IPCRI (Israel/Palestine Center for Research and Information) The Future of the Palestinian Refugee Issue in Final Status Negotiations, Dr Adel H. Yahya, Project Director, Final Status Publications Series, Jerusalem, 1998, pp. 71-73.

\textsuperscript{15} See Georges Marion, “Arafat losing his grip over the West Bank”, Le Monde 2 February 2001.

\textsuperscript{16} In 1997-98 even the relatively benign matter of converting Womens Program Centers into NGOs registered with PA Ministries ran into resistance from both sides.
outsourcing of education and health services, including the accreditation of PA schools, it would be accused of complicity at the expense of the rights of the refugees. Changes to education arrangements, in particular, would be politically sensitive because of the strength of organised opposition to the PA in that milieu. And both UNRWA and PA teachers, not surprisingly, would be vocal in resisting change if it were perceived to be at their expense.

It would require direct intervention from the United States and other key donors with Arafat, and the firm affirmation by the Agency that it was resolved to proceed in a particular direction, for the PA leadership to accept changes along the lines proposed. And even then, irrespective of its private position, it might be necessary for political reasons for the PA to be vocal initially in its rejection of the changes. Publicly, the PA would be unlikely to agree to do more than go along under protest, and it would have to be seen to win at least symbolic concessions in doing so. A crisis situation - with refugee children unable to enter schools, and demands from the refugee community for action to be taken - might well eventuate before the PA gave way.

It would therefore be wise for all concerned to plan certain concessions in advance - for example having the Agency undertaking to agree, as the price of PA acquiescence, to demands from the PA that UNRWA meet the cost of school contributions on behalf of refugee children for a number of years. If necessary, the Agency could plan to increase the level of benefits to early-retiring staff. Consideration might also be given to announcing, strictly as a fall-back position, a delay in introduction of the scheme for accreditation of PA
schools in the West Bank, while pressing ahead in Gaza where the need for change was more urgent.

Donors would also need to appreciate that changes would have to avoid challenging the symbolism associated with UNRWA. Whatever the outcomes of the peace process, refugees would need to be reassured that the Agency will remain as a form of international recognition of their plight. Changes in UNRWA's approach would also need to be introduced without additional financial burden to the refugees. The PA and the host countries would need reassurance on the same score if they were to cooperate with the Agency.

Provided, however, there were the political will at the leadership level of UNRWA to introduce the changes, the resistance to them would not be an insurmountable problem, so long as the process were gradual and the services provided to refugees did not deteriorate. It would be even less an issue if there were obvious and immediate material benefit to refugees from the changes.

The political constraints to moving away from traditional approaches would be evident to most donors from the PA and refugee reactions. The Agency, and the donors, would have to be satisfied that the changes were worth pursuing. For the United States, in particular, the refugee reaction might be beyond its levels of political tolerance and perceived to be contrary to wider US objectives in promoting the peace process. The PA would be quick to encourage such misgivings. There would be likely to be divisions within the US Administration on the issue, with some parties arguing, in the light of political reactions, for the expediency of additional temporary financial assistance.

The Agency would be well-advised, accordingly, to proceed with caution in its broaching of the issue with the PA.
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until it obtained a clear commitment from Washington that the US authorities would be prepared to stay the course until the change in direction was accepted in principle and established in practice. Each of the key donors would need to understand and to be persuaded of the Agency’s strategic vision in regard to the changes being proposed. It would be important, for example, to emphasise that the Agency’s obligations to provide education facilities would be met, in regard to incoming students, by playing a direct part in the supervision and quality control of the education being provided, and in providing training for teachers to work in PA schools.

The case for change would need to be put to the refugees and demonstrated fully, with attention paid to both the Agency’s financial imperatives and the case for contributing to a more sustainable Palestinian infrastructure, through adapting UNRWA’s approach to changing circumstances. UNRWA would need to be able to demonstrate to refugees that their interests had not suffered; and their children had schools to go to, even if they were not UNRWA’s own schools.

Most importantly, the PA should not be taken by surprise by such proposals for change. Prior consultation and coordination with the PA on the issue would be essential. It would be to the Agency’s advantage that the PA would probably have mixed feelings about allowing Hamas-dominated teacher associations to dominate debate on the issue of change, if change seemed inevitable. It would seem reasonable to expect the PA would wish to capitalise discreetly on the opportunities for political patronage that a larger role in the education sector, and additional financial support from donors would bring.

Political concerns would also arise in regard to the backfilling by the PA and NGOs of UNRWA resource needs, but perhaps to a lesser degree of sensitivity. Whereas
refugees living in camps mostly use those facilities, from anecdotal evidence it appears that the political symbolism of using UNRWA facilities does not appear to be a major concern among refugees, even though the ongoing presence of UNRWA is certainly important to them.17 Anecdotal evidence suggests those refugees living outside camps tend to use whatever facilities are most convenient and affordable.

Sensitivities associated with outsourcing could perhaps be lessened to some extent by maintaining the symbolism of the UNRWA presence - flags, insignia and so on - and the continued presence of UN staff in senior management and supervisory capacities. Since the facilities in question would remain UNRWA facilities until the PA wished otherwise, the changes in approach could be defended as an operational change, and not a policy shift by either side.

Ultimately the political arguments for maintaining the status quo would have to be considered as only one factor among many - including the demands of financial reality - that surround the refugee issue. It is questionable whether any other approach would be more expedient, sustainable and in the interests of each of the key parties than the approach UNRWA would be proposing to take to keep recurrent costs within manageable limits. In the event that the Agency and the donors were unable to persuade the PA to take the political risks involved, the Agency would probably have no real choice but to turn to outsourcing anyway.

17 IPCRI The Future of the Palestinian Refugee Issue in Final Status Negotiations, pp. 68-69.
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Conclusion

The foregoing analysis makes it clear that a smooth ride towards placing the Agency on a sustainable basis should not be expected. Changes of approach are capable of being misinterpreted as the Agency 'phasing out UNRWA services' rather than finding ways and means of bridging the gap between income and needs. Many Palestinians would insist - as they did in 1997 - that the main problem was not donor fatigue but political agendas aimed at closing the page on the refugee problem by writing off the Agency.

A range of patrimonial systems would be affected as individuals lost control over resource allocation decisions to other parties. The PA would be nervous at the prospect of the reinvigoration of Palestinian NGOs, both secular and Islamic in their orientation, outside its direct influence.

Such reactions underline the political difficulty of managing change within the Agency towards attaining a secure future role. That challenge would be insurmountable unless the Agency tackled refugee mythologies systematically and firmly, through active engagement in dialogue and debate with the refugees and the PA. Having done so, it also would need to be prepared, to some degree, to tough out refugee criticisms.

There appears to be potential for linkage between the strong support among Palestinians for community empowerment (including in respect of the PA), and the introduction of change. At the same time, the psychological importance to the refugees of retaining an active and effective UNRWA presence should not be ignored. There may be scope for the Agency to be innovative, but only so long as the changes do not involve financial burdens for the refugees, the Agency's
presence remain visible, and the donors and the Agency work hard to bring the PA on board.

The necessary preconditions for change could be met, if change made economic sense and if the Agency were seen to be committed to dealing with the political challenges that would have to be faced. It would take a lot of work at the political level for different approaches to be accepted, however, and to become durable. Flack would fly, both within the Palestinian community and within the Agency, before there was acceptance of the idea that the Agency could and should change its approach to meet changing circumstances.

At the end of the day, the realities of UNRWA’s financial situation projected five years hence mean there is really no choice for the Agency but to reform or to crumble away. A balance has to be maintained between the pace of reform and political constraints, but accommodating political sensitivities is no substitute for finding the means of meeting the Agency’s running costs. Given the projection of needs it will have to meet, the Agency can only survive as an effective body through persuading donors and the PA to support the Agency financially as it moves down that path.

So far as the various audiences are concerned, UNRWA has a singularly important advantage. Provided it were prepared to settle upon a firm position of its own, in regard to the existential questions of what sort of Agency it should be, and to promote that position with vigour, the Agency would probably find that its own strategic thinking would be a good deal more coherent and convincing than that of its other audiences, including the donors. It is better placed than any donor, host government or refugee body to shape the direction of debate about its own future.
Among the donors at least, the Agency would seem capable of generating sufficient goodwill to ensure its ongoing capacity to meet its core functions, provided it accepted that the nature of its activities have to change. Among its other audiences, the Agency may be seen as becoming less successful than before in terms of its direct support to their interests. As mentioned above, since change would be interpreted in many quarters as abandonment by the donor community, the Agency would need to be seen to continue to fulfil its symbolic functions, even if its methods of service delivery changed.
X. Conclusion

Give birth to me again
Give birth to me that I may know
In which land I will die, in which land I will come to life again.

Mahmoud Darwish

This study has focussed on how the relationship between power, perceptions and communication of memories and mythologies affected decision-making in the context of the Palestinian refugee issue during 1997. Through analysis of the 1997 financial crisis in UNRWA, and the manner in which parties responded to it, the study has raised questions about the implications of contested mythologies for the future of UNRWA, and for the management of the refugee issue in the broader context of the Middle East peace process.

The core questions of the study were whether political mythologies, in the Palestinian refugee context at least, are susceptible to change or to being overtaken by new priorities; and whether such mythologies can co-exist with approaches which, in important respects, seek to ignore or to contradict them. With those questions in mind, the study examined the way UNRWA’s 1997 financial crisis was handled, seeking insights into the relationship between the political mythologies and memories that provide the basis of identity and aspirations of Palestinian refugees, and political legitimacy in the Palestinian context.
Palestinian Political Mythologies

The study began by examining Palestinian popular mythologies and political dynamics. Occasional reference was made to studies of Zionist experience relevant to the issue, with a view to gaining insights into the challenges of dealing with the refugee issue in the Arab-Israeli context generally, and with change affecting UNRWA in particular. As part of that discussion, the study examined the social and political context - including the boundaries between refugee and non-refugee populations - sustaining the imagined community in which Palestinian refugee mythology operated in the 1990s.

The core elements of Palestinian refugee collective memories and mythologies were identified as including the direct experience and retelling of memories of flight and dispossession; and perceived rights as refugees to redress vis-a-vis Israel. Those rights include, most importantly, the right of return, and compensation. It also noted that among Palestinian refugees there was a perception that others - including both the international community and the Arab governments hosting Palestinian refugee populations - were morally and legally obliged to support them until such time as their rights were restored in the context of a peace settlement with Israel.

It was argued that at the popular level, over the course of five decades, the Palestinian collective narrative (like its Israeli counterpart) had simplified, polemised and perhaps distorted the events of 1948, stripping them of their historical complexities and moral ambiguities. Collective memory had, in effect, made other interpretation, let alone more critical analysis, of the core Palestinian narrative, including the right of return, largely irrelevant among Palestinian audiences.
There had been a conscious effort among Palestinians to sustain that memory in the hope of obtaining redress.

The study also discussed how the education system and other social infrastructure established by UNRWA facilitated that process. UNRWA therefore played an indirect but important part in sustaining refugee society, and later in revitalising the nationalist movement. It would seem reasonable to conclude, however, that the ongoing strength of familial and other traditional patterns of authority and loyalty in refugee society, particularly among refugee camp dwellers, and the distinctions drawn between refugees and non-refugees in Palestinian society and in host countries, would probably have preserved a sense of refugee identity irrespective of the existence of UNRWA. Mythologies, it was suggested, are deeply embedded in Palestinian refugee society, and are naturally and inevitably part of the Palestinian refugee political agenda.

There is little evidence, at this stage, among the Palestinians of the sort of re-narrativisation of collective memories that had begun among Israelis; nor is there much evidence of willingness to examine critically what such core mythologies as the right of return should mean in practice. The weakness of communication between political elites and non-elites in Palestinian society generally, as well as the other social dynamics mentioned above would all be likely to constrain any efforts to introduce changes in those mythologies. The imagery that Israelis and Palestinians have created about each other, that affects fundamentally their social and political interaction, is driven by personal experience, real and imagined collective memories, and political forces. The imagery also draws upon the desire of individuals for the comfort and familiarity and reassurance of commemorative
narratives and, of course, any material or other benefits that flow from manipulation of that imagery.

The study has argued that such considerations had a direct effect upon UNRWA and the place it occupied in 1997 among Palestinian refugee mythologies. Whereas UNRWA had a remarkable record as an aid agency, among refugees it always had a political significance that extended well beyond its humanitarian functions. UNRWA in 1997 represented, among Palestinian refugees at least, the embodiment of the mythologies central to their aspirations and identity.

In addition to its role as a key contributor to the sense of imagined community among Palestinian refugees, UNRWA was clearly identified, among camp-dwelling refugees in particular, with the sustaining of popular identity. By extension, in refugee perceptions, UNRWA was associated with political opposition to threatening alternatives, including that which was represented, in refugee minds, by the Palestinian Authority.

For Palestinian refugees in 1997, it was suggested, the prospect of change in the role of UNRWA therefore posed important challenges to the intensely-held political mythologies and collective memories of the Palestinian refugee population. The fact that those memories and mythologies were proving highly resistant to change had consequences, moreover, for the political calculus of the Palestinian leadership, and for the dynamics that applied between Palestinian refugees, UNRWA and external actors in the 1990s.

The Political Background to the 1997 Crisis

It was argued that each of the key parties affected by, or involved in, the 1997 crisis had different perceptions of the nature of the crisis and of the appropriate
responses to it. Those perceptions were embedded in specific, usually contrasting, political cultures, institutional norms, ideas and values.

The study suggested that, under the conditions of high political and economic stress that applied at the time of the 1997 crisis, the Palestinian refugee population was likely to seek reassurance through adherence to the established values and symbols of peer reference groups ahead of the Palestinian political leadership. Traditional political sentiment among those groups was bound to have stronger appeal than programs emerging from political leaders which, as discussed below, were perceived, correctly or otherwise, to be based upon a search for compromise solutions to the refugee issue through the Oslo peace process framework.

The study also discussed the impact on the capacity of the Palestinian leadership to influence popular attitudes of an elitist, authoritarian tradition in patterns of Palestinian leadership at all levels. It analysed the effects of neopatrimonialism, non-elite political mobilisation during the 1970s and 1980s, and the intifada. The argument was put forward that on balance, and contrary to the hopes entertained by many Palestinians at the time, the intifada and the responses it drew from external parties may have served to entrench, rather than to diminish, the gap in Palestinian society between those who possessed access to power and influence, and those who lacked those benefits.

The study discussed Palestinian cynicism towards the claims of political leaders, especially where there were perceived gaps between promise and performance, and perceptions of corruption in PA institutions. It noted the prevalence of the "everyone knows" alternative interpretation syndrome in assessing claims emanating from leadership figures, and discussed the widespread
CHAPTER X: CONCLUSION

proclivity among Palestinians for identifying external conspiracies against their interests. The imagery of conspiracy and victimisation, it was suggested, continued to provide a politically acceptable framework within which Palestinian refugees were able to relate personal experience to wider social and political contexts.

The study also argued that the Palestinian political leadership represented by the Palestinian Authority under the leadership of Yasser Arafat lacked popular credibility in many respects. The concerns of Palestinian refugees as a distinctive interest group in the peace process had, it seemed, been largely overlooked in the shaping of the leadership’s nationalist agenda. It appeared to the Palestinian political audience, including refugees, that their concerns to see outcomes from the Oslo process that met their aspirations were at constant risk of being degraded by both Israeli actions and by the political processes at work between the Israeli and Palestinian leaderships. Their demand to exercise a right to return to Israel, or at least to have that right recognised by Israel, was fundamentally irreconcilable with the minimum political requirements of the peace camp in Israel with which the Palestinian leadership was mainly engaged.

In the wider Palestinian context, Yasser Arafat contained centrifugal tendencies within the Palestinian movement through the use of neopatrimonial devices and by authoritarian behaviour. He ensured that the populist sentiment of the intifada period did not translate into an enduring challenge to his own authority. But his approach did not provide a comprehensive or sound basis for dealing with the political challenges posed by accommodation to the peace process following the signing of the Oslo Accords. The period after 1993 arguably saw the continuation of the Palestinian political mythologies
that predated Oslo, rather than the deliberate creation by Arafat of a counter-narrative, or the promotion of Palestinian acceptance of compromise or concessions on matters of deeply-held principle.

For its part, UNRWA’s success in coping with recurrent financial crises did not support the development of fresh thinking within the Agency about its functions, or the development of a more secure financial basis for the Agency. Its major stakeholders - the refugees, the host countries, and the donors - were also unwilling to address such issues, even though UNRWA’s ability to sustain itself in changing regional political circumstances had come under growing pressure, especially following the launch of the Oslo process in 1993.

The 1997 Crisis

Drawing those observations together, and turning to the relationship between refugees and external parties, it was argued that in the absence of change in Palestinian refugee mythologies, the 1997 crisis was inevitably understood among Palestinian refugees as reflecting a malevolent interest on the part of donors, the Palestinian Authority, and Israel, in determining the direction of political events in which UNRWA - and they - were a key part.

Among refugees, the expenditure cuts and other measures announced by UNRWA were widely seen as an abandonment of the international community’s responsibilities, which would place additional burdens upon needy families. The measures were widely interpreted in the Palestinian media and among Palestinian refugee political figures as being part of a more extensive, conspiratorial political agenda whose ultimate goals supposedly included the phasing out of UNRWA prior to the abandonment or unjust resolution, through the Oslo peace process, of the Palestinian
refugee issue. Few refugees could believe that such a vital political issue, from their perspective, would genuinely be seen, from a donor perspective, as a relatively routine, even mundane decision about whether to grant or to withhold the modest additional financial resources required for UNRWA to operate.

Given the presumption that there were wider political objectives involved in the crisis, the refugee response was shaped by concern, in the face of those perceived external pressures, to cling to their mythologies - particularly about their rights as a people to return and to find redress, and the responsibilities of others towards them as symbolised by UNRWA. Those beliefs were central to their sense of identity, of belonging to a place in history, and to their sense of hope.

There were no strong incentives, from the Palestinian leadership's perspective, to challenge or to change that understanding. Rather, there were ongoing pressures from peer groups, family and other affiliations, and from the force of collective memories, to preserve those concerns.

Deft management by the PA of the risk of being outflanked politically on the UNRWA issue by its Islamist and rejectionist critics saw the Palestinian leadership lend a degree of credence, at least initially, to the conspiratorial interpretation of the crisis. It employed the argument that UNRWA - as the symbolic and actual articulation of refugee rights - needed to be protected from the alleged intentions of the United States and other major donors to use the Agency for their own political ends. The Palestinian leadership did not allow a situation to develop whereby the PA's own record in regard to the upholding of refugee concerns became a major political issue.

By taking that approach, and through responding firmly to the perceived threat of Western donor abandonment, the
Palestinian leadership arguably reinforced the mythologies of the refugees. It thereby added to the rigidities of the political environment surrounding the Agency. The Western donor countries, for their part, responded to the crisis by finding the additional funding the Agency required. The end result of the financial crisis was therefore the continuation in all essential respects of the political, financial and mythological status quo.

Palestinian Refugee Political Mythology and Change

The 1997 crisis showed that every move in the Israeli-Palestinian context has repercussions, and that far-reaching changes to UNRWA will be strongly resisted by refugees. To seek to bring about such changes, moreover, will require strategies to address refugee insistence upon their distinctiveness within the Palestinian situation generally, and their insistence also on having special status as a responsibility of the international community, rather than the Palestinian Authority. The strategies will also have to recognise, and deal with, the range of political benefits that flow to several key parties, including the PA, from sustaining that mythology.

The 1997 crisis also showed that placing UNRWA on a more sustainable basis through the donors’ preferred approach - prioritisation among its functions - is bound to be problematic while the refugee issue remained unresolved with Israel, at least so far as the refugees themselves are concerned. Disparities of power will continue to affect refugee perceptions of the motives and credibility of those proposing change, especially where changes are perceived to flow from external pressures.

Securing the future of UNRWA, if not in resolving the refugee issue, will require integrative approaches that
go beyond addressing the material and psychological needs and concerns of popular audiences. Such approaches will also need to be linked to changes in wider political frameworks that shape mythologies.

Providing a sense of empowerment among refugees may make it possible to reduce the perceived relevance of established mythologies and narratives to current experience. Conversely, in the absence of a sense of empowerment, among a Palestinian society lacking cohesion and under stress, and with diverse material interests and evident political differences, attempts to change mythologies are likely to be interpreted as undermining the quasi-sacred foundations of that society. They are certain to be firmly rejected.

Even with political change occurring in the wider context, the emergence of alternative mythologies would not necessarily make them more likely to be acted upon. The 1997 experience showed there was a gap, in perception if not in practice, between refugee mythologies on the one hand, and the Palestinian Authority’s political program on the other hand. The Palestinian leadership allowed the two currents to co-exist, running in parallel despite their apparent contradictions, at least until serious negotiations began with Israel on final status issues in 2000.

This study has also sought to assess the capacity of UNRWA and the international community to deal constructively with the issues surrounding the future of the Agency. It has focussed, in that regard, on the material and political interests of each of the parties concerned. It has also highlighted the fact that refugee political mythologies and the manipulation of those mythologies were central elements in the evolution and in the management of the 1997 crisis.
It has also been argued in this study that although refugee political mythologies will continue to pose challenges to the introduction of alternative approaches to securing the future of UNRWA, the Agency could respond effectively to the financial challenges it faces without departing from the humanitarian purposes for which it was established. Central to those purposes would be the provision of socio-economic assistance to the refugees, whether they remained where they are located at present, or returned to a Palestinian state.

It is conceivable that, with the assistance of the imagery generated by fresh political crises, and by capitalising on donor concern to avoid the prospect of deepening such crises through further instability on the refugee front, UNRWA could continue to orchestrate enough fresh donations to continue its work. The Agency’s political and advocacy skills are remarkable; and the funds generally needed to stave off its financial collapse are fairly modest.

It would be unwise, however, to assume such a strategy was sustainable. The level of future Western interest in the Palestinian-Israeli issue is unpredictable, especially if the failure to find a resolution to the question in its broad form is not accompanied by any obvious disadvantage to Western interests. The political and even the humanitarian impact of the particular issue of Palestinian refugees within the wider context of the Arab-Israel conflict could easily lose its current status among the priorities of donor governments. Other situations may present more pressing humanitarian needs. Priorities for aid disbursement could shift towards the provision of greater support to those states seen to be critical to the protection of Western interests. Under each of those scenarios, UNRWA’s access to resources could be adversely affected.
Alternatively, should the vast majority of the Palestinian refugees remain where they are located at present, the burden of providing education and other services in those places would continue to grow. If that growth in the demands on the Agency developed in conjunction with a more stable regional outlook, UNRWA would be less able to use political crises to secure additional financial support at the rate it required.

It has therefore been argued in this study that UNRWA has to find a balance between the interests of its key audiences and sources of financial and political support, while adjusting to emerging political, financial and other circumstances. UNRWA can achieve this, by becoming a service manager and center of excellence in the delivery of education, health and other services, and by remaining an institution that maintains an effective UN presence in the lives of the refugees and that underlines the commitment of the international community to supporting them.

It has also been argued that the political challenges to developing and implementing changes would not be insurmountable, if dealt with in a strategic manner, in cooperation with the PA, and with carefully-orchestrated and substantial donor support, both financial and political. Obviously, the political relationship between Israel and the Palestinians would need first to stabilise. Then, if certain conditions were met, if the changes made economic sense, and if the Agency were seen to be committed to dealing with the political challenges that would have to be faced, the odds would favour the changes being accepted, albeit with considerable political difficulty, by the Palestinian leadership.

The extent of the political challenge to such a change in approach should not, of course, be understated. The 1997 crisis showed how resistance to change may be fed into
political processes at a range of levels through the medium of political mythologies. In the Palestinian refugee case, those mythologies provided a ready-made basis for efforts to defend the status quo against perceived threats.

Obtaining a different approach among refugees at some future time would be problematic unless the peace process appeared to be moving forward; unless refugees felt involved in the process of change and able to shape its direction through their own political inputs, and unless there were the prospect of something tangible flowing to the refugees from such changes. Careful timing and preparatory work would be essential.

Conclusion

The UNRWA crisis of 1997 mostly underlined the fact that perceptions rooted in Palestinian refugee mythologies, including about donor objectives, are difficult to change at the popular level. In 1997, even among well-educated and sophisticated interlocutors, let alone among the vast majority of refugees, tackling the imagery of conspiracy was not seen as necessary, or even appropriate, by the PA or by UNRWA. Where, in response to the crisis, there were calls for change on UNRWA’s part, these were almost entirely limited to the Western donor countries. Such calls did nothing to dispel refugee concerns and mythologies, and may have reinforced them.

As discussed in regard to the Zionist experience, however, there is evidence to support the view that the deliberate, conscious construction and reconstruction of mythologies is feasible under real-life circumstances. Zionist experience suggested, for example, that over time, leaderships seeking to mould political outcomes
could succeed in refurbishing historical narratives and building new political mythologies.¹ In contrast, the Palestinian experience reviewed in this study has suggested that refugee mythologies have continued to constrain political options, by providing a ready-made basis for conservatism and efforts to defend the political status quo against externally-inspired alternatives.

Far from being malleable, essentially rationalising mechanisms amenable to creative development, refugee mythologies were a factor in 1997 to which, in further contrast to the Zionist experience, the Palestinian political leadership felt it was obliged to respond. It chose to respond, moreover, not by challenging or altering that mythology - as the Zionist leadership did in relation to its view of Jordan, for example, and later Israeli leaders, including such Right wing figures as Benjamin Netanyahu did through their acceptance of territorial compromise and the prospect of some form of Palestinian sovereignty in the West Bank and Gaza - but rather by channelling the mobilising force of Palestinian mythologies into areas that posed the least political risk for the Palestinian Authority.

The notion that Israelis have used mythology effectively as an instrument of political liberation, while the Palestinians continue to be constrained politically by their mythologies suggests a paradox worth further and more detailed exploration. Some brief and necessarily speculative remarks on that issue may be in order before concluding this study.

Both Palestinians and Israelis are prisoners of history and memory.² In the Palestinian case, those factors have continued to shape a weary progress towards statehood. Collective memories among Israelis have an ongoing effect on their search for security, and for regional acceptance as a distinctive national presence. Palestinians and Israelis alike are entangled, in David Shipler’s eloquent words, in each other’s fears.³ But political, economic and social circumstances change and, if life is changing, those mythologies presumably may alter as well, over time, under credible leadership, and in a secure economic and political environment. Mythologies, it has been suggested here, are dynamic, albeit remarkably durable, responses to the realities of daily life.

Although this study has postulated certain social, political and experiental factors that appear to constrain the rate of change in Palestinian refugee mythologies, there is no obvious reason to argue that the nature of Palestinian mythologies necessarily renders them less capable of being reconstructed than those of Israelis. The resistance to change arises, rather, from deep-seated social factors, including notions of identity, dignity and feelings of historical grievance that underlie the political conflict.

It should not be assumed, of course, that changes in mythologies are invariably destined to enhance the collective good. For all its positive qualities from an Israeli nation-building perspective in the period before independence, the romantic, conquering vision of the early Zionists and of the nationalist movement in Israel eventually produced mythologies, particularly among the

religious Right, about the appropriate nature and destiny of the Zionist state which were ultimately at odds with other, arguably more realistic, and certainly more humane perceptions of Israel’s national interests.¹

Most notably in that regard, much of the political success of the settler movement, which began after the 1967 Six Day War, came from its exploitation, in the euphoria following Israel’s military victory, of the image of “reinhabiting” what one Israeli writer has described as a “mythic landscape, longed for in exile and won fairly in a war of survival”.⁵ Despite the fact that the use of such political and religious imagery for propaganda purposes could no longer be justified in terms of Israel’s security interests, and despite the dangers it still poses to Israel’s ability to develop in peace and security as a free and democratic society, it has proven impossible until now to reverse the settlement situation on the ground.

The point of the argument presented here is that the capacity of both Israeli and Palestinian leaders to introduce changes to mythologies, for good purposes or otherwise, has been shaped mainly by evolving political circumstances. For many Israelis during the 1990s there was confidence and optimism that security could be enhanced and made more sustainable through the modification, to a significant degree, of long-standing convictions. There was also a degree of soul-searching, especially among the Israeli Left, associated with the experience of the Lebanon war, and the search for a negotiated solution to the conflict with the Palestinians which opened the way to fresh perspectives.

The misgivings and opposition engendered from the religious nationalist Right and its secular supporters, including the assassination of Prime Minister Rabin, underlined the resistance of that part of Israeli society to perceived dangers to the Jewish character of Israel, and the undermining of what Sternhell refers to as its tribal values, arising from that process. And yet, in spite of those concerns, a paradigm shift became firmly established among most secular Israelis during the 1990s in support of sharing the Promised Land.

For the majority of Israelis, by the mid-1990s, there was a record of success in shaping the political environment, especially in the international context. Israel also enjoyed a situation of military superiority which, when taken together with its political and diplomatic record, provided a basis for a more self-confident society. Israelis grew gradually more receptive to the West and its values, rather than providing ongoing, uncritical support to Zionism as an enterprise for the rescue of the Jews and for their mass transfer to Israel. A settlement with the Palestinians through the launch of the Oslo process came to be seen as the most rational approach in terms of Israeli national interests. That shift continued, at least until the violence of the last few months of 2000 left many Israelis fearing there was neither a biblical past to escape to, nor perhaps a peaceful future to anticipate.

For the Palestinians, however, very different circumstances have applied. There was no record of comprehensive success in meeting popular aspirations at the government or popular levels during the 1990s. The discipline imposed by the emerging state apparatus under

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Arafat was perceived to be oriented towards maintaining the stability of leadership-level dealings with Israel, and towards the preservation of the privileges arising for a select few from that relationship. For the vast majority of Palestinians, the Oslo framework came to be seen, not in terms of the promises and assumptions of its architects, but rather as a process of political disillusionment, involving movement restrictions, collective punishments and the deliberate creation of an over-privileged leadership out of touch with its own people.\

A more credible Palestinian political leadership, that eschewed corruption and that built respect for its observance of democratic processes, even while maintaining a rigorous approach to security, might have had the capacity to reshape popular expectations through placing the limits to the politically possible on view. But that was not the approach taken under Arafat, who chose - no doubt for reasons he found compelling - to take a more expedient political approach. The indignities and stress suffered by ordinary Palestinians probably weighed heavily against the likelihood that they would have accepted such advice from their own leaders, even if it had been offered.

The unfolding of the 1997 crisis showed that the capacity for change in regard to refugee mythologies and UNRWA will be limited in scope by such political, social and economic factors. The complex interaction of those factors, in the Palestinian context at least, also suggests that the timing of the process of change cannot be externally or artificially controlled to any great extent, no matter how real the perceived need for such change may be. The conditions for reconstructing memories

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and reshaping mythologies in the Palestinian context are onerous, and may, under present political circumstances, be beyond reach.

For both Palestinian and Israeli leaderships, moreover, the extent to which political decisions that might reshape existing mythologies can be transformed into practical outcomes remains to be measured. There is a wealth of experience on the Israeli side with the political challenges of acting in the absence of domestic consensus, and, at the same time, some notable failures of political will in that regard.

The capacity of the Palestinian leadership to enter binding commitments under present circumstances, however, is highly uncertain. The forging of a consensus that might make concessions to Israel possible awaits an end to Israeli intrusions into everyday Palestinian life, most notably through the presence of its security forces, and the further development of Palestinian democratic institutions. If Palestinians are to be asked to give effect to decisions which impact on issues central to their sense of identity, they will need to be more directly involved in the making of those decisions.

No Palestinian leadership can afford to ignore the evidence of ambiguity, contradiction and lack of consensus within Palestinian society on issues of public policy. There is no reason either to assume that governments, political leaders and ordinary individuals confronting a range of existential pressures, organisational weaknesses and political instability will possess, or even always strive to achieve, policies which are sufficiently coherent and well-articulated to reshape popular thinking and views.

So far as the refugee issue itself is concerned, the determination of the Palestinian Authority to secure the
establishment of Palestinian sovereignty, over whatever territory Israel may agree to relinquish, carries with it security and political agendas that may, or may not, prove compatible in the longer term with popular Palestinian expectations and mythologies. It is also unclear what long-term effects upon Palestinian society, including refugees, will flow from Palestinian exposure to non-government organisations (NGOs), both Palestinian in origin and international institutions, pursuing agendas ranging from human rights to social and economic development. As in other parts of the Middle East, the cumulative impact on popular mythologies of government-controlled or influenced media, expressions of opposing viewpoints through alternative media outlets, including satellite television, videos, cassettes and the Internet are also still to be measured.

So far as UNRWA is concerned, the events of 1997 showed there was clearly some way to go before UNRWA and the international community would be able to deal constructively with the issues surrounding the future of the Agency. Looking to the future, changes in approach on UNRWA’s part now seem less likely to arise as a result of policy decisions by the Agency, donors or other parties, than as an outcome of an inevitable decline in the capacity of the Agency to service refugee demands.

The way ahead for UNRWA, in 1997 at least, probably demanded a series of half-measures, based on an accurate understanding of the social and political dynamics of Palestinian society, and directed towards building a new sense of certainty and empowerment alongside existing refugee mythologies. Though unlikely to be abandoned, those mythologies might gradually have become less dominant when confronted by new experiences of constructive dealing with Israel, and with the Palestinian Authority, at individual and governmental
levels. It was also clear, however, that the political challenges associated with such processes would remain formidable, even under the relatively benign conditions that applied between Israelis and Palestinians before the virtual collapse of the Oslo-based peace process in late 2000.

While it is important to recognise the strength of the political forces favouring the status quo, it is also necessary to realise that defending the status quo will not secure the Agency’s future under changing regional circumstances. UNRWA therefore needs to demonstrate willingness to adapt its methods of delivering humanitarian support, while fulfilling intangible but real and important refugee needs that go beyond material assistance.

UNRWA needs to convince the donors – the ultimate issue as far as the viability of the Agency is concerned – that the Agency is prepared to initiate creative and positive approaches, that do not lose contact with the needs and demands of Palestinian refugees, but that overall serve the interests of donors sufficiently to warrant their ongoing support. Ultimately, building an Agency characterized by responsiveness to change, but with predictability and the capacity to preserve core functions, would be likely to serve the interests of refugees and host governments, as well as the donor countries.

Whether change in respect of UNRWA comes about through developments in the peace process, or demographic pressures, or the emergence of higher priorities elsewhere for the international community, the political and humanitarian outlook for the Palestinian refugees is increasingly problematic. Determined efforts to refocus the Agency in sustainable directions would be preferable to approaches which, through failure to address the
political mythologies surrounding UNRWA in a coherent way, inevitably come to see the preservation of the status quo for UNRWA as an end in itself.
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Al-Resalah

Al-Arab Al-Youm
al-Hayat al-Jadida
Al-Rai
Tishreen
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