

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Nebraska Anthropologist

Anthropology, Department of

2007

The Influence of Refugee Status on Palestinian Identity and the Impact of Identity on Durable Solutions to the Refugee Problem

Michaela S. Clemens

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/nebanthro>



Part of the [Anthropology Commons](#)

Clemens, Michaela S., "The Influence of Refugee Status on Palestinian Identity and the Impact of Identity on Durable Solutions to the Refugee Problem" (2007). *Nebraska Anthropologist*. 28.

<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/nebanthro/28>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Anthropology, Department of at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Nebraska Anthropologist by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

The Influence of Refugee Status on Palestinian Identity and the Impact of Identity on Durable Solutions to the Refugee Problem

Michaela S. Clemens

Abstract: Over the last fifty years the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has generated massive numbers of refugees. The scale and longevity of the conflict has made the Palestinian refugee problem the most protracted and largest refugee situation in the world today (Merhab et al. 2006). The processes of becoming a refugee and living as a refugee have had direct impacts on the formation of Palestinian identity. In this paper, I examine the influence of refugee status on identity and discuss how this identity affects potential solutions to the protracted refugee situation. I offer a brief historical background to the creation of Palestinian refugees. And, I outline what defines a refugee and, more specifically, a Palestinian refugee. The results of this review indicate that Palestinian refugee identity is strongly influenced by a collective sense of victimization and nationalism. This collective identity is passed on to subsequent generations living in exile. However, refugee status is but one factor in the formation of identity – with other factors being gender, religion, place of exile, and place of origin. The final discussion also indicates that no easy solution to the refugee problem is imminent, but that the many components that make up Palestinian identity should be addressed when seeking solutions to both the refugee situation and the conflict that generated the refugees.

Introduction

The ongoing conflict between Israel and Palestine has garnered much attention worldwide, resulting in numerous media and scholarly reports. This conflict is often presented as two parties with false symmetry, as if Israel and Palestine are simply two nations in opposition (Sharoni & Abu-Nimer 2004). The real asymmetry can only be understood by examining each population, Palestinians and Israeli-

Jews, not simply as opposing political entities, but as distinct national and cultural identities. This paper focuses specifically on one side of this asymmetry – Palestinian identity. Palestinian identity, in particular, is influenced by the designation of many of its people as *refugees*. A large number of these individuals are residing in other countries in the Middle East, and many others are in refugee settlements in the highly contested areas of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. The protracted nature of this refugee problem, half a century in the making, is contributing to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and impeding efforts for peace.

In this paper, I examine the influence of refugee status on the formation of Palestinian identity. The results of my research indicate that Palestinian identity is strongly influenced by a sense of victimization, which is evident by displacement and manifested as a collective nationalistic identity. It is not my intent, however, to suggest that there is one identity that comprises the diversity of individuals that call themselves Palestinian. Therefore, while my focus is on refugee status, I briefly address other factors that influence Palestinian identity and contribute to diversity within this group.

In an effort to convey how being designated a *refugee* would impact identity, it is important to establish a context; therefore, I present a brief history, an explanation of terms, and the implications of individual and collective identity in the larger scale of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. The first section of this paper is not a detailed history of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, but a historical background to the creation of Palestinian refugees for the discussion that follows. In addition, I outline what defines a *refugee* and more specifically what defines a *Palestinian refugee*. Moreover, I discuss how problems associated with a prolonged refugee identity contribute to an asymmetrical power balance between Palestine and Israel and how the refugee problem is impeding efforts for durable solutions.

The Palestinian Diaspora and the Creation of Palestinian Refugees

Zionism, the political movement to establish a Jewish homeland in the Middle East, can be traced as far back as the late 1800s. As Khalidi (1991) notes, the problem with creating a Jewish homeland in Palestine was that this land was already inhabited. Palestine, under Ottoman rule until the end of the First World War, was populated by people that identified themselves as primarily Arabs, Muslims, and Ottomans (Mi'ari 1998). Zionist colonization persisted, however, and can be defined in two major stages.

The first stage of colonization began in 1918 and culminated with a civil war in 1948 between the newly founded state of Israel and Arab armies. With Israel's victory, the Palestinian Diaspora began. By 1950, the total number of refugees registered with the United Nations had reached more than 900,000 (UNRWA website 2006). These displaced persons were scattered throughout the Arab controlled territories of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip and into the neighboring countries of Jordan, Lebanon, and the Syrian Arab Republic. Additionally, there were 45,800 Palestinians receiving UN relief aid still living in Israel – people who today we would call internally displaced persons, or IDPs (UNRWA website 2006). While crossing an international border is a key distinction between a refugee and an IDP, Palestinians were caught in unusual circumstances in that, with the legal formation of the state of Israel, many Palestinians moved, but then so did the borders.

The second stage of Zionist colonization began with the June 1967 war and continues into 21st century. Israel's victory in 1967 gained the state control over East Jerusalem, the West Bank, and the Gaza Strip, “thus taking over 100 percent of historical Palestine” (Khalidi 1991:9). By 2006, more than fifty years and several generations later, the Palestinian Diaspora can claim almost 4.3 million refugees in countries outside of Israel and in the territories of Gaza and the West Bank (UNRWA website 2006).

In her examination of this situation, Sayigh asserts that many Palestinian refugees have been displaced over and over again – even though the big picture is of “two big bangs” of dispersion, scattering Palestinian peoples across the Middle East (1998:20). She cites numerous cases of repeated relocations, leading to constant insecurity and human rights violations. One such example was the nearly 350,000 Palestinians expelled from Kuwait during the Gulf War of 1991-1992, including 12 families forced to live in the Cairo Airport for over five months after they were denied entry into Egypt (Sayigh 1998). Violations of individuals' basic human rights (e.g. forced evictions, restricted movement, degrading and inhuman treatment, etc.) are at the core of the refugee problem. However, to understand the rights of refugees, we must first understand what constitutes a *refugee*.

The Status and Rights of Palestinian Refugees

Article 1A of the 1951 Refugee Convention defines a *refugee* as a person who has fled his or her country of nationality for fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion and is unable or unwilling

to return (Akram 2002). The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the international agency charged with protecting refugees and resolving refugee situations, calls the Palestinian refugee situation “by far the most protracted and largest of all refugee problems in the world today” (Merhab et al. 2006:112). The UNHCR Department of International Protection has noted that a protracted refugee situation is “not a case of length of time but rather an inability to exercise basic rights and meet essential economic, social and psychological needs during years in exile. This leads to deprivation, physical insecurity and exploitation” (UNHCR 2004b:21).

The scale of the Middle East refugee situation is so large that a separate UN organization was formed in 1949 to deal specifically with Palestine: the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East, or UNRWA. This agency defines Palestinian refugees as those “persons whose normal place of residence was Palestine between June 1946 and May 1948, who lost both their homes and means of livelihood as a result of the 1948 Arab-Israeli conflict...UNRWA’s definition of a refugee also covers the descendents of persons who became refugees in 1948” (UNRWA website 2006).

While the situation of Palestine was in the forefront during the establishment of the 1951 Refugee Convention, Palestinian refugees were categorically excluded. Article 1D of the Convention states “This Convention shall not apply to persons who are at present receiving from organs or agencies of the United Nations other than the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees protection or assistance” (Akram 2002:39). Since Palestinian refugees were under the supervision of the newly formed UNRWA, they were and are not guaranteed any of the rights and freedoms afforded by the 1951 Refugee Convention or later refugee protocols, nor are they given any protection or assistance from the UNHCR. In contrast, the UNRWA’s mandate offers basic subsistence (food, clothing, shelter) to registered refugees, but has no obligation to protect Palestinian refugees from human rights violations (including the denial of education or employment, forced eviction, restrictions on movement within a host state, exploitation, arbitrary arrest, etc.).

Limitations on basic human rights accompany the designation of an individual as a *refugee*. In host countries that are often economically and socially strained, the treatment of refugees may be far below international expectations (Steiner et al. 2003). Palestinians refugees found many of their rights constrained by host governments. In Lebanon in 1982, the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs issued a list of jobs, ranging from banking to barbering, that were henceforth

closed to foreigners (Peteet 1996). The areas of employment left open to refugees were in the lowest echelon of income potential (domestic labor, construction, sanitation, etc.). Likewise in Jordan, the majority of refugees living inside and out of camps subsist at the lowest economic level (Sayigh 1998). This economic marginalization extends even to those Palestinians in the contested territories – where roughly 70 percent of camp refugees and 50 percent of refugees outside of camps in Gaza are in the lowest economic bracket, and 40 percent in camps and 20 percent out of camps make up comparable figures in the West Bank (Sayigh 1998).

Palestinian refugees in Arab countries and in the West Bank and Gaza are frequently denied access to employment, rights to property, freedom of religion, primary education, and identity papers (see Peteet 1996; Shibliak 1996; Sayigh 1998). These are all rights specifically outlined in the international law from which Palestinians are excluded. In most refugee situations the principle of *non-refoulement* (non-return) seems sacrosanct – as refugees are spared forced return to their country of origin while their safety is at risk. Palestinians are the marked exception in that they do not qualify for any such rights under the 1951 Refugee Convention and return to their country of origin is their primary goal.

In protracted refugee situations, human rights violations escalate with time, and refugee settlements, like those in the occupied territories, can become “incubators for future problems” (UNHCR 2004a:3). As insecurity and instability progress, long-term refugee situations are particularly vulnerable to militarization. The UNHCR (1997) asserts that violence is inevitable in refugee settlements where young males, in particular, are deprived of education, recreation, and the opportunity to engage in productive activities and are powerless to plan for the future. These refugees are susceptible to recruitment into military groups from their country of origin or within the host country. In the case of Palestinian refugees, the development of organized militias is a factor in the ongoing conflict and violence between these groups and the Israeli army.

Following the withdrawal of Egypt from the Gaza Strip in 1956, Palestinian refugees in the territory found themselves under strict Israeli occupation. Confrontation and resistance to this occupation created a strong sense of unity among displaced Palestinians and was the catalyst for the development of the Palestinian Liberation Movement (Al-Shuaibi 1979). One publication of this movement called for militarization, “Our entity has been wrested from us. To arms, to arms, sons of Palestine...Into battle for the revival of your dignity and your obliterated entity.” (Al-Shuaibi 1979:8, quoting the magazine

Filastinuna). This guerilla movement and the later formed Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) initially had little military impact on Israel, but the mobilization and intensification of armed Palestinians lead directly into the June 1967 war (Al-Shuaibi 1979, Khalidi 1991).

Finally, with a refugee status that affords them no rights under international law or protections from increasing human rights violations and with the growing radicalization and militarization of settlements, displaced Palestinians are seeking solutions to their protracted plight. Three 'durable solutions' to long-term refugee conditions are recognized by international organizations, NGOs, and states alike. In their 2005 Human Rights Resolution, the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) "calls upon States to promote conditions conducive to the voluntary return of refugees in safety and with dignity and to support the other two durable solutions of local integration, or resettlement where appropriate" (OHCHR 2005: 4). The Department of International Protections *Resettlement Handbook* (2004) asserts that the three solutions are complimentary and can function simultaneously as they did in situations for Bosnian refugees in the mid-1990s and for Afghan refugees in the early 2000s. These solutions – voluntary repatriation, resettlement, and local integration – all have distinct advantages and disadvantages. Each solution is an attempt to restore basic human rights to refugees and provide a permanent and successful resolution to the refugee condition. In fifty years of exile, Palestinian refugees have, thus far, been unable to achieve any of these durable solutions.

Local integration has been a strong focus of the international community since the beginning of the diaspora. Palestinian refugees were expected to readily be absorbed into the surrounding Arab countries based on shared language, history, culture, and religion and the UNRWA was expected to assist in this transition (Shiblak 1996). Rather than easy integration, however, Shiblak (1996) notes that the UNRWA has been ineffectual in this task and Palestinian refugees have become more alienated and marginalized with time. This seems to be attributed to both external and internal forces, as Palestinians are resisting integration and host states are discouraging naturalization efforts, following a strategy to keep pressure on the return to Palestine.

Successful local integration implies some measure of naturalization, typically the acquisition of citizenship. The original offer of refuge made by many of the Arab states was with the belief that a solution would be found and that the refugees' stay was temporary. With the passage of time, the growing number of refugees, and no solution in sight, many of the host states expressed sympathy for displaced Palestinians, but did not offer any avenues toward real

integration. At the beginning of the diaspora, most Arab states issued special refugee documents to Palestinians, with the exception of Jordan which granted refugees Jordanian nationality (Shiblak 1996). Residency in all host states is tenuous, however, as Palestinians are not guaranteed rights comparable to citizens and are subject to deportation. Shiblak suggests that the Arab states had a vested interest in maintaining the refugee status of Palestinians, as it prevented "Israel from evading responsibility for their plight" (1996:39). This formal resistance to local integration was evident in policies that reinforced refugee status. Following Arab League resolutions, specific policies were put in place to prevent the naturalization of Palestinian refugees. For example, marrying a female citizen of a host country would not bestow residency rights to either the husband or their children. And, children born in host states could not claim host nationality, although they are afforded refugee status under UNRWA mandate (Shiblak 1996, UNRWA website 2006). Local integration thus thwarted, the refugee identity is passed on from generation to generation in host countries.

Third-party resettlement, likewise, has been an unsuccessful solution to the protracted Palestinian refugee situation. With exclusion from the 1951 Refugee Convention, few Palestinians have been able to obtain full refugee status in North America or in Europe (Shiblak 1996). Again, the Arab states have drafted provisions to prevent third-country resettlement just as they have blocked efforts at local integration. By keeping Palestinians not just as refugees, but as an exceptional, collective case of refugees, the Arab states can keep international attention on their primary goals of repatriation to Palestine and compensation to Palestinians by Israel (Akram 2002). As a representative agency of Palestinians, the PLO has actively argued against treating Palestinian refugees as individual cases who could qualify for resettlement and has made "explicit requests that Palestinians not apply for refugee status in the West" (Akram 2002:43). This Palestinian and Arab strategy for repatriation hinges largely on the belief that the international community in general, and the UN in particular, bears responsibility for the refugee problem by enacting the Palestinian partition plan in 1947 and legitimizing Zionist claims to the land (Akram 2002).

The final durable solution in protracted refugee situations – repatriation – has been the central goal for Palestinians and the most difficult to achieve. Palestine, as the political entity many refugees left in 1948, no longer exists. Palestinians remaining in the occupied territories after 1967 are registered with the Israeli census as foreign residents – regardless of whether they are living in their ancestral

homeland or as refugees in settlements (Shiblak 1996). Despite recent moves toward autonomy including more formalized political organization and the withdrawal of Israeli settlers from Gaza and the West Bank, Palestine remains fragmented and the on-going conflict between Israelis and Palestinians is blocking refugee efforts to return.

Refugee Status and Palestinian Identity

Refugee status, with its entitlements and limitations, is a designation that Palestinians both embrace and deny. It is apparent that the process of becoming a refugee and the reality of remaining in exile for decades has a strong influence on how Palestinians are viewed by outsiders and how Palestinians view themselves. This notion of identity is complex. An understanding of Palestinian identity, therefore, requires a wide lens. We must examine identity both across the Palestinian population and how it has changed through time.

Based on Identity Theory, Elbedour, Bastien, and Center assert that “identity is a cognitive scheme closely related to specific definitions in which we find ourselves” (1997:219). They also acknowledge the importance of human agency in the development of identity – where “people recognize that their power to influence their material and social environments is critical to their ideas of who they are” (Elbedour et al. 1997:219). While complex variables in our past and present circumstances help us define our own identity, the process of forming this identity is constantly in flux and is influenced and reinforced not only by how we view ourselves, but how others view us. In the case of Palestinian refugees, identity is not only influenced by displacement, it is reinforced by how Palestinians view themselves and how the outside world views Palestinians.

In his study of identity among young Palestinians in the West Bank, Mi'ari cites concepts of identity outlined by Daniel Miller several decades earlier:

Viewing identity as a social object frequently reevaluated by the person and others, Miller distinguished between objective public identity (the person as viewed by others), subjective public identity (the person's perception how others view him) and self-identity (the person as viewed by the self) [1998:48].

Public identity, both subjective and objective, is a concept that is more readily open for investigation. A quick glance at popular media sources can demonstrate how particular groups of people are identified and,

more often, stereotyped by others. But self-identity is “ultimately an internal construct” and the problem with trying to understand the self-identity of others is that we are always on the outside looking in (Elbedour et al. 1997:221).

Even the attempt at understanding how individuals and groups view themselves, however, can begin to narrow the divide between ‘us’ and ‘them’ – whether that is Israelis and Palestinians, Westerners and people of the Middle East, or any such populations of people. A number of researchers have begun to examine Palestinian identity after the diaspora. Mi’ari’s (1998) look at Palestinian youth in the West Bank yielded several key components of self-identity and placed these sub-identities in a hierarchical order. He found that this group of people identified themselves first and foremost as Palestinian (national identity), followed by local identity (place of residence), Arab identity, religious identity, and lastly clan identity (Mi’ari 1998). While this study looked at a particular group within the Palestinian population, the results are concordant with other studies and can be used as a basis for discussion of Palestinian identity in general and the influence of refugee status on this identity.

That national identity is the primary component of self-identity for stateless persons should not be a surprising find. As discussed earlier in this paper, refugees are stripped of many of the markers of identity as a result of displacement and dispossession. Education and employment credentials are often unacknowledged in host states, rights to property are violated, and integration into new communities is blocked. Therefore, titles like *farmer*, *teacher*, and *homeowner* all become void in the refugee circumstance. As Palestinians are denied citizenship in Lebanon, Syria, and other Arab states, they cling to a national identity that now lacks a material basis (Al-Shuaibi 1979). In spite of commonalities in language, history, culture, and religion, Palestinians felt betrayed by other Arab governments and turned their focus toward national solidarity rather than pan-Arab unity (Peteet 1995). Before the Palestinian National Movement and the 1967 war, Palestinians were seen as a dispersed group of refugees, not a unified society. It was not until the mid-1970s that the term *Palestinians* became widely used and more recently the term *Palestine* has come to represent the once occupied territories of the West Bank and Gaza (Sharoni & Abu-Nimer 2004).

This resistance to exile and resistance to the legal designation of *refugees* are strong motivators for nationalism in displaced groups. In an examination of other long-term refugees in Africa, Nordstrom notes that people resist in “complex and creative ways” and crafting concepts of self-identity based on resistance to aggression can be a

powerful conflict-resolution strategy (1998:103). At the same time, embracing refugee status gives many Palestinians access to UNRWA resources, however minimal, and legitimizes their right to return to Palestine.

Within refugee groups, solidarity in national identity strengthens in response to a real or imagined threat from an enemy group. While Palestinian identity is fragmented along lines of geography, experience, and legal status (Peteet 1996), a collective identity and a sense of unity is formed in response to a common enemy – Israel. In their research on identity formation as studied through Palestinian and Israeli children’s drawings, Elbedour, Bastien, and Center (1997) found that in conflict situations self-identity is influenced not only by membership within a particular group (in this case Palestinians), but also with reference to the ‘other’ group (Israelis). And the inter-group identity (manifested through nationalism) increases with the level of conflict: “the greater the external (social) conflict the greater the tendency to align one’s identity with the group, and the greater the external placidity the greater the tendency toward concern with individual identity” (Elbedour et al. 1997:226). In other words, those of us who live in relative peace have the luxury of forming an identity around individualistic aspects of our lives (e.g. *farmer, teacher, and homeowner*). Where conflict occurs to the level that it has in the Middle East, identity is overwhelmed by notions of ‘us’ and ‘them.’

This nationalistic collective and individual identity of Palestinians may prove to be the strongest barrier to peace. The conflict is viewed in zero-sum terms, where each side “...holds the view that only one can be a nation: Either we are a nation or they are. They can acquire national identity and rights only at the expense of our identity and rights” (Elbedour et al. 1997:218, quoting Herbert Kelman). This either/or national identity is reinforced internally in many ways. A group identity has been passed from generation to generation. Palestinians see themselves as victims of aggression and pass this identity on to their children through stories of past horrors and abuse (Elbedour et al. 1997). The past and present circumstances of refugees (poverty, disaster, etc.) are explained to their children as a consequence of the loss of their homes and land to Israeli-Jews (Peteet 1995).

An ‘us’ and ‘them’ mentality is coupled with a strong sense of nostalgia for a Palestine that never was. Peteet (1995) proposes that “refugeeness” is a process of becoming rather than a one time event, and exile imbues refugees with nostalgia as a coping mechanism to deal with unstable and uncertain circumstances. This was evident in my

own experience working with Liberian refugees in Ghana. When talking about Liberia, refugees who had been living in the camp for almost 16 years described their homeland in terms that almost completely negated the bloody civil wars that wracked the country for decades.

In Palestinian settlements, national identity is reinforced by recognizing the efforts of those individuals who resist the enemy. Where education and opportunities are limited among displaced groups, status is achieved by contributing to the struggle against Israel. Status in the West Bank and Gaza is attained by participating in demonstrations, throwing stones, and facing arrest, deportation, and death (Elbedour et al. 1997). This status is even conferred to families of those involved in the struggle. The Palestinian national movement endows the mothers of martyrs with national icon status and maternal sacrifice has become normalized in Palestinian society (Peteet 1997). That Palestine itself is often referred to as a “mother” or the “motherland” in poetry, prose, and song creates an interesting parallel when considering notions of sacrifice.

The sense of place is also an important factor in creating the Palestinian identity and is directly tied to the refugee experience. In the West Bank, the hand-painted street signs displaying names of martyrs of the *intifada* (Arabic for *uprising*) can be viewed as an attempt of refugees to claim space with symbols of resistance (Peteet 1995). A common feature on the walls of Palestinian homes in the West Bank, Gaza, or surrounding Arab states is a bronze map of Palestine – a region that includes the contested territories as well as pre-partition Palestine. Produced in PLO-financed workshops, these maps strengthen ideas of nationalism and belonging to people scattered from their ancestral homelands. Similarly, young Palestinians all over the Middle East wear small gold maps of Palestine on chains around their necks (Peteet 1995). Mi’ari (1998) found that many refugees who left their villages or towns in the original diaspora still identify themselves with those places that they left fifty years earlier.

Ideas about family and familial identity are affected by the refugee experience. That clan identity ranks last on Mi’ari’s list for Palestinian youth in the West Bank is also not surprising. In leaving villages and towns, refugees fractured the kinship and lineage systems that had tied groups of people together for generations. In a rare examination of Palestinians prior to the diaspora, Peretz (1977) writes that many of the earliest refugees were Palestinian-Arabs from the upper and middle classes. These families sought refuge with family or friends in neighboring areas, until conflict pushed people further and further away from their kin groups. Palestinian refugees now found

themselves united more by the common experience of exile, rather than a reliance on family bonds. In refugee camps in Lebanon, it was "not uncommon for widows to prefer to live in proximity to others from [the camp] rather than their own kin because of their common experience and their awareness that in a situation of prolonged civil war their presence was burdensome to family members" (Petee 1995:183).

This disruption of kinship groups is evident by a clear distinction between Palestinian refugees and non-refugees. A 1992 survey examining refugee and non-refugee conditions (housing, amenities, occupation, home ownership, and wealth) found an important difference. UNRWA registered refugees have a significantly higher educational level than non-refugees, but are generally less well-off (Sayigh 1998). The study suggested that intact kinship groups among non-refugees afforded these Palestinians more links between groups and property, and this factor was more critical to household income and status than educational background (Sayigh 1998). Clearly, the refugee experience would influence concepts of identity, shifting from a common family group to a common displaced group. And, in the case of Palestinian refugees, not identifying with kin groups has serious economic impacts.

This brings me to my last point on Palestinian identity and refugee status. As demonstrated by the distinction between refugee and non-refugee Palestinians, any discussion of Palestinian identity (and refugee status, for that matter) should not generalize too much. Palestinians are not one homogenous group of people with a single identity. Self-identity by its very nature is individualistic and, while there are commonalities like a strong sense of nationalism, we should not assume that there is one typical Palestinian identity that represents the group as a whole. Likewise, the experience of each refugee is unique and has different effects on how each individual formulates their own identity.

Palestinians of different genders, with different religious beliefs, socio-economic backgrounds, and from markedly different areas of traditional Palestine became refugees and have remained in exile for decades. This common experience serves to unite them under a national identity, but should not negate the diversity within the refugee populations. In terms of gender, the refugee experience can differ significantly for men and women. In her examination of gender-based discrimination of UNRWA policies, Cervenak (1994) found that the UNRWA has adopted a patrilineal system of conferring refugee status from generation to generation through the father. Palestinian refugee women who marry non-refugees maintain their status and access to UNRWA resources, but their children are ineligible for

assistance. In contrast, the children of refugee men who marry non-refugee women can register with UNRWA and receive assistance (Cervenak 1994). While the UNRWA benefits have been called minimal by many, access to food and health services can literally mean the difference between life and death for impoverished children.

Peteet also makes a distinction between refugee men and women in terms of mobility and how that has changed with time:

Because cultural constraints circumscribe female mobility, women in refugee camps moved in more spatially bounded areas. For women, the world exterior to the camps was an alien and dangerous one...During the era of Palestinian military power in Lebanon, however, women moved with safety in Lebanese areas but usually with less frequency than men. Paradoxically, as danger approached and Palestinians as a community were endangered, women's mobility was enhanced. While trust in the world exterior to the camps was completely suspended, Palestinians placed some trust in Arab cultural practices that ensured the safety of women during times of conflict [1995:176].

Thus the process of becoming a refugee and living in exile is experienced differently by men and women, and would impact identity accordingly.

Religion also played a role in a differential experience between many Palestinian refugees. Before dispersion, roughly 88 percent of Palestinian peoples were Muslim and the remaining were Christian (Khalidi 1991). In some host states, refugees were treated differently based on religion. In states that enforced clear policies for Palestinian refugees, like Lebanon, some exceptions were made. During the 1950s and 1960s, nearly fifty thousand refugees were granted Lebanese nationality. These refugees were overwhelmingly Christians or those that had family connections (Shiblak 1996). Knudsen (2005) suggests that the Lebanese government was particularly sensitive to the numerical balance between Christians and Muslims within their state. Naturalizing all Palestinian refugees (the majority of them Sunni Muslims) would upset this "precarious demographic balance" (Knudsen 2005:222). Instead, this decision created a further division between Christian and Muslim refugees.

Gender and religion are just two examples of the many factors that influence identity. And, like the many other components of identity, these factors should be explored further in order to more fully understand the diversity of identities within the Palestinian population.

However, for this discussion, it is more important to recognize that identity is created and influenced by a number of factors within and between populations and the influence of various factors is differential depending upon time and circumstance. While components like gender and religion provide variation in Palestinian identity, it is my assertion that refugee status is a powerful influence on Palestinian identity, in general, and contributes to a collective sense of victimization and nationalism among Palestinian people.

Conclusions

It is remarkable that Palestinians, Middle East states, and the international community are still looking for solutions to a refugee situation that was created more than fifty years ago. It is also evident that, with time, problems associated with this situation and with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict overall are becoming firmly entrenched in the Middle East and increasingly resistant to change. Many refugees are actively resisting assimilation in host countries and holding out for repatriation. Other refugees and non-refugees within the contested territories are using political and military power to challenge Israel's actions in the West Bank and Gaza. While a number of international and regional proclamations have affirmed the right of Palestinian refugees to return, an apt question at this point is "a return to what?"

Peteet acknowledges that while a state is conceivable in the West Bank and Gaza, "it cannot accommodate all diaspora Palestinians" (1995:171). The magnitude and diversity of Palestinian refugees mean that any durable solution to their plight must make allowances for the complexity of the situation. The experiences of Palestinians and the formation of self-identities are influenced by a multitude of factors: refugee and non-refugee status, men and women, place of origin, place of exile, religious beliefs, etc. The internationally-recognized political organizations of Palestine cannot encompass all Palestinians, as "dispersion deprives them of a single voice" (Sayigh 1998:22). Even the notion of a collective Palestinian identity steeped in nationalism and resistant to change creates an internal and external barrier to solving the refugee problem.

While the focus of this paper has been on refugee status and Palestinian identity, any proposed resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict must also acknowledge the existence of an Israeli identity and how both identities can influence the peace process. Just as Palestinian identity is formed around two reference groups – their own and the perceived enemy group, Israeli identity would be equally influenced. Elbedour, Bastien, and Center argue that "it is a very safe assumption

that children in Israel are undergoing the same identity problems as are the children of the West Bank and Gaza” (1997:228).

While protracted refugee situations are found around the world and encompass millions of displaced people, the scale and longevity of the Palestinian refugee situation is unparalleled. There are significant difficulties in resolving any protracted situation and in shielding refugees from human rights abuses – even with the intervention of the UNHCR and the rights and protections granted these refugees under the 1951 Refugee Convention. Palestinians are categorically excluded from these rights and protections and the UNRWA services provided to refugees have not moved them closer to resettlement, local integration, or repatriation. The fact that refugees have languished in exile for more than fifty years suggests that local, regional, and international bodies all have a moral responsibility to re-examine the situation and provide new avenues for change.

Finally, in researching refugee status and its relationship to Palestinian identity, it was not my intent to perpetuate ideas of a single, homogenous group – rather, to identify commonalities and significant factors that would contribute to the formation of identity (or more appropriately multiple identities) within this population. The images that are portrayed in Western media tend to depict the typified Palestinian – nationalistic, radical, and militant – without understanding the basis for this collective identity or acknowledging the diversity of peoples that call themselves Palestinian. Only by understanding the conditions that create stateless persons and the incredible circumstances in which they live can we move one step closer to resolving the problem for all refugees in the Middle East and around the world.

References Cited

Akram, Susan M.

2002 Palestinian Refugees and Their Legal Status: Rights, Politics, and Implications for a Just Solution. *Journal of Palestine Studies* 31(3):36-51.

Al-Shuaibi, Issa

1979 The Development of Palestinian Entity-Consciousness: Part 1. *Journal of Palestine Studies* 9(1):67-84.

Cervenak, Christine M.

1994 Promoting Inequality: Gender-Based Discrimination in UNRWA’s Approach to Palestine Refugee Status. *Human Rights Quarterly* 16(2):300-374.

- Department of International Protection (DIP), UNHCR
- 2004 Resettlement Handbook. Geneva: UNHCR. Electronic document, <http://www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/home/opendoc.pdf?tbl=RSDLEGAL&id=3ae6b35e0>, accessed March 16, 2006.
- Elbedour, Salman, David T. Bastien and Bruce A. Center
- 1997 Identity Formation in the Shadow of Conflict: Projective Drawings by Palestinian and Israeli Arab Children from the West Bank and Gaza. *Journal of Peace Research* 34(2):217-231.
- Khalidi, Walid
- 1991 The Palestine Problem: An Overview. *Journal of Palestine Studies* 21(1):5-16.
- Knudsen, Are
- 2005 Islamism in the Diaspora: Palestinian Refugees in Lebanon. *Journal of Refugee Studies* 18(2):216-234.
- Merhab, Nada, Sean Loughna, and Suresh Unny (UNHCR editorial team)
- 2006 *The State of the World's Refugees: Human Displacement in the New Millennium*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. Available online at <http://www.unhcr.org>
- Mi'ari, Mahmoud
- 1998 Self-Identity and Readiness for Interethnic Contact among Young Palestinians in the West Bank. *Canadian Journal of Sociology* 23(1):47-70.
- Nordstrom, Carolyn
- 1998 Terror Warfare and the Medicine of Peace. *Medical Anthropology Quarterly*, New Series 12(1) The Embodiment of Violence:103-121.
- Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR)
- 2005 Human Rights and Mass Exodus. Human Rights Resolution 2005/48. Electronic document, <http://www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/home/opendoc.pdf?tbl=RSDLEGAL&id=29c54414>, accessed March 10, 2006.
- Peretz, Don
- 1977 Palestinian Social Stratification: The Political Implications. *Journal of Palestinian Studies* 7(1):48-74.
- Peteet, Julie
- 1997 Icons and Militants: Mothering in the Danger Zone. *Signs* 23(1):103-129.
- 1996 From Refugees to Minority: Palestinians in Post-War Lebanon. *Middle East Report* 200(Minorities in the Middle East: Power and the Politics of Difference):27-30.

- 1995 Transforming Trust: Dispossession and Empowerment among Palestinian Refugees. In *Mistrusting Refugees*, E. Valentine Daniel and John Chr. Knudsen, eds. pp. 168-186. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Sayigh, Rosemary
 1998 Dis/Solving the "Refugee Problem." *Middle East Report* 207 (Who Paid the Price? 50 Years of Israel):19-23.
- Sharoni, Simona and Mohammed Abu-Nimer
 2004 The Israeli-Palestinian Conflict. In *Understanding the Contemporary Middle East*, Second Edition, Deborah J. Gerner and Jillian Schwedler, eds. Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers.
- Shiblak, Abbas
 1996 Residency Status and Civil Rights of Palestinians in Arab Countries. *Journal of Palestine Studies* 25(3):36-45.
- Steiner, N., M. Gibney, and Loescher, G.
 2003 *Problems of Protection: The UNHCR, Refugees, and Human Rights*. New York: Routledge.
- United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)
 2004a Protracted Refugee Situations. Executive Committee of the High Commissioner's Programme, Standing Committee, 30th mtg. U.N. Doc EC/54/SC/CRP.14, 10 June 2004.
 2004b Protracted Refugee Situations: Solutions in Light of Refugee and Human Rights Norms. 55th Session of the Executive Committee Report on Consultations with NGOs. Electronic document, <http://www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/partners?id=40fbc0104>, accessed March 16, 2006.
- 1997 *The State of the World's Refugees: A Humanitarian Agenda*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA)
 2006 Who is a Palestine Refugee? and Number of Registered Refugees. UNRWA Website. Electronic document, <http://www.un.org/unrwa/refugees/whois.html>, accessed November 8, 2006.