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# Coming Home: Considering Sustainable Human Development in Jordan's Palestinian Refugee Camps After the Conflict

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# COMING HOME

CONSIDERING SUSTAINABLE HUMAN  
DEVELOPMENT IN JORDAN'S  
PALESTINIAN REFUGEE CAMPS  
AFTER THE CONFLICT

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SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS  
FOR *JORDAN: MODERNIZATION AND SOCIAL CHANGE*  
SIT STUDY ABROAD, FALL 2011



# ABSTRACT

The study explores the views of Palestinian refugee camp residents in Jordan on the long-term provision of health and education services in the camps and their status as residents of the Hashemite Kingdom, contrasting these views with the policies and future plans of the Jordanian government. Special attention is given to the Right of Return discussed in UNGA Resolution 194 and the possibility that many refugees would willingly choose to remain in Jordan if given the option of returning. The study asks how Jordan and the refugees it hosts would be affected by a possible solution to the broader Israeli-Palestinian conflict that offered a much limited Right of Return, adding to the number of Palestinians who would remain in Jordan. Through a series of interviews conducted in the *al-Wahdat* and *Jabal al-Husseini* refugee camps and in a variety of government offices, the study investigates the implications of such an agreement on what were found to be the main issues facing the camp residents and government: basic services, integration, identity, inequality, and citizenship rights. The study found that the Right of Return would indeed be limited in all likelihood, with 60 percent of interviewed participants believing most of their neighbors would stay in Jordan regardless of a Right of Return and government representatives citing political and economic limitations that would further limit the prospects for return. The study also explores the concepts of home and legitimacy for the refugees in a qualitative style designed to encourage the opening of a dialogue on the issues Jordan and its camp residents are likely to face when a resolution is achieved. The study aims to begin an honest and pragmatic discussion of these issues since one has not developed in the literature to date.

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# INTRODUCTION

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict has come to be viewed as one of the most intractable political issues in contemporary history. In more than sixty years, potential for progress has been realized far too infrequently, often impeded by obstinacy and hubris. Meanwhile, bitterness and despair have come to define the most pragmatic of outlooks. As the decades have stretched on without a meaningful resolution, the political conflict, with its periods of laborious negotiation and intolerable violence, has often masked the very real human costs. With internationally-recognized refugee camps in three countries and in the Palestinian territories, the provision of services to the Palestinians by the *United Nations Relief & Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees in the Near East* (UNRWA) is one of the longest-lived humanitarian fields of action in the world. Though my research has been limited to Jordan, the 42 percent of Palestinian refugees who are hosted by the Hashemite Kingdom provide the most sizable sample of affected individuals.

Since the first wave of refugees entered Jordan in 1948, the UNRWA-administered camps have been a constant presence in the small Levantine country.<sup>1</sup> After the addition of two more major waves of refugees and displaced persons in 1967 and 1991, more than half of Jordan's population of 6.5 million is now Palestinian.<sup>2</sup> This sort of demographic shift in a country built on the base of tribal systems has far-reaching ramifications for the individual and collective identities of a people. Questions of balancing political power, providing economic opportunity, and integration into a host society are still major threads of uncertainty within Jordan. These challenges are compounded by the preponderance of Palestinians who live in or near one of the ten official camps, all of which have been operating for a minimum of 43 years and have long since transitioned from the tent cities brought to mind by use of

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<sup>1</sup> It has been my experience that the term *refugee* has a reductionist effect when applied to an individual or group of individuals and therefore becomes a label that can strip people of their dignity and confine them to a particular set of stereotypes. For this reason, I use the term only rarely when specifically applying to the official political designation of the entire community. In most other instances, the terms *Palestinians*, *camp residents*, or *camp community* are used.

<sup>2</sup> Additionally, the political distinction between the categories of *refugee* and *displaced person* are discussed in the next section.

the term *refugee camp*. Most now resemble towns or poorer neighborhoods within larger metropolitan areas.

With constant budget constraints and an international community that has failed to recognize the need to increase support to meet the growing needs of the refugee camp residents, UNRWA's camps struggle to provide basic health, education, and relief services in an impoverished and overcrowded setting. While the current state of basic humanitarian services, not to mention the more pertinacious issues of economic outlook, political voice, and camp infrastructure, is chronically insufficient, those services and their administration by UNRWA have come to represent the commitment of the international community to the Palestinians. Their existence is a symbol of their *raison d'être*. As long as the conflict stretches on, so too should UNRWA's blue flag continue to fly above a clinic providing life-saving vaccinations to Palestinian boys and girls.

The contemporary insufficiencies of the services themselves as a development challenge though may in fact pale in comparison to the coming storm of a post-UNRWA world. Few have considered the effect any larger political solution would have on the lives of those in the camps and while there is widespread agreement that the provision of services represents a responsibility on the part of the international community to the Palestinian people until an acceptable resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is found, there remain major questions about the long-term path to sustainable development in the camps when that resolution is eventually achieved and UNRWA is no longer operational. *UN General Assembly Resolution 194* guarantees refugees the *Right of Return* to their homes at the earliest possible date, but the political realities of negotiations and the practical truth that most Palestinians in Jordan have now lived their entire lives in the Kingdom makes the concept of a mass exodus somewhat unlikely. It therefore stands to reason that a sizable number of camp residents would continue to require services even if a hypothetical political solution were reached. Since any solution would also almost certainly include the dismantling of UNRWA, this seemingly inevitable dilemma forms the theoretical basis for this study, which begins to explore the concept of a just solution for the affected communities.



Though researching a hypothetical future is a uniquely arduous task, a commitment to the sustainability of *human development* requires difficult inquiries by virtue of the fact that few practitioners consider them until the crisis is upon them. This study represents my own attempt as a practitioner to struggle with the questions of sustainability and justice within development. I have chosen to focus specifically on health and education services, both because they represent the major facets of UNRWA's human development work in the camps and because of my own specific interest in the health field. Despite that narrowing of my perspective, I have found it absolutely necessary to include a broader set of factors and indicators that are inextricably linked to the future of services within the camps.

Like most field studies, the scope of this one is woefully inadequate to the magnitude of the topic. While the primary purpose of my field work was to delimit the most probable scenarios that might face the camp residents in this future, the study also pointedly seeks to include the views of the residents themselves, though in necessarily but unfortunately limited numbers. For this reason, the subsequent pages will include both the opinions and prognostications of experts and policy-makers and the input of refugee camp residents with an eye toward encouraging the opening of a dialogue between development practitioners, political stakeholders, and the affected community.

Fundamentally, this study will explore how the Jordanian government envisions the long-term provision of health and education services and the status of those individuals who rely upon them in the Palestinian refugee camps of Jordan, and how those visions compare with the desired future of the camp communities themselves. For many, the just resolution of the refugee problem is *the* central component of any comprehensive, lasting peace between the Israelis, the Palestinians, and the Arab world. It is this study's intention to provide additional and vital perspectives from those affected on the East Bank of the Jordan River, be they Jordanian, Palestinian, or both, in pursuit of that just resolution.

# BACKGROUND

Though many volumes have been written on the broader Israeli-Palestinian conflict, this study is focused on the refugee issue and the humanitarian and development components thereof. It is therefore necessary to have a basic understanding of the history of the conflict, but this study does not seek to adjudicate the actions of the players therein as much as it intends to advocate for the people who have been affected by those actions. What follows then is a brief and simplistic description of the introduction of the displaced Palestinians to Jordan, their status in the Hashemite Kingdom, and the international organization that seeks to serve them, UNRWA.

## ISRAEL & PALESTINE: THE ENDURING CONFLICT

A total of three major waves of Palestinians have entered Jordan in the last century, each fleeing a conflict that was felt to pose such significant danger that abandoning home and community was the most reasonable course of action. Oroub Al-Abed's *Palestinian Refugees in Jordan* provides an excellent and concise history of the conflict with particular attention to both the refugee situation and Jordan (2004). Al-Abed, a researcher at the American University in Cairo's Forced Migration and Refugee Studies Programme, points out that the refugee problem has its most immediate origins in the wake of the 1948 Arab-Israeli war, when more than 900,000 Palestinians fled their homes. The vast majority fled to neighboring Arab countries, with a large portion finding asylum in Jordan, which formally annexed the West Bank in 1950. Responding to the humanitarian crisis, the newly formed *United Nations Relief & Works Agency* (UNRWA) took over the administration of the four refugee camps created in Jordan from the *Red Cross* and other non-governmental organizations.

After the 1967 Six-Day War, Israel occupied the West Bank, the Gaza Strip, the Golan Heights, and the Sinai Peninsula, forcing another wave of about 245,000 Palestinians to flee into Jordan from the West Bank. The UN officially identifies those who fled in 1948 as *refugees* while terming those unsettled

in 1967 *displaced persons*. As al-Abed points out, many of those displaced in 1967 were already refugees from 1948 and were forced to flee a second time (2004, 4). These displaced persons were housed in six hastily created emergency camps throughout Jordan. Three additional camps were created by the Jordanian government, but they are not recognized or administered by UNRWA.

A third wave of nearly 350,000 Palestinians entered Jordan in 1991 following Iraqi President Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait. Many of these individuals had initially traveled to the Gulf with Jordanian passports granted to them after they were initially displaced in 1948 or 1967, so Jordan became the most likely place for them to seek refuge. About 35,000 of these individuals, often referred to as the *returnees*, were forced into already overcrowded camps in Jordan, compounding the economic stagnation already felt by the camp communities. In total, there are now roughly two million registered Palestinian refugees in Jordan.

## **PALESTINIANS IN THE HASHEMITE KINGDOM**

Al-Abed points out that Jordan's handling of the refugee population has varied with the political context, "either emphasizing the unity between Palestinians and Jordanians as equal citizens in one nation-state, or privileging a local Transjordanian identity" (2004, 15).

Joseph Nevo, professor of Middle East History at the University of Haifa, further explains the need for such a tension in *Changing Identities in Jordan* (2003). Nevo explains the Jordanian context into which the Palestinians were thrust. Founded in the aftermath of the First World War, Jordan was a young country that had just seen the creation of a unified national identity thanks to the difficult political work of Jordan's first king, Abdullah I. Despite this relatively fragile situation, Jordan opened its doors to the Palestinians and granted the 1948 refugees and all those living in the newly-annexed West Bank Jordanian citizenship. Thereafter, Jordan's longtime ruler, King Hussein, instituted a policy of "controlled integration" aimed at preserving the Jordanian identity while encouraging Palestinians to contribute to and enjoy the benefits of Jordanian society. Though this version of events is undoubt-

edly favorable to the Hashemite monarchs, noted Arab historian Kamal Salibi generally agrees with the assessment in his respected volume *The Modern History of Jordan* (1993).

In *Finding Ways: Palestinian Coping Strategies in Changing Environments*, a report issued by the Norwegian research foundation FAFO, the Jordanian acceptance of refugees is explored and contrasted to the less welcoming receptions offered by Lebanon and Syria (1994). The report finds that “the host-societies where refugees settled had to adapt to the Palestinians, just as the Palestinians have adapted to the societies where they find themselves” (10). Those “mutual adaptations” have had different outcomes in different countries, with Jordan’s Palestinians being generally better integrated into the economy than their counterparts in other host countries. The report also deals with the critical concept of the camps themselves.

In Jordan, there are no demarcations labeling the camps and no barriers, so they often abut other urban areas allowing for tremendous freedom of interaction. Because of this, and particularly in larger metropolitan areas, the neighborhoods surrounding the camps often become “extended camps,” which are similarly dominated by poorer Palestinians (19). For this reason, statistics about the number of Palestinians living inside camps can be somewhat misleading. UNRWA’s own profile of the Jordanian refugee camps from their web archives agrees with this assessment, noting that the population of Jordan’s ten official camps, the three unofficial camps, and “the refugees residing in the vicinity of camps [living] under similar socioeconomic conditions...make up an estimated 65 per cent of the Palestine refugees in Jordan.”

FAFO also points out that while most Palestinians in Jordan hold Jordanian citizenship, there is a subsection of the population commonly known as the *Gaza refugees* who do not enjoy citizenship rights. Many of these individuals are refugees twice over and are not strictly “Gazan” in origin, having fled to Gaza after the 1948 war and then to Jordan in 1967. Al-Abed discusses the Gazans as well, noting that they fell under Egyptian administration after 1948 but were forced to flee to Jordan after 1967 when Gaza was occupied and Egypt was considered unsafe (2004, 5). When they arrived in Jordan they were

not granted citizenship rights and have since been obliged to apply for residence and work permits in Jordan. Many of the Gazans live in the Jerash camp, which is locally known as Gaza camp.

## **UNRWA**

Since its establishment in 1950, UNRWA has been tasked with providing relief, human development, and protection services to the Palestinian refugees of 1948 and the 1967 displaced persons. Currently, UNRWA's records indicate there are 4.77 million refugees registered within their five fields of operation: the West Bank, the Gaza strip, Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria; Jordan hosts the largest share with nearly two million of the total refugee population in the Hashemite Kingdom (Field of Operation 2011). Official statistics indicate just over 350,000 of those Palestinians reside in one of the ten UNRWA-administered refugee camps in Jordan, though as previously noted that figure can be somewhat misleading.

According to a report entitled *UNRWA in Figures*, UNRWA runs 172 schools and 24 primary health care facilities in Jordan's camps, which compose the major human development initiatives of the Agency (2011). Additionally, they offer a variety of relief and social services including food rations and stipends for special hardship cases, community centers and centers dedicated for Women and Youth, and a microfinance program which has awarded just under 40 million USD in over 28,000 loans (al-Abed 2004, 13; UNRWA in Figures 2011). Though the Agency is primarily a relief organization and was not originally designed to continue services for such a lengthy term, UNRWA's mandate has been extended by the UN General Assembly every few years in the absence of solution to the refugee issue. To this end, the organization has adapted to its more longterm role as a human development agency, aiming to help registered refugees to acquire knowledge and skills, to lead long and healthy lives, to achieve decent standards of living, and enjoy human rights to the fullest possible extent (UNRWA at a Glance 2011).

# LITERATURE REVIEW

While literature related to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict itself is plentiful, few researchers have explored the potential effects a resolution of the refugee issue would have in the Jordanian setting. Despite this, it is necessary to understand a broad range of issues and contexts which inform the study which follows, including the principle of the Right of Return, the activity and mandate of UNRWA, a survey of life in the camps of Jordan especially related to health and education, and finally the literature specifically dealing with the future, possible solutions to the conflict, and the resulting effects on those countries hosting refugee populations.

## THE RIGHT OF RETURN

The concept of the Right of Return comes from *United Nations General Assembly Resolution 194* from December of 1948. Article 11 “resolves that the refugees wishing to return to their homes and live at peace with their neighbors 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.” This critical resolution forms the international legal basis for the most frequently discussed aspect of the Palestinian refugee issue. While the Right is seen as a sacred principle to most Palestinians, the actual implications of such a Right’s enactment have recently been reconsidered. Would the Right of Return lead to a mass repatriation of Palestinians to pre-1948 Palestine? Several sources have suggested the actual numbers would be somewhat limited.

The most extensive study on the issue, conducted in 2003 by the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research, concluded that far fewer refugees would return than many had assumed. The survey of more than 4,500 refugees in the West Bank, Gaza, Jordan, and Lebanon, concluded that about 48 percent of the refugees in Jordan would either stay in Jordan and accept compensation or stay in Jordan and refuse compensation if offered the options of returning to the 1948 territory with Israeli citizenship

or a new Palestinian state based on the 1967 borders. The surveyors posit that even these numbers of return may be inflated, which is consistent with an understanding of the practical reality of the situation. Since the vast majority of refugees in Jordan have never even visited Palestine, the Right of Return has a sacred, but essentially symbolic value for most. Their desire to return is kept alive by the communal memory of what has been lost. The practical reality for many though would suggest that family and community ties, financial hardship for some and businesses and stable employment for others, and the comfort of what is already known would make remaining in Jordan the easiest choice. Rex Brynen points out that international and historical experience suggests the number of refugees who actually choose repatriation is usually far below that anticipated by the planners and that the number usually declines further as the refugee's time away from his or her homeland increases (1997, 48).

In a 2007 report for the New York Times entitled *For Many Palestinians, 'Return' Is Not a Goal*, Hassan Fattah indicated that there is a growing feeling that “it may be neither possible nor desirable to go back.” Fattah notes that many of those he interviewed acknowledged that such thoughts are rarely expressed openly, but “when people think, ‘Is it possible for us to go back?’ deep inside they now know they are not going back.” Such opinions are of course far from universal. The only position that enjoys almost universal acceptance is the belief that the right to choose is sacred for every individual Palestinian. This sentiment is echoed both in the 2003 survey, which indicated agreement from 95 percent of those surveyed, and in the BADIL Center's 1998 study, which cited the implementation of *Resolution 194* as a major demand of camp residents in Jordan. For many of the Palestinians in Jordan, it seems somewhat probable that the Right of Return is most inherently a principle of the individual's right to choose their own future and of the desire to see the injustice they have suffered acknowledged.

## **THE SYMBOLISM AND MANDATE OF UNRWA**

Oroub Al-Abed points out that UNRWA is the only organization in the UN structure dedicated to serving a refugee population that does not fall under the mandate of the *UN High Commissioner for Refugees* (UNHCR) (2004). To the Palestinian people, UNRWA has become an enduring symbol of

the international community's commitment to them. William Lee, the former director of UNRWA in Jordan, asserted that UNRWA "has a great symbolism. It means that the world hasn't forgotten them" (al-Abed 2004, 14). Though perhaps not forgotten, the Palestinians have been consistently neglected. UNRWA's budget woes have been a chronic challenge and are frequently blamed for the limitations or failures of the organization. Despite this pervasive trend, Sandra Mitchell, UNRWA's current director in Jordan, reported to the *Jordan Times* that no budget deficit was expected for the organization in Jordan for the current fiscal year. Mitchell also reiterated that UNRWA's "mandate is to keep serving the Palestinian refugees until there is a lasting peace and until the right of return is recognized" (Azzeh 2011).

In *The Mandate of UNRWA at Sixty*, Lance Bartholomeusz, chief of UNRWA's International Law Division, discusses UNRWA's mandate in detail and the challenges of defining that mandate in light of the organization's special status (2010). He notes that the organization's mandate is mainly humanitarian in nature with a strong focus on human development, which is defined as "the process of enlarging people's choices" (464). From a development standpoint, poverty itself is a function of choice, or the lack thereof, and human development focuses on equipping people with the tools they need to live their lives fully. This means basic human needs must be met, including the three most basic needs: health, education, and access to resources allowing for a decent standard of living. He also acknowledges that UNRWA has a political role to play in highlighting the ongoing plight of Palestinian refugees. Finally, in addressing the length of the Agency's mandate, he indicates that UNRWA does not enjoy a permanent authorization, but that it is widely recognized that it is necessary for UNRWA's work to continue "pending the just resolution of the question of the Palestinian refugees," indicating that such work would be discontinued in the event of a resolution (473).

## **LIFE IN THE CAMPS**

Despite its budget constraints, studies have suggested that UNRWA's administration of services in the camps has seen a number of positive trends in recent years. General conditions in the camps are still far from positive though. FAFO's *On the Margins: Migration and Living Conditions of Palestinian*



*Camp Refugees in Jordan*, provides tremendous detail about the current condition of life in the camps (2002). In terms of living conditions, the camps are generally in need of infrastructural attention and overcrowding is a massive problem. Each individual has about seven square meters of space and each shelter comprises twenty-seven persons on average (Gilen et al 1994, 18). The camps themselves function as micro-economies with most residents occupying a marginal economic role that relegates most to a life of permanent vulnerability (Khawaja and Tiltnes 2002, 58). Ninety-five percent of camp residents have no savings and sixty percent of households report “lower total income than the minimum necessary to make ends meet” (59; 61). Sixty percent of households reported regularly experiencing unreliability in water supply and the sewage systems of some camps is in considerable disrepair (131). Overall there is “a clear clustering of poverty in the camps” (55).

In terms of health, there are some positive indicators. UNRWA reported in 2011 that it had reduced child mortality among refugees in Jordan from 160 per 1,000 children in 1960 to 22.6 per 1,000 in 2010. At 4.6 children per woman, fertility rates were still slightly higher in the camps than in the rest of Jordan, but were falling steadily (Khawaja and Tiltnes 2002, 22). This trend owes in part to the pervasive use of contraceptives with 71 percent of married, non-pregnant women reporting usage and UNRWA clinics being the most common source (23). UNRWA health services have also played a major role in the reduction of both the *Infant Mortality Rate* (IMR) and the *Under-Five Mortality Rate* (U5MR) in the camps (23-24). According to the *Jordan Living Conditions Survey*, 87 percent of camp residents have “easy access to local health facilities” meaning they are within five to ten minutes of a hospital, clinic, or medical doctor by foot (Kharabsheh and Tiltnes 1998).<sup>1</sup> According to UNRWA’s 2010 *Annual Report of the Department of Health*, immunization coverage is almost 100 percent. They also report that health expenditure per registered refugee was only 19.8 USD in 2010.

Unfortunately, non-communicable diseases continue to increase, accounting for 70-80 percent of deaths among refugees (8). The *Jordan Living Conditions Survey* confirms this, noting that camp

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<sup>1</sup> The acknowledgment of this achievement, however, is tempered in the report. While health care is more accessible in the camps than anywhere else in Jordan, health is also poorest (Kharabsheh and Tiltnes 1998, 165-166).

residents are “the worst off” in terms of permanent poor health (1998, 174). Both the *Annual Report* and *On the Margins* point to a massive shortage of needed medical staff, with each physician seeing an average of 100 patients per day (2010, 8; 2002, 166). Limited clinic hours, lack of medical equipment, lack of medicines, long wait times, and a lack of specialists, particularly gynecologists, are also major problems (Khawaja and Tiltnes 2002, 166). UNRWA’s *Annual Report* acknowledges these failures and cites the “chronic disparity between the refugee needs and the financial resources available” (2010, 4).

There are similar competing trends in education. *On the Margins* reveals that 93 percent of currently enrolled children attend UNRWA schools in the camps, where camp residents generally regard education as a good investment (2002, 72; Gilen et al 1994). This has resulted in a six-fold increase in the percentage of adults with at least a basic level of education in just two generations (2002, 72). Despite this, 25 percent of women and 10 percent of men were functionally illiterate (73).<sup>2</sup> Dropout rates are also high (86). For many, the choice between investing time in more schooling and bringing home enough to survive is no choice at all. Unfortunately, particularly in the short term, books are not edible.

In her study of *UNRWA’s Role in Education in the Palestinian Refugee Camps of Jordan*, Marian Hale addresses the recent decision to add a human rights emphasis to curriculum of schools in the camps (2009). Hale indicates the 2004 decision was taken in an attempt to decrease violence between children, teach children their basic rights, and encourage and foster new generations of community leaders (15). The program’s potential is limited though by overcrowded schools, almost all of which run double shifts of students, provide no playgrounds and poor nutrition, and have a shortage of well-trained teachers (36). Despite these numerous challenges, 90 percent of camp residents expressed satisfaction with the schools and health services available to them (Khawaja and Tiltnes 2002, 134).

*On the Margins* also addresses the camps as communities, referring to them as “an important marker of collective identification in Jordan” (2002, 170). Interestingly, while half of the population is not satisfied with living there, only 13 percent want to leave (38). This cognitive dissonance is created in

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<sup>2</sup> This gender gap may be closing, since girls now outnumber boys at all levels of education in the camps (Khawaja and Tiltnes 2002, 73).

large part as an effect of community. Life finds a way to thrive in staggeringly imperfect circumstances and though relationships offer little in terms of the basic needs of physiological health, they are invaluable to psychological health. The FAFO researchers point out that “the camp continues to be a resilient feature of the Palestinian refugee experience” (169).

## LOOKING FORWARD

Rex Brynen’s *Imaging a Solution: Final Status Arrangements and Palestinian Refugees in Lebanon* operates on much the same theoretical framework as this study and quite possibly represents the most similar paper produced on the subject (1997). Though based in Lebanon rather than Jordan, Brynen, associate professor of Political Science at McGill University, explores many of the same hypothetical challenges. His paper focuses more prominently on the political and legal implications of such a future, but we share a belief that “the need for scenario generation, planning, and dialogue on the refugee issue is particularly acute” (43). He further argues that the refugee situation requires both “immediate humanitarian attention and long-term political reflection” (44).

In his survey of the possible political scenarios, Brynen concludes “whatever the considerable moral and legal weight of refugee’s claims, the right of return [as originally understood] is one that will not be realized under any conceivable set of circumstances” (45). Given the probability that repatriation would be mostly limited to the West Bank and Gaza, and that 60 percent of Jordan’s refugees are not originally from those areas, the proportion of refugees who would choose to “return” is likely to be much smaller than most estimates assume. In the event a host country reacted to this development with hostility, as is possible in Lebanon, government policies could act as a “push factor,” but barring a major change in policy this is far less likely in Jordan. Brynen argues therefore, that host countries like Jordan are likely to see a significant refugee population permanently declaring their adoptive states home.

In *The Palestinian Refugee Problem and the Right of Return*, Joseph Alpher and Khalil Shikaki, writing on behalf of Harvard’s Joint Working Group on Israeli-Palestinian Relations, explicate the findings of a group of prominent Israeli and Palestinian scholars brought together to seek a functional

solution to the political conflict (1998). Though the scholars do not settle on a single solution to the refugee problem, they do explore many of the challenges facing future negotiators and attempt to find reasonable areas of compromise on both sides. Since the paper's release, the Working Group's findings have been regarded as a positive guidepost for final status negotiations. At its outset, the Working Group notes that Palestinians and Israelis approach the refugee problem and the Right of Return from "radically different perspectives" (5). To Palestinians, the problem represents the "nature of their plight and the historic injustice done to them" (10). To Israelis, "the refugee problem is first and foremost an existential security threat" (11). This fear is based in the concept that a significant and sudden increase in the Arab population would "undermine the Jewish character and the viability and stability of the Jewish state...and would thus be profoundly disruptive" (8).

Both sides agree though, on a variety of things and it therefore seems reasonable to draw some tentative conclusions about the basic shape of a hypothetical resolution to the issue. These agreements include the idea that Israel must acknowledge some historic role in the events that created the refugee issue, that a full Right of Return is simply not possible and return will be limited, that resettlement in host countries will occur to some degree, particularly in Jordan, that Israel will pay some form of compensation, and that any real solution must include the dismantling of UNRWA and the current camp infrastructure (19). There is also an acknowledgment that successfully resolving the refugee issue must result in the Palestinians themselves "[ceasing] to consider themselves refugees," and hence any solution must be considered legitimate by the refugees (9). It also recognizes that many Palestinians have "in fact resettled and made their homes elsewhere" (14).

The Working Group's findings are illuminating when considering possible future scenarios, and while tremendous uncertainty remains about the exact nature of a hypothetical agreement, the report can be highly useful in its capacity to inform a study such as this one. This study will return to many of the possibilities and questions raised by the Working Group in subsequent sections, including the concept of home, the likelihood for resettlement and integration, and the importance of legitimacy in any possible solution.

# METHODOLOGY

It must be openly admitted from the outset that the capacity of this study is incommensurate with the complexity of the topic it seeks to understand. While every attempt was made within the temporal and logistical constraints of the project to gather data that was as complete and as representative as possible, no study, no matter its size, can claim to predict the actual course of future events or the actions of such divergent players, much less fully express the voice of a community. This study, then, represents an attempt in good faith to ask questions that should be asked and to encourage a future dialogue. Given this fact, it was most sensible to conduct research qualitatively rather than quantitatively.

Despite the challenges of conducting research in a country other than my own, most of the individuals interviewed were warm and welcoming. With a few notable exceptions interviews were completed smoothly and seemingly straightforwardly. A significant challenge was faced when I sought to include the perspective of UNRWA, though, with bureaucracy consistently claiming the role of primary antagonist. Despite this obstacle, I was able to include a variety of voices from the Jordanian government and from within the camps, and while I do not claim to offer a complete perspective from any sector, my hope is that the sampling is more or less representative of broader trends.

## THE INTERVIEW PROCESS

The complexity of the issues being discussed, their connection to the emotions of many individuals, and the potential for so many diverse responses made interviews the most reasonable source of data collection. Surveys were ruled out early on, both because of their limited capacity to accurately convey intricate abstract concepts and the simple fact that the study's scope would not allow the collection of enough surveys to ensure a more quantitatively acceptable sample. Though the study was begun with the intention of including UNRWA more directly, the two most important types of actors were the camp residents and the Jordanian government.

Within the camps, I conducted interviews with a total of eight residents. Due to my gender and the gender of my translators, I was only able to interview male residents, which I deeply regret. This challenge is discussed in more detail below. With this major exception, I actively sought to gain insight from as diverse a sampling as possible. Four interviews were conducted in *Jabal al-Hussein* camp, with the participants aged 18, 19, 31, and 60, and four interviews were conducted in *al-Wahdat* camp, with the participants aged 21, 32, 33, and 38. During the course of the study and my time in Jordan I visited *Jabal al-Hussein* camp on five occasions and *al-Wahdat* camp on six.

Interviews in the camps were conducted in Arabic with the assistance of translators. The interview questions were drafted in advance and translated into Arabic, allowing the translator to see the complete question ahead of time. As the interviews progressed, the translator would communicate both the general sense of the response and the literal translation of the wording whenever possible. The translators also frequently fielded follow-up questions and additional spontaneous questions. The interviews were recorded whenever the participant was comfortable, which was determined prior to recording and after signature of the informed consent document.<sup>1</sup> Notes were also kept during each interview. The location of the interviews was unique to each participant, usually occurring in a public place inside or very near to the camp, such as a *souk*, café, or barbershop, or in the home of the camp resident. Some interviews were prearranged while others were organized spontaneously with the help of another resident of the camp with knowledge of the study. This occurred in *Jabal al-Hussein* camp for example, where one of the participants also acted as a connection to other residents within the community after being interviewed. When approaching a potential participant, the scope of the study was explained briefly and clearly and some sample questions offered. The individual was then asked if he would be willing to participate and in which location he would be most comfortable.

In the case of the Jordanian government, it was important to include representatives of the ministries and departments that would be most likely to participate in future final status negotiations and

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<sup>1</sup> In the camps, two of the participants were illiterate and the consent form was therefore read aloud to them and explained to their satisfaction.

those most likely to be directly affected by the outcome of those negotiations on the issue of refugees. In the former case, I interviewed Mr. Samar Naber, director of the Negotiations Coordination Bureau at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and Senator Akel Biltaji, an advisor to His Majesty King Abdullah II, whose experience in the government and with the monarch could offer particular insight into the likely role the Jordanian government would play in the direct aftermath of an agreement. Due to the probability of a sizable refugee population remaining in Jordan after a peace deal and the complimentary dissolution of UNRWA, I conducted interviews with Dr. Saleh al-Khalaylah, managing director of education at the Ministry of Education, and Mr. Mahmoud Aqribawi, acting director general of the Department of Palestinian Affairs which serves as the governmental counterpart of UNRWA in Jordan.

Two additional experts were interviewed with direct or unique knowledge of the issues. The first was Mr. Riyad as-Subuh, head of the Awareness and Empowerment Unit of the National Centre for Human Rights, an independent national institution tasked with protecting and promoting human rights in Jordan. The second, Dr. Fawzi Samhuri, is currently serving as the director of the Roots Centre for Human Rights. A refugee himself, Dr. Samhuri worked as a dentist in UNRWA clinics in three different camps over an eight year period. Both of these individuals were able to provide tremendous insight from unique perspectives.

Interviews with government employees and other experts were conducted in English and in the individual's offices in an effort to make them most comfortable, except in the case of Dr. Samhuri who requested the meeting occur at a café near his home. Questions were prepared, but I felt it important to keep the interviews conversational so follow-ups and tangential discussions were frequent. Despite this, questions were always open-ended and phrased as objectively as possible. It was important for me to create a comfortable balance between actively listening and using affirmation to assure the participant I was interested in his opinion, while still remaining nonjudgmental of the content of his responses. All of these interviews were prearranged and the participants were asked to sign the informed consent document prior to commencing the interview. Each participant was asked if they were comfortable with the interview being recorded and all agreed. Notes were also kept during all interviews.

## **DATA COLLECTION AND INTEGRITY**

The integrity of data collected was of paramount importance. When interviews were recorded, the recording was transferred to my personal laptop within 24-hours and subsequently deleted from the recording device. Recordings were then transcribed or extensively noted in word processing documents saved on my hard drive. Paper copies of my notes were kept with me as often as possible and their contents were also transferred to word processing documents on my laptop. All data on my computer was kept in a single folder that was password encrypted.

Each governmental or expert interviewee was asked whether he would like his name to appear in the study and each agreed, which was appropriate given their public positions. Participants in the camps were not asked their names and their names were never recorded if they were offered. It was explained to each that his identity would be kept secret encouraging him to speak freely. The location of the interview, age of the interviewee, and a single letter assigned alphabetically to each participant were the only means of identifying and referencing the interviewees in the camps. For the purposes of the study, that letter has been used as the first letter of a pseudonym randomly assigned to the participant for ease of reference, i.e., the first participant was recorded as 'A' and is hereafter referred to as 'Ali.'

## **OBSTACLES AND CHALLENGES**

Despite a generally positive experience, a few obstacles were encountered. The first of these was related to my inability to conduct a single interview with a representative of UNRWA. Nearly three months before the study's completion, a formal letter was submitted to UNRWA requesting their cooperation in the process of the study. A reply was received which notified me that UNRWA was obliged to decline my request. During the interview process, I attempted to set up an interview with an UNRWA employee in the Health Services Department through a personal connection. The individual initially agreed and received me at the appointed time in his office at UNRWA headquarters in Amman, but promptly introduced me to the Chief of the Field Health Programme, Dr. Ishtaiwi Abu Zayed, who



informed me that an interview was impossible at this time. I was told to submit another formal letter to him, including in it a description of my research, including my full methodology, a list of my other contacts and interviewees, and the questions I would ask in the interview. He said the department's senior staff would then meet in committee to make a decision to accept or reject my request for an interview within two weeks. Given the time constraints the study was facing, every attempt was made to convince Dr. Zayed to allow a limited and expedited interview. He initially agreed and invited me for an interview, but subsequently cancelled pending my completion of the formal process. At this time I attempted to reconnect with my initial contact, who agreed to an interview outside of UNRWA's offices on the condition of anonymity. This interview was also cancelled by the contact, who again told me that I would need to submit a full proposal. Given how intricately linked UNRWA is to this study, it is unfortunate that the study cannot include any insight from them but every effort to include it was rebuffed by the Agency's bureaucratic structure.

I also intended to interview policy makers and medical professionals within the Ministry of Health and at Prince Hamza Hospital in Amman, but faced similar bureaucratic obstacles. Few of the officials I encountered were eager to help and most seemed to dismiss the need for such a study. At one point, during a meeting in which I was declined permission from the ministry to interview a doctor who had worked for UNRWA for 16 years, a department director informed me that most of the camp residents were actually quite wealthy and living better lives than most Jordanians.<sup>2</sup> Needless to say, this was not consistent with my experience in the camps.

Other challenges were comparatively minor. As previously mentioned, I was unable to interview any female camp residents due to my gender and the gender of my translators. I had intended to interview men and women in equal numbers from the camps, but social norms in the camp communities made it difficult for a man to approach a woman without prearranging the meeting. Attempts at such an

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<sup>2</sup> It should be noted that this belief is not uncommon among Jordanians, many of whom feel, perhaps fairly, that their nation has spent tremendous capital hosting the refugees that could otherwise have gone to other initiatives and development efforts within the country. This too is part of the tension present in Jordanian society.

arrangement were unsuccessful mostly due to male family members' unwillingness to allow the interview, which was seen as potentially improper. Though the topic of the study does not focus on gender-specific issues at length, it is my profound belief that any and all research claiming to be representative should include the voices of both men and women.

Though most interviewees seemed comfortable speaking to me, one individual from the government was somewhat reluctant to answer questions related to political issues and a hypothetical future. Dr. al-Khalaylah from the Ministry of Education, was uncomfortable addressing questions related to any hypothetical future in which UNRWA-administered education services would be absorbed by the Ministry. He was also reluctant to address the condition of the schools in the camps. Given the importance of remaining politically impartial in education policy, his reluctance was somewhat understandable, though it is my hope that his discomfort at speaking publically does not reflect a similar reluctance to seriously debate the issues internally.

## **ADAPTATIONS**

Particularly in the camps, I was aware of the difficulty of gathering accurate information as an outsider, specifically as an American, as a student, and as an English-speaker. To combat this, I attempted to build a rapport with the participant before commencing the interview, tried to use mutual, personal connections who could endorse my trustworthiness to set up interviews, used a translator to allow the interviewee to communicate in his native language, and structured my interview questions to flow from simpler and more generic to more complex and specific. It is of course impossible to completely prevent skewed results, but I generally felt my interviewees were forthcoming and genuine.

Additional adaptations through the course of the study were numerous but minor and included shifting the style of interview questions, restating and rephrasing questions when I felt it necessary, and attempting to compensate for the lack of UNRWA involvement with additional literature and further questions of Dr. Samhoury who was formerly an UNRWA employee. In all, the study reflects my best attempt to discuss these complex issues as fully as possible with the most appropriate actors.

“We need a hospital!”

The elderly man slammed his clenched fist onto the café table to make his point. It was a cold and rainy Friday afternoon in *Jabal al-Hussein* refugee camp and the man had interjected during an interview with Ali, a 60-year-old camp resident originally from as-Sarafand.

Ali had been expressing his satisfaction with the health services provided in the camp when the disagreement began. How could Ali say such a thing, the second man demanded. The single clinic in the camp was always packed and there were never enough doctors. Ali calmly sipped his tea and then looked back at my translators and I.

“UNRWA provides everything we need and I have no problems,” he remarked. “And think about how much worse some people have it.”<sup>1</sup>

The neighbors were clearly well-acquainted and this same café had probably been the site of many a friendly argument. In many ways, both of them were making valid points. As one of my translators, a Jordanian university student, mentioned under his breath, the availability of services in the camps is far superior to that in parts of the Badia, Jordan’s rural areas that are home to much of the Kingdom’s non-Palestinian population. Though understaffed and overextended, the UNRWA clinics are certainly better than nothing. They can point to tangible achievements in child vaccinations, women’s health, and reduction of mortality rates in infants and children.

At the same time, the clinics are massively limited. Each health center is open for about five hours a day and doctors see an average of 100 patients in that time. That works out to about three minutes per patient. “Asking how the patient is becomes a wasteful use of your time,” notes Dr. Fawzi Samhoury, who worked for UNRWA for eight years. “Doctors are unable to provide patients with the highest quality of care because of the large number of patients and the lack of enough medical staff.”<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Since this section relies heavily on interviews I have conducted during the course of this study, all of which occurred in 2011, I will not note the year in a parenthetical citation when the interviewee is mentioned in the body of the text.

<sup>2</sup> To give some perspective, one young Jordanian physician told me he was exhausted after seeing 32 patients in an eight-hour period.

Furthermore, specialists are in short supply and most services not related to primary and preventative care, such as surgeries and hospitalization, are not available. For these services, *Hussein* camp residents must travel to a hospital in Amman, only two of which are public. It's also arguable that medical services are far from the highest priority on a list of issues that require immediate attention in the camps. Schools are overflowing, sanitation systems are in desperate need of repair, and the dilapidated and stunningly overcrowded housing units contribute more to the Dickensian specter of camp life than anything else.

And then there's the poverty. Tens of thousands of camp residents wake up each morning with little prospect of eking out more than a basic standard of living. Hassan, a 33-year-old shop owner in *al-Wahdat*, is concerned about how he'll pay his rent this month. It's a surprisingly elusive 70 Jordanian Dinars (USD 98.70) for a man who works every day to come up with a monthly income of less than 100 JD (USD 141). Given the immediacy of these challenges, understanding the proclivity to avoid the issues of tomorrow is simple. Today has its own problems.

Someone needs to be asking about the future though, because eventually the blue flag that flies above those understaffed clinics and overcrowded schools is going to be lowered. It may happen next month or in six more decades, but the camp residents deserve to be met by a situation that is just and sustainable and that respects their right to script their own story.

What is required is a focus on both the immediate and the long-term. Andrew Robinson, former chair of the Refugee Working Group, notes that "the purely humanitarian approach, which is mostly what has been possible until now, does not really allow us to get to the heart of the issue" (1996). The issue is development, in all of its implications: political, economic, medical, educational, and more. The issue is a future that tries to restore the dignity of choice to a people who have been impoverished by their lack of it for too long. The situation "demands both immediate humanitarian attention and long-term political reflection" (Brynen 1997, 44).

That need is about healing a deeply felt wound in the Palestinian memory as much as it is about anything. The people we call refugees don't simply need a hospital. They don't just need teacher training

courses. They need more than better political representation or more and better jobs. They don't just need better houses. In the end, what the Palestinians need is to finally be at home.

## **THERE'S NO PLACE LIKE HOME**

The resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is contingent on more than just a political agreement between the two opposing actors. A number of important players will have a role, notably including both the government of Jordan and the Palestinian refugees. In fact, the resolution of the broader conflict is inextricably linked to the resolution of the refugee issue, or more precisely the attempt to provide five million Palestinians with a home. "There is no two-state solution without a solution to [Resolution] 194," asserts Senator Akel Biltaji, an advisor to His Majesty King Abdullah II. The director of Jordan's Negotiation Coordination Bureau, Samer Naber, agrees and addresses this point specifically when he comments on a future peace. "In the end we need an agreed, consensual, non-prescriptive solution, which takes into account the political, economic, and humanitarian aspects. You cannot have the first two without respecting the humanitarian issues connected to the refugees themselves."

Such a resolution is predicated upon and affective of a number of different issues, though. There is the issue of how the broader political agreement affects the principle of the Right of Return and the reality of actual repatriation. Then, the response of the Jordanian government to the subsequent status quo and its responsibility and capability to fill the role held by UNRWA since 1950 must be considered. This will define the issue of integration and the resulting questions of identity, both for the refugees and for Jordan. The issue of legitimacy will also weigh heavily, since any agreement will be meaningless unless the refugees themselves accept it. Through each of these issues and challenges, this study aims not just to point to the desperate need for a resolution to the refugee problem, though that need is dire. It also urges the opening of a real and pragmatic dialogue that could construct the intellectual and emotional framework for a resolution capable of leading to a more peaceful future.

## THE REALITY OF RETURN

“I started out as a recipient of UNRWA rations in a camp in Hebron,” Senator Biltaji recounted. “My father decided that we should get going with life rather than waiting in limbo—do we go back, do we not go back? I was seven at the time.” Now, in his seventies, Biltaji still remembers what it was like when his family fled from their home in Jaffa, first to a camp in Hebron and then again to Jordan after the Six-Day War in 1967. After decades of service to the Hashemite Kingdom, Biltaji is quick to express his appreciation for the generosity of the Jordanian people and their king.

“At some point a lot of the refugees felt at home simply because of that warmth,” he remarked. “But still, the aspiration has always been to return to their lives.” He is also willing to acknowledge though that such aspirations become increasingly less likely to be realized over time. The desire has a way of remaining though and for many it is still a powerful and emotional issue. “Many kept on hoping they could go back,” he mentioned. “They kept the keys to their homes and the deeds to their land.”

It was this cognizance that something of great value had been lost that allowed the Right of Return to take on an all but sacred value in the minds and hearts of the displaced Palestinians. Nearly every camp resident I spoke with could speak to the importance of the Right, many of them quite personally. Dr. Fawzi Samhuri, whose family fled from the village of Lidd in 1948, told me his father’s last words before passing away were, “I want Lidd.” Before 1967, Ali, a long-time resident of the *Jabal al-Hussein* camp whose family fled from their village near what is now Haifa in 1948, used to travel from Jordan to *al-Aqsa* mosque in al-Quds (Jerusalem) with his father every Friday to pray. “Why won’t they allow us to go back?”

It is undeniable that the Right of Return represents the legitimacy of that which has been lost. It is the internationally recognized and historically-documented confirmation that the injustice was real. For this reason, its value in principle is unlikely to fade regardless of how many decades pass. It is a matter of communal memory; it cannot be forgotten with the passage of time. And, as with most traumas, it is of paramount importance to the Palestinians that their suffering be acknowledged, especially by those they feel were primarily responsible. Among Palestinians who lost their homes and livelihoods, the be-

belief that the Right of Return must be respected before peace can be realized is nearly universal. Of the ten Palestinians I interviewed, there was unanimity on this issue. In understanding the issue though, it is vital that we separate the principle of choice from the reality of its execution.

The Right of Return is fundamentally about the principle of choice. That a choice must have at least two options, one of which in this case is not returning, is often overlooked. Ehab, a 32-year-old shopkeeper in *al-Wahdat* camp whose family came from al-Khalil (Hebron) in 1948, stressed the importance of giving people the freedom to choose, but told me there was no question that he would stay. “All of my family is here, so why would I leave?”

Badar expressed the same sentiment. The 31-year-old from Beer as-Sab’a (Beersheba) said it was vital that every individual choose either to stay or to return. “Most would stay here though. I know I would.” Over and over again, the camp residents expressed the belief that the right to choose was inalienable, but that had little effect on their personal decision-making. In all, 50 percent of the camp residents told me they would stay, and 60 percent said they thought most of their neighbors would remain. Eight years after the release of Dr. Khalil Shikaki’s monumental survey on the issue, the limited experience of this study seems to corroborate his findings, which stunned many when they suggested that the proportion of Palestinians who would choose repatriation would be far more limited than many assumed (Palestinian 2003).<sup>3</sup>

If then, the Right of Return is about the principle of choice for all, but a real goal only for some, then host nations like Jordan must consider the very real possibility that a sizable number of refugees are in fact here to stay. This is to say nothing of the political reality that is likely to pervade any actual agreement. As numerous sources, including the Harvard Working Group and Dr. Rex Brynen, have suggested, final status negotiations are likely to produce an agreement in which the Right of Return is maintained symbolically but not entirely practically. This could mean a full return to the 1967 borders but only a limited and nominal return to the 1948 borders accompanied by compensation, for example.

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<sup>3</sup> Some writers on the subject have suggested even these numbers might be inflated, an idea which is briefly covered in the Literature Review section of this study.

Acting Director General Mahmoud Aqribawi of the Department of Palestinian Affairs, points out that such an arrangement would limit the number of returnees even further. Since sixty percent of Jordan's refugee population were originally from towns inside the 1948 borders upon which the post-agreement Israeli state would likely be based, a Right of Return for the majority would not even be given as an option. "If they want to return, they want to return to their homes and their land, meaning inside the state of Israel." Though the Right of Return was originally written for the 1948 refugees, they are politically the least likely to be guaranteed the ability to exercise that right.

Additionally, although Jordan's 1994 peace treaty with Israel guarantees it the right to participate in final status negotiations on the refugee issue, the Kingdom is unlikely to push for a significant portion of its refugee population to be relocated. Senator Biltaji confidently remarked "Jordan would never push [for this]. Jordanians have never rejected the presence of refugees." He also could not imagine Jordan's king, His Majesty Abdullah II, making such a suggestion during negotiations.

Samer Naber, director of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' Coordination Negotiation Bureau, agrees with Biltaji and states that while Jordan supports Resolution 194's concepts of repatriation and compensation, "it isn't a rigid formula." Jordan's position is that "you must accept [Resolution] 194 in principle," he stated. "The Arab Peace Initiative is clear that we're looking for an *agreed* solution based on [Resolution] 194. It's an agreement that must be found by all parties. We are not prescriptive and we don't advocate for a nominal number, but we've always been willing to talk about that, with a focus on compensation. We don't advocate for one position or another; we advocate for a respect of the principle of the right of return."<sup>4</sup>

Naber argues that Jordan's official stance is in total alignment with its Arab neighbors, the Palestinian Authority, the Quartet, and the entire international community, all of whom have stated their support of a two-state solution as the framework for a final agreement.<sup>5</sup> Notably, Israel is the only actor

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<sup>4</sup> The Arab Peace Initiative, first proposed in 2002 by then-Crown Prince Abdullah of Saudi Arabia and subsequently agreed to by all Arab countries, offers Israel a full normalization of relations in the region in exchange for a withdrawal to the 1967 borders and a "agreed, just settlement" of the refugee issue (Muasher 2008).

<sup>5</sup> The Quartet on the Middle East is comprised of the United Nations, the United States, the European Union, and Russia.



yet to endorse the two-state solution. So then, if a two-state solution is the most likely framework of a final agreement and Israel is highly likely to offer little beyond a nominal Right of Return within its borders, then the choice of return is likely to be mostly limited to the West Bank and Gaza.

Naber noted that even this should be questioned. “The Palestinian Authority has already pointed to a lack of capacity to receive refugees.” Even the very limited number of 100,000 returnees was seen as unmanageable in discussions with the PA, indicating “a lack of capacity at least in the short term.” This would suggest a newly created Palestinian state would be politically resistant to a large influx of returnees and that weak economic prospects inside the state might dissuade returnees even further.

Though it is impossible to fully predict any course of events, there are strong indicators that the Right of Return would be highly limited in principle. Even before the imposition of political and economic limitations by Israel and the Palestinian Authority, many refugees openly state their preference for remaining in Jordan. It is therefore useful to consider the implications of such a reality for Jordan, particularly in light of the consensus, which exists on the commensurate shuttering of UNRWA.

## THE HASHEMITE REACTION

Assuming only a limited return of Jordan’s refugee population, the ramifications of the closure of UNRWA in the Jordanian context are of great importance. With the exception of Faris, a 21-year-old university student in *al-Wahdat* camp, all of the camp residents agreed that UNRWA should cease to exist upon the conclusion of a comprehensive solution to the conflict. This feeling is echoed by all of the Jordanian officials with whom I spoke, the literary consensus on the issue, and the mandate of UNRWA itself. Mahmoud Aqribawi summed up the accord: “When the problem of the Palestinian refugees is resolved, UNRWA will have finished its duty.”<sup>6</sup> There was also widespread agreement concerning the responsibility of the Jordanian government to succeed UNRWA in the provision of services to the Palestinian population.

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<sup>6</sup> Aqribawi also spoke to the need for a period of transition for the Agency, indicating that a limited period of continued function would be necessary to allow the government to absorb UNRWA’s responsibilities.

Particularly in a future where refugees willingly chose to remain in Jordan, the consensus among camp residents and government officials alike was that such individuals should be treated as any other Jordanians and would accordingly be deserving of the same services the government already supplies to all other citizens. This would likely mean the absorption of UNRWA responsibilities into a number of different ministries and departments, as Aqribawi suggested. Health services and schools would likely fall under the Ministries of Health and Education, respectively, while other services would be absorbed by the Ministries of Public Works and Housing, Social Development, and Water and Irrigation. That this sort of discussion is possible is to Jordan's great credit. It is certainly possible to imagine a scenario in which a host state would recoil at the idea of accepting the permanent responsibility to provide for such a significant population, but Jordan's officials were unanimous in their treatment of the issue from a technical rather than rhetorical perspective. Jordan's responsibility was assumed, the only question was in how to go about the induction of that responsibility.

This is not to say that the government is prepared for such a scenario in any way. In fact, though all agreed that Palestinians who remained in Jordan would be Jordanians deserving of services, none seemed to have given much thought to the implications of that fact. Most indicated that planning of any sort would be premature until a resolution neared and downplayed the difficulty of the task. Managing Director Saleh al-Khalaylah of the Ministry of Education said, "[the future] is not our responsibility, but we would support the students who choose not to return." Samer Naber, addressing a hypothetical future, noted "Jordanian institutions, including the king, the parliament, and civil society, would have to come to an agreement on the way forward in that situation. There would need to be an open and frank discussion about Jordan's future and stability."

Both al-Khalaylah and Aqribawi suggested the absorption of the refugee camp populations would be relatively simple logistically and neither thought capacity would be an issue. The government already serves the education and health needs of the vast majority of Palestinians, who live outside of the camps. They reason the assimilation of the remaining 350,000 refugees would be manageable, but the issue of funding weighed heavily for both men. Aqribawi pointed out that Jordan already spends

more than USD 700 million each year in services to the refugees and Naber noted that the Kingdom consistently faces a deficit in this area. Riyadh as-Subuh, head of the Awareness and Empowerment Unit at the National Centre for Human Rights, underscored the point. “Without any funding from international organizations or other countries, the government will not [be able to] do enough.”

This led many officials to raise the issue of compensation from the international community, and potentially Israel and the Palestinian Authority. Aqribawi and Senator Akel Biltaji both mentioned compensation specifically and Biltaji reasoned “it would only be fair to compensate Jordan for the last 60 plus years.” Naber went a step further, suggesting that compensation would enable Jordan “to take a position on those Palestinians who want to remain here.”

The calculus from the government’s standpoint then is that Palestinians who choose to remain would be welcome and deserving of services, which could easily be absorbed by the government if sufficient funding were available. There are obvious questions regarding the true capacity of any of these specific institutions to assimilate as many as 350,000 new clients and it is to be hoped that the government will seriously investigate these issues prior to accepting the responsibility. The factors that most strongly support the government’s position come from the similarities of the services offered currently by UNRWA to those offered by the Kingdom. For example, though UNRWA runs all schools in the camps, the schools operate on the same curriculum as the Jordanian schools.

Though all of those interviewed thought planning was best left for a later date, the Kingdom should consider a number of ideas to ease the eventual transition, including trying to ensure consistency by taking over the employment of the skilled professionals currently serving under UNRWA in the camp schools and clinics while offering them additional training to limit disparities. The government’s position indicates that the greatest challenges for Jordan will be in funding the services, which will need to be discussed seriously during final status negotiations.

It is important to include the voices of the camp residents here as well, the vast majority of whom expressed their support for the idea that Jordan would become responsible for the provision of services to those who choose to remain. Many also felt the government’s ability to properly provide

those services in the future was linked to the dismantling of the current inequitable system. Dr. Sam-houri called the current system openly discriminatory and said many worry the government would continue to be unfair if it took over UNRWA services. “When schools in camps are on double shifts, unable to provide text books, and unable to keep up with teacher training while a different standard of education is readily available outside the camps, that is discrimination, whether passive or overt.” The key according to Samhoury is the system of *wasta*, which loosely translates to connections and derives from the tribal networks on which much of the Jordanian society is based.

Those who have *wasta* are able to navigate the system with ease, bypassing the rules and getting their needs met. Certainly not all Jordanians have the right *wasta* and not all Palestinians are without them, but camp refugees are possibly the least likely members of society to have these tribal connections. This can mean waiting months rather than days to see a surgical specialist. A lack of *wasta* is not just a burden when seeking needed government services though, it also provides an economic barrier for many when it comes to finding employment or getting a loan. Eighteen-year-old Dhiya, who was working in a barbershop on the outskirts of *Jabal al-Hussein* camp, noted this as a serious problem and said he wanted to see a transition to an economy based on skills rather than *wasta*. Despite their concerns, all of the residents who mentioned discrimination believed UNRWA could not stay forever.

Ultimately there is agreement though that a resolution means the dismantling of UNRWA and integration of the refugee populations into the Jordanian system. This means seriously considering the prospect of integration. Through what process can Palestinians be fully integrated as Jordanians and the camps transitioned fully into neighborhoods or towns? As-Subuh of the National Centre for Human Rights saw these questions as the greatest challenge for both Jordanians and Palestinians. “We’re talking about integration. They’re not camps without UNRWA.”

## INTEGRATION AND IDENTITY

Jordan has long been sensitive to the issue of integration and for a number of different reasons. Firstly, since the policy of “controlled integration” adopted by King Hussein in the 1950s, Jordan’s na-

tive, Bedouin population has feared the prospects of becoming a minority in their own country (Nevo 2003).<sup>7</sup> This has led to the implementation of policies that maintain an East Bank Jordanian majority in the political system and to the strengthening and perpetuation of the *wasta* system. Most estimates suggest Palestinians are already a demographic majority in the Kingdom, which has led to the entrenching of the controlled integration system.

Secondly, it must also be noted that the Palestinians themselves have prevented integration in some ways for political reasons. Senator Biltaji, himself a refugee, pointed out that “the desire to keep the Palestinians somewhat separate from society economically and politically, to not transition them from refugees to normal citizens, to not give them permanent and stable situations here was in fact the desire of the refugees themselves.” In early generations, this was mostly due to the view that Jordan was a necessary but temporary place of residence. Advocating for rights in the host country would simply distract the refugees from the real cause, the struggle to return home. Worse, becoming too comfortable in Jordan might attend a process of forgetting. To this day, there are some who believe UNRWA exists primarily as an impediment to the Palestinian cause. Gadiel, a 38-year-old shop owner in *al-Wahdat* from al-Khalil (Hebron), believed that “UNRWA is here so we will forget and be quiet. When we are hungry they give us enough food to shut us up. So we will forget Palestine.”

Furthermore, the complex history of Jordan’s relationship with the nascent Palestinian nationalistic organizations in the 1970s and 1980s continues to haunt discussions of the issue. The conflict centered on questions of who had the right to speak for and negotiate on behalf of the Palestinians: Jordan or the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO). After some in the PLO networks began advocating for taking over Jordan and using the country as little more than a base of operations for the struggle against Israel, Jordan expelled the groups in the events of Black September.

Though the late 1980s saw the beginnings of normalization, trust is still hard-won for some and often centers on the idea of choosing Jordan. It is reasoned that trust cannot be given until one has fully

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<sup>7</sup> Bedouin is used here to refer to the roots rather than the station of the population. Many Jordanians who can trace their origins back to the Badia now live in large cities, but that does not necessarily suggest the severing of tribal ties.

expressed his or her loyalty to Jordan and renounced any other political allegiance, including to Palestine. Though such a hard-line view is certainly a minority, mistrust lingers for those who openly express their fidelity outside the Kingdom.

All of this tension is further complicated by the position of some Israeli politicians, who advocate for an alternative homeland solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The argument asserts that Jordan is in fact Palestine and that most of the Palestinian demands are therefore moot. Riyadh as-Subuh from the National Centre for Human Rights cites the desire to not provide fuel for this fire as one reason Jordan avoids policies that might integrate the Palestinians or improve their station in the Kingdom, but dismisses them in the end. “They are integrated automatically. They are Jordanians.” The camp residents seem to suggest this is true. All but one of the residents now feel they are Jordanians rather than guests and that Jordan is their national home.

For the Jordanians, this positive choice of Jordan is important. “Jordan is home for those who choose Jordan,” according to Senator Biltaji. “For those who have their aspirations and their political rights in Palestine, Jordan respects that.” This issue is likely to be critical in a future where Jordan becomes permanent home to many of those it has long hosted. Samer Naber argues that Palestinians choosing Jordan over returning would go a long way to stabilizing the situation. “There is no doubt that the Right of Return even in principle would create an element of choice. Choice is essential both for the Palestinian refugees and for the host countries like Jordan.” Both men also stressed that choosing Jordan should be attached to an offer of compensation for the refugees, as promised in Resolution 194. Senator Biltaji noted “choosing Jordan doesn’t mean the loss of their right to compensation.”

It also cannot mean the wholesale rejection of the Palestinian ethnic identity. Most of the camp residents noted their strong ties to the camp community and felt their Palestinian identity was of great importance to them. When discussing the need for UNRWA to continue serving the camp communities pending a solution, Ali remarked on this keenly. “Without UNRWA there is no Palestine. The camps are Palestine.” Ali was hardly advocating for a Palestinian takeover of the Jordanian government and also felt strongly connected to Jordan. “I am a Jordanian,” he said proudly when noting that he would

not leave if given the choice. Rather, Ali was expressing the value of community. For Ali, Palestine is not just a place; it is a concept which has been kept alive in his personal connections to neighbors and friends over the long decades. The concept of a Palestinian identity must be understood as two distinct identifications. Ali has chosen a Palestinian ethnic identity, but not a Palestinian national identity.

“The only positive part of the camps is that they have helped preserve that identity and kept people from forgetting,” added Senator Biltaji. This need not suggest that Palestinians who choose to remain must have a schizophrenic understanding of their own identity. In reality, identity is a complex issue and is unique to each individual, often involving the layering of multiple personal identifications to produce an elaborate composite. Choosing a Palestinian ethnic identity does not preclude someone from also choosing a Jordanian national identity. The key to this sensitive and complex issue is the multifaceted nature of identity. For Jordan, a country long preoccupied with identity, it is a question of definitions.

It is vital that a frank discussion of the identity issue not become a proxy for other arguments not focused on the wellbeing of both the Palestinians and their Jordanian hosts. This discussion cannot become a supplement to the alternative homeland theory and this study has absolutely no intention of advocating such a concept. A Palestinian state must be formed to satisfy the national interests of many Palestinians and the principle of choice, as espoused in the Right of Return, must be preserved to as large a degree as possible, but these beliefs cannot prevent a pragmatic and honest discussion of the identity issue in Jordan.

## **LEGITIMACY**

One of the greatest dangers of a final agreement is the potential that it will have compromised too far to enjoy legitimacy from the displaced Palestinians. It is difficult to determine exactly where such a line might be crossed, but, given the likelihood that the principle of choice will not be preserved absolutely in any partial or nominal Right of Return, the possibility that an agreement might be rejected by the people must be considered. Dr. Samhuri felt strongly about the issue of legitimacy.

As a 1948 refugee, Samhuri is considerably less likely to be fully guaranteed his right to return to his family's land. When asked about a solution that would offer him the ability to return to a newly created Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza, Dr. Samhuri rejected the concept flatly. "I would be a refugee there and I am already a refugee here. Here I am already established, so why would I go start over there?" Samhuri argues that giving him a choice between Jordan and the West Bank does not satisfy his right to return as established in the international legal literature. "It is very much possible to solve the problem of the 1967 displaced persons while not solving the problem of the 1948 refugees. We will continue to be refugees until we are given our Right of Return."

For Samhuri, compromise seems almost impossible on this issue. "There is only one legitimate solution," he asserted. "Give me the right to choose." Notably, the doctor expressed no reservations at the thought of returning to an Israeli state. "I don't care if you want to call it Israel, just give me the right to return home and to be a democratic citizen regardless of my religion," he told me. "We are human beings and they are human beings. If they treat us as any other citizens, as the human beings that we are, then not only is it *mish mushkila* (Arabic for "no problem"), it is the permanent solution to this conflict. You will eliminate all sorts of hating and enmity."

At least one of the camp residents suggested legitimacy would be an issue for him as well. Faris, the 21-year-old student from *al-Wahdat*, said he would be inclined to reject an agreement that offered him only the choice of moving to the West Bank. Riyadh as-Subuh also weighed in from a human rights standpoint. "Do you want to push them to go to the West Bank? Their right as refugees within international law is to go to what is now Israel."

The danger then is that the political actors will return to the hard work of negotiations and finally reach an agreement, trumpeting the achievement under a banner of support from the international community, but the Palestinians will continue to understand the conflict and injustice as ongoing. Samer Naber admits that this is a possibility. "At the end of the day, I could not imagine a majority refusing a step forward."<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Naber was careful to note that such an opinion is hypothetical and not intended to be prescriptive or patronizing.



In all, only two of the ten Palestinians interviewed felt the likely outline of an agreement would be seen as illegitimate to them, but the potential for even a minority holding this belief could have serious consequences. It is therefore vital that the political actors begin listening more intently to the Palestinians themselves.

## **URGENCY AND NEED**

Respecting the voices within the Palestinian refugee camp communities is an issue that need not be left for a hypothetical future. It has already become a chronic problem of its own. Dr. Fawzi Samhuri stressed “the camp refugees have never been given a real role in decision-making. They have never been empowered to use their own voices, not by UNRWA and not by the government.” Part of that lack of respect is evident in the consistently underfunded initiatives designed to serve the communities. Making matters worse, the trend is going in the wrong direction. Despite the clear need to address issues like overcrowding and doctor-to-patient ratios, UNRWA isn’t being bolstered it is being cut further. Samhuri added that the symbolism and responsibility of UNRWA should not excuse the Jordanian government’s complicity in the status quo.

“I am a taxpayer,” he declared. “The government is already responsible for delivering services to me as a citizen, not as a refugee.” Though Samhuri believes in UNRWA as a symbol and agrees it must continue to function, he doesn’t believe that means the political reality of their funding situation should keep the refugees from accessing the highest standard of care available through the government. Senator Biltaji also noted the link between the quality of services and respect for the dignity of the camp residents. “No camp, no relief, no aid is ever enough. The fact that it is aid is in itself condescending to the pride of people,” he insisted.

Another outstanding aspect of the eventual agreement that need not be left for the future is the status of the Gazan refugees. Riyadh as-Subuh argues that the dissolution of UNRWA would be particularly detrimental for the Gazans, who do not enjoy full citizenship rights. Without UNRWA, there would need to be a legal transition of some sort. The first option is for Jordan to normalize the Gazans’

status and offer them full citizenship. This option should be given careful consideration as part of any eventual effort to integrate a remaining refugee population. As long as UNRWA continues to exist, the *United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees* (UNHCR) is prohibited from advocating on behalf of and offering protection to the Palestinian refugees.

As-Subuh said the plight of the Gazans raises an interesting set of questions. “Would UNHCR take responsibility for those without Jordanian nationality? After UNRWA, we will find ourselves with hundreds of thousands of Gazans: refugees without a nationality and without international protection.” One of the residents of *al-Wahdat* I met would face this situation. Thirty-three-year-old Hassan expressed his frustration as a second generation Gazan refugee. “I should have a passport. I should be a citizen. I have been here for 33 years. I am from Jordan.”

The multitude of issues that Jordanians of all backgrounds will face in the future require the conduct of a sober and frank discussion and that dialogue should not be left for some distant future. The need for a resolution to the refugee problem was recognized universally among those interviewed. Dr. Samhuri described the conflict as a “wound that is felt in the soul.” Until it is dealt with, parents will continue passing it on to their children, sustaining the generational cycle of trauma. Senator Biltaji maintained that there is strength in that pain though and noted that the conflict will never go away until it is seriously addressed. “The determination of the Palestinian people is greater than the fortress of security we call Israel.”

For the camp residents, there is a sense that the future is not just something they will passively experience. Many identified with the success of ordinary people in the recent revolutions occurring across the Arab world and felt the camp communities needed to find their voice. In a cramped barbershop in *Jabal al-Husseini* camp, Dhiya (18) insisted, “if we want to be heard, we must follow Egypt’s example.” The sentiment was echoed in *al-Wahdat*, where Hassan (38) said the camp residents “[had] to be brave enough to demand change and respect.” His neighbor, Ehab (32) agreed. “People have to speak up.” For the camp residents, finding a permanent home and an end to generational injustice is about asserting dignity and finding a voice, whether that home ends up being in Palestine, Israel, or Jordan.

# CONCLUSION

Negotiators of a final agreement to conclude the Israeli-Palestinian conflict face a number of monumental tasks, with the resolution of the issue of refugees likely to prove the most difficult to satisfy. After decades of negotiations and literature, it is not unreasonable to argue that the broad outline of a likely agreement is already known, and that outline would suggest major ramifications for the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan and the significant refugee population it hosts. In the likely event a political solution were achieved on the basis of a two-state solution, the principle aspect of the refugee issue, the Right of Return, would likely be limited in its actuation.

By denying refugees a full right to choose return, negotiators will create new challenges for the Jordanian government, which will be obligated to succeed the *United Nations Relief & Works Agency* (UNRWA) as the primary provider of services within the communities that have formed inside the internationally administered refugee camps of the Kingdom. The government will face a number of logistical challenges in presiding over the transition to a post-camp situation, including increasing its capacity and funding. It will also have an opportunity to confront some of the trials that stand to prevent the Kingdom from emerging from the peace process as a more whole and equitable society, including systemic disparities in the political and economic system and issues of citizenship rights among hundreds of thousands of Gazans refugees.

The camp residents will face similarly imposing challenges related to intergation and legitimacy. For those who remain in Jordan, the issue of identity will loom large and it will be the profound struggle of Jordanians of all backgrounds to define the collective identity of their shared society in a uniquely Jordanian way. This struggle should primarily take the form of a dialogue. Such a conversation will require the participation of the camp residents and refugees and the inclusion of the voices of all those who choose to build for themselves a life and a home in the Hashemite Kingdom.

# LIMITATIONS OF STUDY

Though the study draws upon the existing literature and surveys on the Right of Return, the study makes a large assumption about the validity of those findings and the responses of the camp residents interviewed during the project. Of course, the actual percentage of Palestinians who would choose repatriation cannot be determined with any degree of certainty.

Similarly, the study assumes the outline of a final status agreement based on the previous rounds of bilateral and multilateral discussions and the various political and academic working groups that have investigated the issue at length. It is possible though that one or several of the components held to be likely in a final agreement may be adapted or compromised by various means that could affect the refugee issue in untold ways.

The limited number of camp residents interviewed prevents the study from offering a more quantitative perspective, though the dialogue to which the study seeks to contribute is likely to be based more on the qualitative experiences of individuals and communities than simple statistics. Other factors including the gender of the interviewees and the fact that interviews were only conducted in two camps add to this limitation, but should be seen as opportunities to explore the issues raised here and those not considered through a continuation of this dialogue with other camp residents.

The study also willingly limits itself by focusing on refugees residing in camps, rather than the majority of Palestinians in Jordan who live outside the camps.

Methodologically, the study also might be limited by its researcher. As a male, English-speaking, American university student, my access to the most complete and accurate responses might have been affected by cultural biases. Attempts were made to combat this possibility by adhering to cultural norms, utilization of a translator, and the use of mutual connections to assure participants of my intentions.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

First and foremost, any future study which aims to continue the critical dialogue encouraged in this project will be a welcome addition to the sparse literature on the issue. Specific recommendations for further study include:

- The current and future status of the Gazan refugees, their attitudes toward their station, and the likely affect such views will have on the possibility of repatriation for this group.
- The disparities that currently exist between the schools inside the camps and those in larger cities like Amman.
- The Jordanian government's position on supplementing the services UNRWA is currently offering to ensure a higher standard of living, including the potential political downside of such a decision.
- The supplementary role of non-governmental organizations in the camps.
- The community organizations inside the camps, most particularly the Camp Service Improvement Committees, and how they both amplify and limit the voices of the camp residents.
- The formation of a Jordanian national identity within the Palestinian communities over time and how that process creates tension among Palestinians and in interaction with "East Bank" Jordanians.
- The effects of the 2011 Arab Awakening on camp residents and how the revolutions have influenced the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, including an investigation of why the conflict has not played a larger role in protests.

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# APPENDIX I: CONSENT

## مشاركة في دراسة بحثية

أنت مدعو للمشاركة في بحث حول "مستقبل الخدمات المقدمة للاجئين الفلسطينيين المقيمين في الأردن"

### الباحث:

جوردن يونج، طالب جامعي متخصص في مجال الصحة العامة في جامعة دنفر في الولايات المتحدة الأمريكية-كالورادو.

### الإجراءات:

إذا تمت الموافقة على المشاركة في هذه الدراسة سأقوم بمقابلتك وسؤالك بعض الأسئلة المتعلقة بموضوع الدراسة.

### السرية:

سأبقي على سرية جميع المعلومات التي سأحصل عليها أثناء المقابلة. غير أنه سيكون من الأكثر فائدة للدراسة إذا كنت أستطيع ذكر إسمك ومؤسستك و بعض الإقتباسات

برجى إختيار واحد مما يلي  
أود أن تكون هذه المقابلة من غير مسمى \_\_\_\_\_  
أسمح للباحث إستخدام إسمي في هذا البحث \_\_\_\_\_

### للإتصال والأسئلة

الرجاء عدم التردد في الإتصال بالباحث في أي وقت. يمكنك السؤال الآن أو في أي وقت بعد المقابلة على البريد الإلكتروني: [jordanmyoung@gmail.com](mailto:jordanmyoung@gmail.com)

يمكنك أيضا الإتصال ب

مجلس البحوث المؤسسي مع جمعية التعلم العالمية  
د. رائد التبيني ، الممثل والمدير الأكاديمي لجمعية التعلم العالمية  
هاتف: (962) 077 7463348 +  
البريد الإلكتروني: [raed.altabini@sit.edu](mailto:raed.altabini@sit.edu)

### بيان الموافقة

لقد قرأت المعلومات المذكورة أعلاه، وأوافق على المشاركة في هذه الدراسة

ل \_\_\_\_\_ التوقيع \_\_\_\_\_ توقيع الباحث

\_\_\_\_\_ التاريخ \_\_\_\_\_ التاريخ

شكرا لتعاونكم