



“Incredibly Difficult, Tragically Needed, and Absorbingly Interesting”: Lessons from the AFSC School Program for Palestinian Refugees in Gaza, 1949 to 1950

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“INCREDIBLY DIFFICULT,
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LESSONS FROM THE AFSC SCHOOL
PROGRAM FOR PALESTINIAN REFUGEES
IN GAZA, 1949 TO 1950

JO KELCEY

ABSTRACT

This article examines a school program operated by the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) for Palestinian refugees in Gaza in 1949 and 1950. Drawing on historical records from organizations involved in the broader relief effort, it examines why the school program was set up and how it operated, and considers the lessons it offers for contemporary refugee education efforts. I argue that, while AFSC adopted an atypical approach to humanitarian relief that prioritized education from the outset of the crisis, the school program it developed was invariably constrained by the overarching humanitarian paradigm within which it operated. Funding for education was limited, which left the schools vulnerable to competing political objectives. This article underscores the importance of understanding the history of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East in order to understand its present, and to inform contemporary education efforts for other refugee populations. The article also highlights the need for a critical appraisal of attempts to align refugee education programs with the generally accepted principles of humanitarianism.

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INTRODUCTION

Established in late 1949, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) today provides education for more than half a million refugee students in Gaza, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, and the West Bank. The U.S. government has been a major funder of UNRWA, consistently contributing one-third or more of its budget. However, in 2018, the Trump administration cut this funding, describing the agency as an “irredeemably flawed operation.”¹ Since education accounts for over half of UNRWA’s program budget and two-thirds of its 21,000-member staff, these funding cuts effectively threaten the education of half a million Palestinian refugees in a region where 700,000 Syrian refugee children are already out of school.²

UNRWA officials described the funding cuts as creating an “existential crisis” for the agency and expressed particular concern about the future sustainability of its education program.³ Much criticism of the U.S. decision to cut funding focused on the immediate humanitarian consequences and the security implications of a large number of children being out of school.⁴ This article considers UNRWA’s financial susceptibility from a historical perspective. Drawing from extensive archival research, I examine an early response to the need for education for Palestinian refugees who fled the Arab-Israeli war that began in 1948. In 1949 and 1950, the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC), a Quaker organization that works to promote just and durable peace in the United States and abroad, initiated a school program for Palestinian refugees in Gaza.⁵ Since the AFSC program served as a prototype for the UNRWA education program, this history offers important insights into UNRWA’s current situation. It also sheds light on the complexities inherent in setting up education services in contexts of large-scale displacement.

1 Peter Beaumont and Oliver Holmes, “US Confirms End to UN Funding for Palestinian Refugees,” *The Guardian*, August 31, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/aug/31/trump-to-cut-all-us-funding-for-uns-main-palestinian-refugee-programme>.

2 UNRWA, “What We Do,” <https://www.unrwa.org/what-we-do/education>; Ana V. Ibáñez Prieto, “Four Million Refugee Children Out of School Worldwide, Over 70,000 in Jordan,” *The Jordan Times*, August 30, 2018, <http://www.jordantimes.com/news/local/four-million-refugee-children-out-school-worldwide-over-70000-jordan>.

3 UNRWA, “UNRWA Statement on Implications of Funding Shortfall on Emergency Services in the OPT,” July 26, 2018, <https://www.un.org/unispal/document/unrwa-statement-on-implications-of-funding-shortfall-on-emergency-services-in-the-opt/>.

4 Colum Lynch, “U.S. to End All Funding to U.N. Agency That Aids Palestinian Refugees,” *Foreign Policy*, August 26, 2018, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/08/28/middle-east-palestinian-israel-pompeo-trump-kushner-u-s-to-end-all-funding-to-u-n-agency-that-aids-palestinian-refugees/>.

5 AFSC, “About Us,” July 10, 2019, <https://www.afsc.org/about-us>.

This article asks and answers two main questions: Why did AFSC establish a school program for Palestinians in Gaza? How did the AFSC school program operate? I argue that AFSC supported education in Gaza in keeping with its mission to promote peace and justice. However, the United Nations' (UN) overarching view of humanitarian relief as a temporary and apolitical intervention limited funding for the school program, resulted in heavy dependence on host states' education structures, and left the schools susceptible to political manipulation. I draw two important lessons from this history. First is the need to understand UNRWA's contemporary situation in light of its past, in particular the conditions that shaped its establishment. Second is the importance of learning from the Palestinian case when designing and implementing education responses to contemporary large-scale displacement crises. I argue that the decisions made in the months following the Palestinian refugee crisis of 1948 have had an enduring impact on UNRWA's education program. This history points in particular to the need to reflect critically on the implications of initiating education programs for refugees under conditions imposed by humanitarianism, which, by claiming to be neutral and impartial, obscures the highly political and politicized role of education.⁶

The article is organized as follows. In the next section I provide background on the Palestinian case and discuss its wider significance, followed by a description of my methods and analytical approach. I then examine the establishment and development of the AFSC school program in light of the two most persistent claims of humanitarian aid: that it is temporary and apolitical. I conclude by reflecting on the relevance of this history for understanding UNRWA's current situation and the challenges facing refugee education initiatives more broadly.

THE RELEVANCE OF THE PALESTINIAN CASE

Between 1947 and 1949, approximately 800,000 Palestinians were forced to leave Palestine due to the raging conflict. Most sought asylum in neighboring countries and territories.⁷ Humanitarian support initially was provided by families, religious

6 International Committee of the Red Cross, "The Fundamental Principles of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement," October 31, 1986, <https://www.icrc.org/en/document/fundamental-principles-red-cross-and-red-crescent>. For a more detailed discussion of these claims and their centrality to humanitarian action, see Michael Barnett, *Empire of Humanity: A History of Humanitarianism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011). For a discussion of the short-term horizons of humanitarianism, see Cathrine Brun, "There Is No Future in Humanitarianism: Emergency, Temporality and Protracted Displacement," *History and Anthropology* 27, no. 4 (2016): 393-410, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02757206.2016.1207637>.

7 Ilan Pappé, *A History of Modern Palestine: One Land, Two Peoples*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

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organizations, and host governments. In July 1948, these efforts were supplemented by the United Nations Disaster Relief Programme (UNDRP), which delivered basic supplies to the refugees. In November 1948, UNDRP was replaced by the United Nations Relief for Palestinian Refugees (UNRPR), which contracted three organizations to administer aid on its behalf: AFSC in Gaza, the League of Red Cross Societies in Lebanon and Syria, and the International Committee of the Red Cross in Jordan and the West Bank. These organizations were contracted to deliver food, shelter, and basic medical aid for the refugees for an eight-month period, but they remained for 18 months. Their programs were transferred to UNRWA when it began operations in May 1950. Among the projects handed over was a burgeoning network of schools.

Although studies have highlighted the key role the refugees themselves played in setting up these schools, less attention has been paid to how international aid actors shaped the education efforts.⁸ A better understanding of the dynamics and practices of aid provision during the formative period of 1948-1950 is important to understanding what came after. While the politics of aid have been examined in conflict-affected contexts, less attention has been paid to the ways aid shapes education for refugees whose displacement and exile are protracted and for whom education is often a priority.⁹ Aid is never apolitical, not least aid to education, and the history of AFSC's work in Gaza provides a valuable lens through which to view this topic.¹⁰ Refugees have outnumbered locals in Gaza since 1948, accounting for around 70 percent of the territory's population. Most refugees in Gaza are dependent on the aid and services UNRWA provides.¹¹ Although schools for Palestinian refugees were established across UNRPR's area of operation, the Gaza program was the largest. When UNRWA started work on May 1, 1950, it inherited 33,000 refugee students studying in 62 schools in Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, the West Bank, and Gaza; more than half were in Gaza.¹²

8 Anne E. Irfan, "Educating Palestinian Refugees: The Origins of UNRWA's Unique Schooling System," *Journal of Refugee Studies* fez051 (2019): 1-23, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/fez051>.

9 Sarah Dryden-Peterson, "Refugee Education: Education for an Unknowable Future," *Curriculum Inquiry* 47, no. 1 (2017): 14-24, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03626784.2016.1255935>.

10 Dana Burde, *Schools for Conflict or for Peace in Afghanistan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014).

11 UNRWA, "Where We Work," <https://www.unrwa.org/where-we-work/gaza-strip>.

12 UNESCO, "Report on Educational Assistance to the Refugee Children in the Middle East, 1 January 1949 to 31 July 1950," UNESDOC, 5, https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000128047_eng. Of the 33,000 students UNRWA inherited across Gaza, Lebanon, Syria, and Jordan (including the West Bank), approximately 18,000 students were located in 22 schools in Gaza. AFSC, "Report on Educational Assistance to the Refugee Children in the Middle East, 1 January 1949 to 31 July 1950," 5.

In taking over AFSC's work in Gaza, UNRWA didn't just inherit schools, it inherited an education program with specific policies. Records suggest that the AFSC program was the most systematized of the education efforts developed for those in exile.¹³ Moreover, the role AFSC played in ensuring that the refugee schools continued under UN administration and the fact that UNRWA hired former AFSC volunteers to run the schools are indicative of the influence this early education model had on the model developed by UNRWA.

UNRWA: EXCEPTIONAL OR INDICATIVE?

Initially conceived as a temporary organization, UNRWA has now been in operation for seven decades. It currently serves five million "Palestine refugees" to whom it is mandated to provide relief, human development, and protection services.¹⁴ Education is UNRWA's largest activity, accounting for more than half of the agency's core operational budget and around 70 percent of its staff.¹⁵ The field of refugee studies has tended to treat the Palestinian case as an exception, which reflects the partial exclusion of Palestinians from the 1951 Refugee Convention and the different ways UNRWA and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) operate.¹⁶ The Palestinian case is also distinguished by its longevity, its high proportion of refugees relative to the overall Palestinian population (refugees account for three-quarters of the Palestinian population worldwide), and the entrenched political impediments to finding a just and durable solution to the refugees' situation.¹⁷ These differences have been reified

13 AFSC, report on education activities, November 1949, Folder 60, Foreign Service Section, Palestine 1949, "Refugee Projects: Projects School Program" (Philadelphia: AFSC). "It is a pleasure to note that the refugee schools in the Southern Palestine area are an integral part of the AFSC program with refugees, operating with regular hours, administration and curriculum. Attendance of both teachers and students is regular."

14 Palestine refugees are "persons whose normal place of residence was Palestine during the period 1 June 1946 to 15 May 1948, and who lost both home and means of livelihood as a result of the 1948 conflict." UNRWA, "Palestine Refugees," <https://www.unrwa.org/palestine-refugees>. Although this is an administrative definition endorsed by the UN General Assembly, Palestine refugees are also recognized as refugees as per the 1951 Refugee Convention. See Francesca Albanese, "Current Issues in Depth: UNRWA and Palestine Refugee Rights. New Assaults, New Challenges" (Washington, DC, Institute for Palestine Studies, 2018).

15 UNRWA, "What We Do: Education," <https://www.unrwa.org/what-we-do/education>.

16 UNHCR statute states that UNHCR services should not extend to refugees who receive protection or assistance from other UN agencies. Article 1D of the 1951 Refugee Convention notes, however, that whenever the assistance and protection provided to the refugees served by other agencies ceases they should then come under UNHCR's mandate. For an in-depth discussion of this, see Albanese, "Current Issues in Depth."

17 These impediments include Israel's *raison d'être* as a Jewish and Zionist state, the lack of Palestinian sovereignty over historic Palestine, the fact that a large number of refugees within UNRWA's areas of operation continue to demand repatriation, and the associated denial of citizenship rights to the refugees by several host states. Michael Dumper, "Palestinian Refugees," in *Protracted Refugee Situations, Political, Human Rights and Security Implications*, ed. Gil Loescher, James Milner, Edward Newman, and Gary G. Troeller (New York: United Nations University Press, 2008), 189-213.

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in policy discourse, which creates a tendency to avoid comparisons between the Palestinian case and other refugee contexts, or even to highlight shared aspects.¹⁸

Certainly, the Palestinian case evolved in a distinct way. In July 1948, the UN established UNDRP, which was replaced by UNRPR in November of that year. Just one month later, in December 1948, the United Nations Conciliation Commission for Palestine (UNCCP) was created to negotiate a political solution to the Israel-Palestine conflict. When UNRWA was established in late 1949, it took over UNRPR’s relief portfolio while its operational and supposedly apolitical mandate was intended to complement, rather than reproduce, the efforts of UNCCP. Although UNCCP still exists in name, its operations stopped in the early 1950s, leaving UNRWA as the only UN agency actively working with Palestinian refugees in Gaza, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, and the West Bank. Thus, by the time the 1951 Refugee Convention was drafted, a distinct two-part regime, consisting of UNCCP and UNRWA, was already in place for the Palestinian refugees.

The different purposes assigned to UNRWA and UNHCR and their separate historical trajectories have resulted in marked differences in how the two agencies operate. These differences are especially apparent in education. Fifty-four percent of UNRWA’s program budget is spent on education, which is used to operate schools and hire and train thousands of staff members, the overwhelming majority of whom are Palestine refugees.¹⁹ In the 1960s, the agency achieved nearly full enrollment in basic education for Palestine refugees. UNHCR, in contrast, does not operate schools; it coordinates efforts between various service providers (public, private, and NGO) to provide education for the refugees under its mandate. Education accounted for 9 percent of UNHCR’s global programs budget in 2017, and only 50 percent of the refugees under UNHCR’s mandate currently have access to primary education.²⁰

While UNRWA fares comparatively well in terms of providing refugees with access to education, the role and purpose of its education program are contested. Scholars have questioned whether the agency can meet the needs and aspirations of stateless Palestinians for whom national liberation and the preservation of

18 Michael Kagan, “The (Relative) Decline of Palestinian Exceptionalism and Its Consequences for Refugee Studies in the Middle East,” *Journal of Refugee Studies* 22, no. 4 (2009): 417-38, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/fep023>.

19 UNRWA, “How We Spend Funds,” <https://www.unrwa.org/how-you-can-help/how-we-spend-funds>.

20 UNHCR, “Biennial Programme Budget 2018-2019 of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees,” August 31, 2017, <http://www.unhcr.org/excom/excomrep/59c276a27/biennial-programme-budget-2018-2019-office-united-nations-high-commissioner.html>; UNHCR, *Turn the Tide: Refugee Education in Crisis* (Geneva: UNHCR, 2018).

cultural identity are paramount.²¹ Moreover, UNRWA's use of host state curricula has been criticized for suppressing Palestinians' historical narrative and violating their right to a culturally relevant education.²² Another critique of the agency is that it breeds dependency on aid and promotes anti-Israel bias, including through its schools.²³ This last critique was cited by the U.S. government in 2018 when it withdrew its funding. In announcing this decision, the state department declared that it was "no longer willing to shoulder the disproportionate burden of UNRWA's costs." It further objected to UNRWA's "business model and fiscal practices," which, it argued, resulted in an "endlessly and exponentially expanding community of entitled beneficiaries."²⁴

The particulars of the Palestinian case notwithstanding, the protracted nature of contemporary displacement and the many debates about UNRWA's education program highlight the common challenge facing refugee education programs;²⁵ namely, the tensions that arise when education—which is conventionally understood as a long-term activity that helps foster sociocultural belonging, political community, and economic development—occurs within the framework of humanitarianism, which posits temporary and apolitical interventions.²⁶ The history of the AFSC program sheds light on these contradictions and offers valuable insights into the subsequent development of UNRWA, and the inherent challenges of initiating education efforts in contexts of large-scale displacement.

21 Ibrahim Abu Lughod, "Educating a Community in Exile: The Palestinian Experience," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 2, no. 3 (1973): 94-111, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2535750>.

22 Rosemary Sayigh, "Where Are the History Books for Palestinian Children?" *Journal of Holy Land and Palestine Studies* 16, no. 2 (2017): 145-75, <https://doi.org/10.3366/hlps.2017.0163>.

23 Adi Schwartz and Einat Wilf, "How UNRWA Prevents Gaza from Thriving," *Ha'aretz*, June 6, 2018, <https://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/palestinians/premium.MAGAZINE-how-unrwa-prevents-gaza-from-thriving-1.6155143>.

24 U.S. Department of State, "On U.S. Assistance to UNRWA," August 31, 2018, <https://www.state.gov/on-u-s-assistance-to-unrwa/>.

25 A protracted refugee situation is 25,000 refugees or more who have been in exile for a minimum of five years. This figure *excludes* Palestine refugees in UNRWA's areas of operations. In 2018, 78 percent of refugee situations were protracted accounting for 15.9 million refugees. UNHCR, *Global Trends: Forced Displacement in 2018*. (Geneva: UNHCR, 2019).

26 See, for example, Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983); Emile Durkheim, *Education and Sociology*, trans. Sherwood D. Fox (New York: The Free Press, 1956); Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1983).

DATA AND METHODS

History is a contested social process, as different groups and individuals have uneven access to the means for producing and narrating history.²⁷ As such, historical approaches are especially relevant in uncovering the politics and power dynamics of aid interventions. However, historical research on responses to forced displacement is relatively rare. Several factors explain this. Bakewell argues that the trend toward policy-relevant research can render certain groups of refugees invisible to scholars.²⁸ A preoccupation with the relevance of policy may also favor research on newly emerging crises, rather than on cases of longstanding displacement. Moreover, humanitarianism, which continues to dominate responses to refugee situations, is rooted in the idea that the provision of aid is apolitical, which in turn implies a significant degree of ahistoricism. Finally, displacement and conflict often are not conducive to record-keeping or to preserving historical sources, which limits the possibility of conducting historical research.²⁹ Fortunately, rich historical sources were found to support this examination of the Palestinian case.

HISTORICAL RECORDS

This study is part of a larger research project for which I consulted seven archives and several online collections between 2016 and 2018. Three archives were especially relevant in reconstructing the history of the AFSC school program: the AFSC archive in Philadelphia, the UNESCO archive in Paris, and the United Nations Archives and Records and Management Section (UNARMS) archive in New York City.

AFSC meticulously documented its work in Gaza; six boxes of files cover the period from 1948 to 1950. Typical documents include program reports sent from Gaza to colleagues in Philadelphia, correspondence between the AFSC team and the UNRPR staff, internal memos, and meeting minutes. The AFSC records were especially valuable in understanding this period because of the leading role AFSC played and because of the self-reflective nature of Quakerism, which lends itself

27 Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), xix.

28 Oliver Bakewell, “Research beyond the Categories: The Importance of Policy Irrelevant Research into Forced Migration,” *Journal of Refugee Studies* 21, no. 4 (2008): 432-35, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/fen042>.

29 Jérôme Elie, “Histories of Refugee and Forced Migration Studies,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Refugee and Forced Migration Studies*, ed. Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, Gil Loescher, Katy Long, and Nando Sigona (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2014), 23-35.

to rich and critical political commentary.³⁰ I reviewed all the AFSC files related to its Gaza program during this period.

UNESCO and UNARMS offer finding aids that help researchers identify and locate files that are relevant for their studies. The UNESCO archive was an important source of information. UNESCO has been involved in providing education for Palestine refugees since November 1948, when the Lebanese government requested support during the agency's Third Annual Conference, held in Beirut. Between 1948 and 1950, UNESCO provided funding and technical advice to the agencies contracted by UNRPR and offered fellowships for Palestinian teachers to study abroad. When UNRWA was established, the UN secretary general asked UNESCO to continue providing technical support to the agency on education matters. However, few studies have considered the role UNESCO played in shaping UNRWA's education program or have drawn from UNESCO's rich archives. The UNARMS records in New York offer insights into the administrative and logistical dimensions of UNRPR's work. I took detailed notes while in the archives and scanned the most relevant documents for further analysis. I supplemented these records with the memoirs of aid workers, oral histories of former AFSC volunteers, and other relevant literature.

INTERPRETATIVE APPROACH

To understand the contested social processes that shaped the establishment and operation of the AFSC school program and precipitated its transition to UN administration, I sought to identify the motivations and influences that informed the establishment and operation of the program. Since the AFSC program was initiated first and foremost as a humanitarian intervention, I interrogated these motivations and influences in light of two aspects of the humanitarian paradigm: that the nature of emergencies is temporary, and that humanitarian interventions are apolitical. I thus sought to understand how the discursive environment of humanitarian aid shaped the provision of education for Palestinian refugees.

By analyzing the records of different organizations and a wide range of document types, I sought to balance organizational perspectives and mitigate gaps in the historical narrative. However, limitations must be acknowledged. Archival records are necessarily incomplete, and the criteria for preserving documents are not

30 Julie Peteet, "The AFSC Refugee Archives on Palestine: 1948-1950," in *Reinterpreting the Historical Record: The Uses of Palestinian Refugee Archives for Social Science Research and Policy Analysis*, ed. Salim Tamari and Elia Zureik (Washington, DC: Institute for Palestine Studies, 2001), 109-28. See also, Ilana Feldman, "The Quaker Way: Ethical Labor and Humanitarian Relief," *American Ethnologist* 34, no. 4 (2007): 689-705, <https://doi.org/10.1525/ae.2007.34.4.689>.

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always clear. Archives also privilege particular perspectives, in this case those of foreign aid workers and Western government officials. Thus, the history presented here by no means comprehensively reflects the refugee experience. Rather, it sheds light on why and how the AFSC school program was established and provides insight into the limitations that shape education programs for refugees.

SETTING UP THE SCHOOLS

By 1948, AFSC had amassed extensive experience working in the United States and abroad. Grounded in the Quaker approach to conflict resolution, the AFSC's work differs from traditional models of humanitarianism, in that it focuses not only on saving lives but also on creating conditions for peace through education and community development.³¹ During the 1930s, AFSC won the admiration of Eleanor Roosevelt, and when the Arab-Israeli war broke out in 1948, she recommended to UN Secretary General Trygve Lie that AFSC be involved in relief efforts for Palestinian refugees. Lie considered AFSC a good fit for the UN relief efforts: it had the requisite experience, had worked with Jewish refugees in Europe, and had been engaged in early efforts to secure a ceasefire in the Arab-Israeli conflict. Conscious that the UN was a new organization that needed to prove itself, Lie was also keen not to subcontract the entire aid effort to the Red Cross.³²

However, AFSC had reservations about working with the UN. It was largely a volunteer-based organization, and senior staff members were concerned about their ability to manage such a big operation. They also worried that, by working through the UN, AFSC would “have to face some compromises away from their traditional ways of working.”³³ To address these concerns, AFSC officials agreed to work with the UN only if certain operational criteria, known as the 19 points, were met. These criteria established the scale and scope of the planned relief efforts, articulated AFSC's operational autonomy, and underscored AFSC's expectation that its relief efforts would be accompanied by concerted political efforts by the UN to address the refugees' predicament.³⁴ To the surprise of AFSC officials, the UN agreed to these terms, and a contract between AFSC and UNRPR was

31 Nancy Gallagher, *Quakers in the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict: The Dilemmas of NGO Humanitarian Activism* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2007), 7-8.

32 Gallagher, *Quakers in the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict*, 51.

33 AFSC, Minutes of the Foreign Service Executive Committee meeting, November 17, 1948, Folder 174, Foreign Service Section, Palestine (Philadelphia: AFSC).

34 Minutes of the Foreign Service Executive Committee meeting, November 17, 1948.

signed in November 1948. The project was to last eight months, which UN officials assumed would be enough time to get a political resolution in place.

AFSC was contracted to provide food, shelter, and basic medical care for the refugees—a huge task. More than 200,000 people had sought refuge in Gaza, far outnumbering the local population of 80,000. Moreover, fighting between the Egyptians and Israelis continued, causing fear among the refugees and tensions between AFSC and the Egyptian army. In journal entries from January 1949, Clarence Pickett, then CEO of AFSC, described the difficult conditions the agency faced in its aid efforts:

I watched them bury a man, a baby born, hundreds of malnourished children, a local farmer angry because the refugees are burning up his trees and sands would soon shift again. Also we saw the problem of the surrender of authority by the army and our assuming it. This project is incredibly difficult. Tragically needed, and absorbingly interesting.³⁵

By March 1949, however, AFSC was not only providing food, shelter, and basic medical care to the refugees; it also had launched a school program.

Schools for the refugees preceded AFSC's arrival in Gaza. An AFSC report from February 1949 describes, for example, how refugee teachers in the Al Maghazy camp in central Gaza had established three classes in an old kitchen. Students lacked desks and there were only a few copy books to go around. The instruction was repetition-based, and teachers illustrated lessons by drawing on the stone wall with rocks.³⁶ Refugees had also sought placement in local public schools, but demand far exceeded supply. The Egyptian authorities, who had assumed effective control of Gaza during the Arab-Israeli war, were overwhelmed, and the UNRPR plans did not include provisions for education.

External support for education was initiated in January 1949, when Pickett visited Gaza and Egypt to set up the relief program. Pickett had an expansive vision that included all 70,000 school-age children in Gaza having access to education.³⁷ Egyptian officials were receptive to the idea but stressed that these schools should

³⁵ AFSC, Journal entry of Clarence Pickett, undated, Folder 133, Foreign Service Section, Palestine, 1949 Refugee Projects: Reports, Pickett trip (Philadelphia: AFSC), 4-5.

³⁶ AFSC, Background material on Maghazy, February 16, 1949, Folder 116, Foreign Service Section, Letters to the United Nations (Philadelphia: AFSC).

³⁷ AFSC, Report on Educational Activities, August 1, 1949. Folder 60, Foreign Service Section, Palestine, 1949, Refugee Projects (Philadelphia: AFSC), 13.

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be kept separate from their country’s education system. Although the records do not give a clear reason for this, there was general resistance among Arab states to integrating the refugees into the public sector through the burgeoning aid projects, lest this commit them to the long-term care of the refugees and prejudice the resolution of their situation.³⁸ The Egyptians also asked AFSC to work closely with the Palestinian education authorities in Gaza to develop a hybrid program that supported both Gazans and the refugees.

The AFSC school program was officially launched in March 1949. It sought to integrate refugee children into public schools to the greatest extent possible; they did this by increasing the number of students per class and using two school shifts. Schools that had been established by the refugees and local Gazans were brought under the auspices of the AFSC school program and additional schools were created, all staffed by volunteers. The Palestinian inspector of education for Gaza supervised and kept records on all of these schools, thus providing a measure of standardization between the refugee and local school systems. Despite resistance from the Egyptian administration, AFSC also insisted that the schools accommodate girls and boys.

The school program grew quickly; by June 1949, 16,000 refugees were studying in dedicated refugee schools where they were taught by 400 teachers. Five thousand of these students were girls.³⁹ A further 6,000 refugees were studying in public schools. However, UNRPR’s vision of humanitarian relief was of a short-term intervention that addressed the biological necessities of life, and it did not allow its funds to be used for the schools, despite the refugees’ clear demand for education. Financially unable to expand their program, the AFSC team spent much of late 1949 and early 1950 consolidating the existing schools. They sought donations of paper, books, maps, and pens from UN agencies, diplomatic missions, and religious and charitable societies in Egypt and further afield. In carpentry workshops run by AFSC, refugees made classroom benches and cabinets. Finally, the decision was made to direct surplus tents and food rations to the school program to create a basic classroom infrastructure and a feeding program.

As time wore on, AFSC grew concerned about the future of the school program. The UNRPR mandate was set to expire in April 1950, but political negotiations led by UNCCP regarding the refugees’ return had stalled. By late 1949, it was clear

38 Letter from Sir Raphael Cilento, Director of the Division of Social Activities to Mr. Trygve Lie, Secretary General of the United Nations, September 26, 1949, Folder, S-0369-0034-002 (New York: UNARMS).

39 AFSC, Letter from Howard Wriggins to Colin Bell, re. Educational Programme, June 2, 1949, Folder 60, Foreign Service Section, Palestine, 1949, Refugee Projects: Projects School Program (Philadelphia: AFSC).

that UNRPR would be replaced by a new initiative. Plans for this follow-up were heavily influenced by the U.S. government, which dispatched an economic survey mission (ESM) to the region. The ESM recommended replicating large-scale public works projects of the type implemented in the United States during and after the Great Depression. U.S. officials reasoned that schemes of this type would create jobs for the refugees and promote the economic development of the host states. There also was an ulterior motive; Elmore Jackson, director of the Quaker UN office, wrote to Pickett, “Although the [ESM] report itself and no one here says that this is a first step towards the ‘resettlement’ of the refugees in Lebanon, Syria and Trans-Jordan, everyone tacitly admits that this is the case.”⁴⁰ U.S. officials assumed that economic development and jobs would distract the refugees and host states from their resistance to resettlement, thus bypassing the political stalemate and any corresponding obligation to facilitate large-scale repatriation for the refugees. The ESM did recognize the need for ongoing humanitarian assistance, but it stated that these efforts should be on a smaller scale than before and only last until December 1950. By this time, U.S. officials reasoned, the refugees would be self-sufficient and the need for relief obviated.⁴¹ The ESM’s recommendations formed the basis for UN General Assembly Resolution 302(IV), which spelled out plans for the creation of a UN agency to carry this vision forward.⁴² This agency was UNRWA. Interestingly, these plans made no reference to the primary education that would come to characterize UNRWA’s programming.

The AFSC was committed to ensuring that the schools continued. However, staff members found themselves unacceptably constrained by the UN’s humanitarian vision and structures, which prevented them from pursuing programming that promoted peace and justice.⁴³ Staff members were especially uncomfortable with the idea of providing long-term relief in the absence of meaningful political engagement around the refugees’ future.⁴⁴ AFSC briefly considered transferring the schools to Egyptian authorities, which made sense practically, as operation of the schools already required the Egyptians’ agreement. By early 1950, it was AFSC policy to use the Egyptian curriculum where possible.⁴⁵ However, AFSC

40 AFSC, Memo from Elmore Jackson to Clarence Pickett, November 29, 1949, Folder 123, Foreign Service Section, Palestine, 1949, Refugee Projects: Reports, United Nations, Economic Survey Mission (Clapp Mission) (Philadelphia: AFSC).

41 Benjamin N. Schiff, *Refugees unto the Third Generation: UN Aid to Palestinians* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1995).

42 UN General Assembly, 1949, December 8, “Resolution 302(IV)—Assistance to Palestine Refugees.” A/RES/302(IV).

43 Feldman, “The Quaker Way.”

44 Letter from Clarence Pickett to Trygve Lie, May 5, 1949, File S-0369-0034-001 (New York: UNARMS).

45 Operational report of the AFSC, February 1950, Folder 132, Foreign Service, Projects, school program 1950 (Philadelphia: AFSC).

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was concerned that the Egyptian authorities would make the schools selective and charge fees, and that they would be used to promote government propaganda.⁴⁶ Consequently, the team focused on persuading the UN to assume administration of the schools. Between January and April 1950, they approached the UN secretary general, the U.S. State Department, UNESCO, the British foreign office, and even U.S. oil companies in the hope that one of these could financially or politically secure the future of the schools, but none would commit to such support.⁴⁷ In the meantime, AFSC funded the school program by selling empty containers that had been used to deliver relief supplies.⁴⁸

In March 1950, UN officials expressed interest in continuing the schools under UN administration.⁴⁹ However, in early April, just weeks before UNRPR was set to dissolve, a representative from the U.S. State Department informed AFSC that it was unlikely UNRWA would receive the full funding it was promised, leaving the future of the schools unclear.⁵⁰ Finally, on April 21, 1950, just nine days before UNRWA officially began operations, AFSC received confirmation that the schools could continue, financed by UNRWA’s relief budget.⁵¹

With these historical contours in mind, the next section examines the establishment of the AFSC school program in light of the two central impulses of conventional humanitarianism: its assumed temporary and apolitical character.

THE “EMERGENCY IMAGINARY”⁵²

Definitions of humanitarianism are central to the provision of education in conflict-affected contexts. Burde distinguishes between maximalist and minimalist

46 Memo from Corrine Hardesty to Bronson Clark on the future of the schools, March 1, 1950, File 132, Foreign Service Projects, School Program 1950 (Philadelphia: AFSC).

47 Although records show that the AFSC— by and large—supported repatriation, it also issued a memo in January 1949 stating that its vocational and training projects in no way prejudiced the chances of refugee resettlement. Clarence Pickett, Memorandum regarding work possibilities in the Gaza area, January 26, 1950, File 132, Foreign Service Projects, School Program 1950 (Philadelphia: AFSC).

48 Operational report of the AFSC, March 1950, Folder 151, Foreign Service Reports to UNRPR, OPS (Philadelphia: AFSC).

49 AFSC operational report, March 1950.

50 Letter from Bronson Clarke to Colin Bell, April 18, 1950, Folder 244, Administration Transition from AFSC to United Nations (Philadelphia: AFSC). See also, Confidential memo from James Keen on the ending of direct international responsibility for Palestine refugees, May 13, 1950, File S-0369-034-04 (New York: UNARMS).

51 Correspondence from T. Barton Akeley to Bronson Clarke, April 21, 1950, File 132, Foreign Service Projects, School Program, 1950 (Philadelphia: AFSC).

52 Craig Calhoun, *The Emergency Imaginary: Humanitarianism, States, and the Limits of Cosmopolitanism*. In University Professorship Inaugural Lecture, November 15, 2006 (unpublished).

approaches to humanitarianism.⁵³ Minimalists adhere to definitions that are consistent with the “emergency imaginary”—that is, the idea that emergencies are sudden, temporary problems that suspend populations in a “state of exception.”⁵⁴ This in turn shapes the organization of humanitarian interventions and the type of aid provided. Minimalist aid tends to focus on biological needs for survival and assumes that, once a crisis is over, longer-term activities like education can resume. Maximalists, on the other hand, recognize that crises are often protracted and they question the usefulness of aid that simply keeps people alive. They favor a more expansive definition of humanitarianism that recognizes the centrality of education in influencing and potentially transforming the inequities that often contribute to conflict.⁵⁵

The history of the AFSC school program in Gaza highlights the centrality of the “emergency imaginary” in the emergent post-world war refugee regime. Whereas the Palestinian refugees immediately set about establishing schools, UNRPR was guided by a minimalist understanding of humanitarianism as a temporary life-saving measure and it did not fund education. Moreover, the political arm of the UN actively sought to avoid providing education, fearing it would “unwittingly make the refugees a long-term UN responsibility.”⁵⁶ AFSC had different motivations. Its approach to humanitarian service was grounded in the principles of Quakerism and a desire to work toward reconciliation and peace. Schooling was seen as essential to achieving this purpose.⁵⁷ Due to the high demand for education among the refugees and its belief that education offered the refugees hope for the future, AFSC continued to support the schools, even as the UN did little to promote the refugees’ repatriation.

However, while AFSC had the operational autonomy to set up schools, it did not have a budget to do so. This heavily influenced how the school program was set up. It was supported through ad hoc donations and in-kind resources, which limited expansion of the school program and resulted in its punctuated development. The viability of the school program was contingent on adopting practices that kept costs to a minimum—for example, by using the Egyptian

53 Burde, *Schools for Conflict*, 40.

54 Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception*, trans. Kevin Attell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

55 Burde, *Schools for Conflict*, 40.

56 Correspondence from John Reedman to Martin Hill, Executive Office of the Secretary General, October 28, 1949, File S-0369-0034-002 (New York: UNARMS). In the letter, Reedman notes the reluctance of the ESM team to recommend education as a potential activity for UNRWA and the need to convey this tactfully to the Specialized Agencies (most likely a reference to UNESCO).

57 Gallagher, *Quakers in the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict*, 55.

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curriculum examination structure and volunteer teachers.⁵⁸ These practices were not sustainable, and their use created tensions between the AFSC administration and the refugee community. In October 1949, for instance, teachers in three camps in Gaza resigned over lack of pay, and they only returned to work when AFSC, with some difficulty, secured financial contributions that enabled them to pay the teachers a modest stipend.⁵⁹

Nevertheless, the early initiative taken by the refugees and AFSC’s continued reliance on the refugee community to run the schools likely facilitated their transition to UN administration. UNRWA was unprepared to begin operations in May 1950, although it had already delayed its start date by a month. It still needed to negotiate its terms of operations with governments that were clearly hostile to its mission, and it was under pressure to calm an increasingly tense political situation as the refugees grew frustrated that their return to Palestine was not materializing. By contrast, the schools were operated, were staffed, and, crucially, were supported by the refugees. It seems likely that this favored their continuation, even though the original plans for UNRWA did not provide for this level and type of education.

The transition of the schools to UN administration did not signal an end to the financial challenges facing UNRWA or its burgeoning education program. Although UNRWA had a budget for education, it inherited UNRPR’s debt and was accorded only a temporary mandate and voluntary funding structure. These structural impediments, which were inextricably linked to the temporary and instrumental purpose Western donors ascribed to the agency, contribute to the agency’s chronic underfunding to this day. Addressing the UN General Assembly in October 1950, UNRWA’s first director, Howard Kennedy, warned:

I wish to emphasize the difficulties and frustrations of attempting to operate a multi-million-dollar enterprise without working capital. The Agency has rarely had in hand finance for more than a few weeks ahead, and at times the cash available has only been adequate for a matter of days. Unless there is no other solution feasible, I strongly urge that Agencies such as UNRWA be not required to operate on voluntary donations provided

⁵⁸ Prior to 1948, Gaza schools taught a Palestinian curriculum that was heavily circumscribed by British Mandate authorities. After 1948, the supply of books dwindled and it became impossible to accredit exams based on the Palestinian curriculum. The AFSC did explore creating its own curriculum but ultimately decided to align refugee schools with the Egyptian system, in spite of resistance from the refugee community.

⁵⁹ Report on Education Activities, August 1-October 15, 1949, Folder 60, Foreign Service Section, Palestine, 1949, Refugee Projects (Philadelphia: AFSC), 28.

in unknown amounts at unknown times and sometimes in commodities that are difficult to fit into the program.⁶⁰

Kennedy's concerns were never addressed, and UNRWA's financial situation has remained precarious for the last seven decades, as voluntary donations have often failed to keep pace with the refugee community's population growth.⁶¹ Lacking a systematic and sustainable solution to its financial situation, the agency has responded to successive financial crises by reallocating, realigning, and reprioritizing the money it does have. Early on, it switched funding for education from its relief budget to the more expansive rehabilitation budget.⁶² However, this budget is still based on voluntary contributions that are subject to renewal every few years. To save money for primary education during the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, UNRWA shut down vocational education centers and discontinued adult education and secondary education, as well as its practice of subsidizing host states to accept refugees in their schools. In the 1980s, general food rations were also eliminated to save the education program. The agency relies increasingly on extra-budgetary funding to maintain its services, but funding of this sort tends to "focus on short-term results, which also come with increased donor control and alignment to their strategic objectives, [which] may not support the purpose global public goods are supposed to serve."⁶³ Moreover, UNRWA's adaptation to its unreliable and unpredictable funding structure has contributed to what Al Hussein refers to as the agency's "incremental and distorted administrative and institutional development."⁶⁴ The result is a bare-bones education program where few savings can be made. This financial precarity has left UNRWA vulnerable to the competing political stratagems of its stakeholders, as I discuss next.

60 Remarks on Report of UNRWA by Howard Kennedy, 1950, File S-0369-034-04 (New York: UNARMS). Moreover, although it was prepared to offer technical support, UNESCO was "very cautious about giving UNRWA any money of its own." Memo from Malcolm Adiseshiah, Head of Technical Assistance Service to UNESCO Director General re. Notes on Mr. Kennedy of UNRWA, TA Memo 1.227, October 10, 1950, File, X 07.21(5-011) TA/UNRWA (Paris: UNESCO).

61 In August 2017, the UN secretary-general proposed making UNRWA's budget more "sustainable, sufficient and predictable." However, Danny Danon, the Israeli vice president of the General Assembly, dropped this item from the agenda of the General Assembly. See UN General Assembly, Resolution A/71/849, "Operations of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East Report of the Secretary-General," March 30, 2017, cited in Jaber Suleiman, "The Ongoing UNRWA Crisis: Context, Dimensions, Prospects and Responses," *Policy Dialogues Series, Lebanese-Palestinian Relations/06* (Beirut: Common Space Initiative for Shared Knowledge and Consensus Building, August 2018).

62 Report of the UNESCO Director General on the Education of Arab Refugees in the Middle East, May 26, 1952, UNESDOC, 12.

63 Maya Rosenfeld, "From Emergency Relief Assistance to Human Development and Back: UNRWA and the Palestinian Refugees, 1950-2009," *Refugee Survey Quarterly* 28, nos. 2-3 (2010): 286-317, <https://doi.org/10.1093/rsq/hdp038>; "Fulfilling Our Collective Responsibility: Financing Global Public Goods in Education," UNESCO Global Education Monitoring Report, March 2018, Policy Paper 34.

64 Jalal Al Hussein, "An Agency for the Palestinians?" in *Land of Blue Helmets: The United Nations and the Arab World*, eds. Karim Makdisi and Vijay Prashad (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2016), 304.

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POLITICAL DILEMMAS

Whereas a core principle of humanitarianism is its apolitical nature, the essence of mass education is to create conditions of political belonging. Thus, attempts to initiate education under conditions of humanitarianism are fraught with tension. This is especially true in contexts where large numbers of refugees are hosted, as multiple stakeholders share responsibility for refugees' education, which greatly complicates decision-making. The history of the AFSC program and the transition of the schools to UNRWA administration brings to the fore the political contests that undergird refugee education efforts. Former AFSC volunteer Lee Dinsmore recalled how the refugees and Egyptian authorities jostled for influence over the school program, in particular which textbooks were used. “One of the problems with education,” he astutely reflected, “was whose education is it going to be?”⁶⁵

From the outset, refugee politics played a key role in shaping the school program. As Irfan argues, demand for education among the refugees was driven by implicit and explicit political concerns.⁶⁶ Implicitly, education was a means of empowerment. Explicitly, it was a tool to facilitate a return to Palestine. By 1949, teachers had gone on strike to demand pay and better resourcing for education, and this was just the beginning of decades of political activism in which UNRWA teachers played a key role. In 1957, for example, UNRWA teacher and renowned Gazan poet Mu'in Bseiso was fired by UNRWA's Gaza office after writing a poem protesting the alleged collusion between the king of Jordan and the Israeli government. In coded cables, the UNRWA management noted that the poem not only was being played on the radio but was accompanied by recordings of demonstrations in schools and protest messages from teachers and pupils in Gaza.⁶⁷ Subsequent teacher activism during the Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990) and the First Intifada (1987-1993) further underscores the ongoing political purpose education serves for the refugee community.

Western donors also viewed the schools with a political calculus. By 1949, the U.S. and British governments were largely aligned with Israeli interests in supporting resettlement of the refugees outside of Palestine. This ignored the wishes of the host states and the refugees who sought repatriation. These differences of opinion were reflected in the initial plans for UNRWA, which was ambiguously tasked

65 Lee Dinsmore, “Oral History Interview #610,” interview by Joan Lowe, AFSC, September 20, 1992, <https://www.afsc.org/sites/default/files/documents/AFSC%20Oral%20Histories%20600%20Series%20Palestine%20Relief.pdf>.

66 Irfan, “Educating Palestinian Refugees.”

67 J. Lalive, Incoming code cable Beico 122, November 15, 1957, File, S-0169-0011-01 (New York: UNARMS); Henry Labouisse, Outgoing code cable number 429 from New York to Lalive in Beirut, November 16, 1957, Folder S-0169-0010-07 (New York: UNARMS).

with addressing the refugees' "economic dislocation" and supporting their "reintegration" in the region.⁶⁸ The refugees' resistance to resettlement outside of Palestine also created security concerns for donor governments. In 1949, UNRPR staff reported that the prevailing situation in Gaza was "ideal for the works of agitators who preach the gospel of unrest."⁶⁹ Then, in October 1950, UNRWA director Howard Kennedy warned the UN General Assembly that, "after more than two years of enforced idleness living under uncertain and trying conditions, more than 800,000 of these refugees constitute a serious threat to the peace and stability of the Near East countries."⁷⁰ The U.S. government, at the time in the throes of McCarthyism, was receptive to these concerns. In 1950, a U.S. State Department report noted that the potential for communist activity and unrest among the refugees meant that it was in the best interests of the United States "to alleviate the refugee problem, and to improve the lot of these people."⁷¹ Humanitarian motivations and security considerations thus went hand in hand to influence U.S. support for UNRWA.

Egyptian authorities also viewed the refugees as a destabilizing force and a threat to their legitimacy.⁷² Consequently, they kept a close eye on the teachers and sought to retain a heavy influence over what happened in the schools. AFSC staff members expressed concern about the Egyptian authorities' tendency to disseminate propaganda through the schools. Security considerations continued to motivate Egypt's support for the schools after the program transitioned to UNRWA. In a letter from the UNRWA director of education to his counterpart at UNESCO in 1958, the former complained that "the Egyptian authorities still demand for security reasons that every child has to be accepted in our secondary schools, thereby occupying classrooms originally built for elementary schools."⁷³

As this last example suggests, these opposing purposes shaped the structure and policies of UNRWA's emerging education program. Initially, UNRWA

68 U.S. Department of State, November 1949, United Nations Economic Survey Mission for the Middle East, First interim report, Folder 123, Foreign Service Section, Palestine 1949, Refugee Projects: Reports UN Economic Survey Mission (Clapp Mission) (Philadelphia: AFSC).

69 Memo by Dillon Meyer to Martin Hill, November 9, 1949, File, S-0369-034-04 (New York: UNARMS).

70 "Interim Report of the Director," A/1451/Rev.1, October 6, 1950, <https://unispal.un.org/DPA/DPR/unispal.nsf/0/EC8DE7912121FCE5052565B1006B5152>.

71 The Palestine Refugee Program, Publication 3757, Near and Middle Eastern Series 3, U.S. Department of State, February 1950, Folder 248, Foreign Service Reports General (Philadelphia: AFSC), 4.

72 See, for example, Open letter protesting the Egyptian military occupation of Gaza, sent to Captain Waheed Bey, the Egyptian military official in charge of refugee affairs in Gaza, Folder 8, Foreign Service Section, Government, Egypt (Philadelphia: AFSC). The letter signed off: "Refugees and non-refugees! Fight for the establishment of an Arab State and tell the occupying tyrants 'Evacuate our country and let us live free!' Down with the Anglo-American imperialism and all those who assist it!"

73 Letter from R. Van Duffelen to W. Van Vliet, April 3, 1958, Box 37.362.92, File (5.011) UNRWA "66" part 3 (Paris: UNESCO).

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and UNESCO formalized many of the practices and policies AFSC and other voluntary agencies had adopted. Perhaps the most significant decision was to teach the refugees the host state curriculum.⁷⁴ Inspection of the schools, which in Gaza had been entrusted to local education authorities, also became a core function of the UNRWA education program, although the agency often collaborated with the host state security apparatus when teachers were suspected of involvement in political activities.

The practice of hiring teachers from the refugee population was also continued in order to meet the high demand for education. In accordance with AFSC and UNESCO recommendations, teachers' salaries were increased and teacher training introduced, decisions that helped cement the autarkic nature of the education program. Western donors, however, continued to pursue the refugees' resettlement in host states, including through the education program. In 1960, for example, UNRWA director John Davis sought to expand the education program in order to achieve the full enrollment of eligible refugees. U.S. officials tacitly agreed to the expansion but reminded Davis that “UNRWA must be operated so as to stimulate the resettlement of the refugees in every way possible.”⁷⁵ Practically speaking, this required ongoing alignment with host state education systems to “facilitate the eventual phasing in of the Agency's programme with its counterpart in each country once a solution to the refugee problem has been finalized.”⁷⁶

From the outset, therefore, education for the refugees was imbued with political meaning and purpose. This likely supported the continuation of the schools and UNRWA's unplanned reorientation toward education, despite the fact that the ESM and UN officials overlooked the need for it. However, the refugees, Western donors, and host states ascribed different and at times opposing purposes to the schools. The contested foundations of the education program underscore the inevitable and unavoidably political dimensions of aid, especially in contexts of protracted humanitarianism, of which the Palestinian case is exemplary. Of note: Feldman writes of the politics *of* humanitarianism, which shape subjects, societies, and systems, and the politics *in* humanitarianism, by which people living within

74 See, for example, UNESCO, “Report of the Director General on the Education of Arab Refugees in the Middle East,” 12. This policy was qualified, however, with the recommendation that the refugees be taught Palestinian history and geography.

75 Memorandum of a Conversation, Department of State, Washington, October 5, 1960, Foreign Relations of the United States, 1958-1960, Arab-Israeli Dispute; United Arab Republic; North Africa, Volume Xiii, Office of the Historian, U.S. Department of State, cited in Jalal Al Hussein, “An Agency for the Palestinians?” 306.

76 Bi-annual report, education and training division, August 1-December 31, 1960, UNESDOC, <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0017/001785/178573eb.pdf>.

humanitarian systems seek to affect their circumstances.⁷⁷ Both phenomena have shaped and been shaped by education efforts for Palestine refugees, which provides further evidence that politics are not only unavoidable in humanitarian aid efforts but that humanitarianism is instrumentalized in the pursuit of political goals. The schools were established and developed around contested visions of the refugees' future that by and large persist to this day. This reflects both the tenacity of the humanitarian paradigm in contexts of protracted displacement and highlights the limitations that humanitarianism imposes on education's potential to promote meaningful social and political transformation for refugee populations.

CONCLUSION

In considering the questions that guide this study—Why did AFSC establish a school program for Palestinians in Gaza? How did the AFSC school program operate?—it's clear that AFSC viewed the schools as a way to counter the limitations of humanitarianism, as conventionally understood. Contrary to UNRPR's vision of humanitarianism as encompassing only food, shelter, and medical aid and reflecting its longstanding commitment to local-level peace-building and reconciliation efforts, AFSC viewed the systematization of education as a necessary step to ensure a just and durable resolution to the refugees' situation. However, as AFSC volunteer Cassius Fenton complained, operating conditions in Gaza profoundly challenged these goals:

Our inability to show success toward an ultimate goal has enabled us with little hesitation to turn back our work to the UN. We had found that contrary to our early high hopes for achieving “friendly services”, very little was possible within the framework with which we had to operate. In fact, even now, the staff has little to suggest in the way of concrete proposals for furthering “Friends” concerns in that territory.⁷⁸

Despite these setbacks, and notwithstanding the refugees' ongoing efforts to set up their own schools, AFSC's systematization of the schools and their lobbying for the continued provision of education appear to have played an important role in ensuring that education was an integral part of UNRWA operations. But the AFSC vision could not overcome the discursive limitations of humanitarianism. The

⁷⁷ Ilana Feldman, *Life Lived in Relief: Humanitarian Predicaments and Palestinian Refugee Politics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2018).

⁷⁸ A Palestine Report by Cassius Fenton, June 7, 1950, Folder 247, Foreign Service Reports, Evaluative, 1950 (Philadelphia: AFSC).

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temporary and teleological view of humanitarian crises evoked by the “emergency imaginary” excluded education from the UNRPR budget and shaped the practices and policies of the AFSC school program. Two lessons from this history stand out.

First is the relevance of UNRWA’s past to understanding its present. The history presented in this article shows how the decisions made in the weeks and months immediately following a refugee crisis can have an influence on education programs for decades to come. The conditions under which the first refugee schools in Gaza were started shaped education policies and practices and informed the structure of the UNRWA education program. Of particular note are the schools’ alignment with the host state education systems, the retention of a separate UN administration for the schools, and the autarkic nature of the education program. These features have persisted, largely owing to the tenacity of the humanitarian paradigm in shaping responses to protracted displacement. Over the last 70 years, the UNRWA education program has been invoked under the labels of humanitarian relief, rehabilitation, welfare, protection, and development programming. However, the relentless need to fundraise and persistent critiques that the schools are politicized underscore the implicit humanitarian logic attached to the agency and its schools. This provides an alternative perspective on the U.S. government’s recent defunding of the agency. In announcing its decision, the state department stated that “Palestinians, wherever they live, deserve better than an endlessly crisis-driven service provision model. They deserve to be able to plan for the future.”⁷⁹ This is a valid critique. History shows that the agency’s financial volatility has resulted in ad hoc programming and an inability to align the schools with a just and durable vision for the refugees’ future. The precarious balance of opposing stakeholder interests also heightened the education program’s susceptibility to being manipulated for politically expedient objectives. But the continued existence of UNRWA and the intergenerational dependency on its services by millions of Palestinians in no small part reflect the inherently political context in which the agency is embedded. U.S. policies have persistently characterized the refugees as a temporary economic problem, continue to objectify them as a security threat, and seek to resettle them against their will.

The second and related lesson, therefore, is the importance of learning from the Palestinian case when designing and implementing education responses to large-scale displacement crises. Many of the features that currently distinguish the UNRWA education program from the UNHCR approach—features that have tended to exclude or make an exception of the Palestinian case and obviate the

⁷⁹ U.S. Department of State, “On U.S. Assistance to UNRWA,” <https://www.state.gov/on-u-s-assistance-to-unrwa/>.

lessons it offers for contemporary academic and policy debates—in fact reflect the limitations that come with initiating education efforts for refugees within the humanitarian paradigm, in particular the vision of a crisis as a temporary state and the assumption that political interests can be bypassed. The Palestinian case has been exceptionally protracted and is compounded by Palestinians’ statelessness. However, most displacement situations now last for decades and durable solutions are often elusive. Moreover, responsibility for refugees is increasingly shared among an array of actors.⁸⁰ The history of the Palestinian case therefore exemplifies a growing trend in refugee situations and highlights the implications of humanitarian logic over education policy and practice for refugees.

Indeed, aligning education with the principles of humanitarianism is fraught with contradictions. Education is necessarily oriented to the future, requires stable financing, and is never politically neutral. Attempts to justify education within the context of humanitarianism mask these realities and, as this historical account suggests, can create and entrench political dynamics of their own. Although the politics of and within humanitarianism are well established in scholarship, education policies and interventions for refugees continue to operate within the bounds of a humanitarianism that posits that politics can be practically and analytically isolated from programs and policies.⁸¹ One of the most recent iterations of this assumption is the ongoing discussion about the need to bridge the humanitarian-development divide. Implicit in these discussions is the assumption of a linear and teleological transition away from a temporary state of emergency. But, as the protracted Palestinian case highlights, education initiatives for refugees need to be conceived of free from the limitations of the humanitarian paradigm and in ways that are flexible enough to support at least the full gamut of durable solutions: voluntary repatriation, resettlement, and local integration. These solutions are neither mutually exclusive nor spatially and temporally consistent. Rather, they behoove a more flexible ideology that allows education programs to respond to the myriad transnational, national, and local challenges that refugees face and, as AFSC originally intended, refugees’ ongoing need for justice.

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80 UN General Assembly Resolution A/Res/71/1, “New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants,” September 19, 2016.

81 Brun, “There Is No Future.”