



ARXIPÈLAG D'EXCEPCIONS

Giorgio Agamben / Tariq Ali / Raymond Bauman / Teddy Cruz
Seiler Esterlino / Assala Franke / Stephen Graham / Thomas Kwon
Raïson Naveh / Lluís Oriago / José Luis Pérez / Josep Borja Padé
Eyal Sivan / ԳԵՐՈՍ ԿՐԻՍՏՈՐԻԱՆ / Eyal Weizman

ON THE PALESTINIAN REFUGEE CAMP AS A «PERMANENT TEMPORARY SOLUTION REGIME»

Eyal Sivan

Refugee camps¹ are designed to be provisory architectural and social environments that serve as a temporary solution in a situation of emergency.

Despite the similarities among different refugee camps the world over, and the fact that they are all areas of refuge for displaced persons in transit, there is no complete symmetry between the different camps around the world.

For the last 58 years, the 59 Palestinian refugee camps in the Middle East – the oldest existing refugee camps in the world – have been the scene of ongoing tension between permanent or definitive settlement (in the camps) and the camp as a temporary or transitional solution.

This tension is defined as «the Palestinian refugee problem». In order to analyze this «problem», one must not ignore the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict which created

1. In the mid 1980s, just a few months before the beginning of the first Palestinian uprising against the Israeli occupation known as the stone Intifada, I started a documentary project in the refugee camp of Aqabat-Jaber, on the outskirts of the city of Jericho in the Jordan valley. After the implementation of the Oslo agreements in 1994 and the withdrawal of the Israeli forces from the Jericho area, I went back to the Aqabat-Jaber camp to continue the documentary project in the new situation. The following paper is inspired by two of my films, *Aqabat-Jaber, Passing through* (1987) and *Aqabat-Jaber, Peace with no return?* (1995).

it or the lengthy period of time that has lapsed since the emergency situation in the beginning of the 1950s which brought about the building of the camps.

These 60 years are characterized by the refugee population's refusal to abandon their demand to return to their lands in the territories that became the Jewish State and the resulting refusal to consider their situation as permanent. During these years the Palestinians have been subjected to ongoing pressure by the perpetrators and their successors, aimed at forcing the refugees to abandon the right of return and to transform the camps into a definitive solution for their problem. Time, the political conflict, repression and resistance have shaped the Palestinian refugee camps as spaces of exception, laboratories of a *regime of permanent temporary solution*.

Under this regime, the demand to exercise rights (the return); the need to improve life (a decent life); the pressure to accept the camps as permanent residences and the refusal to acknowledge the refugees' rights and the transitory nature of the camps are all reflected in the physical and discursive expressions created by the tension between provisory and permanent solutions. This state of exception is justified through the conflict between the Palestinian refugees' wish and right to return (expression of transit) and their need to improve their lives, (expression of transformation), on the one hand, and the wishes and actions of the ruling power to force them to settle in the camps permanently and to renounce the hope, the discourse and the right of return, on the other.

Focusing on the refugee camps and the refugees, may lead to ignoring the crime which brought them about and its perpetrators. Separating the result (the establishment of the camp structure and the refugee status) from the cause (the population transfer) leads to considering the refugees and the camps as a human rights juridical issue which is independent from the political questions that it raises.

There is no consensus as to the reasons that lead to the existence of refugees. One leading theory is that the refugees were forced out of Palestine during the execution of an ethnic cleansing. The other is that they massively fled because of fear and propaganda.

The shared suppositions in both these viewpoints should be that people may experience fear and may seek refuge without these impacting on their other rights.

When dealing with the so-called Palestinian refugee problem, one must always bear in mind the crimes that created the fear and led people to seek refuge.

As always, the perpetrators make the best witnesses of their crimes.⁷

7. The following dialogue is taken from the film *Roads 181, Fragments of a Journey in Palestine-Land* by Eyal Swan and Michel Khleifi, 2004.

-My folks arrived at the turn of the century. They arrived as babies, from Russia, Odessa and L'atnansa. At 17, I went to war. I fought in the Galilee. First in 'Operation Broom'. In the Galilee, there were many Arab villages. But not only. Also a lot of Bedouin camps. They moved around with tents and camels. We needed a front to stop the Arab armies invading. The Syrian, Lebanese and Jordanian armies. We couldn't leave so many of the enemy behind us. We had to chase them out. But not kill them.

-Q -How?

-A -We chased them to Jordan.

-Q -But how?

-A -How? You don't have to kill. You fire in the air and they scam.

-Q -Why was it called "Operation Broom"?

-A -We swept them out. We needed them out of the region to create Jewish territorial continuity.

-Q -What did you do with the villagers?

-A -We drove them out toward Jordan. ... Some we expelled, some stayed, but we mostly expelled.

-Q -How?

-A -We'd go in trucks, disperse in an area and when we went over them they ran. ... We formed a chain. We were armed, of course. When they saw us coming, they fled. ... It's not complicated. When we approached, they were afraid we'd kill them. They ran. But we didn't come to kill them. They didn't know that. When you see a group of armed men, with guns, arms, coming at you what do you do? You flee.

-Q -You saw them flee?

-A -Sure. We gave chase, we advanced. We went up the hills pushing them towards Jordan. Once in Jordan, they couldn't come back. We stayed in our positions until they'd disappeared. Most fled, usually to Lebanon or Syria. It didn't take long, we didn't have a lot of time. It didn't take us long to create an Arab-free zone.

-Q -You saw the families go with your own eyes?

-A -Yes.

-Q -Close up?

-A -Close up, sure.

-Q -Were they afraid?

-A -Yes.

-Q -How did they leave?

-A -Usually on foot and donkeys. They didn't have cars. The border wasn't far, they didn't have to go. They knew what would happen.

-Q -What were they afraid of?

- A: «It didn't take a lot to scare them. Fear in the mind is worse than anything. They're going to kill us!»
- Q: «So you killed some ...»
- A: «We killed many.»
- Q: «Who gave the orders?»
- A: «We had commanders. We were all army ... We had superiors, commanders, sub-commanders, units, sub-units... It was just like the army.»
- Q: «Which villages did you conquer?»
- A: «We didn't think about it, it wasn't the goal. The purpose was expulsion. It wasn't to conquer and control the people. That wasn't the aim. The aim was to get rid of them. That was the goal, not to have enemies at our backs.»
- Q: «They didn't try to come back?»
- A: «No, not then. I don't think so. Later, they set up the refugee camps. That's a different story.»
- Q: «Were villages razed?»
- A: «Sure, sure, for Jewish settlements, kibbutz for example. The land went to kibbutz and moshav. Some houses are still standing. Empty.»
- Q: «Did people try to come back?»
- A: «They couldn't. You needed a visa to enter the country.»
- Q: «Why was it called "Operation Broom"?»
- A: «A broom! To clean the earth, because we swept out the Arabs.»
- Q: «And the women and children?»
- A: «The same. Children went with parents. Don't forget, this war was imposed on us. It wasn't us who wanted war.»
- Q: «Have you ever felt pity for the expelled?»
- A: «Often, so what? What could I do?»
- Q: «But the children, the women?»
- A: «You can't expel parents without their children. That's pity.»

At the end of the 1947-1948 war in Palestine, about 650,000 Palestinian Arabs, former farmers, village and city dwellers, professionals, businessmen, house and land owners who had been living in the territories that were to become the Jewish State, found themselves with a new common status: refugee.

Those who were able, took their families and belongings with them, fleeing mainly to neighboring Arab countries. Others moved to other parts of Palestine. Many families were separated. The men often stayed behind for a while to guard and protect their homes, believing that the wives and children they had sent out of the Jewish

territories would soon be able to return. The long escape routes took refugees from the country's northern regions to Lebanon and Syria, from the center to the East Bank of the Jordan River and from the South to the Gaza Strip and Egypt.

Those who escaped to Arab territories within Palestine set up immense improvised encampments on the outskirts of the major Arab towns. The poverty and lack of proper sanitation in these fringe urban developments inevitably led to disease, and the tent communities became an enormous burden on the public services of their adopted towns. The latter remained unwilling and ill-equipped to handle the situation.

A report published in September 1948 by the United Nations mediator in Palestine stated that «action must be taken to determine the necessary measures of relief and to provide for their implementation», and that «the choice is between saving the lives of many thousands of people now, or permitting them to die.» In November the same year, the UN decided to establish a special fund for the relief of Palestine refugees. The UN General Assembly appealed to the Governments of both member and non-member states, and also to international relief agencies for aid. Towards the end of 1949, however, UN officials began to doubt the temporary nature of the Palestine refugee situation and in December 1949 they decided to set up a proper agency to carry out relief work amongst the Palestine refugees: the *UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East*, or UNRWA. UNRWA's responsibilities were to provide sanitary material and educational aid to the Palestinian refugees in Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, the West Bank, the Gaza strip and Israel, in cooperation with the host governments. One of the consequences of the creation of a specific United Nations agency was the exclusion of the Palestinian refugees from the general statistics drawn up by the UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) and as a result the creation of a human-juridical status.⁵

In January 1952, the acute need for long term aid was recognized and a three year UNRWA program was established. During the program, camps were to be built for the settlement and reintegration of the Palestinian refugees. UNRWA had to find a quick and effective solution for the degrading sanitary and housing conditions of the refugees. The immediacy of the problem did not permit a full appraisal of the situation and the lack of time (emergency) was blamed for the absence of urban or social

5. Palestinian refugees do not receive the protections afforded to «convention refugees» by the UNHCR.

planning. Since it was impossible to predict how long the refugee camps would be required, it was impossible to justify major investments.

Until the late 1960s, this unique and specific agency, settled 59 refugee camps, as a temporary solution that lasts to this day. The refugee camps were established just a few kilometers away from the refugees' original homes and lands. In their early stages, the refugee camps looked like military camps containing tents, collective sanitary and administration structures and enclosed areas. Sometimes, refugees were simply settled in abandoned British military bases or structures. Military structures and humanitarian ones share a kind of a common sense of spatial organization.⁴

Initially, the refugees refused to cooperate with UNRWA. They feared that UNRWA's enthusiastic construction program would serve to institutionalize their status. Fawaz Turki, a writer and Palestinian refugee himself, describes the tension between humanitarian actions, aimed to improve life conditions in the camps, and the refugees' political demand and wish to return to their original lands in Palestine, as manifested in a Palestinian refugee camp in Lebanon in the following words:

«The UNRWA was planting some trees, renovating some fruits, moving the tents and arranging the camp. They were saying that they want to make the camp better to live in... The Palestinians were saying: We do not want them to make the camp better to live in, we want to return. What they are doing is to make our passage here permanent. The day after, we (the kids) uprooted the trees.»⁵

In order to gain the refugees' confidence, UNRWA recruited 99% of its staff locally with a majority from among the refugees.

UNRWA's involvement, however, did not detract from the right to return. This right was officially recognized in UN resolution 194 of December 1948, which affirmed that Palestinian refugees should be allowed to return to their homes and to live in peace with their neighbors. The resolution also affirmed that help should be given to facilitate their repatriation, resettlement and economic and social rehabilitation. Under this resolution, the United Nations' Conciliation Commission for Palestine,

4. It is interesting to note that both at individual and social levels, the camp scenery is a continuation of the oppressors' scenery: In fact, the Zionist commando forces - the Palmah, main executors of the population transfer - created a mythology commando which was architecturally translated into boy-scout camps. This scenery was imitated in the camps built by the Red Cross and other humanitarian organizations.

5. TURKI, Fawaz. «To be a Palestinian», *Journal of Palestine Studies*, vol. 3, no. 3, spring, 1974, pp. 3-17.

UNCCP, was created with the mandate of «providing protection». This resolution also stated that those not wishing to return must receive compensation for their property and that compensation also be paid for any other property that was lost or damaged. These rights have been reaffirmed in numerous UN resolutions since 1948 and are based on the principle that everyone has the right to return to his own country which is reflected in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and on the provisions of the 1949 Geneva Conventions regarding the protection of civilian populations in time of war.

In practical terms, the «return» of Palestinian refugees to their homes is not as simple as that. Not because of physical distance - sometimes the displaced population lives within sight of their homes. However, some are now occupied by new, Jewish owners, and others no longer exist. The few houses that are empty are under the control of the Absentee Property Custodian, which is a public body. The decision to return all property to its original owners is tied up with the political outcome of the entire Arab-Israeli conflict. This issue is the essence of all this conflict.

In 1967 war broke out again between the Arab countries and Israel, and this time the conflict spread to the West Bank. Approximately 20% of camp inhabitants in the West Bank and up to 90% in the Jericho Valley (the largest refugee camp area) crossed over to the east bank of the Jordan river. Some fled from the war and others chose to join their families already on the other side of the river. At the end of the 1967 War all the Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, including those in camps, found themselves under Israeli military occupation.

The State of Israel, which was established in 1948 on the ruins of Palestine and became an occupying military power in 1967, flatly refused both to take responsibility for the creation of the Palestinian refugee problem and for the refugees' return to their original lands. All Israeli governments have treated the demographic danger presented by the refugees' return as the reason for this refusal. The application of UN resolutions and international law as far as it concerns the Palestinian refugees is considered in Israel's political vocabulary as the destruction of the State of Israel (as a Jewish state).

Despite the lapse of time since the expulsion in the 1940s and Israel's continued refusal to allow the refugees to return, the architectural and social structures of the camps are a living testimony to the political discourse on the right of return. All attempts to reconstruct a coherent urban structure are immediately considered as attempts to awaken the demand of the right to return.

The issue concerning the Palestinian refugees came to be known as the «Palestinian refugee problem». The problem refers to the question of the return of the Palestinian civilian population to their lands and villages which had been occupied and destroyed by the Israelis and which have come to be widely recognized as part of the State of Israel.

Aqabat-Jaber is one of the 59 Palestinian refugee camps built by UNRWA in the Middle East in the early 1950s. The camp is located 3 kilometers south of the city of Jericho in the Jordan valley. At the time of its construction, it was the biggest camp in the Middle East (65,000 inhabitants). Most of the original population of Aqabat-Jaber came from villages and cities in the centre of Palestine. All these villages were destroyed without a trace.

Aqabat-Jaber was built at the edge of the desert in the Jericho valley on 2,800 dunams (700 acres) of land belonging to three Palestinian families. Like all refugee camps around the world, Aqabat-Jaber was built as a temporary solution. For the first three years, the refugees lived in tents. UNRWA then decided to build mud huts, or «shelters», as they were officially called. These shelters were identical and measured 3 meters by 3 meters. Each family was given a plot of land measuring 100 square meters surrounded by a mud wall where they built one or more shelters, according to the size of the family. Only locally available materials were used: mud for the walls, cane for the roofs and beaten earth for the floors. There was no electricity, and water was collected from two sets of stand-pipes. The toilets were public, with one toilet for every 50 people, and the sewage system consisted of open gutters in the middle of the street. In total 5,465 shelters were built with an average of ten people to a shelter. The streets were very narrow, not wide enough for a car to pass and barely wide enough for more than two people to walk side by side. UNRWA also built schools and field offices.

Fifteen years later, during the 1967 War between the Arab countries and Israel, 95% of Aqabat-Jaber's inhabitants fled to the other side of the Jordan river and settled in refugee camps in the Jordanian kingdom. Out of some 60,000 people only 2,500 remain. The traces of war and the effects of desert erosion mark a very clear contrast between the abandoned, crumbling shelters and the inhabited huts with their signs of human care. Aqabat-Jaber was becoming more and more like a ghost town.

In the months that followed the war, refugees from neighboring camps that were also abandoned began moving into the empty shelters in Aqabat-Jaber.

Until the middle of the 1980s only minor changes occurred in the camp.

In November 1985, the Israeli Military Authorities decided to destroy most of the empty structures in Aqabat-Jaber, claiming that they were a security and health risk. With UNRWA's agreement, 4,700 shelters were leveled. Today, 479 families live in the Aqabat-Jaber Camp.

The winter of 1987 saw the emergence of the Palestinian uprising in the Gaza Strip refugee camps (where massive demolitions were carried out in the 1970s) which spread to the other refugee camps in Palestine and then to the cities.

The camp, whatever physical and social structure changes it undergoes, is mainly a living memory, a testimony, to the catastrophe that brought about its creation. About Moussa, a 53-year-old Palestinian refugee living in Aqabat-Jaber camp, recounts 60 years of history in few words:

«I was born in Ramleh. Before 1948, Ramleh was a true paradise. At first, there was the Arab army, they left and the village surrendered.

Then, there was the Zionist propaganda, and the massacre at DeirYassin. They killed women and children, the Jews ... They expelled the Palestinians. Otherwise, Israel would never have existed. We left on May 15th, 1948. We left our village because the Jews came and occupied our land.

When the Jews took over the village, they put the young people in the convents and the mosques. Our group went to the convent. The Jews came early to ask the youngsters and the men to move to one side. They separated them from the women, children and old people. That evening, we were taken in buses to Salbit, to the border. We stayed for three days at the Arab border. Cars came and took the women, children and old people. They were sent to Ramallah. On the seventh day they said: «Go to Amman.» We left, with four families in one car, for Amman. We waited a whole day to cross the border. At 8pm they said, «That's it, the border's closed.» They ordered us: «Get in your cars and go to Aqabat-Jaber.» A policeman took us to Aqabat-Jaber. We arrived in the camp, there was no-one here, only tents. No-one, absolutely no-one. Only those who had come from the border. It was like that for two months. We were given bread and food. We were in a miserable state. A year later, they gave us some wood and corrugated iron and 200 planks. They told us to each build a house of 16m². We settled in. We sold vegetables until 1967. After 1967, Israel came. At 6.30am the Jews started bombing. People were screaming: «They'll cut our throats, they'll kill our women!» 65,000 refugees were living in the camp, and they all left in one day. We went to Amman. We stayed there a month. We came back secretly. I brought my children back, two boys and a girl. When we arrived, there was a population count. They counted us, and we settled in our house. I opened a shop. I bought and sold ... After leaving our land, we first-

ned for five years to the news on "The Arab Voice". They said: "You'll go home tomorrow, or the day after." For ten years, we hoped to return to our land. Then, when we lost hope, we built and settled down. What else could we do?-

—Q: -Is the hope of going back one day still alive?-

—A: -I have great hope. We will go back, Inch'Allah.-

—Q: -So you haven't lost hope?-

—A: -We still hope. Peace will come and we will return.-

The camp inhabitants and their insistence on the status of refugees are a living memory, witnesses of the past. They carry in their status both the testimony of people that were seeking refuge and the conscience that the only way of becoming citizens or bearing a civil status is by going back.

Abou Farah, another refugee from Aqabat-Jaber, who was a baby in 1948, tells it in his own words:

"Refugee" itself is not humiliating. The shame is inside me, because I left my village, though it's not my fault. It's the fault of my elders, of my father, my uncle, my aunt and those older than me. I was a child! Because of them, I accept to be called a "refugee". I'm proud of the word "refugee". I'm not proud of having left my village, of having fled from it! "Refugee" will always mean that one day, of course, I'll go back to my village. That's my meaning of "refugee". It doesn't make me angry, if someone calls me "refugee", it's my real situation. Being here proves it.-

The consciousness, the expression, and the architectural existence of the camps create time continuity, a non-interrupted period that has gone on since the catastrophe to the present time. The memory of the catastrophe is transmitted orally and is expressed by the camp's appearance and structures: exposed sewage, the absence of any kind of social or urban planning, etc. Despite the miserable life conditions, camp transformation is considered as an attempt to tamper with memory.

An example of this may be found in the fact that most refugee camp registries in the West Bank list more refugees than the number actually living in them. Many people keep their addresses in the camps while actually living in cities or villages nearby. Beside the fact that their original village appears on their refugee card and the camp address is a testimony of the link to it, it is a testament to the wish to keep the continuous sequence between the event of the catastrophe and the present time. The expression of this continuous sequence of time, without any breaches, is evident in

the effort to keep the camp in its primary physical and structural shape. In these conditions the temporary becomes a way of life.⁶

To the question, "Why did you plant this garden and these trees?" – a sign of settling down in the camp – Ali, an 18-year-old refugee from Aqabat-Jaber, answers:

"If you mean by your question that maybe we're going to settle down here? It is no! We planted trees to have some greenery. We need some freshness. You know that Aqabat-Jaber is very hot, up to 42 or 43 °C in the summer. It's unbearable heat. The trees don't break! we'll stay. We hope that tomorrow, if not today, we'll leave and return to our village and not to exile somewhere else!-

Almost ten years later during the Oslo agreements and the evacuation by the Israeli army of the camp region, and while building a concrete house in the camp, the same young man persisted:

"If by building a house it makes you think that I accept my situation and I'm counting on staying here, you are wrong. Be wary of appearances. Our situation is a step that I intend living in the best possible conditions, enough of roofs that let in the rain and mud. I want to live in a real house. I built this house because the solution we are waiting for is far from being as close as we thought. The Israelis are fighting us about our return to the West Bank, so what will it be like when we ask for the land occupied in 1968. It will take time and we must be prepared. Meanwhile, let's live in decent conditions. I am building because I'm getting married. That doesn't mean that I accept my life in this camp.-

Ten years before this interview, only one person in the entire camp dared to build a concrete house. To build new as opposition to development, transformation or rehabilitation is considered as renunciation. It is a visible political statement. The declarations of the man on the building site of his new permanent house are revealing.

"No Palestinian will return to his village as it was before 1948. As for this house, it's only a cleaner one than the first. As you can see, all the huts in the camp are built of earth. They're not real houses. This one is better built and will withstand torrential rain... It's built in concrete. I'm here for good. I've lost hope.-

6. We should note that by being kept in their life conditions in some Arab countries, the refugee population can be exposed to political instrumentalization as is sometimes the case. Usually, they are considered purely as a political issue without any regard to their life conditions (see more in HANANI 2006).

The correlation made between improving life conditions or aspiring for a decent life and the demands of right to return create a paradox that should be pointed out.

Improving the refugees' life conditions is used as a political weapon by the victimizers – not as compensation, as one might suppose, but rather as a way of oppression. Any transformation, whether humanitarian and development aid, demolitions, forced social transformation, expulsions, etc... is done under a humanitarian or security pretext, when in fact, it is aimed at bringing the refugees to renounce their rights and erasing memory. Indeed, the camps are also a place of memory for the perpetrators and their successors. By erasing memory, one can avoid dealing with the question of responsibility. While sharing a common memory, the refugees and the perpetrators reach opposing conclusions.

While the refugees themselves are doing as little as possible to change the physical aspects of the camp, and everything to avoid breaking the continuous sequence of time, they also aspire to «live in decent conditions». On the basis of this demand, humanitarian organizations and UN agencies are pushing to improve everyday life. Seeing destruction and demolishing as a condition for rehabilitation of the camps, these agencies unwittingly join the occupying power (the Israeli army) which, by systematic demolition of houses, and dismantling collective social and education structures in the camp, during military actions, erases the memory of the past and forces the refugees to rebuild.

The conflict between the refugees' aspirations and memory, on one side, and the authorities' memory, on the other, is the pretext for the establishment of a «permanent temporary solution regime», a state of exception which is an adaptation and a continuation of the 1948 perpetrators' wishes to erase the link to the past, the traces of the crime and its representation in present time.

House demolitions and massive destruction plans have been widely used in the West Bank and Gaza Strip since the 1967 occupation.

In spring 2002, after the invasion and the demolition of hundreds of houses in the West Bank Jenin refugee camp, a revealing debate emerged among the refugees. On one side, the international agencies in charge of rehabilitation and some of the old refugees accepted the new situation created by the massive destruction, and planned to rehabilitate the camp and improve life conditions in it. On the other side, a strong opposition rose among the young generations who believed the reconstruction and improvement of the camp would send the occupying forces the message that permanent establishment in the camp was being accepted. In essence, the

major question that rises is how to improve life and at the same time continue to hold the political demand of return. As mentioned, the refugees in the camps are both a living testimony of the crime and a permanent monument to the demand that the perpetrator recognize his responsibility for creating and for solving the problem. Under these conditions the camp, and its inhabitants, become a laboratory of a political struggle that conceptualizes the notion of the provisory without any link to the question of passing time. This suspended time can be defined by a notion that will be a transitory concept between living and surviving: passing through.

We are no longer in an emergency situation, nor are we in a temporary state. We are in a violent situation, where the ruling power uses the permanent temporary solution regime as a framework for exceptional laws. Despite the transformation of the camp into a suburb dependant on the city, the settlements, humanitarian aid and external economy, it has developed its own social and political structure. It has become a laboratory of political struggle to maintain suspended time or the sense of the temporary. The political awareness of the young generations in the camp is due, among many other factors, to the fact that the camp is a space that generates, day by day, new generations of refugees.

In 1994, after the signing of the Oslo Accords and the establishment of a Palestinian autonomy in the area of Jericho, which includes the Aqabat-Jaber camp, a young mother – herself born in the camp – answers the question: «Are your children refugees?»:

«Of course! Our children and grandchildren will be refugees in the camp, even under the Palestinian Authority, they will still be refugees. Any child born in the camp, even in 20, 30 or 40 years, will still be a refugee. Even under Palestinian administration or rule. Despite all that, we will remain refugees. Until today, the UN provides our food and schooling for our children. As long as we have a UN ration card, we are and will remain refugees.»

Around the same time, when Palestinian police forces take control of the camp, Abu Farah, a refugee who defines his status by the fact that he is living in a refugee camp which means belonging to an absent place and the return to it, builds a house in the camp and argues:

«Return, return... So what's it all about? The return! Let's be realistic. Thinking about our return whilst continuing to live as before is impossible. ... return is a big word. Actually, we can't do it. We must be realistic. We cannot get Palestine back by fighting, nor return to our land from 1948 through prayer. The Jews have been building here

for 45 years. They came here from all over. All this means that talking of returning to the land occupied by Israel in 1948 is like blowing into a punctured balloon. You blow for nothing, it never inflates.

The talk is all empty words. We have taken Jericho, Gaza, and the West Bank. That's good. We can live a stable life.¹

Nevertheless, the same testimony continues by the paradigm of the refugee consciousness and existence as a struggle.

-We dreamed and hoped so long to see our soldiers here! With their presence amongst us I'd erase the word "refugee" from my vocabulary and consider myself a Palestinian citizen ... on Palestinian land, even though I'm not on my native land, in Al-Abbasiyeh. Our generation hoped to return. Alas, this is not possible! Perhaps our children or grandchildren will get our land back. If they get it back, they will not regret leaving here. Erasing the word refugee doesn't mean forgetting my village and the land from 1948. That stays in my head, in my memories and in my soul, but there's nothing I can do. The desire of every Palestinian, up to his last breath is the Return, if not him so his son's or his son's. Man cannot give up his right whatever happens.²

This struggle, the idea that the return is imbedded in the refugees' consciousness is interpreted by Israeli governments as a desire to destroy the Israeli State. As already mentioned, the refugees' -problem- is considered, according to the Israeli Zionist narrative, as a humanitarian issue, that might be solved just through the question of land, ignoring the need for acknowledgement and acceptance of historic responsibility. This is, as suggested regularly by Edward Said, the very precondition for any true reconciliation and mutual forgiveness as the Israeli authorities consider the recognition of this responsibility as the negation of Israel's right to exist. This position includes a supposition that the refugees carry with them the desire and the capacity for destruction. One can argue that the refugee's existence is inextricably linked to the idea of destruction. He is born out of the destruction of Palestine, the catastrophe, Nakba in Arabic, and he can find -normalcy- - i.e. emerging from the refugee status - in destruction: that of the Jewish State. The figure of the refugee lives between two cataclysmic events. His life is passing through in the camp in an extemporal existence, going from destruction to destruction.

-We love our land, and our children will love it too, even if we don't manage to free it. We didn't choose to live like this. We will try all our lives to free our land. What we have obtain-

ed so far is not enough. My land is in Beit-Dajan, near Jaffa, not here. If we get our land back, we won't need to resist any more. There will be no more resistance, since we will have recovered what is rightfully ours. We are not asking for the moon, only what is rightfully ours. They took my freedom, stole my land, I was left with nothing. That is what a refugee is. I am a political refugee. It's all linked, peace, being a refugee, the right to return ... It's all linked. I will be a refugee as long as I don't go back home. Our claim to the right to return is clear. It's an integral part of the Palestinian cause. Nobody can ever cancel it. It is the right to return to my land, that of my ancestors, not to any other land. For some people that means coming back to the West Bank from Jordan, or from Jordan to another part of Palestine. All this is Palestine. But I am from Beit-Dajan and I have the right to go back there, to have my land, my water, my borders and my security. I want to recover everything that was taken from me. By any means, by peace, by war. I want what is mine by right.³

In this context, it is not surprising that the suicide bombers, most of them refugees or from refugee camps, young people who had never seen Palestine or could not enter the parts of it recognized as the State of Israel, are -returning- to the areas out of which their grandparents were chased, carrying with them the potential for destruction. The refugees, as the *ticking bomb* in the heart of the conflict, are the permanent justification of the state of exception justified by the ruling power. The permanency of the temporariness in a dialectic movement between refugees and ruling power should be considered as a permanent temporary regime laboratory that might be multiplied around the world in different areas where there is a growing demand for recognition of historical responsibility as a primary condition to the fulfillment of rights.

Bibliography

- AGAMBEN, Giorgio, *State of Exception*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2003.
 BOQAI, Nihad and REMPEL, Terry (eds.), *Survey of Palestinian refugees and internally displaced Persons 2003*, Badil Resource Center for Palestinian Residency & Refugee Rights, 2004.
 DESTREMAU, Blandine, «L'espace du camp et la reproduction du provisoire», in *Moyen-Orient, migrations, médiation*, directed by JALLIL, M. R., Paris 1995.
 HANAFI, Sari, *Coupling land issue with refugees issue, Sparrow-cite and Bi-politics*, 2005 (manuscript to be posthumously published).

HANAÏ, Sari, «Vivre dans le camp, vivre ailleurs: Les Palestiniens réfugiés en Egypte et dans les Territoires palestiniens», in *GEOGRAPHIES. Bulletin de l'Association de Géographes Français, Association de Géographes Français*, January 2006.

MORRIS, Benny, *The birth of the Palestinian refugee problem 1947-1949*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2003.

MARDAM-BEY, Farouk and SANBAR, Elias (eds.), *Le droit au retour, le problème des réfugiés palestiniens*, Sindbad Actes Sud, Paris 2002.

SIVAN, Eyal (director), *Aqabat-Jaber, Passing through*, documentary, 81 min., DVD, www.momento-production.com, 1987.

SIVAN, Eyal (director), *Aqabat-Jaber, Peace with no return?*, documentary, 61 min., DVD, www.momento-production.com, 1994.

SIVAN, Eyal and KHELEI, Michel (directors), *Rouie 181, Fragments of a journey in Palestine-Issad*, documentary, 270 min., DVD, www.momento-production.com, 2004.