

A point of view by Hisham H. Ahmed

For Israelis, Palestinians must remain refugees permanently

When I left Dheisheh in 1983 to continue my education in the United States, people in the camp were already facing several economic, social, psychological and political hardships. For most people in the camp, suffering began when they were evicted from their towns and villages in 1948. A sense of urgency was created at the time of the catastrophe, which was reflected in the camp, as in other camps, in the overcrowding of people and houses.

In the late 1940s and early 1950s, the focus was on resettling the refugees so that the question of return could be ignored. Yet the underlying problem continued to dominate refugee life, that is, the impossibility of fulfilling their desire to return to their homes and land.

In its attempt to pacify Palestinian refugees, the international community alleviated some of the immediate suffering.

Refugee families were given tents, then UNRWA took the responsibility of building houses. Still, a feeling of homelessness and statelessness was present, as the refugees refused to be treated as such. What was lacking was a mechanism by which they could exercise the right to determine all aspects of their lives.

With the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip in 1967, life in Dheisheh, as in other camps, entered a new stage. Obstacles multiplied, and the inhabitants found themselves at a crossroad: They could either accept the status quo or persevere until they could exercise their rights. As is well-known, the choice was not a difficult one: The people chose to resist, in spite of the suffering they were to face on a daily basis.

The occupation authorities took concrete measures to suppress the inhabitants of the camp and to destroy the social infrastructure which people had managed to build over the years. Before 1983, curfews, arrests, shooting and other forms of harassments were experienced by camp residents.

Today, as I observe life in the camp after seven years of interrupted absence, I believe that the Israelis are more determined than ever to make the

refugees' status permanent. All main entrances to the camp are blocked by concrete and barbed wire, and soldiers continue to fortify the fences around the camp by, for example, adding sheets of corrugated iron on top of the wire mesh. The only way to enter or leave the camp, other than through the mountains, is by the one gate which remains open, a turnstile through which only one person at a time can pass.

In this prison-like environment, new problems have emerged. It is an ordeal for ill people to travel to the hospital, and burying the dead has become a complicated task. The children of the camp, the young people and the elderly live lives of repression. Indeed, the camp has become a ghetto, where the unemployment rate, particularly among young people, is extremely high. In the period between September 1989 and June of this year, a nighttime curfew from 5 p.m. to 6 a.m. was imposed by the Israeli army. While many children in the West can play in parks, the children of the camp are most excited when they can leave their homes to play in the camp's alleys. However, the time during which they can leave their houses is very limited, as the camp is often under curfew.

Residents of the camp are still suffering, and, in spite of serious underlying problems, most are still resilient. Although some are exhausted, the majority are determined to make their refugee status impermanent. Particularly for the older generation, their former homes and lands continue as a living reality in their memory.

For the young people, who were born in the camp and who know no other life but that of the camp, the stories of parents and grandparents about life before the catastrophe provide them with the stimulus to search for a state of affairs where human dignity is respected and maintained. For them, this cannot be done except through the establishment of a Palestinian state, the only forum in which Palestinian rights can be exercised.

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