

**ROOTING DISPLACEMENT, ENLIVENING RETURN:  
AN ANALYSIS OF PALESTINIAN REFUGEES' SENSES OF PLACE**

An Honors Thesis for the Department of International Relations

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## Abstract

**Rooting Displacement, Enlivening Return:  
An Analysis of Palestinian Refugees' Senses of Place**

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Today, there are more than 7 million Palestinian refugees dispersed around the world constituting one of the largest and most protracted refugee crises in history. My thesis examines how the protracted refugee crisis has affected Palestinian refugees' senses of place and belonging in five locations: Lebanon, Jordan, the West Bank, Gaza, and Israel's 1948 territory. By concentrating on the various contours of the right of return debate and expectations across Palestinian societies in these locations, I provide nuanced insights into Palestinian refugees' complex relationship with place. I situate my analysis within existing scholarship on senses of place and the right of return. In my analysis of BADIL survey data, Twitter hashtags, and the Campus in Camps project archive, I identify that the alignment of people and place is more complicated than what is traditionally enforced in rhetoric around the right of a return to a future Palestinian state. Due to the realities of diasporas, dispersal, and movement, Palestinians feel deeply connected to their homeland and their current spatial locations abroad, in refugee camps, or in occupation. My thesis hopes to expand on how displaced Palestinians construct a history and identity in exile, and how they articulate a sense of belonging, both to a diasporic community and to a Palestinian homeland.

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## Introduction

Between 1947 and 1949, at least 750,000 Palestinians from a population of 1.9 million were made refugees. Israeli forces took more than 78 percent of Historic Palestine, ethnically cleansed and destroyed about 530 villages and cities, and killed about 15,000 Palestinians in a series of mass atrocities, including more than 70 massacres.<sup>1</sup> Palestinians commemorate this displacement on May 15th known as “Nakba Day.” Nakba means Catastrophe in English, and for Palestinians this day is an annual day of commemoration of the displacement that preceded and followed the Israeli Declaration of Independence in 1948.

Today there are more than 7 million Palestinian refugees dispersed around the world. The majority of Palestinians live in the Middle East, though there are sizable numbers living outside of it. Due to the absence of a comprehensive census with the Palestinian diaspora population, exact population data is difficult to determine. Around 5 million Palestinian refugees are eligible for The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) services. Nearly one-third of the 4.3 million Palestinian refugees registered with UNRWA, approximately 1.5 million, live in one of UNRWA’s 58 official Palestinian refugee camps which operate in Jordan, Lebanon, Syria and the occupied Palestinian territory. Many of the camps were created in 1948 as a result of the first Arab-Israeli war. Other camps were added after the wars in 1967 and 1973 and more recently after the war in Syria for Syrian Palestinians. The reality of continued forced displacement is at the core of the Palestinian experience and the refugee crisis constitutes one the most protracted and largest in the world.

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<sup>1</sup>“The Nakba did Not Start of End in 1948.” *Al Jazeera*. May 23, 2017.

In my thesis, I will seek to address the unique sense of place and belonging Palestinian refugees experience their living throughout the Middle Eastern region. In particular, I will look at the different contours of the right of return debate and expectations across Palestinian societies in Lebanon, Jordan, Gaza, and the West Bank. I will consider the significance of political violence, as well as local national, and transnational politics, on conceptualizations of Palestinian place and belonging. I hope to understand how Palestinian refugees affirm their various ethnic, religious, and national identifications. The survey data I am using, as well as my qualitative sources, reflect the lives and views of Palestinian refugees in societies throughout the Middle Eastern region.

### Research Questions

I will examine a variety of correlational, explanatory, and predictive questions. My first and main question to guide the majority of my research is a correlational question, asks how has the protracted Palestinian refugee situation shaped conceptualizations of Palestinians' sense of place and belonging? I will explore this line of thinking through both a historical and contemporary lens by examining how perceptions of the Palestinian right of return have emerged and shifted since the 1948 Palestinian exodus, known as the "Nakba" or "Catastrophe" in English.

I will also seek to answer three other questions, adjacent to my central research question. The first is an explanatory question asking in what ways do the contingencies of life in refugee camps and exposure to political violence contribute to Palestinians' (dis)connections with the nation and homeland? I ask this question as a means to examine the other possible influences on sense of place, such as political violence, citizenship laws, as well as trans governmental and

local policies. My other explanatory question is: as displaced people, how do Palestinians affirm their “identity” as Palestinians? This question seeks to address the possible influences on why Palestinians identify in specific ways. My last research question is a predictive question as to how this sense of place will be passed down to the subsequent generations of Palestinian refugees. I am looking at refugees of the past and present, thus it is important to address how this protracted refugee situation has already and will continue to impact future generations of Palestinians.

### Terminology

“Sense of place” captures the idea that people do not simply occupy places - they experience them, granting them life and social meaning. Sense of place is determined by personal experiences, social interactions, and identities.<sup>2</sup> I aim to explore the complex ways Palestinians experience, conceptualize, and confer meaning to their natural surroundings. I am interested in the transformation of a Palestinian sense of place from a local rootedness in particular towns, villages, and neighborhoods to an imagined sense of belonging to an abstract Palestinian nation and homeland. I chose the Palestinian refugee diaspora community because I believe the unique experience and meaning of life as a Palestinian in the region facilitates a sense of place defined in terms of displacement and exile. It will be interesting to see how a stateless status may form a central point of identification amongst Palestinians that could enable specific forms of ethnic and national belonging grounded in the experience of prolonged displacement.

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<sup>2</sup> Arjun Appadurai, “Introduction: Place and Voice in Anthropological Theory,” *Cultural Anthropology* 3(1):16-20. 1988.



I will be exploring Palestinian sense of place through the perceptions of the right of return among refugees in the region. A refugees' right to return to the homes from which they were displaced is a recognized customary norm of international law which is included in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, and the Fourth Geneva Convention.<sup>3</sup> The first source of support for Palestinian refugees' claims to a right of return is U.N. General Assembly Resolution 194 (III) Of December 1948, paragraph 11, in which the U.N. General Assembly, which "Resolves that the refugees wishing to return to their homes and live at peace with their neighbors should be permitted to do so..."<sup>4</sup> I hope to understand whether perception of return and its feasibility varies based on a refugees host location, and whether belief in the right of return is a fundamental aspect Palestinian identity.

Political violence encompasses all violence perpetrated by people or governments to achieve political goals.<sup>5</sup> In the Palestinian context, one-sided violence by the state, which includes genocide and police brutality, constitutes a large part of their experience. I plan to look at both the role of political violence in fighting for the right of return, as well as how exposure to political violence in a host country may affect the way Palestinians assimilate, and subsequently their desire to return. I will explore the role of the ongoing Great March of Return protests that have been occurring every Friday in Gaza since March of 2018 in the right of return debate. In the past, as well as annually on Nakba Day, there are various demonstrations across the region

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<sup>3</sup> Layla Allen, Melissa Yvonne, Alessandro Dainelli, Martina Ramacciotti, Alice Osbourne, Layla Allen, Atallah Salem, Al-Ayyam Printing, and Distribution Company. "Survey of Palestinian Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons, 2016-2018 Vol IX 220 Pages, 30 c.m.," n.d., 260.

<sup>4</sup> UNRWA, "Resolution 194," Accessed October 16, 2020. <https://www.unrwa.org/content/resolution-194>.

<sup>5</sup> Thomas Badey, "Defining International Terrorism: A Pragmatic Approach," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 10, no. 1 (March 1, 1998): 90-107.

protesting for the right of return. By examining these instances of political violence - violence between a state and non-state actor - I will better understand how the right of return debate in conjunction with political violence factors into the Palestinian ethno-national identity.

Throughout my thesis I will use the term “Israel’s 1948 Territory” when referencing the land that Israel gained after the 1948 War, which excludes the West Bank and Gaza as at this time they were occupied by Jordan and Egypt, respectively. This terminology serves to distinguish the West Bank and Gaza, which the Israeli government presently controls and is sovereign of, from their territory in 1948. I use this opposed to “Historic Palestine” because that would include Israel, the West Bank, the Gaza Strip, and in some definitions, parts of western Jordan. In addition, I use the terms “camp” and “city” to distinguish between the context of refugee camps and areas of cities that are not refugee camps. Although some of the refugee camps are integrated into parts of cities, they are nevertheless distinguishable from the surrounding area by the presence of UNRWA institutions and those who receive its services.

### Background Information

While studying abroad in Amman, Jordan, I studied the historical event Black September in my classes, which I hadn’t learned about in any of my prior Middle Eastern studies courses. Black September was a conflict fought in the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan between the Jordanian Armed Forces (JAF), under the leadership of King Hussein, and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), under the leadership of Yasser Arafat, in September 1970. The PLO wanted to overthrow the Jordanian monarchy. This happened when Jordanian police forces lost control in refugee camps. The camps became independent republics as the Palestinian fighters established administrative autonomy by creating a local government under the control of

uniformed PLO militants.<sup>6</sup> This event sparked my interest in how the militarization of refugee camps can be a common factor leading to political violence. It also helped me understand further why there is a Jordanian-Palestinian divide today.

Jordan has more than two million registered Palestinian refugees, and with the exception of people from Gaza, the vast majority of those of Palestinian origin have Jordanian citizenship. However, the Jordanian government arbitrarily and without notice withdrew Jordanian nationality from its citizens of Palestinian origin in the early 2000s and in 1988, making them stateless. There is lasting tension from this policy and I was able to see the Palestinian relation to place while there. For example, Palestinian refugees with citizenship would either introduce themselves as Jordanian or Palestinian, but Jordanians with no Palestinian ancestry or not part of another refugee diaspora introduced themselves as “Jordanian-Jordanian.” I became interested in how as displaced people, Palestinians affirm their “identity” and what this reveals about the social conditions and political imperatives of the refugee population.

Upon my arrival in Amman, Former President Donald Trump and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu announced their “Deal of the Century,”<sup>7</sup> an official peace plan to resolve the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. The plan required few concessions from the Israelis and imposed harsh requirements on the Palestinians. During the press conference announcing the plan, Netanyahu announced that the Israeli government would immediately annex the Jordan Valley and West Bank settlements while committing not to create new settlements in areas left to the Palestinians for at least four years.

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<sup>6</sup> Encyclopedia Britannica. “Black September | Organization, Attacks, & Facts.” Accessed October 7, 2020.

<sup>7</sup> Arabic: صفقة القرن (Transliteration: Safqat Al Qarn)

The announcement of the plan caused uproar among Palestinian communities, especially in Jordan with the Prime Minister openly opposing the plan. Protests ensued and I watched them unfold at the University of Jordan campus I was studying at. Although I was only following a few Jordanian students on Instagram and Twitter, I saw how they used social media to organize and spread awareness of the protests. The Jordan BDS official Twitter account posted information about protests as well as pictures and videos of them as they were happening live.<sup>8</sup> I became intrigued with the role of social media in creating discourse and temporary community across displaced groups.

### Relevance of Topic

I was inspired to write my thesis based loosely on my experiences abroad in Jordan. My original research topic was how the composition of the Jordanian national identity is impacted by tribalism, refugee crises (in particular the Palestinian and Syrian cases), and whether this affects terrorist actions in Jordan and the Middle East region. I eventually narrowed it down to focus on how Palestinians have built their national identity as a community in exile and how this is influenced by ongoing political violence in the region.

I chose the Palestinian refugee crisis because it is the oldest and largest refugee case in the world. One in three refugees worldwide is Palestinian. There are about 7.2 million Palestinian refugees worldwide. More than 4.3 million Palestinian refugees and their descendants displaced in 1948 are registered for humanitarian assistance with the United Nations.<sup>9</sup> However, the expanding numbers of refugees from the Middle East and Africa today challenge the

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<sup>8</sup> Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) is a Palestinian-led movement for freedom, justice and equality. The Jordan BDS Twitter account can be found here: <https://twitter.com/bdsjordan?lang=en>

<sup>9</sup> UNRWA. "Palestine Refugees." <https://www.unrwa.org/palestine-refugees>.

uniqueness of the Palestinian situation. The theoretical importance of studying the Palestinian case is that it is a situation similar to these other emerging refugee crises. Thus, my research on Palestinian sense of place could extend to other diasporic refugee communities.

There has been ample literature on both the impact of refugee crises on political violence and how national identity is affected by refugee status, but based on my online research and conversations with my academic professors when I studied abroad at the University of Jordan, there appears to be less discussion about how a refugee's sense of place and belonging interacts with political violence. I want to look specifically at the Palestinian refugee community because not only is it the oldest and largest protracted refugee situation, but it is a situation analogous to that of other diasporic refugee communities. In addition, recent events this year, specifically President Trump and Netanyahu's "Deal of the Century" as well as the annexation, have placed increased relevance on the Palestinian refugee crisis. I would add to the existing literature by examining how a Palestinian national identity and sense of place is maintained and shaped as a result of on-going political violence in the Middle Eastern region, as these are topics that I have not seen examined together.

## Methodology

My research seeks to answer four questions regarding the sense of place of Palestinian refugees living in the Middle Eastern region. I have divided my thesis into three sections: each dedicated to answering one of my three sub-questions, which all tie into my main research question: how has the protracted Palestinian refugee situation shaped conceptualizations of Palestinians' sense of place and belonging? My methods include an analysis of quantitative survey data on Palestinian's perception of the right of return, as well as a qualitative analysis of

Palestinian discourse on return on social media feeds, and media produced by the youth participants of Campus in Camps. In addition, within each chapter, there will be significant space for analysis of previous scholarly literature on the concepts being explored. Below I further describe the methodologies I will use to best answer each specific research question, as well as provide the hypotheses I have developed.

In my first chapter, I address how the contingencies of life in refugee camps contribute to Palestinian's (dis)connections with the nation and homeland. To answer this question, I employ survey questions from The Biennial Survey on Palestinian Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) produced by BADIL, an advocacy center for Palestinian refugee rights, every two years.<sup>10</sup> The most recent data was collected in 2016-2018, and surveyed refugees from the West Bank, Gaza Strip, Jordan, and Lebanon, as well as IDPs within Israel's 1948 territory. The survey data explores the Palestinian's responses to a multitude of questions designed to shed light on and encourage further exploration of the feasibility, practicality, process, and politics of return.

Through analyzing the results of the survey, as well as the survey itself, in addition to existing literature on the right of return, I hope to understand not only which factors may cause the perceptions of the right of return, but also Palestinians beliefs and behaviors more fully. I hypothesize that regardless of differences in living conditions of Palestinians throughout the region, the salience of the belief in the right of return among communities in exile unites them as one cohesive, transnational, refugee category.

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<sup>10</sup> Layla Allen, Melissa Yvonne, Alessandro Dainelli, Martina Ramacciotti, Alice Osbourne, Layla Allen, and Atallah Salem. "Survey of Palestinian Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons, 2016-2018 *BADIL* Vol IX 220 Pages, 30 c.m.," n.d., 140-187.

In the second section of my thesis, I plan to utilize an alternative qualitative approach to analyze the sense of place of Palestinian refugees and displaced persons throughout the region as expressed on social media. I want to explore as displaced people, how Palestinians affirm their “identity” as Palestinians. An analysis of social media will best answer this explanatory question, as social media has become a “space” that cultivates individual and collective identities.<sup>11</sup> I will scrape existing qualitative data from the vast repertoire of discourse taking place on social media sites such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram. One way I do this is by analyzing posts in English and Arabic under three specific hashtags: #RazanAlNajjar, #GreatMarchOfReturn, and #FreePalestine. Social media is a particularly interesting site for dialogue this year, as in-person protests and events such as the anniversary of the Nakba were entirely virtual.

The function of this chapter is to show in contrast to formal survey responses, what is happening on the ground. It will be necessary to consider how the demographics of the participants who took the questionnaire vary compared to those using social media. For instance, the survey data separates the responses by location, while the Twitter feed under certain hashtags will not be separated by location. Thus, this social media analysis will be a more broad look at how scattered Palestinian refugees in the region have been able to unite, to identify with one another, and consequently to establish a sense of unified national identity and embody their collective struggle for self-determination.

Alongside exploring the various facets of social media utilized by Palestinian refugees, I will continue to examine research and scholarship on both Palestinian identities throughout history, and social media as a site for Palestinian discourse on the right of return. I hypothesize

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<sup>11</sup> Malene Charlotte Larsen, “Understanding Social Networking: On Young People’s Construction and Co-Construction of Identity Online,” Aalborg University, 2008.

that due to prolonged displacement and continuous distance from the 1948 exile, Palestinians affirm their identity by emphasizing their status as refugees to sustain the Palestinian national community in exile, as well as their collective right to return to their national homeland, Palestine.

In the third and final chapter of my thesis, I will analyze the website “Campus in Camps”, which hosts the archive of projects produced by Palestinian refugee youth over two years from 2012-2014. Campus in Camps was created as an experimental educational program with Al Quds University and hosted by the Phoenix Center in Dheisheh Refugee Camp in Bethlehem with the support of the Popular Committees of Southern West Bank refugee camps. The project was implemented in cooperation with the UNRWA Camp Improvement Program. The goal was to create strategic partnerships of institutions and organizations that rarely work together to connect people to people, institutions to institutions, and camps to other camps. Together the participants of this initiative produced a booklet with a collection of their various media.<sup>12</sup>

I use Campus in Camps to form a predictive analysis of how a sense of place will be passed down to subsequent generations of Palestinian refugees. “Campus in Camps” is an interesting site for analysis as it was founded to seek out narratives of youth in refugee camps. Also, all of the media on the website is produced directly by Palestinian youth, allowing for deeper and authentic narratives, ideas, and discourse. The dialogue began with the urgency of Palestinians to explore and produce new forms of representation of camps and refugees beyond the static and impersonal representation of surveys and the news, making it a meaningful site for analysis along with other forms of media and the BADIL survey data.

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<sup>12</sup> Alessandro Petti, “Architecture of Exile,” Campus in Camps, June 11, 2013, <http://www.campusincamps.ps/about/>.



Using *Campus in Camps*, along with an exploration of generational narratives of Palestinians in exile, I will test my hypothesis that despite the distance from their ancestors' initial displacement in 1948, Palestinian youth hold the right of return as an inherent part of their identity to protect their national cause from erasure.

In summary, in the following chapters, I analyze three sets of research questions which all tie into my main research question: how has the protracted Palestinian refugee situation shaped conceptualizations of Palestinians' sense of place and belonging? My main hypothesis is that the protracted refugee situation has caused a transformation of a Palestinian sense of place from a local rootedness in particular towns, villages, and neighborhoods to an imagined sense of belonging to an abstract Palestinian nation and homeland. This is articulated through a collective identity rooted in the sacred belief in the right of return.

### Contribution to Scholarly Discussion

Though commonly assumed to be holding this status temporarily, according to UNHCR statistics at the beginning of 2019, approximately 78 percent of all the refugees displaced worldwide find themselves in a situation of protracted, long-term exile.<sup>13</sup> Long-term displacement affects every aspect of a person's life, making it a core aspect of their identity. Yet the identity of long-term refugees and their relationship to place is understudied. By addressing the intersection of identity and geography, I will analyze how Palestinians' relationship to place contributes to the differing contours of the right of return debate across Palestinian societies.

My thesis will contribute to the understanding of protracted displacement through the perceptions of place and right of return among Palestinian refugee camps located in the West

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<sup>13</sup>UNHCR, "Protracted Refugee Situations Explained."

Bank, Gaza, Lebanon, Jordan, as well as IDPs within Israel's 1948 territory. Using books, articles, surveys, oral histories, social media, and youth media produced by Palestinians in the region, I will analyze the repertoire of ideas and voices that exist around a sense of place as articulated by Palestinians across the diaspora on the issue of the right of return.

I will contribute to the existing literature by highlighting how beyond differences in living conditions of Palestinians throughout the region, the salience of the belief in the right of return among communities in exile unites them as one cohesive, transnational, refugee category.

In addition, many studies on the right of return do not include the opinions or narratives of IDPs living within Israel. In my thesis, I will examine the right of return in a holistic manner and thus treat discourse on and by IDPs as integral to the general discourse on the right of return. Furthermore, rather than treating the issue in its narrowest form, solely the question of whether or not Palestinian refugees will or should return to their former homes and villages, I will attempt to unravel the many other grievances and issues being negotiated and contested between the parties throughout the diaspora.

## **Chapter One: Unraveling the Relationship Between Palestinian Senses of Place and the Right of Return across the Middle Eastern Region**

### Introduction

Since the Nakba, Palestinians have experienced several waves of exile and spread into different host countries around the world. According to the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, there are an estimated 13 million Palestinians in the world, and about 5 million reside in the State of Palestine.<sup>14 15</sup> The places Palestinians presently live in are more than just spatial locations, but sites of power struggles, displacement, annexation, absorption, and resistance. Due to the complexities of how Palestinians relate to places, their views on the right of return to a future Palestinian state are more complex than what can be captured in a public opinion poll. This chapter offers a starting point for better understanding Palestinians' opinions on return. I hope to draw attention to how individual Palestinians have a different sense of what their claims are based on their location.

In this chapter, I will explore existing scholarly literature on or relating to how the protracted refugee crisis has impacted Palestinian refugees' perceptions of their sense of place. I analyze perceptions of place and belonging through Palestinians' belief and desire to exercise the right of return, a well-established principle in international law, allowing all refugees to voluntarily return to, or re-enter their country of origin or citizenship. The right of return is foundational to the human right of freedom of movement and is also the legal concept of nationality. The right was first established by the United Nations General Assembly in

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<sup>14</sup> PCBS. "On the Occasion of the International Population Day 11/7/2019." November 11, 2019.

<sup>15</sup>The "State of Palestine" recognized officially by the United Nations and other entities, is the de jure sovereign state including the West Bank and Gaza Strip with Jerusalem as the designated capital. In other parts of my thesis, I refer to the "State of Palestine" as the Occupied Territories.

Resolution 194 near the end 1948 Arab-Israeli War. In Article 11, the resolution defines principles for reaching a final settlement and returning Palestinian refugees to their homes, resolving that

refugees wishing to return to their homes and live at peace with their neighbours should be permitted to do so at the earliest practicable date, and that compensation should be paid for the property of those choosing not to return and for loss of or damage to property which, under principles of international law or equity, should be made good by the Governments or authorities responsible.<sup>16</sup>

The General Assembly has affirmed Resolution 194 over 40 times. It represents the strongest claim, under international law, for the inalienable right of repatriation available to Palestinian refugees.<sup>17</sup> This right is also articulated in several modern treaties and conventions, including the 1948 Fourth Geneva Convention, the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and the 1966 International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. Discussions on the Palestinian right of return have constituted one of the main hurdles in reaching an agreement in the context of Israeli-Palestinian peace negotiations.

The right of return is a fundamental aspect of Palestinian identity and a key factor in the Palestinian's sense of place and belonging. I will present the different contours of the right of return debate and expectations across Palestinian societies in Lebanon, Jordan, the West Bank, Gaza, and Israel's 1948 territory with consideration for how political violence, as well as local,

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<sup>16</sup> UNRWA, "Resolution 194," <https://www.unrwa.org/content/resolution-194>.

<sup>17</sup>Wadie Said, "The Obligations Of Host Countries To Refugees Under International Law: The Case Of Lebanon," *Pluto Press*, 2001.

national, and transnational politics, affect this debate.<sup>18</sup> I aim to connect the way living conditions in refugee camps, as well as exposure to political violence, contribute to Palestinians' (dis)connections with the nation and homeland and subsequent belief in return.

This chapter will examine bodies of literature that address the various right of return movements and attitudes in five locations: Jordan, Lebanon, the West Bank, Gaza, and Israel's 1948 territory, as well as analyze quantitative survey data on public opinion of Palestinian refugees in these locations. As I rely heavily on the results of the BADIL survey in this chapter, I aim to not only analyze the survey data, but also develop an analysis of the survey itself, its intentions, and its implications. I seek to understand to what extent BADIL is part of the human rights industry documenting and reporting on facts, and to what extent it is making a political argument and enlivening the argument for return. By positioning the survey in the larger context of this discourse, I hope to better understand the multiplicities in the human rights field and its effects on a sustained belief in the right of return by Palestinians across these locations.

### Introduction to Survey Data

There are many nuances in the debate around the right of return, especially when it comes to the desire to exercise the right, how the return should be implemented, whether Palestinians should be compensated, as well as the belief in the feasibility of return. To account for these nuances, I will employ survey questions from "The Biennial Survey on Palestinian Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs)" produced by BADIL, an advocacy center for Palestinian

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<sup>18</sup> The BADIL survey uses the terminology "1948 Palestine" to refer to the same land I reference when I use "Israel's 1948 Territory" - the land that Israel gained after the 1948 War, which excludes the West Bank and Gaza as at this time they were occupied by Jordan and Egypt, respectively.

refugee rights, every two years.<sup>19</sup> The most recent data was collected in 2016-2018, and surveyed refugees from the West Bank, Gaza Strip, Jordan, and Lebanon, as well as IDPs within Israel. The survey data explores the Palestinian's responses to a multitude of questions designed to shed light on and encourage further exploration of the feasibility, practicality, process, and politics of return. The manually completed face-to-face questionnaire contained 21 questions posed to 1000 youth, gender-balanced, across five geographic areas (labeled 1948 Palestine, the Gaza Strip, the West Bank, Jordan, and Lebanon). An online survey was also provided for 605 additional participants who were unable to meet face-to-face. BADIL also provides an in-depth analysis of the Palestinian refugee experience. It includes historical background, demographic and socio-economic profiles, as well as information about assistance, protection, and durable solutions for Palestinian refugees and IDPs.

The data is gender-balanced within each area and thus across the whole sample. The targeted group consists of youth from Palestinian families living in refugee camps recognized by UNRWA in the West Bank, Gaza Strip, Jordan, and Lebanon. The target group in 1948 Palestine consists of Palestinian families in communities with a majority of IDPs. The sample consists of Palestinian refugees or IDP youth from ages 18-29 years old. In addition to the research carried out by a field team commissioned by BADIL, there was also an online questionnaire developed as an opportunity to engage Palestinian refugees within the targeted areas, but not necessarily in refugee camps and in exile. These groups are less accessible in general and their views are often marginalized or overlooked entirely in the discussions around return and its practicality. While the dissemination of an online questionnaire increased access to more information, it

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<sup>19</sup> Layla Allen, Melissa Yvonne, Alessandro Dainelli, Martina Ramacciotti, Alice Osbourne, Layla Allen, and Atallah Salem. "Survey of Palestinian Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons, 2016-2018 *BADIL* Vol IX 220 Pages, 30 c.m.," n.d., 140-187.

undoubtedly affected the results as it was not limited to youth. Only 27 percent of online respondents were aged between 18-29 years old. However, there were clear consistencies in the results of the traditional survey and the broader online questionnaire and regardless of noticeable diversions, the results were thoroughly analyzed with this in mind.

It is important to note that there is no single authoritative source for the global Palestinian refugee and IDP population. Estimates of the current size of the Palestinian refugee and IDP population and their socio-economic situation are based on the best available data, which, if existing, is uneven and shifting. Up until 2001, there was no thorough research or documentation that existed on the issue of the right of return, and even today, Palestinian positions on the right of return are unclearly articulated in scholarly literature and public opinion polls.<sup>20</sup> While the BADIL survey certainly has limitations in its scope, I selected it as a quantitative data source because it surveyed persons from each location as I am analyzing in my thesis. Also, the questionnaire is compartmentalized into thematic sections. Each section asks specific questions regarding Palestinian refugees' perceptions of the right of return, including belief in the feasibility of return, what they envisaged return to be in practice, who should be prioritized, and the components of the reparations package.

There are few public opinion surveys that had the same geographical reach and specificity that BADIL had. I considered using Dr. Khalil Shikaki's 2003 survey from the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research (PSR) to make an argument about

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<sup>20</sup>Wadie Said, "The Obligations Of Host Countries To Refugees Under International Law: The Case Of Lebanon," *Pluto Press*, 2001.

Palestinians' perception of the right of return over time.<sup>21</sup> However, due to the differences in methodology, scope, and survey objectives, I decided to only analyze the more recently published and in-depth results of the BADIL survey.

To give a holistic overview of the right of return debate in each of these societies, I am analyzing the survey data alongside scholarly literature on the issue of return and sense of place before my other chapters of analysis. This includes looking at literature produced by scholars studying the experiences of refugees and their sense of place in the region, as well as ethnographic case studies. By bringing together the literature on the senses of place and perceptions of the right of return in the region, this chapter will open up the question of whether people have an emplaced experience of rights.

#### Analysis of Survey Data

BADIL Resource Center for Palestinian Residency and Refugee Rights issues a formal report on the Palestinian refugee crisis every two years. Their most recent report, which was a survey of Palestinian Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) from 2016-2018, included extensive survey data regarding the opinions of Palestinians in various geographic locations on crucial issues, including the right of return. I will reference this data throughout this lit review and subsequent sections of the thesis. The data and subsequent analysis serve to emphasize that return remains at the core of the Palestinian question.

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<sup>21</sup>Khalil Shikaki, "PSR Polls among Palestinian Refugees," Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research, September 25, 2014, <https://www.pcpsr.org/en/node/493>.



BADIL holds that the right of return is an inherent part of Palestinian identity, with belief in its feasibility exceptionally high among youth at 81.3 percent overall.<sup>22</sup> The vast majority of the 18.7 percent who do not see any possibility for realization of their return are internally displaced persons in Israel, with 81.1 percent of 1948 IDPs not believing return will be realized. If the 1948 IDPs are removed from the sample, the belief in the feasibility of return rises considerably to 97 percent among refugees in the West Bank, Gaza Strip, Jordan, and Lebanon. BADIL uses these results to make a political statement that the Palestinian belief in the right of return supersedes the politics of individual states, cities, or environments. However, by making this regional claim about all Palestinian refugees, the BADIL survey questions do not capture all of the nuanced arguments individual Palestinian communities hold. I will analyze the results in each of the five locations in the following subsections, as well as how they interact with existing literature.

### Lebanon

The findings of BADIL reflect the popular opposition to Palestinian resettlement in Lebanon. Only 3.1 percent of the population believe return is not realizable at all. For respondents who do not believe return is realizable, they do not cite the size of the refugee population or lack of sufficient space in Palestine as the reasons. Instead, 100 percent of those who do believe return is realizable, agreed that “Arab weakness” is the reason, likely an expression of a sense of abandonment, frustration, and helplessness in the face of Israel’s tyrannical power. Noteworthy is among those that believe return is realizable (96.9%) when asked what return means to them personally, 90.4 percent of those surveyed said that return is a

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<sup>22</sup> Layla Allen, Melissa Yvonne, Alessandro Dainelli, Martina Ramacciotti, Alice Osbourne, Layla Allen, Atallah Salem, Al-Ayyam Printing, and Distribution Company. “Survey of Palestinian Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons, 2016-2018 *BADIL* Vol IX 220 Pages, 30 c.m.,” n.d., 260.

right that they seek to realize in totality, as in it is fully realizable, as opposed to only partially realizable. When surveyed about different options for reparations, respondents from Lebanon had relatively consistent results across each of the options, indicating that they would be prepared to accept any package enabling them to return. BADIL attributes this to Palestinians believing that integration into Lebanon is not possible due to the specific political context in Lebanon, as well as the harsh living conditions.

BADIL also notes that ever since the Nakba, there has been a prevailing Palestinian political discourse in Lebanon, which has consistently prioritized return, regardless of other forms of reparations. This may be because Palestinian refugees in Lebanon represent the poorest sector in all of Lebanese society and the poorest grouping of Palestinian refugees in any Arab country.<sup>23</sup> Due to the inhumane conditions of Palestinians in refugee camps, as well as the conception by Lebanese citizens that Palestinians are inferior and low class, refugees do not have equal economic opportunities and cannot easily assimilate into the social fabric of society. Although Palestinians have formal representation on a political level, as well as an embassy in Beirut, this is seen as merely a formality and does little to mitigate Palestinian suffering in Lebanon.<sup>24</sup>

Diana Allan argues these extremes of poverty, powerlessness, and political disillusionment have contributed to refugees' political agency and insistence to return.<sup>25</sup> Upholding the right of return and their status as refugees status over assimilating has become a core tenet of the community's political identity. The Lebanese government has exploited

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<sup>23</sup> Wadie Said, "The Obligations Of Host Countries To Refugees Under International Law: The Case Of Lebanon," *Pluto Press*, 2001.

<sup>24</sup> Rami Siklawi, "The Palestinian Refugee Camps in Lebanon Post 1990: Dilemmas of Survival and Return to Palestine," *Arab Studies Quarterly; London* 41, no. 1 (Winter 2019): 78–94.

<sup>25</sup> Diana Allan, *Refugees of the Revolution: Experiences of Palestinian Exil*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013, 11.

Palestinians' condition in exile by withholding basic rights like health care, education, and social security, implicating that opposing civil rights for Palestinian refugees in Lebanon is inextricably linked to supporting their national rights in a future Palestinian state.<sup>26</sup>

Simon Haddad, a lecturer of political studies at the American University of Beirut, attributes the intense desire to exercise the right of return in Lebanon to the religious composition of the population and the degree of social distance displayed by the Lebanese towards the Palestinians as members of a distinct community are two major factors. Haddad defines "social distance" in this context as the degree of acceptance Lebanese citizens have towards the integration of Palestinians. He conducted a study to assess the impact of social distance on attitudes towards Palestinian resettlement using comprehensive cross-cultural survey research. The results revealed that Lebanese respondents of all six sub-groups are likely to hold unfavorable attitudes towards permanent Palestinian resettlement in Lebanon if they display prejudice and hostility toward Palestinians.<sup>27 28</sup> In short, the degree of social distance is inversely and consistently a predictor of attitudes toward resettlement.

All of these factors have contributed to a lack of belonging in Lebanese society and an intense desire to exercise their right of return to their homeland, Palestine. If the right of return is terminated, Rami Siklawi asserts that Palestinian refugees in Lebanon will feel as if their identity is no longer protected from erasure, and their plight as refugees will be forgotten by the international community. One refugee in their interview said that even if the Lebanese government were to dedicate time and resources to improving the living conditions of the

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<sup>26</sup>Diana Allan, *Refugees of the Revolution: Experiences of Palestinian Exil*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013, 4.

<sup>27</sup> Simon Haddad, "The Determinants of Lebanese Attitudes Toward Palestinian Resettlement: An Analysis of Survey Data," 27.

<sup>28</sup> The sub-groups surveyed by Haddad were: Maronites, Catholics, Greek Orthodox, Sunnis, Shi'is, and Druze.

Palestinian refugee camps, this does not mean the right of return can be taken away because this right ensures a collective public awareness within the Arab world and the international community.<sup>29</sup>

When presented with different options of where they will return to, the refugees in Lebanon showed the most support (98.7%) for the original homes of where their ancestors were displaced. The other options were “Anywhere within the borders of historic Palestine, other than the original homes” (84.1%) and “Within the borders of the promised Palestinian state (within 1967)” (62.2%). Although support for return to their ancestors’ homes was considerably higher, the majority of refugees would still agree to the other options. These results highlight the Palestinian public consciousness of return being to the original homes of their ancestors, but also that the understanding that the issue of return must be separated from the issue of Palestinian statehood in order for return to be realizable and sustainable.

Wadie Said offers an explanation for these responses, citing that the overwhelming majority of Palestinians in Lebanon are from Galilee and the coastal areas of historic Palestine, which are areas that are currently within the state of Israel. Palestinian refugees in Lebanon have stronger family and cultural ties to their original homes and villages and often have little or no connection or direct experience with the areas of the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Due to this, Palestinians in Lebanon are seeking to return to their areas of origin within Israel, and not the promised Palestinian state within the agreed 1967 borders. Furthermore, relocating to the occupied territories is viewed as unfeasible, by both the refugees and the Palestinians currently residing there, due to lack of sufficient space and economic instability.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup>Rami Siklawi, “The Palestinian Refugee Camps in Lebanon Post 1990: Dilemmas of Survival and Return to Palestine,” *Arab Studies Quarterly*; London 41, no. 1 (Winter 2019): 78–94.

<sup>30</sup> Wadie Said, “The Obligations Of Host Countries To Refugees Under International Law: The Case Of Lebanon,” *Pluto Press*, 2001.

The research of these scholars as well as BADIL's survey data shows a consistent geographic trend that due to a lack of assimilation into Lebanese society, in addition to the deprivation of other rights such as free movement inside and outside of the country, Palestinian refugees residing in camps show a strong desire to exercise the right of return. Beyond just a high belief in the feasibility of return at 96.9 percent, refugees in Lebanon had the highest rating in regards to prioritizing returning and rehabilitating refugees economically and socially.<sup>31</sup> The deteriorating conditions of refugee camps in Lebanon, combined with ongoing discrimination, are likely why economic and social rehabilitation is a more urgent priority in comparison to other groups. The emphasis on not only a return but economic rehabilitation contributes to Palestinian refugees in Lebanon's unique set of claims. They are claiming a right to return to their original villages as well as a future Palestinian state, but also contesting their rights as refugees against the Lebanese state.

#### Jordan

The BADIL survey found that 100 percent of respondents from Jordan believed that return is realizable, the highest percentage of all the territories studied.<sup>32</sup> There are a variety of factors that may be sustaining this high rate of belief that individually and jointly overlap and affect respondents' opinions.

Jordan offers an interesting point of comparison with Lebanon. Both territories have the highest rates of belief in feasibility, but the living conditions, as well as the degree of

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<sup>31</sup> Layla Allen, Melissa Yvonne, Alessandro Dainelli, Martina Ramacciotti, Alice Osbourne, Layla Allen, and Atallah Salem. "Survey of Palestinian Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons, 2016-2018 *BADIL* Vol IX 220 Pages, 30 c.m.," n.d., 140-187.

<sup>32</sup> Layla Allen, Melissa Yvonne, Alessandro Dainelli, Martina Ramacciotti, Alice Osbourne, Layla Allen, and Atallah Salem. "Survey of Palestinian Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons, 2016-2018 *BADIL* Vol IX 220 Pages, 30 c.m.," n.d., 140-187.

assimilation, are vastly different. The survey data reveals integration does not mean abandoning the right of return nor giving up the pursuit of return. In Jordan, the majority of Palestinians hold Jordanian citizenship, yet all respondents believed in the feasibility of return in principle. Then in Lebanon, the opportunities for integration into the local community are virtually non-existent due to official restrictions, but again the vast majority of respondents also believed in the feasibility of return in principle. However, integration into the local community is more of a factor in the questions regarding respondents' concerns and their individual priorities in the return process. For instance, the relatively low prioritization by Palestinian refugees from Jordan (68.5 percent) for rehabilitating refugees economically and socially once they return to Palestine is a reflection of the comparative socio-economic status of refugees in these Jordan, having largely acquired citizenship. Regardless, the disparate experiences of integration in Lebanon and Jordan emphasize that the conviction in the possibility of return is unaffected by the degree of integration into the local community. The issue of return supersedes political and economic conditions. It is clear from the result that this belief as a realizable right derives from an inherent Palestinian belief in the right of return and its importance to a durable solution.

Many scholars have addressed the unique situation of Palestinian refugees in Jordan. Jalal Al-Husseini provides a detailed historical overview of refugee camps in Jordan since 1950 and explores refugees' and Jordan's unified commitment to the right of return. He asserts that Jordanian refugee camps embody the humanitarian and political plight borne by Palestinian refugees. In addition, the refugee camps maintain an international consciousness of Palestinians in exile while also protecting the right of return.<sup>33</sup> Although at first, Palestinian refugee camps

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<sup>33</sup>Jalal Al-Husseini, "The Evolution of the Palestinian Refugee Camps in Jordan. Between Logics of Exclusion and Integration," In *Villes, Pratiques Urbaines et Construction Nationale En Jordanie*, by Myriam Ababsa and Rami Farouk Daher, 181–204. Cahiers de l'Ifpo. Beyrouth: Presses de l'Ifpo, 2013.

were characterized by poverty and destitution, over time they have become gradually socioeconomically integrated with their surrounding environment. Al-Husseini comments on the complex nature of “full integration”, given that most camp refugees are citizens, yet their places of residence are still considered temporary spaces.

Bocco and Al-Husseini shed light on both the potential lines of cohesion and fragmentation that have formed among Palestinians in exile over crucial issues like the meaning of the right of return and the role UNRWA has in determining a lasting Arab–Israeli peace process. Using recent surveys with information drawn from primary and secondary sources, they seek to answer how Palestinian refugees living under a variety of different national jurisdictions and experiencing different living conditions affect their identity as a cohesive, transnational, refugee category. They assert that beyond the vast differences in living conditions of the host countries where Palestinian refugees reside, the prevalence of the right of return remains in all of their collective narratives. Even in Jordan, where many Palestinians have been formal citizens since 1949, the right of return remains a salient issue for most refugees over seventy years after their, or often their family’s initial exile.<sup>34</sup> Their article highlights the continuous interplay of humanitarian, socioeconomic, and political considerations that have shaped the refugees’ status in the Near East over the course of recent history.

Jordan also ranked the highest in respondents who said “Evacuating former colonizers from refugee properties and re-housing them in new homes established by the State” was “not important” to them (75.8%). This perhaps reflects their experience in Jordan, where despite being refugees they hold many objective measures of equality with Jordanian citizens. While Palestinian refugees in Jordan are subjected to systemic but implicit discrimination because of

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<sup>34</sup>Jalal Al-Husseini and Riccardo Bocco, “The Status of the Palestinian Refugees in the Near East: The Right of Return and UNRWA in Perspective,” *Refugee Survey Quarterly* 28 (January 1, 2009): 260–85.

their Palestinian identity, it is less severe than the obvious forms of discrimination refugees in Lebanon and the occupied territories face. Thus, Palestinian refugees in Jordan know they can successfully coexist in a country with people who do not share their identity.

Michael Vicente Pérez examines this implicit discrimination of Palestinian refugees living within United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) camps in Amman, Jordan, and how the refugee crisis impacts Palestinian sense of place, belonging, and ethnonational identity, specifically in Jordan. Pérez's dissertation is an ethnographic study of Palestinian national identity in Jordan. He employs a methodology of field research, participant observation, and document research. He argues that due to the lengthy nature of the Palestinian refugee situation, as well as discriminatory practices within the Jordanian state, Palestinians have to assert their status as refugees to sustain the Palestinian national community in Jordan, as well as their collective right to return to their national homeland, Palestine.<sup>35</sup>

Palestinian studies have largely ignored the Jordanian and diasporic context, focusing instead on the claims of Palestinians in the occupied West Bank, Gaza, Lebanon, and Israel. In this case, the necessity of addressing the extremes of occupation, colonization, and armed conflict unwittingly led to the exclusion of the less dramatic albeit important stories of Palestinians living in places like Jordan.

West Bank

In the West Bank, despite achieving local integration due to being in Palestinian communities and in areas that remain part of Palestine, the rates of belief in the feasibility of

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<sup>35</sup>Michael Pérez, "Identifying Palestinians: Palestinian Refugees and the Politics of Ethno-National Identity in Jordan," Department of Anthropology Michigan State University, 2011.



return are still high at 95.2 percent. As there is still exposure to the discourse on return by Palestinian political groups and factions in the West Bank, the issue of return remains important to refugees residing there and is reflected in the results. However, in contrast to Palestinian refugees living in exile, those residing in the occupied territories expressed lower rates in belief of the feasibility of return. Likely due to the realities of living under military occupation, Palestinians in the West Bank have a different understanding of what legal rights are possible. Thus, the ability to exercise the right of return is tied to other legal rights they are unable to access under an apartheid regime, making it seem less possible in practice.

The BADIL survey tries to account for the nuances of the differing claims of Palestinians due to their location. Those surveyed could choose from a list of what the major challenges to a return is, and BADIL listed "Palestinian fear of Israeli repression during the attempted return," as a choice. Palestinians who believed in return in the West Bank selected this as the main obstacle to the return movement. This sentiment was shared by those who did not consider return to be possible at all (4.8%), as the strength and suppression of Israel were seen as the primary factor preventing return. Palestinians in the occupied territories are in the unique position where their idea of return is to a place within Historic Palestine and not a future Palestinian State in the same way, as they technically already reside in the State of Palestine. In addition, they have claims to make against the Israeli government for being discriminatory, which is something they share with other refugees in the occupied territories, but not all Palestinian refugees.

In addition, their belief in return may be affected by despite being refugees, they are technically already residing on Palestinian territory and feel attached to two places at once. Dorota Woroniecka-Krzyżanowska discusses this concept in her case study of the Palestinian refugee camp of al-Am'ari in the West Bank, based on her ethnographic fieldwork there between

January 2010 and August 2012. She reviews different interpretations of dilemmas faced by camp refugees living in extended exile, based on the concept of "mediated locality."<sup>36</sup> Woroniecka-Krzyżanowska argues that quasi-permanent refugee camps can function as sites of commemoration, the habitation of which may be treated by the refugees as proof of commitment to their pre-exilic locations.<sup>37</sup> She analyzes how refugee camps have become a symbolic representation of refugees' places of origin and how their inhibition permits residents to retain links with pre-exilic communities and locations. She asserts that in the case of al-Am'ari, the camp is a physical embodiment of their refugee status and the aspirations of return, causing long-term refugees to be torn between the feeling of belonging to the places of origin and growing domestication of, and attachment to, sites of contemporary residence - refugee camps. Overall, Woroniecka-Krzyżanowska's work was a thorough analysis of how protracted exile in one refugee camp affected the sense of place and belonging for Palestinians living there. This attachment to two places does not only apply to Palestinians living in refugee camps on Palestinian territory, but to Palestinian refugees throughout the region. I will discuss this concept in later sections of my thesis.

In Sobhi Albadawi's research, she asks whether the right of return is still desirable and sacred among Palestinian refugees in the West Bank. The study adopted a quantitative research design surveying 1200 participants from five refugee camps located in Hebron and Bethlehem in the West Bank. The study results conclude that even after 72 years of displacement, the right of return remains an active but changing political construct among surveyed Palestinians living in

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<sup>36</sup> Woroniecka-Krzyżanowska defines mediated locality as feeling territorialised in a place that acts as a symbolic representation of another site, to which individuals or groups feel attached.

<sup>37</sup>Dorota Woroniecka-Krzyżanowska, "Identity and Place in Extended Exile: The Case of a Palestinian Refugee City-Camp," *Studia Universitatis Babeş-Bolyai Sociologia* 2013 (January 1, 2013): 21–37.

the West Bank. Albadawi asserts negotiations must consider varying generational narratives and ensure that the right of return claim, resettlement, and compensation are not treated as mutually exclusive in the delivery of a just solution to the displacement of Palestinian refugees.

Albadawi's major findings were that, in relation to age, the highest percentage amounts indicating agreement with the proposition of return to their village or place of origin were for participants aged 65+ (72%) who experienced the exodus and agreed with the proposition, followed by 70% of participants aged between 45 and 55 years. A lower percentage (49%) of younger participants agreed with the proposition.<sup>38</sup> Her research proves that there is a great variation in the commitment of Palestinian refugees to Resolution 194 according to age (ranging from 49% to 72%).

Albadawi's study accounts for the nuances within the right of return debate. It does not conflate the idea of return with compensation or other alternatives. It also accounts for the varying attitudes among each generation of Palestinian refugees in the West Bank. My thesis intends to further address the generational differentiation in perceptions of the right of return among Palestinian refugees. She also explores how the right of return is both a human right and a sacred right among Palestinian refugees, and how the two should be distinguished.

Albadawi's findings were interesting to view alongside the BADIL survey results which showed 95.2% of people aged 18-29 in the West Bank believe return is realizable.<sup>39</sup> This number is slightly lower than Jordan, Lebanon, and Gaza, which may reflect the fact that what is experienced by Palestinians in the West Bank is less severe than that of Palestinians there. This

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<sup>38</sup>Sobhi Albadawi, "Is the Right of Return Still Desirable and Sacred among Palestinian Refugees?" *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, July 6, 2020.

<sup>39</sup> Layla Allen, Melissa Yvonne, Alessandro Dainelli, Martina Ramacciotti, Alice Osbourne, Layla Allen, and Atallah Salem. "Survey of Palestinian Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons, 2016-2018 *BADIL* Vol IX 220 Pages, 30 c.m.," n.d., 140-187.

percentage is significantly higher than Albadawi's survey results, which is likely due to the slight difference in the questions. Albadawi asked about the desire to return compared to BADIL, which asked about whether return is feasible. There are many intricacies in this debate, and the Palestinian desire for the right of return compared to their will to practice return to their original village are two different things. This specific intricacy is evident here. BADIL also includes numerous follow-up questions as to whether return is feasible, attempting to account for the differentiation in what return looks like in practice.

### Gaza

Gaza provides an interesting point of analysis as it is home to both a large refugee population and a significant native population that was also dispossessed in the aftermath of 1948. Unlike the previous places I have reviewed, Gaza has been under siege for more than 12 years and faces the daily threat of occupation by the Israeli forces, which may be a large factor in how they conceptualize place and eventual return.

The BADIL survey results on conceptualizations of return from Palestinian refugees living in Gaza results indicated that 95.6% of those surveyed in Gaza believed return is realizable, just 0.4 percent higher than those living in the West Bank and lower than refugees in Lebanon and Jordan.<sup>40</sup> It is likely that distance from the reality and extent of colonization in Palestine is a reason for the substantially stronger conviction among Palestinians in exile than among Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Despite being subjected to great restrictions on their freedom of movement, the construction of the Apartheid Wall, and other security measures that substantially diminish their opportunities to cross the Green Line, the

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<sup>40</sup> Layla Allen, Melissa Yvonne, Alessandro Dainelli, Martina Ramacciotti, Alice Osbourne, Layla Allen, and Atallah Salem. "Survey of Palestinian Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons, 2016-2018 *BADIL* Vol IX 220 Pages, 30 c.m.," n.d., 140-187.

youth population of Gaza and the West Bank still hold high levels of belief in realizing return.<sup>41</sup> This indicates a detachment between what is happening on the ground and the ability to realize return, which could be attributed to despite having far greater restrictions, this generation maintains significant distance from the events of 1948 which impact perceptions on the feasibility of return.

As highlighted through the example of Palestinians granted citizenship in Jordan, the conviction in the possibility of return is not attributable to misery or lack of other options. In fact, BADIL asserts that there is no correlation between the variations in opinions across different areas and the differing humanitarian and living conditions. However, living conditions may affect refugees' individual and collective priorities when realizing return. For instance, Gaza marked the second-highest group (95.4%) after Lebanon (98.4%) to say receiving returnees and rehabilitating them economically and socially was an urgent priority for them. The deteriorating living conditions in both of these locations, including displacement combined with discrimination in Lebanon and the extended siege and continual bombardment on the Gaza Strip, make economic and social rehabilitation a more urgent priority in comparison to other groups.

Furthermore, all groups, with the exception of 1948 IDPs, considered "Ensuring reparations for the victims; and accountability for perpetrators of crimes and violations" to be a top priority. However, for refugees in the Gaza Strip, this issue was the single most widely agreed issue of importance (97.2%). This result highlights the severity of the human rights violations to which refugees in Gaza have been subjected. In addition, building state institutions

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<sup>41</sup> The Green Line is the 1949 ceasefire line delineating the boundary between 1948 Palestine (what is today called Israel) and the West Bank, including east Jerusalem and Gaza Strip. The Green Line, also called the 1949 Armistice Line, is not an international border but is considered to be so for the purposes of distinguishing Palestinian IDPs and refugees.

that are effective, just, and equitable was an issue of high importance only for Palestinian refugees in Lebanon (100%), Gaza Strip (92.7%), and West Bank (89.6%). This possibly reflects the absence of any or effective state institutions designed to protect Palestinians in either of these locations, rendering this a crucial point of rectification in any new state of affairs.

Interestingly, Gaza ranked lower than the majority of other locations when asked whether “return is a right that I seek to realize in totality (it is fully realizable)” with only 65.9 percent agreeing while the other 35.1 percent said it may only be a partial realization. Scholar Ilana Feldman offers an explanation as to why Gaza ranks similarly to Jordan (55.9%) than Lebanon (90.4%) on this issue, despite having more similarities with refugees in Lebanon.

Feldman has done extensive work on the situation of Palestinian refugees living in Gaza. In her article “Home as a Refrain”, she details narrative accounts of the 1948 War and its aftermath tracing refugees’ changing relationship with their lost homes. She discusses the rituals and practices refugees participated in during post-displacement and how they shaped people’s understanding of their relationship with their lost homes and places. Feldman asserts that life in refugee camps in Gaza allows for “the repeated articulation of memories” which “animates a refrain of home that shapes people’s experiences of their communities, of themselves, of their past and of their future.”<sup>42</sup> This assertion proves that by the very nature of living in a refugee camp, Palestinians are able to feel connected to their place of origin and right of return to it, regardless of whether they can physically access these places.

Feldman finds refugee camps to be the physical embodiments of forced migration and “operate as forms of visible commemoration.” She details how refugee camps have been creatively used by Palestinian refugees and national politicians to increase the visibility of their

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<sup>42</sup>Ilana Feldman, “Home as a Refrain: Remembering and Living Displacement in Gaza,” *History & Memory* 18 (October 1, 2006): 10–47.

national cause. This visible commemoration is rooted in its internationally recognized status and the poor living conditions of the camps. Feldman asserts "the very conditions of people's daily lives (...) articulate both displacement and desire to return home."<sup>43</sup> Camps signify the ongoing injustice done to Palestinian refugees and contribute to the campaign to relieve their inhabitants of suffering.

Feldman's research provides an interesting lens to view the BADIL survey results. Belief in the feasibility of return is a strong conviction among youth in Gaza, but this does not mean they desire to realize return in totality. Despite poor living conditions, these refugee camps aid in sustaining their national cause - the right of return - allowing Palestinian refugees everywhere, not just in Gaza, to feel connected to their former homes even if they aren't able to realize return entirely. In addition, there may be a fear among residents of Gaza that if they leave their refugee camps and return, they could still be subjected to injustices, but they wouldn't be as visible to the international community.

#### IDPs in Israel's 1948 Territory

There is generally less scholarly literature on the perceptions of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) within historic Palestine on the right of return. However, I view IDPs as integral to the general discourse on the right of return.

Maha Nassar's research asserts that because IDPs inside the Green Line are often overlooked and ignored by the international community and humanitarian organizations, they feel politically isolated from the Palestinian refugees living in exile.<sup>44</sup> This helps explain the low

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<sup>43</sup>Ilana Feldman, "Refusing Invisibility: Documentation and Memorialization in Palestinian Refugee Claims," *Journal of Refugee Studies - J REFUG STUD* 21 (November 23, 2008): 498–516.

<sup>44</sup>Maha Nassar, "Palestinian Citizens of Israel and the Discourse on the Right of Return, 1948–59," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 40 (July 1, 2011): 45–60.

percentage of IDPs within Israel who believe in the feasibility of return, just 18.9 percent.<sup>45</sup> The inability to enjoy equality and frequent discrimination make the reality of the changes on the ground clearer for IDPs than for those in exile. This likely contributes to them rendering return less possible.

BADIL attributed the lack of political discourse around the right of return among IDPs in Israel as a significant influencer of conviction in return. With the exception of occasional press statements, political parties, as well as Palestinian factions, generally tend to ignore the issue of 1948 IDPs and their return to their original villages. Although IDPs can technically live anywhere in Israel's 1948 territory, they may not be able to access their ancestors or family's village in Historic Palestine. As the issue of return is not discussed in the political sphere or party platforms of Palestinians who are citizens of Israel, there is an overall lack of exposure and awareness which leads to diminished belief in the feasibility of return. The way the right of return is perceived by Palestinian citizens of Israel highlights not only does political discourse influence opinions about rights but also about the potential realization of these rights.

When asked what the most important issues were in a post-return scenario, 1948 IDPs were considerably more concerned with issues of private property and re-housing refugees. "Dealing with changes in private property" was the most widely agreed concern following return at 98.5 percent. This is a reflection of their direct exposure to the changes created on the ground, including ongoing changes to Palestinian properties, new private installations, or public facilities over more than 70 years. In addition, 87.3 percent of 1948 IDPs also considered "Evacuating former colonizers from refugee properties and re-housing them in new homes

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<sup>45</sup> Layla Allen, Melissa Yvonne, Alessandro Dainelli, Martina Ramacciotti, Alice Osbourne, Layla Allen, and Atallah Salem. "Survey of Palestinian Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons, 2016-2018 *BADIL* Vol IX 220 Pages, 30 c.m.," n.d., 140-187.



established by the State” to be one of the more complicated issues. Due to the Israeli government’s oppressive control of Palestinians, IDPs’ are unsure of their capacity to evict their colonizers. Given IDPs’ direct exposure to Israel’s nation-state law and its deep-rooted religious and racial racism, 1948 IDPs hold out little hope of realizing return to their original homes, even partially.<sup>46</sup>

### Review of Survey Data

BADIL’s analysis emphasizes that without conviction in the right of return, Palestinian refugees would have even less, due to their lack of rights and suppression in their host locations. This idea expressed by BADIL that the right of return stems from a deeply rooted conviction that empowers Palestinian refugees despite their life circumstances is at odds with the work of Lori Allen. In her book *The Rise and Fall of Human Rights* she asserts that while the human rights industry has thrived in the occupied Palestinian territory, there has not been any improvement in most Palestinians’ political and social circumstances. This assertion continues in Allen’s book *A History of False Hope* where she investigates six key commissions out of the more than twenty that have convened over the last century to investigate political violence and human rights violations, yet no significant change has resulted from these inquiries.<sup>47</sup> Human rights work that focuses on documenting violations but does not work to fix them causes Palestinians to feel disempowered by the concept of rights. This is in direct opposition to BADIL’s assertion that the

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1. <sup>46</sup> Passed in 2018, Israel’s nation-state law does three major things. First, it states that “the right to exercise national self-determination” in Israel is “unique to the Jewish people.” Secondly, it establishes Hebrew as Israel’s official language, and downgrades Arabic — a language widely spoken by Arab Israelis — to a “special status.” Lastly, it establishes “Jewish settlement as a national value” and mandates that the state “will labor to encourage and promote its establishment and development.”

<sup>47</sup> Lori Allen, *A History of False Hope: Investigative Commissions in Palestine*, Stanford University Press, 2020: 70-73.

right of return is sustained because it provides Palestinian refugees with a sense of empowerment.<sup>48</sup>

This tension between Lori Allen and BADIL could be explained by the fact that BADIL's work centers advocating and furthering national and international political discourse on the right of return and its implementation in the case of Palestine. Despite their advocacy work, not only does the right of return remain unrealized today since the BADIL survey was released in 2018, the Palestinian people have continued to face repression with regards to exercising their other national and individual rights. The rapid advancement of Israeli annexation policies in the West Bank, oppressive apartheid policies throughout Mandatory Palestine, and renewed attacks on the rights of Palestinian refugees, particularly in the delegitimization of UNRWA, have all contributed to an ongoing Nakba. "Al-Nakba Mustamirra" which translates to "The Nakba is ongoing" is a key political expression upholding the idea that the 1948 war led to a "catastrophe" for Palestinians, but this is not an isolated event.<sup>49</sup><sup>50</sup>

While Lori Allen asserts Palestinian refugees feel disempowered by the lack of progress made by human rights organizations since the Nakba, the BADIL survey affirms their conviction that the right of return remains salient as without it they would have even fewer rights. Lori Allen references the depoliticizing nature of the work that the human rights industry does as they tend to report on objective information as opposed to making a political argument. However, BADIL uses its platform in a political manner to advocate for the Palestinian right of return. The survey is not neutral in its language and the questions are designed to promote BADIL's stated

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<sup>48</sup> Lori Allen, "The Beginning of the Decline," *The Rise and Fall of Human Rights: Cynicism and Politics in Occupied Palestine*, Stanford Studies in Human Rights, Stanford University Press, 2013: 1-6.

<sup>49</sup> Amahl Bishara, "Wearing Catastrophe on Our Chests," *Jadaliyya - جدلية*, May 19, 2015, <https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/32103>.

<sup>50</sup> Ahmad H. Sa'di, Lila Abu-Lughod, "Introduction: The Claims of Memory," *Nakba: Palestine, 1948, and the Claims of Memory*, Columbia University Press, 2007: 10.

goal to “advance the individual and collective rights of the Palestinian people.”<sup>51</sup> BADIL considers itself a human rights non-profit organization and therefore part of the human rights industry. Their human rights work in political polling demonstrates that the human rights world contains multiplicities and the diversity of NGO

## Conclusions

In conclusion, the BADIL survey provides essential data and analysis on one of the most crucial, yet most marginalized issues in Israeli society regarding the question of Palestinian refugees: the right of return and specifically the practicalities of realizing and implementing return. BADIL argues that the results indicate that while there was slight differentiation in the results around the feasibility of return in each location, this variation is marginal, and the right of return transcends the political, economic, and living conditions in each location, and derives from an inherent Palestinian belief shared by the majority of refugees. However, I argue that while the individual living circumstances of refugees may only marginally affect their belief in return’s feasibility, their sense of rights in their current location impacts their priorities and vision for what return could look like if realized.

The lack of local integration for 1948 IDPs contributed to the absence of any belief in the possibility of return. Under direct Israeli rule, they are unable to realize even their more basic rights, such as equality and freedom of movement as well as an end to discrimination and segregation, let alone a more politically complex right like return. Palestinians residing in Lebanon and Jordan have to emphasize their status as refugees in order to not normalize their

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<sup>51</sup>“About BADIL,” BADIL Resource Center for Palestinian Residency and Refugee Rights, <https://www.badil.org/en/about-us.html>.

condition in exile. In addition to contesting their rights as refugees with their host country's government, they also make claims to return to a future Palestinian state. Their high belief in the feasibility of return is likely part of a performative political script, a belief that regardless of the reality, a return will be realized if they continue to claim it. Conversely, Palestinians in the occupied territories expressed lower rates in belief of the feasibility of return because they are exposed to the realities of living under military occupation. Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza have a different understanding of what legal rights are possible. Their ability to exercise the right of return is tied to other legal rights they currently don't have, which makes return feel even less possible in reality. Due to the varying claims, priorities, and beliefs of refugees by locations, I conclude that refugees do have an emplaced sense of rights which affects their vision for practicing return.

## Chapter Two: Twitter Hashtags as a Site for Articulating Place

### Introduction

On the third Friday of Ramadan, June 1, 2018, Razan al-Najjar was shot and killed by an Israeli sniper near the Gaza-Israel border. al-Najjar volunteered as a first responder for the "Great March of Return" protests, which she had been doing regularly each Friday beginning on March 30, 2018, when the protesting began. On that particular Friday, over 3,000 protesters demonstrated near the fence and al-Najjar was one of five paramedics on a shift. According to witnesses, al-Najjar was shot after she, walking with her hands up and wearing a white vest indicating her status as a medic, approached the border fence to treat a wounded man who was calling for help after being hit by a tear-gas canister. Three shots were heard. al-Najjar was taken to an ambulance and pronounced dead minutes later, at 21 years old, become the 119th Palestinian to be killed by Israeli fire since the protests began in March 2018.<sup>52</sup>

Within hours of her death, al-Najjar's name circulated hundreds of times on Twitter, mostly by Palestinians, garnering significant media attention from the international community to Israel's violent response to the peaceful protests. Anecdotes, pictures, and testimonials to al-Najjar's character, bravery, and kindness were all shared under a hashtag of her own name "#RazanAlNajjar" or in Arabic "#رازان\_النجار". Many of the tweets referenced how only a month before her death, al-Najjar was interviewed by the *New York Times* about her volunteer work as a paramedic in Gaza.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>52</sup>Ian Lee, Dominique van Heerden, "Palestinians Mourn Death of Nurse Killed by Israeli Forces," *CNN*, June 3, 2018, <https://www.cnn.com/2018/06/03/middleeast/razan-al-najjar-gaza-nurse-killed/index.html>.

<sup>53</sup> Abdi Aynte, Twitter Post, June 2, 2018, 6:03 p.m., <https://twitter.com/Aynte/status/1003034395714912258>.

Many of the posts dedicated to al-Najjar under her hashtags, also included other hashtags like #FreePalestine #Palestine or #GreatMarchOfReturn in both Arabic and English. al-Najjar's tragic death directed the Great March of Return protests from a physical form of resistance into a virtual space, like other key incidents in the series of demonstrations. The protests were first brought to life by a viral post on Facebook written by Ahmed Abu Artema, a Palestinian journalist and peace activist. The post, which called for the “recognition of this wrong”, being the inability of Palestinians to exercise their right to return, inspired the in-person protests every Friday along the Gaza-Israel border.<sup>54</sup>

When the victims of peaceful protest go unnoticed by the mainstream media, organizers and witnesses take matters into their own hands to ensure they are recognized. As Gaza continues to suffer, the Great March of Return (GMR) protests and discourse around return persist in the viral space. In this chapter, I use textual analysis to gain insight into how Twitter hashtags, inspired by the right of return, are used to form a reimagined temporary sense of place and community among Palestinian refugees.

### Twitter and Palestine: Setting the Context

Twitter first appeared in 2006. By 2020, the application had over 145 million active users worldwide who produced a volume of about 500 million tweets per day.<sup>55</sup> Staying true to its original format, Twitter allows users to draft short posts (tweets) of up to 140 characters. In many ways, Twitter resembles a news medium rather than a social network. As an open platform

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<sup>54</sup> Ahmed Abu Artema, “I Helped Start the Gaza Protests. I Don’t Regret It,” *The New York Times*, May 14, 2018, sec. Opinion, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/14/opinion/gaza-protests-organizer-great-return-march.html>.

<sup>55</sup> Twitter 2019 Annual Report.

where non-registered users can view tweets, Twitter has about 330 million visitors per month.<sup>56</sup> Hashtags are used when the number symbol (#) comes before a term, and permits users to both search and classify topics and contents based on themes rather than users. Users and non-users can freely connect with other people, news outlets, and ideas by following a hashtag.

I have selected Twitter because of the critical role of microblogging in news and information dissemination, especially under conditions of restricted news access which is sometimes the case for news on Palestine. Twitter use by Palestinians will also be restricted at times. In October 2020, Palestinian news organizations on Twitter were suspended after Israel's Ministry of Strategic Affairs accused them of manipulating social media to delegitimize Israel through coordinated inauthentic behavior online.<sup>57</sup> Secondly, Twitter is an increasingly integral part of a broader networked public sphere where marginalized groups can connect.<sup>58</sup>

Before beginning my analysis, I will provide a more detailed map of the relationship between social media and Palestine, to understand the wider media context. There is little data on the actual numbers of social media users in Palestine. The estimated diffusion of the internet in the West Bank and Gaza was 66.3%, approximately 3.3 million users, in March 2020 according to Internet World Stats.<sup>59</sup> This is slightly below the average for the region of the Middle East, which has a mean internet diffusion rate of 70.2 percent.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Statista, "Twitter: Monthly Active Users Worldwide," <https://www.statista.com/statistics/282087/number-of-monthly-active-twitter-users/>.

<sup>57</sup> MEE Staff Editorial, "Twitter Suspends Palestinian Accounts Shortly after Israeli Ministry Report on 'phony' Profiles," *Middle East Eye*, October 29, 2020, <http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/twitter-palestine-israel-accounts-suspended-ministry-report>.

<sup>58</sup> Yarimar Bonilla and Jonathan Rosa, "#Ferguson: Digital Protest, Hashtag Ethnography, and the Racial Politics of Social Media in the United States," *American Ethnologist* 42, no. 1 (2015): 4–17. <https://doi.org/10.1111/amet.12112>.

<sup>59</sup> "Palestine Internet Usage and Telecommunications Report," <https://www.internetworldstats.com/me/ps.htm>.

<sup>60</sup> Arab Social Media Report (2019), Arab Social Media Report. Dubai School of Government

The Arab Social Media report estimates Twitter penetration in Palestine at 0.84 percent, which is about 36,800 users.<sup>61</sup> However, this statistic does not account for Palestinians living in Israel or the diaspora. This number is rapidly increasing, with an annual increase rate of 234%.<sup>62</sup> These statistics suggest that despite the digital divide, the number of social media users in Palestine is steadily growing, and expanding their influence among other Palestinians in the region.

### Hashtags as a Tool for Belonging

Since its launch in 2006, Twitter has evolved into a mass phenomenon. It has transformed from being just a social media platform into a site for political debates and cultural participation. Unlike conventional analysis of Palestinian refugee's sense of place, in this chapter, I aim to show that hashtags are more than number signs attached to phrases; they contribute to individuals' own "virtual world" and thus are a site necessary to examine just like a physical location would be.<sup>63</sup> Hashtags allow Twitter users to connect on any given topic or idea, despite being in a separate location. It holds a powerful force in the global Palestinian community given the vast displacement of Palestinian refugees throughout the Middle East and the world.

The ability for expansive digital connectivity has given rise to many social and political movements. In the United States, Twitter is an effective platform for people to respond to police brutality. After the shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, people across the US and world engaged in digital protest through "hashtag activism" which allowed for a safe outlet to

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<sup>61</sup> Twitter Penetration, as defined by the Arab Social Media Report, is the number of active Twitter users relative to the total number of internet users in a given country.

<sup>62</sup> Arab Social Media Report (2019) Arab Social Media Report. Dubai School of Government

<sup>63</sup> Tom Boellstorff, *Coming of Age in Second Life: An Anthropologist Explores the Virtually Human*, Princeton University Press, 2008.<sup>63</sup>



contest the racialized policing of specifically black men.<sup>64</sup> In 2011, the world watched the uprisings across the Middle East and North Africa, known as the Arab Spring, through their social media feeds where thousands of young people had taken to tweeting, streaming, and reporting from the ground.<sup>65</sup>

In Gaza and across the Middle East, the story of how Palestinian social movements operate is changing. Historically, Palestinian mass communication has been subject to censorship from the Israeli government, and their plight was largely ignored by international news organizations until the First Intifada. Both Israelis and Palestinians are aware of the importance of playing to an international audience of who is seen as aggressors and who are cast as victims. Particularly for Palestinians, there has been a strong dependence on the news media as it is one of their few means to get other countries to intervene, highlighted during the First Intifada in which Palestinians were successful at placing their struggle in the consciousness of the international community.<sup>66</sup>

Today, an effective way Palestinians have been able to disseminate information to one another and the world is through Twitter. Twitter, and more specifically hashtags, have become a place for disenfranchised Palestinians across the diaspora to forge a “shared political temporality,” and use social media to reimagine their own sense of place in society.<sup>67</sup> In a time when Palestinians across the diaspora lack a clear leader and unified community, Twitter strengthens Palestinians ability to form movements without extensive planning.

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<sup>64</sup> Yarimar Bonilla and Jonathan Rosa, “#Ferguson: Digital Protest, Hashtag Ethnography, and the Racial Politics of Social Media in the United States,” *American Ethnologist* 42, no. 1 (2015): 4–17.

<sup>65</sup> Zeynep Tufekci, *Twitter and Tear Gas: The Power and Fragility of Networked Protest*, Yale University Press, 2017.

<sup>66</sup> Gadi Wolfsfeld, “The News Media and the Second Intifada: Some Initial Lessons,” *Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics* 6, no. 4 (September 2001): 113–18.

<sup>67</sup> Yarimar Bonilla and Jonathan Rosa, “#Ferguson: Digital Protest, Hashtag Ethnography, and the Racial Politics of Social Media in the United States,” *American Ethnologist* 42, no. 1 (2015): 4–17.

The dynamism of Twitter means I have had to reduce the vast number of tweets to a more manageable size for qualitative analysis. This was done by focusing on three single hashtags within specific time frames. I will sample a selection of tweets from three different hashtags to understand what becomes of the Palestinian national cause when it traverses Twitter. The hashtags were started by Palestinians living in Gaza, but are used widely throughout the Palestinian diaspora regardless of their physical location. I will begin with #RazanAlNajjar, as her death was a smaller scale instance of the widespread injustice Palestinians face, regardless of their role in society. Next, I will analyze #GreatMarchOfReturn. The hashtag, inspired by the in-person protests in Gaza, has spread throughout the Middle East, just as the physical march has. Lastly, I will analyze #FreePalestine perhaps the most all-encompassing of the hashtags, it will explore the interpretations of Palestinian liberation across the diaspora as it connects to their sense of place. I will look at the tweets under all of these hashtags in both English and Arabic, in an attempt to capture a wider sample. The purpose of this analysis is to find out the kinds of meanings and associations circulating that are attached to these hashtags as a means of understanding Palestinian's sense of place and belonging better.

#### #RazanAlNajjar

Within hours of her death, Razan al-Najjar's name was circulating through the Twittersphere. Most of the tweets hashtagged her name in both Arabic and English, allowing them to reach a larger audience. I analyzed tweets under this hashtag from June 1, 2018 until two weeks later on June, 15, 2018. In the immediate aftermath, most of the tweets were commemorative, memorializing her work and her life with pictures and videos, before it reached the mainstream media. However, within days of her killing, the nature of the Tweets transitioned

from solely a commemorative nature to calling on the IDF and Israel to recognize their crimes and the global community for accountability.

Al-Najjar's death, coming just a few weeks before Eid al-Fitr, was a painful reminder of how many Palestinian families are unable to celebrate the holidays with their families, a sentiment shared on Twitter. Muhammad Smiry, a Palestinian activist and influencer born, raised, and based in Gaza, regularly tweets about his life under occupation. On June 15th, 2018, he said "People are supposed to be happy in #EidulFitr but Israel deprived #RazanAlnajjar mother from that happiness." Putting a number to families grieving in Gaza, he said "First Eid for #RazanAlnajjar 's family without their beloved daughter. First #EidulFitr for 130+ Palestinian families without their beloved ones. #Gaza."<sup>68</sup> This tweet highlights the fact that Razan al-Najjar's death was not an isolated incident, but a representation of the devastation Palestinian communities are regularly confronted with.

Calls for global solidarity with Palestinians in Gaza echoed through Twitter, from civilians, journalists, grieving neighbors, people who knew her, and many who did not, but her story resonated. User @hanichadi tweeted on June 9, 2018. "You don't need to be Muslim, or Arab, or Palestinian to stand for Gaza. You just need to be Human. #The calls on رزان\_النجار"<sup>69</sup> social media for people regardless of their religion, ethnicity, or country of origin to stand up for the people suffering in Gaza represented how dire the situation had become. One major part of the story is how repression and violence had previously silenced the suffering of Palestinians, but this time they were determined not to let that happen. Razan al-Najjar and the other victims of the brutality would not just be numbers. Their names were going to be heard around the world.

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<sup>68</sup> Muhammad Smiry, Twitter Post, June 15, 2018, 3:11 a.m., <https://twitter.com/MuhammadSmiry/status/1007520967634153472>

<sup>69</sup> Chadi Hani, Twitter Post, June 9, 2019, 8:09 am., <https://twitter.com/hanichadi/status/1005421566778400768>

Two days after her death, pictures of al-Najjar's funeral circulated on Twitter. Journalist Muhammad Lila tweeted on June 3rd, 2018 "Let this sink in. The funeral for #RazanAlNajjar was so crowded that there wasn't enough room to pray on the streets, so people went to rooftops."<sup>70</sup> Razan al-Najjar's death, and the many others who died in the Great March of Return protests, were grieved not only in Gaza but across the Palestinian diaspora. Those who could not pray on the streets took to the rooftops. Those who could not make it to the rooftops took to Twitter to express their sorrow, grief, and persistence for the cause al-Najjar died helping. Twitter allowed for a shared sense of place, albeit temporarily, for Palestinians to unite in shared grief despite being separated physically.

Across the diaspora, al-Najjar came to be associated with the hashtag "PrincessOfReturn." For Palestinians, Razan al-Najjar came to signify martyrdom, and for women, regardless of whether they were Palestinian, her death united them. From Germany, a Palestinian woman tweeted on International Women's Day, March 8, 2019, "I can't finish this day without remembering the wonderful Razan al-Najjar #PrincessOfReturn. The girl with a big dream became a symbol for millions of girls & women all over the world. The day is almost over, the killing is not."<sup>71</sup> The name "Razan al-Najjar" became intrinsically tied to the right of return, and for Palestinian feminists, this "liberation" has two meanings. The Great March of Return protests are unique to Gaza's history not only because of its peaceful nature but also because women activists have played a visibly crucial role in the protests on a scale not seen for decades.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Muhammad Lila, Twitter Post, June 3, 2018, 1:06 p.m., <https://twitter.com/MuhammadLila/status/1003322032396820480>

<sup>71</sup> Phoenix from the Ashes, Twitter Post, March 8, 2019, 1:49 p.m., [https://twitter.com/Filistin\\_Roots/status/1104091749365018624](https://twitter.com/Filistin_Roots/status/1104091749365018624)

<sup>72</sup> Hosam Salem, "Gaza Rallies: How Women Shape Great March of Return Movement," *Al Jazeera*, May 11, 2018.

The meaning of “Razan al-Najjar” changed because of Twitter. She was not just one of the 59 victims killed in the Great March of Return protests that day. She became a symbol of both martyrdom and feminism for Palestinians and a representation of the plight and grief Palestinians face daily. User @Du7aAbuAlkhair, a Palestinian living in Jordan and a graduate of Yarmouk University, tweeted, “She was an overachieving, articulate, selfless, fearless Palestinian feminist activist. I’ve never met Razan. But I’ve met her a thousand times. #RazanAlNajjar #Gaza #FreePalestine #GreatReturnMarch.”<sup>73</sup> Al-Najjar died while helping others protest for the right of return. The words “But I’ve met her a thousand times” signify the ongoing sacrifice Palestinian make so they can reclaim their right to live in freedom and justice. In theoretical terms, this relationship between social media and Palestine can be described as one of mediation, which holds that social media is part of a socio-cultural and political process that contributes to the construction and circulation of meanings.<sup>74</sup> In doing so, the contents are part of an ongoing cycle, feeding into, and consequently changing each other.<sup>75</sup>

Aside from annual Tweets honoring the anniversary of her death, the Razan al-Najjar hashtag remains relatively unused throughout the year. However, its significance should not go without recognition. Palestinians' public articulation of their attachment to Palestine, their place of origin, seemed to only strengthen after her death, with the number of people hashtagging “GreatMarchOfReturn” and “FreePalestine” rapidly increasing after June 1st, 2018. On the day of her death, Twitter was flooded with tweets dedicated to her, and often included other hashtags such as #GreatMarchOfReturn and #FreePalestine which I will analyze next. Her death ignited a

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<sup>73</sup> Amer Zahr, Twitter Post, June 2, 2018, 11:53 a.m., <https://twitter.com/AmerZahr/status/1002941358083059712>

<sup>74</sup> Nick Couldry, “Mediatization or Mediation? Alternative Understandings of the Emergent Space of Digital Storytelling,” *New Media & Society* 10, no. 3 (June 2008): 373–91.

<sup>75</sup> Eugenia Siapera, “Tweeting #Palestine: Twitter and the Mediation of Palestine,” *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 17, no. 6 (November 2014): 539–55.

spark under the Great March of Return hashtag propelling the protests into the digital sphere just as much as the real world.

### #GreatMarchOfReturn

Conceptualized first by a group of young Palestinians in Gaza through social media, the Great March of Return (GMR) protests quickly developed into a grassroots community organizing effort. Disheartened by former President Donald Trump's announcement that Jerusalem would become the official capital of Israel, Ahmed Abu Artema wrote on Facebook: "We are forced to choose between confrontations or between life" and concluded the post with the hashtag GreatReturnMarch.<sup>76</sup> Young people immediately started sharing the post and adding their ideas. The first demonstrations were organized by independent activists, but the initiative was soon endorsed by Hamas, as well as other major factions in Gaza. Despite the internal political splits, the organizers succeeded in embodying the unified struggle through the GMR protests.

I examine tweets under this hashtag from March 30, 2018, when the protests to May 15, 2018, the scheduled end of the protests, although the demonstrations continued for almost 18 months every Friday until Hamas announced on December 27, 2019, that they would be postponed.<sup>77</sup> March 30 commemorates Land Day - a day that honors the protests of Galilean Palestinians against the appropriation of their land by the Israeli state in 1976 - and May 15th is the anniversary of the Nakba, also known as "Nakba Day."

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<sup>76</sup> Artema, Ahmed Abu, "I Helped Start the Gaza Protests. I Don't Regret It," *The New York Times*, May 14, 2018, sec. Opinion, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/14/opinion/gaza-protests-organizer-great-return-march.html>.

<sup>77</sup> "Organisers Say Gaza Protests to Be Scaled Back," *Al Jazeera*, December 26, 2019, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/12/26/organisers-say-gaza-protests-to-be-scaled-back>.

Return marches are popular throughout the diaspora, especially on Nakba Day, and celebrated both in real life and the virtual sphere by Palestinians in Israel, under occupation, and abroad to seek recognition of their right to return. A person under the username @AshAgony tweeted on May 14th, 2018: “People honking their horns in support as folks march in Brooklyn for Palestine. #FreePalestine #GreatMarchOfReturn.”<sup>78</sup> Many other users documented their own city’s Nakba Day events on May 15th, from Brooklyn to Berlin to Beirut, hashtagging “GreatReurnMarch” or “GreatMarchofReturn” alongside their photos.

The commemorative act of marching for return was not created by organizers in Gaza. The March of Return was a movement that began in May 2008 on the anniversary of the Nakba and was organized by Palestinians living inside Israel. As part of their activities on Nakba Day, the annual day of commemoration which was inaugurated by Yasser Arafat in 1998, they enacted a march on a site of a different emptied village each year. In 2008 approximately fifteen thousand people participated. As the group of protestors was leaving the destroyed village, they were met by right-wing Israeli counter-demonstrators and the Israeli police. The brutal treatment the Palestinian marchers faced, from beatings and tear gas to threats of opening fire with live ammunition and arrests mirror the violence that the Gaza protestors faced during the GMR protests.<sup>79</sup>

Since the GMR protests commenced on March 30, 2018, Israeli forces have killed at least 214 Palestinians, including 46 children, and over 36,100, including nearly 8,800 children, have been injured. One in five of those injured (over 8,000) were hit by live ammunition.<sup>80</sup> On May

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<sup>78</sup> Ash J, Twitter Post, May 14, 2018, 7:36 p.m., <https://twitter.com/AshAgony/status/996172468204326912>

<sup>79</sup> Rochelle Davis, *Palestinian Village Histories: Geographies of the Displaced*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010: 224.

<sup>80</sup> Christopher Heaney, “Two Years On: People Injured and Traumatized During the ‘Great March of Return’ Are Still Struggling,” *Question of Palestine*, April 15, 2020.

14, 2018, when the Trump administration opened its new embassy in Jerusalem, the protests escalated and some marchers attempted to break through the barrier. On that day alone, Israeli forces killed 59 Palestinians and injured 2,700 more. Motivated by a deep desire to return to their native villages, Palestinians persisted in their weekly marches after this fatal day.<sup>81</sup>

One way to analyze the intensity of feelings people hold towards a place is if people are prepared to sacrifice their interests for it. In other words, those who were prepared to endure some form of behavioral cost would also hold developed beliefs and strong feelings about the place. Palestinians in Gaza, as highlighted through the ongoing Great March of Return protests despite ongoing fatalities like Razan al-Najjar, are prepared to sacrifice their interests and endure a high cost for the right to reside in Palestine. Ahmed Abu Artema explained the reason for this attachment to place when he wrote “Desperation fuels our generation.”<sup>82</sup>

Tweets from the day the embassy was established were often marked with #Nakba70 as well, as it was the day before the 70th anniversary of the Nakba. Many tweets showed civilian video footage of people being shot by the IDF and pictures from inside Gaza. However, a large portion also came from the international community, an indication of global solidarity with Palestinian suffering. Irish Activist Gerry Sligo, tweeted, calling out the hypocrisy of the EU for “taking action against Russia on the basis of British secret service claims of an attempted poison attack on a spy. Now Israel massacres dozens of peaceful Palestinian protesters what action will

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<sup>81</sup> “Gaza’s ‘Great March of Return,’ Six Months On,” Amnesty International, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/campaigns/2018/10/gaza-great-march-of-return/>.

<sup>82</sup> Ahmed Abu Artema, “With the Great Return March, Palestinians are demanding a life of dignity,” The Nation, 2018.



EU take?”<sup>83</sup> British Television Host Jemimah Goldsmith tweeted to her 3.2 million followers “Silence is complicity - Political leaders need to speak out now & condemn unreservedly.”<sup>84</sup>

The GreatReturnMarch hashtag became widespread among the international community as well as Palestinians not only in Gaza but also in the diaspora. It allowed Palestinians to articulate their collective sense of place in historic Palestine and memories of their place of origin. Twitter has become a site for collective memories, of both their original homes and villages and for the younger generation their more recent memories of oppression and colonialism and sharing their ancestors' stories. In an opinion piece to *The Nation*, the organizer of the return march Ahmed Abu Artema described the plight Palestinians in Gaza face with the sentiment, “it is as though displacing us was not enough; it’s as if the entire memory of Palestinian refugees must be contained and erased.”<sup>85</sup> Twitter and social media provide a platform for those memories to not be erased or censored, for the world to see Palestinians and hear their stories, as opposed to mainstream media outlets which will often veil some or all of the details.

There is strong evidence that making these memories public on social media “affirms identity, tames trauma, and asserts Palestinian political and moral claims to justice, redress, and the right to return.”<sup>86</sup> The production of memories by Palestinians on social media means that the collective struggle to return proliferates regardless of whether they can practice it. Thus, Twitter

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<sup>83</sup> Gerry Sligo, Twitter Post, May 14, 2018, 4:32 p.m., <https://twitter.com/GerryCasey1968/status/996126182021222400>

<sup>84</sup> Jemimah Goldsmith, Twitter Post, May 14, 2018, 12:26 p.m., [https://twitter.com/Jemima\\_Khan/status/996064118925938688](https://twitter.com/Jemima_Khan/status/996064118925938688)

<sup>85</sup> Ahmed Abu Artema, “With the Great Return March, Palestinians are demanding a life of dignity,” *The Nation*. 2018.

<sup>86</sup> Ahmad H. Sa’di, Lila Abu-Lughod, *Nakba: Palestine, 1948, and the Claims of Memory* (Columbia University Press, 2007).

Hashtags like #GreatReturnMarch embodies this communal act of remembering. It is a statement by Palestinians that they refuse to be erased.

Ahmed Masoud, a Palestinian writer from Gaza, living in London, tweeted a photo of a protestor who had lost both his legs with the caption “Resistance is existence.”<sup>87</sup> The public act of resisting the Gaza blockade and Israeli occupation shows the rest of the world that Palestinians are the embodiment of a people who refuse to disappear and refuse to legitimize their historical dispossession. When Palestinians resist this dispossession on Twitter they are establishing durable new forms of transnational belonging within the Palestinian diaspora, by invoking their attachment to Palestine and shared cultural heritage.

The power of collective memory and the existential threat posed by forgetting are pervasive themes in much Palestinian scholarship and literature. The continued existence of Palestine and its people depends on a conscious resistance and retelling of history. The GMR protests being visually represented on social media means this cultural commemorative act can reach and inspire Palestinian refugees in the diaspora, despite their long years of exile. The refusal to become Lebanese, Jordanian, or other nationalities is also a refusal to forget or disappear symbolically and gives the GMR protests more power.<sup>88</sup>

Furthermore, the importance of the GMR protests and the subsequent dialogue surrounding them on Twitter and other media bring displaced and dispossessed Palestinians in Gaza and elsewhere closer to their primary goal of returning to their home - something humanitarian assistance has failed to do. Since Hamas’s victory in the Palestinian parliamentary elections in January 2006, Israel and the international community have maintained and tightened

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<sup>87</sup> Ahmed Masoud, Twitter Post, May 14, 2018, 7:09 a.m., [https://twitter.com/masoud\\_ahmed/status/995984328122359810](https://twitter.com/masoud_ahmed/status/995984328122359810)

<sup>88</sup> Diana Allan, *Refugees of the Revolution: Experiences of Palestinian Exile*, Stanford University Press, 2013.

its blockade of the Gaza Strip. The ongoing blockade of the territory is part of a strategy to depose the Hamas-led government and refuse refugees the right of return to their homes. “Humanitarianism is not an arena well-suited for pursuing accountability,” Scholar Ilana Feldman writes. “Its cause is the redress of “suffering,” not the crafting of political and military strategies to halt the actions and structures that produce this suffering.”<sup>89</sup>

Palestinians and international allies echoed this view on Twitter. Khatija Suleman, a Palestinian woman, tweeted “The @UN & Western countries have neglected taking any measures against massacre in #Gaza...How many more [people] should be killed for international organizations to consider it as a crime against humanity? #GreatMarchOfReturn.”<sup>90</sup> Unlike Palestinians living in Israel and the West Bank, Palestinians in Gaza live under a 14-year blockade of the strip. The blockade has limited the movement of people, goods, and services in and out of Gaza and has contributed to a chronic humanitarian crisis entailing a lack of sufficient electricity, sanitation, and health services for Palestinians in the Gaza Strip. In this regard, The Great March of Return is more than a demand for the right of return to be acknowledged and implemented, it is a demand for life in a place that has gradually been stripped of it. Ahmed Abu Artema highlighted the unique set of circumstances Palestinians in Gaza face as opposed to those living in the West Bank or abroad when he says the march represents a reclaim of their right to live. More than demanding the right of return, people in Gaza are asking for a restoration of their humanity.

Journalist Sana Saeed reiterated this sentiment, when she retweeted a *New York Times* Headlines on May 14th, 2018, writing “To be clear - Palestinians in Gaza are not protesting against the embassy move (alone or primarily), rather it is part of the #GreatMarchOfReturn

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<sup>89</sup> Ilana Feldman, "Gaza's Humanitarianism Problem," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 38, no. 3 (2009): 22-37.

<sup>90</sup> Khatija, Twitter Post, August 25, 2019, 12:44 p.m., <https://twitter.com/KatSuleman/status/1165666180599832577>

where Palestinians are demanding an end to the occupation, against the denial of basic human rights and for the right to return.”<sup>91</sup> Saeed highlights how although the vast majority of those participating in the Great Return March in Gaza are yearning for a return to Palestine, they are demanding more than that. An end to occupation and the recognition of their most basic rights, as well as return to some form of a Palestinian state, constitute some of their other wishes. While Palestinians in Lebanon, Jordan, and abroad participating in a Nakba Day March also desire a Palestinian state and return, they aren’t contesting their rights directly with the Israeli government like Palestinians in Israel and under occupation have to.

While IDPs living within Israel can return to visit their villages, those across borders in Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, and the occupied territories for the most part cannot. However, in the diaspora, particularly in the camps, events like Nakba Day and commemorative marches for return connect people collectively to Palestine and their village of origin. Twitter and participating in mass hashtags serve to enhance this connection by anchoring the lives of Palestinians to one another regardless of geographical location, political status, gender, race, or class. For displaced people, the majority of Palestinians have had to make a home in a place that is not Palestine. Through the Great March of Return hashtag, they can congregate virtually and articulate their connection to their homeland of Palestine, regardless of where their “home” is now. By showing the collective desire for Palestinians to return in some form to Palestine, the Great March of Return hashtag highlights the connection Palestinians feel to two places at once - both their current home and their homeland. Thus, the use of hashtags like #GreatReturnMarch has become an expressive practice for Palestinians, specifically those in Gaza, to illuminate the varied and unique ways that place is voiced and experienced.

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<sup>91</sup>Sana Saeed, Twitter Post, May 14, 2018, 11:06 a.m., <https://twitter.com/SanaSaeed/status/996044153921261568>

## #FreePalestine

I choose of the hashtag “FreePalestine” to capture the contributions of a broader public that may not know or use more specific hashtags, such as #GreatMarchofReturn, #RazanAlNajjar, or transliterated Arabic-language hashtags. I looked at the #FreePalestine first with no specified search filters, and then with an eye for two separate time frames. First, I searched between Jan 26 - 31 2020, which is when Former President Trump and Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu announced the “Deal of the Century” - their Israeli-Palestinian peace plan. The second time frame I looked at was six months later from June 26 - July 1, 2020, in the days before Israel’s planned annexation of the West Bank. In this analysis, I hope to discover the different meanings, emotions, and associations attached to #FreePalestine and the spatial setting of Palestine by the diaspora.

I identified the FreePalestine hashtag on several different platforms. The hashtag was often attached to news tweets or tweets that convey new information on events concerning Palestine that may not have been covered in the mainstream media. On Jan 25, 2021, a person under the username @just\_H30 tweeted “The Israeli occupation forces demolished a house in the village of Al-Walaja, west of Bethlehem, this morning. #FreePalestine”<sup>92</sup> with a picture of the demolition occurring. Demolitions inside Israel’s 1948 territory are not regularly covered by news media that isn’t directly produced by Palestinians, which means Twitter allows primary accounts of this destruction of places and homes for people who don’t directly experience them to see it. The FreePalestine hashtag is attached to both tweets covering relatively small events like home demolitions and tweets drawing attention to larger events like the Great March of Return protests.

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<sup>92</sup> @just\_H30, Twitter Post, January 25, 2020, 9:34 a.m., [https://twitter.com/just\\_H30/status/1353712879271251968](https://twitter.com/just_H30/status/1353712879271251968)

A large selection of the tweets came from activists and Twitter users calling on their followers to mobilize or participate in protests and other political activities, online and offline. For instance, the various chapters of the Palestine Solidarity Campaign (PSC) used the Free Palestine hashtag after Trump announced the Deal of the Century to organize mass protests against the plan internationally and in Israel and the occupied territories. Other activist account tweets sought to draw attention to the injustice to their large following. An account called Popular Resistance tweeted to their 22.7 thousand followers “#DealofCentury resurrects and restores grand apartheid. The Palestinians will be allowed to select leaders but will have no political rights in #Israel, the state that rules over them. #FreePalestine #DealOfTheCenturyDisaster.”<sup>93</sup> Another account PalestiniansAbroad said “It is never a peace plan, it is an ethnic cleansing machine!’ #FreePalestine.”<sup>94</sup> The tweets varied from expressions of disgust and sadness for the deal to concrete action steps to protest it more directly.

As the planned annexation of the West Bank on July 1st neared, activists used the hashtag to spread awareness of what was occurring as well as share petitions and places to donate. Ayah Ali, a Palestinian woman living in Chicago, tweeted “Palestinian sovereignty will be reduced to less than 10% of historic Palestine, while Israeli occupation’s full control will extend to 90% of Palestinian land - this is UNACCEPTABLE! Join us in saying #NoToAnnexation and #FreePalestine!”<sup>95</sup> Below her tweet was a link to an Amnesty International article for her followers to learn more about the annexation.

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<sup>93</sup> Popular Resistance, Twitter Post, January 30, 2020, 5:05 p.m., <https://twitter.com/PopResistance/status/1223004208636604417>

<sup>94</sup> Palestinians Abroad, Twitter Post, January 30, 2020, 2:36 p.m., <https://twitter.com/PalesAbroadE/status/1222966795910467586>

<sup>95</sup> Ayah Ali, Twitter Post. June 30, 2020, 1:39 p.m., <https://twitter.com/ayahalina5/status/1278020335162601473>

Between 1947 and 1949, 418 villages were emptied during the fighting and absorbed geographically into the new Israeli state. The state's policy during and after the 1948 War was to destroy the houses in the villages so that people would not be encouraged to return. In the process, approximately 70 percent of these villages were destroyed, and another 22 percent were left with only a few houses or religious places standing.<sup>96</sup> The FreePalestine hashtag provides space for personal tweets, where Palestinians have shared their experiences, family photos of their original homes, and maps with their original village names. Other users also shared pictures of their refugee camps from when they were first established, highlighting the longevity of the crisis.

The day before the planned annexation, June 30, 2020, many Palestinians shared their family's story on Twitter. A person under the username @reemsaad01 said "In 1948 my grandparents were forced out of farms that had been in our families for generations. We were masters at growing olives and making olive oil. #NoToAnnexation ensures that other families don't lose their farms in the Jordan Valley. #FreePalestine till it's backwards."<sup>97</sup> Islam Essa, a Palestinian activist living in Gaza, tweeted a picture with the caption "Old Palestinian family from Bait Jala in 1914 #Palestinian #FreePalestine."<sup>98</sup>

These maps, family photographs, and anecdotes emphasize how entrenched the geography of dispossession is into the contemporary narrative of the Palestinian diaspora. In her book *Palestinian Village Histories*, Rochelle Davis writes "Palestinians have carried these village and city names (not to mention their memories, hopes, tragedies, and possessions) with them into the diaspora." She highlights how regardless of the destruction and displacement from

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<sup>96</sup> Rochelle Davis. *Palestinian Village Histories: Geographies of the Displaced*, Stanford University Press, 2010: 9-12.

<sup>97</sup> بابا فين, Twitter Post, June 30, 2020, 1:34 a.m., <https://twitter.com/reemsaad01/status/1278019113206444032>

<sup>98</sup> Islam Essa, Twitter Post, Jan 23, 2021, 4:59 a.m., <https://twitter.com/SaloomaEssa/status/1352918762106851334>

a physical landscape, village names continue to be part of Palestinians' everyday lives, evoking memories of the past. Through recalling and commemorating their villages and cities on Twitter, Palestinians have placed these names into the current landscape and can reconnect with others across our geographies.<sup>99</sup> These geographies are not only the geographic locations of the displaced, but also to the creation of spaces and forums in which displaced people can reconstitute their communities and memories.

In many of the Tweets, Palestine is personified and the belief that Palestine will be free is performative in that if the people say it, it will become true. User @yosrahafezz highlights this in her tweet on June 30, 2020. "Dear Palestine, We have failed you. Our humanity is nowhere to be found. We have failed you. You've been suffering for over 70 years. We have failed you. All I do is pray and pray to see the day you're free. As humans, we have failed you. #FreePalestine until the day I die."<sup>100</sup>

Many of the tweets under #FreePalestine are in solidarity with the Palestinian cause by both Palestinians and non-Palestinians and did not offer any new information or call to action, but simply conveyed support for the Palestinian community. Many of these types of tweets showed up when major events were occurring in the region such as the annexation, deal of the century, and the establishment of diplomatic relations with four Arab League countries, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates, Sudan, and Morocco. For instance, Marwa Osman, a journalist and TV host tweeted a photo of people protesting the Deal of the Century in Yemen on January 31, 2020, saying "#Saada province rises from under the rubble bombed by #AlSaud and shouts #NoToTrumpPlan #DealOfTheCenturyDisaster #FreePalestine The beautiful people of

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<sup>99</sup>Rochelle Davis, *Palestinian Village Histories: Geographies of the Displaced*, Stanford University Press, 2010: 3.

<sup>100</sup> Yosra, Twitter Post, June 30, 2020, 6:06 p.m., <https://twitter.com/yosrahafezz/status/1278087624234807297>



#Yemen.”<sup>101</sup> #FreePalestine is therefore clearly contextualized in terms of developments in the region, such as developments in Israel’s annexation, US-Israeli Peace Plans, and other countries’ recognition of Israel.

The FreePalestine hashtag allows meanings to be assigned to the landscape of Palestine by both people who have lived there and people who have not. Kent Ryden, a professor of cultural geography said "a place...is much more than a point in space...but takes in the meanings which people assign to that landscape through the process of living in it."<sup>102</sup> However, this definition can be expanded to include both people who have experienced the process of living in a place, and those who have not, as many second and third-generation refugees have not, but still conceptualize and feel a sense of place there. As Keith Basso and Steven Feld assert in their book, spaces can be grounded in an understanding of the realities of boundary erosion, diasporas, and dispersal, mobility, and movement.<sup>103</sup> The ability for Palestinians both living inside Israel and outside to connect with the FreePalestine hashtag reveals that the experience of displacement of Palestinians who may have never lived in Israel's 1948 territory is no less the source of powerful attachments than are experiences of profound rootedness.

## Conclusions

These three hashtags - #RazanAlNajjarr, #GreatMarchOfReturn, and #FreePalestine each have their own unique role in the Palestinian resistance on Twitter. The Razan al-Najjar hashtag gave a space of Palestinians to come together and publicly grieve her death and the many other

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<sup>101</sup> Marwa Osman, Twitter Post, January 31, 2020, 3:49 a.m., [https://twitter.com/Marwa\\_\\_Osman/status/1223166488208707586](https://twitter.com/Marwa__Osman/status/1223166488208707586)

<sup>102</sup> Kent Ryden, “Mapping the Invisible Landscape: Folklore, Writing, and the Sense of Place,” *The Annals of Iowa* 54, no. 3 (July 1995): 290–92.

<sup>103</sup> Steven Feld and Keith H. Basso, Michael, *Senses of Place*, Vol. 100. School of American Research Press, 1996: 6.

Palestinian lives lost. In doing this, Palestinians could rearticulate their connection to Palestine and the cause many have died fighting for. It also fueled the Great March of Return hashtag by placing the protest into the digital landscape.

In addition to Al-Najjar's death, the Great March of Return hashtag garnered significant media coverage for the ongoing protests that weren't consistently being covered by major news outlets. Palestinians, mostly in Gaza but also those living in the diaspora, could congregate virtually and articulate their connection to Palestine, regardless of where their home is now. Centering the voices of those in Gaza, the Great March of Return hashtag highlights the connection many Palestinians feel to two places at once, both their current home and their homeland.

The Free Palestine hashtag, unlike the previous two case studies, was not created to commemorate a specific event, person, or anniversary. Instead, it encompasses a wider scope through a combination of Palestinian voices and international solidarity. The hashtag itself personifies Palestine and has a performative nature to it, in that if people say Palestine will be free, it will become true. This hashtag also reveals that Palestinians both living inside Israel and outside of it feel powerfully attached to Palestine - both Historic Palestine and the idea of a future Palestinian state.

While they all serve their own unique roles, they are all successful in allowing Palestinians to express their connection to place by making their memories and experiences public on social media. By sharing their narratives and desire to return on social media, the collective struggle to return proliferates regardless of whether they can practice it. Thus, these Twitter Hashtags allow for the communal act of remembering. Each tweet is part of a larger

message from Palestinians that they will not be erased. I conclude that Twitter, and specifically these three hashtags, are a function of collective memory and collective claims making.

## Chapter Three: Space and Belonging in the Dheisheh Refugee Camp

### Introduction

In 1949 the United Nations founded the United Nations Relief and Works Administration for Palestinian Refugees, or UNRWA, which in May of 1950 helped establish the first refugee camps for those expelled during the Nakba.<sup>104</sup> More than 70 years later, these camps have transformed from temporal tents idling on barren land into relatively autonomous social spaces that more closely resemble a city than a camp as traditionally depicted. Yet, representation of these spaces has often not developed beyond characterizations of victimization, passivity, and poverty. In an effort to explore and produce new forms of representation of camps and refugees beyond these static and traditional symbols, a two-year experimental educational and project-oriented program called “Campus in Camps” emerged.

In this chapter, I will analyze the Campus in Camps website, which hosts the archives of the initiative. Founded in 2012 by two architects, Alessandro Petti and Sandi Hilal, they sought to create experimental forms of communal learning in refugee camps by combining critical reflections with action. Engaging 15 participants from the Dheisheh refugee camp in Bethlehem, Palestine, the initiative attempted to deepen the connection between refugees and one another as well as non-refugees, institutions, and other camps.<sup>105</sup>

The idea for the Campus in Camps sprung from the unique nature of Palestinian refugee camps. These camps, many of which have existed for more than 70 years, have historically and

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<sup>104</sup> UNRWA, “Palestine Refugees,” <https://www.unrwa.org/palestine-refugees>.

<sup>105</sup> Alessandro Petti, “Architecture of Exile,” Campus in Camps, June 11, 2013, <http://www.campusincamps.ps/about/>.

are still undergoing the process of political and spatial transformation and have developed into relatively autonomous social spaces. The goal of the program was to allow refugees to represent their experiences and lives in camps without normalizing the status of Palestinian refugees as people in exile. Through the process of collective unlearning by transmitting independent, personal, and fertile approaches to refugee camp communities and grounding learning processes in rooted experience, the program also seeks to decolonize education relating to camps as a site of history and knowledge.

The unlearning efforts made by the Campus in Camps initiative are oriented in the transformation of camps as spaces of marginalization and suffering to sites of knowledge production. In this manner, refugees can represent themselves in a way that supersedes their typical labels. The program allows participants to create a mode of activism to alter the perspectives of outsiders and better camp life without “normalizing” their conditions.<sup>106</sup>

The Campus in Camps website is available in English and Arabic, signifying its wider intended audience beyond the Arab world and native Arabic speakers. The importance of the website being translated into English should not be overlooked, as it reveals the initiative’s motivation for participants to not solely reflect on their experiences and lives as refugee youth, but also to advocate for new forms of representation to the international community. Thus, Campus in Camps is both a project by refugee youth and a platform for them as well.

The website is organized into five categories displayed as tabs in the top left-hand corner. From left to right they read All, Collective Dictionary, Cycles, Initiatives, and Symposia. Under each tab is a collection of some or all parts of the project archives. The Collective Dictionary is a series of publications containing definitions of concepts considered fundamental for the

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<sup>106</sup> Alessandro Petti, “Architecture of Exile,” Campus in Camps, June 11, 2013, <http://www.campusincamps.ps/about/>.

understanding of the contemporary condition of Palestinian refugee camps. It provides a framework for the rest of the Campus in Camps projects. The Cycles section, short for education cycles, lists the issues the project has focused on throughout the two-year program. Some of the topics aimed to increase understanding of tools for Palestinian political agency like the “International Law and Human Rights” cycle. Others focus more on the development of community work tools like “Agri-Culture and Resistance.” The initiatives tab includes the names of different locations of the camp, such as “the garden” or “the square” and analyzes the historical and present conditions of these specific sites. Lastly, the Symposia section includes a series of lectures and seminars that occurred in conjunction with the camp’s education cycles.

In my analysis, I seek to examine Palestinians' sense of place and belonging through the meanings refugees assign to their social, material, and affective worlds that they inhabit day to day. This analysis is unique in that much of the field of studies on Palestinian refugees has been dominated by scholarships about Palestinians as political actors and agents of resistance and less attention has been given to Palestinians everyday lived experiences. However, very little academic attention has yet been paid to Campus in Camps, with the exception of Ilana Feldman, who gave a few workshops to the participants. Feldman writes about the project archive and its articulation of a collective narrative in exile from the first-hand perspectives of refugee youth in Bethlehem. Feldman said one of the achievements of Campus in Camps was that it articulated a vision of return that is future, rather than past oriented and that is collective rather than individual.<sup>107</sup>

## Background on Dheisheh Refugee Camp

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<sup>107</sup>Ilana Feldman, “Reaction, Experimentation, and Refusal: Palestinian Refugees Confront the Future,” *History and Anthropology*, 2016.

The Dheisheh refugee camp was established in 1949 as a temporary solution for 3,400 Palestinian refugees from 45 villages as a result of the 1948 Arab-Israeli War. It is located along the main street in Bethlehem and although the camp was built to serve only 3,000 refugees, today, the number of residents in Dheisheh has reached approximately 15,000. Sitting on 0.33 square kilometers with an estimated population density of 45,454 per square kilometer, Dheisheh has roughly twice the population density of Paris.<sup>108</sup>

Dheisheh refugee camp has a very active civil society with many community-based organizations and has played a significant role in the Palestinian plight over the years, particularly during the Intifadas.<sup>109</sup> During the First Intifada, the Israeli security forces (ISF) fenced in the entire camp, leaving a small turnstile as the only entrance and isolating the camp from the main road between Bethlehem and Hebron. While the fence has been removed, the turnstile is still visible at the camp entrance. During both the first and second intifadas, many of Dheisheh's older male residents were arrested. Although Dheisheh is under full Palestinian control, the ISF still conducts frequent incursions and arrests inside the camp.<sup>110</sup>

#### Language and Power: The Collective Dictionary

The first year of Campus in Camps was largely focused on establishing a common language and a common approach among the participants. This was achieved through the creation of the Collective Dictionary. According to the website, the Collective Dictionary was a necessary step in the process of unlearning and “healing from pre-packaged alienating

<sup>108</sup> Insee, “Paris Population Statistics 2017,” <https://www.insee.fr/en/recherche?q=paris+population&debut=0>

<sup>109</sup> An intifada (Arabic: انتفاضة intifādah) is a rebellion or uprising, or a resistance movement. The First Intifada occurred between December 8, 1987 and September 13, 1993 and the Second Intifada occurred between September 28, 2000 and February 8, 2005.

<sup>110</sup> UNRWA, “Dheisheh Camp,” <https://www.unrwa.org/where-we-work/west-bank/dheisheh-camp>.

knowledge, knowledge that is not linked with life.”<sup>111</sup> Participants in collaboration with Munir Fasheh, one of the best known Palestinian learning theorists and practitioners, created a series of booklets in English and Arabic proposing new definitions for terms. Through cataloging, describing, creating, and narrating their histories through these terms, the participants are able to replace the definitions with their own into their current landscape.

The words chosen by the participants to redefine were: citizenship, common, knowledge, ownership, participation, relation, responsibility, sustainability, well-being, and vision.<sup>112</sup> The words were selected based on what phrases and terms were coming up in life-history interviews and active dialogs with the camp community. The themes, generational differences, and overall discourse that were coming up in the interviews became the apparent choice of words for the participants to redefine according to their experience of life in the camp. Each of the booklets contains diverse material registers ranging from written reflections on personal experiences, interviews, and photo essays.

The Collective Dictionary attempts to simplify an expansive set of terms and restructure them in the Palestinian context of refugee camps. It centers the Palestinian narrative, which is so often dominated by discourse from humanitarian organizations.<sup>113</sup> Furthermore, the dictionary counters the established hegemony of thinking by defining words by themselves and for themselves, while also invoking the spatial and historical significance of them.

Aspects of the Collective Dictionary were often made into education cycles and workshops within Campus in Camps initiatives. For instance, the “Language and Power” five-

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<sup>111</sup> Alessandro Petti, “Architecture of Exile,” Campus in Camps, June 11, 2013, <http://www.campusincamps.ps/about/>.

<sup>112</sup> In Arabic (from right to left) : المواطننة، المشاع، المعرفة، المشاركة، العلاقة، المسؤولية، الاستدامة، العافية، الرؤية

<sup>113</sup> Ilana Feldman, “Uncertainty as possibility: reflections on an experimental space,” Campus in Camps, June 15, 2013, <http://www.campusincamps.ps/about/>.



week workshop was created to explore and compare Arabic and English texts to see the impact of facing the text in two different languages. The participants read books ranging from *Orientalism* by Edward Said to *Outliers* by Malcolm Gladwell.<sup>114</sup> The goal of the workshop was to explore and expand upon participant's understanding of language and refine the Collective Dictionary to meet these new understandings. The workshop raised further questions about the relationship between wanting to adapt to a hegemonic language and the struggle for more rights within the camp. It also sought to answer how a new language can become a tool to reflect and construct new forms of representation. The effort by the participants to produce publications in both Arabic and English was born out of this workshop and demonstrates an attempt to reformulate the meanings and translation of words into a new camp language.

As Diana Allan asserts in her book *Refugees of the Revolution*, which focuses on Palestinian refugees in Lebanon, younger generations born and raised outside of Palestine are “finding it difficult to absorb original narratives as part of their own identity or as a frame for national belonging.”<sup>115</sup> Although the refugees in Dheisheh are facing a different set of circumstances under occupation in historic Palestine, the youth there also articulated a struggle to form their own generational narrative. By transmitting independent and personal approaches to these terms, and thus creating a new framework for language, refugee camp communities are able to create their own narrative and alter the perception of the future and, consequently, that of the present.

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<sup>114</sup> Campus in Camps, “Language and Power,” April 11, 2014, <http://www.campusincamps.ps/projects/language-and-power/>.

<sup>115</sup> Diana Allan, *Refugees of the Revolution: Experiences of Palestinian Exile*, Stanford University Press, 2013, 60.

## A Vision for Return

The word “Vision” or “الرؤية” in Arabic in the Collective Dictionary asks contributors to visualize the reality of refugees in 2040 who have obtained the right of return to a place, civil right, or something else.<sup>116</sup> They are asked to describe the environment, the people, and what is happening in their original camp, as well as the other camps – Dheisheh, Fawwar, Arroub, and Azzah – where their friends live.<sup>117</sup> This collection reflects the power of free expression when envisioning how the idea of the right of return will affect refugees and camps in the future. The responses I mention in this section were all written in the early stages of the program in March and April of 2012.

The participants' diverse approaches to the prompt make visible the lack of one collective desire, narrative, and representation of refugees. In Rochelle Davis's book *Palestinian Village Histories*, she notes how Palestinians' understanding of their places and past is often cast with a political and national character. They have to make an effort to record their lives as part of Palestinian history, to remember when all of Palestine was one geographic entity, and to register a community that existed prior to its destruction.<sup>118</sup> This prompt highlights the need to place individual stories, particularly those of Palestinian youth, in collective, social, and historical processes when creating ideas for proposals about a Palestinian future. The project showed the power of decision-making, which is usually left to outside humanitarian actors who do not necessarily share in the Palestinian collective struggle or imagination. It is also of note that the

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<sup>116</sup> Transliteration: Al-Ruwya

<sup>117</sup> Campus in Camps, “Vision,” January 11, 2013, <http://www.campusincamps.ps/projects/vision/>.

<sup>118</sup> Rochelle Davis, *Palestinian Village Histories: Geographies of the Displaced*, Stanford University Press, 2010: 20.

participants could have named the booklet “return” as this is the focus of the definitions for “vision.” The choice to turn to abstract language instead of key Palestinian political terminology makes clear the emphasis that not all participants, and thus not all Palestinians, desire a “return” in its traditional meaning. The word “vision” made space for a multiplicity of Palestinian futures.

Saleh Khannah wrote in his response “At that time, year 2040, do I have the right of return? Even dreaming of that does not make any sense for me unless we (Palestinians) make a serious step forward.”<sup>119</sup> Thinking about a world where the right of return exists feels so out of reach, Khannah suggests instead redefining refugees as “the new settlers.”<sup>120</sup> The image he creates of the Arroub refugee camp consists of an expansive landscape of buildings, new communities of refugees popping up, where he is “a rich refugee with wellbeing and a good life.”<sup>121</sup> The reality suggested in this scenario is less of a “return” and instead, a redefinition of the place and person he is today. The idea that being a refugee living in a camp is not equated with being poor or without a home. Instead Khannah’s “vision” allows him to experience the joys refugees seeking the right aspire to have - a sense of place, community, and financial security - without ever having to leave the refugee camp.

The sentiment was shared among other youths that 28 years would allow concrete steps to be made but ultimately would not be enough time to change the present system Palestinians live in. Instead, Aysar Al-Saifi and others chose to focus on what they love and what they hope Palestine will be like one day. Al-Saifi envisions a future where Palestine is economically prosperous and the state considered “one of the top producing countries in both industrial and agricultural domains, producing products such as olives, oil, wood, and many others.” Despite

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<sup>119</sup> Campus in Camps, “Vision,” January 11, 2013, 14, <http://www.campusincamps.ps/projects/vision/>.

<sup>120</sup> Campus in Camps, “Vision,” January 11, 2013, 20, <http://www.campusincamps.ps/projects/vision/>.

<sup>121</sup> Campus in Camps, “Vision,” January 11, 2013, 15, <http://www.campusincamps.ps/projects/vision/>.

years of suffering, the future of Palestine is one with the best hospital systems providing free services, thriving transportation systems across the state, repopulated destitute areas, and “a comfortable atmosphere for everyone.”<sup>122</sup> Al-Saifi’s vision includes a thriving version for all sects of society that struggle presently, notably healthcare and infrastructure. The emphasis on “a comfortable atmosphere for everyone” highlights the importance of respect to Palestinian youth in a time where they are stripped of it. In an environment where they constantly face discrimination, refugees dream of a society where everyone is treated equally.

When looking at Khannah’s vision in contrast with Murad Odeh’s, the third vision in the booklet, we see a distinct difference in the role of Palestinians in achieving the right of return. Khannah says the right of return will not be feasible “unless we (Palestinians) make a serious step forward.”<sup>123</sup> While Khannah puts the responsibility of accessing a return to Palestine on Palestinians, Odeh writes about the need for support from the international community if his vision for return is to be achieved. Although Odeh writes of a Palestinian revolution and the importance of uniting despite political fractures, he believes without international intervention there cannot be a return to their lands and a new government with an election process.<sup>124</sup> The differing views on the role of the actors at play with regards to return reveal how individual experiences of a place impact the nationalist narrative.

In Nedaa Hamouz’s vision, she expresses her attachment to both a return to Palestine and her camp, the Al-Fawwar Camp. She envisions herself returning to the former camp after many years, age 51, and “a flood of different feelings overwhelmed me. I missed the place, the sweet memories, the people, and even the alleyways of the camp... I missed them.” Hamouz sees

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<sup>122</sup> Campus in Camps, “Vision,” January 11, 2013, 25, <http://www.campusincamps.ps/projects/vision/>.

<sup>123</sup> Campus in Camps, “Vision,” January 11, 2013, 14, <http://www.campusincamps.ps/projects/vision/>.

<sup>124</sup> Campus in Camps, “Vision,” January 11, 2013, 41, <http://www.campusincamps.ps/projects/vision/>.

herself recalling past memories with joy and laughter, and when asked why she is laughing she will respond “here, I witnessed all the joy of life!”<sup>125</sup> Hamouz’s preemptive nostalgia for her camp represents her emotional attachment to two places at once. At this moment, Hamouz realizes that the feelings she holds towards the camp are the same as her feelings towards her village in Historic Palestine. She concludes by saying she will never forsake her right to be in the camp even after her eventual return.

Palestinians’ feelings of a nostalgia are typically thought about in terms of longing for the long-absent past and their lost lands, but the present also plays a role. Their families experience of exile in communities where they were born and raised not only informs their perspective on the past, but also on the future. For Hamouz and many refugee youths, the camp represents their home, their childhood, and their community. Traditionally in rhetoric about the right of return, we think of it as finite. Refugees will sacrifice the camps they have lived in their whole lives just to return to their homeland. However, because of the longevity of the Palestinian refugee situation, refugees feel a deep attachment to both the place where they reside - whether in occupation or abroad - in addition to their ancestors or original villages in Historic Palestine. Thus return does not equate to sacrificing that place for another, but it allows refugees to have both.

The contrast in responses to the prompt represents the challenges for Palestinian refugee youth today write about a future in a place they may never have seen or lived in surrounded by others that provides multiple perspectives on and individual memories of that place and varying nationalist narratives about the importance of Palestine. The right of return – in its traditional speech enforced by UN Resolution 194 and by an intergenerational transmission – affects

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<sup>125</sup> Campus in Camps, “Vision,” January 11, 2013, 44-45, <http://www.campusincamps.ps/projects/vision/>.

refugees' perceptions of camps in future scenarios. These different written reflections on personal experiences, interviews, excursions, and photographic investigations all constitute starting points for the formulation of various structured visions around the right of return.

### The Camp as Commons

Departing from personal experiences discussed in “Vision”, the participants published two booklets exploring concepts and practices related to the “Common,” or in Arabic “المشاع.” The participants define the Commons as all the non-commodified resources that are shared with other people, such as air, water, empty spaces, parks, education, health care, knowledge, information, skills, the internet and much more.<sup>126</sup> The booklets, titled Common<sup>1</sup> and Common<sup>2</sup>, sought to address whether heightened attention to the commons can shift the discourse of Palestinian refugeehood and the way the right of return is imagined and articulated.

Naba' Al-Assi asserts her attachment towards the Dheisheh Refugee Camp as compared to her experience living in Doha City saying “When we think about the differences between these two places, we should think about the soul of the camp which the city lacks.”<sup>127</sup> Al-Assi describes the camp's soul as a symbol of the shared struggle for the right of return. She says in the camp you can feel the soul among the people. She cannot feel like herself in Doha because it is missing the common traditions and habits due to the residents not knowing each other very well. The assumption is often that a city would be a better place to live than a camp, but Al-Assi attributes the social relations of the camp as the reason she prefers it.

In concluding the summary of “Common<sup>1</sup>”, participants said: “Common is resistance, struggle, and rebellion. The right of return is to reclaim the land for common use. The camp is

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<sup>126</sup> Campus in Camps, “Common<sup>1</sup>,” January 15, 2013, 14, <http://www.campusincamps.ps/projects/common-1/>.

<sup>127</sup> Campus in Camps, “Common<sup>1</sup>,” January 15, 2013, 40, <http://www.campusincamps.ps/projects/common-1/>.

the common.”<sup>128</sup> The assertion that that camp is the common holds space for multiple meanings. First, the idea that the camp is a shared space that holds non-commodified resources - knowledge, public parks, streets - that refugees share with one another. Al-Assi’ references this idea that commons allow for the practice of neighboring and sharing in a way a city does not. For instance, the streets in Doha are wide and well-lit and considered a public area. Whereas in Dheisheh, the streets are narrow and not well lit.<sup>129</sup> The streets in the camp are a common space.

The second meaning invoked in “the camp is the common” is the idea of the camp being the refugees’ collective experience and symbolic of their how purely existing in these everyday spaces is an act of resistance. The meanings associated with the common and by association with the camp, help in understanding why Palestinian refugees like Al-Assi’ feel deeply connected to living there. Living in the camp is a symbol of a struggle and activates the necessity for a right of return in a way living in a non-refugee space outside of Palestine does not.

Brave New Alps, an organization that helps produce design projects that engage people in discussing and reconfiguring the politics of social and environmental issues, partnered with Campus in Camps to design and produce the Commons booklet. They also contributed to the conversation around commons. They said “Commons, in order to continue to be commons need to be preserved, taken care of, maintained, protected. But they also need to be activated by people – in a sense, they need to “function.”<sup>130</sup> In part, Palestinians’ attachment to their camps can be attributed to how it activates the right of return. In order for conservation around the right of return to persevere and expand, there needs to be a community activating this dialogue.

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<sup>128</sup> Campus in Camps, “Common<sup>1</sup>,” January 15, 2013, 16, <http://www.campusincamps.ps/projects/common-1/>.

<sup>129</sup> Campus in Camps, “Common<sup>1</sup>,” January 15, 2013, 23, <http://www.campusincamps.ps/projects/common-1/>.

<sup>130</sup> Campus in Camps, “Common<sup>1</sup>,” January 15, 2013, 64, <http://www.campusincamps.ps/projects/common-1/>

## Decolonizing Design

Deviating from the Collective Dictionary's conceptual basis, the second year of the Campus in Camps program was committed to "initiatives." Each initiative concentrated on a different site within the refugee camps to better understand the historical and present conditions of these specific places. While refugee camps are built on the destruction that began in 1948 and are historical sites, they are periodically destroyed and rebuilt. Due to their Palestinians' projected condition of sixty-five years of exile, the camps have developed from a purely humanitarian space to an active political space with their own form of social life. In an attempt to create the right vocabulary and discourse to describe this new condition, participants sought to rethink the various social, spatial and political structures, and they were able to activate new meanings within the contemporary landscape. The initiatives bear the names of this urbanity of exile sites such as "The Garden", "The Square", and "The Pool", as well as more conceptual ones like "The Unbuilt" and "The Shared."<sup>131</sup> The existence of these everyday places within refugee camps suggests new spatial and social formations beyond the idea of the camp as a site of marginalization, poverty, and political subjugation.

Each location was numbered one through ten, except one: The Concrete Tent. The concrete tent was singled out as it stands to represent the entirety of the refugee camp and the longevity of the crisis. The Concrete Tent was built in the Dheisheh Refugee Camp in Bethlehem as a representation of the paradox of permanent temporariness. When envisioning what a refugee camp is, many will imagine barren land filled with an aggregation of tents. For refugees, the tent's material and architectural structure represents their temporary status in the camps and eventual right of return. However, because of the protracted nature of the Palestinian situation,

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<sup>131</sup> Alessandro Petti, "Architecture of Exile," Campus in Camps, June 11, 2013, <http://www.campusincamps.ps/about/>.



most refugees reside in concrete urban structures - structures without an expiration date. By building a hybrid of these two architectural forms, concrete urban housing, and mobile tents, The Concrete Tent seeks to embrace the contradiction of life in exile: temporariness and permanence.

This contradiction, represented through architecture, also symbolizes the variety of nuanced perspectives Palestinians hold towards the right of return. On the Campus in Camps website, participants wrote that The Concrete Tent allows offers the “possibility for the camp to be a historical political subject of the present, and to see the achievements of the present not as an impediment to the right of return, but on the contrary, as a step towards it.”<sup>132</sup> The initiatives focus on reclaiming history within the camp is not normalizing the political condition of being exiled. The re-creation of a tent made of concrete today makes public the cultural and symbolic importance of the Nakba, while also engaging the present political condition of exile. Recognizing the camp’s present condition is a step in beginning to articulate the right of return.

### The Square: Learning in the Common Place

During the Campus in Camps initiatives, the emphasis shifts from an emphasis on language and vocabulary to the forms of knowledge that emerge from actions. Actions like gathering, walking, and events are a method of more direct engagement with the camp condition. The goal of the initiatives was for the participants to create projects in the camps without feeling like they were normalizing their exceptional conditions. These voluntary and participatory actions aimed to rethink an important historical site thus re-activating it in contemporary life.

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<sup>132</sup> Campus in Camps, “The Concrete Tent,” May 27, 2015, <http://www.campusincamps.ps/projects/the-concrete-tent/>.

The Camp Improvement Unit constructed “The Square”, a large open plaza of 700 square meters, surrounded by walls, basins for plants and vegetation surrounding it, and 4 entrances, in the middle of the camp.<sup>133</sup> The project sought to create a common space in the camp where all people of different ages and genders can have access. Notably, conversations and interviews about the role of women and their activities in the square are discussed at length in the Women's Center. Generally, it is not common for women to participate in the learning sessions alongside men.<sup>134</sup> However, Campus in Camps centers the belief that learning is a right, and wanted to include women in their collective learning. The Square became a place of learning. In it, English lessons took place, children played, women cooked, and everyday acts were made public.

In an interview, one woman said “If we had cooked maftoul in another place, for example in one of the centers in the camp, we wouldn’t be comfortable as it was in the square. Here in the square, we arranged the square, we cleaned it and therefore we feel it is ours. We cooked, we ate and we cleaned without any order from anybody.”<sup>135</sup> Cleaning the square was a gesture of reappropriation, ownership, and care. In fact, this seemingly ordinary action demonstrated a sense of collective ownership and community. Building a space where everyone in the camp could comfortably reside helped create a collective awareness towards themselves and towards the place they were in.

While initially, women were worried about using the square and how others would perceive them, they ended up having a positive experience with the space. “It seemed that no one could bear being inside closed spaces any longer; we were all longing for some fresh air,” one

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<sup>133</sup> Campus in Camps, “The Square,” June 18, 2013, 20-23, <http://www.campusincamps.ps/projects/02-the-square/>.

<sup>134</sup> Campus in Camps, “The Square,” June 18, 2013, 27, <http://www.campusincamps.ps/projects/02-the-square/>.

<sup>135</sup> Campus in Camps, “The Square,” June 18, 2013, 39, <http://www.campusincamps.ps/projects/02-the-square/>.

woman said.<sup>136</sup> Sandi Hilal, the Head of Camp Improvement Program in the West Bank said the plaza is not an abandonment of the dream to return or in any way a symbol of permanency, but instead a new strategy of refugees to capitalize on their strengths rather than their weakness as victims.<sup>137</sup>

The Square allowed refugees to reshape social networks within the camp, specifically the role of women who some perceive as dormant. Participants noted a negative outcome of camp development overtime was that people were less likely to gather or meet up publicly. Instead, people focused on their own personal interests and less on the collective.<sup>138</sup> Creating this public space helps to re-gather people again, break social barriers, and begin new healthy social relations built on mutual comprehension and communication.

## Conclusions

Built on the destruction that began in 1948, refugee camps are continuously destroyed and rebuilt. Over seventy years after the Nakba, Palestinian refugee camps became, and remain, a hallmark of Palestinian existence in the diaspora; they are the embodiment of the Palestinian struggle to exist and an expression of the right of return.

The Campus in Camps project urges people to remember and celebrate elements of place that both fill in and fall outside of the larger frameworks of Palestinian national history and politics. The Palestinian refugees who remember the villages and cities of historic Palestine constitute an ever-dwindling segment of the population, but even those who have never stepped foot in historic Palestine remain emotionally and spatially attached to it.

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<sup>136</sup> Campus in Camps, "The Square," June 18, 2013, 53, <http://www.campusincamps.ps/projects/02-the-square/>.

<sup>137</sup> Campus in Camps, "The Square," June 18, 2013, 16, <http://www.campusincamps.ps/projects/02-the-square/>.

<sup>138</sup> Campus in Camps, "The Square," June 18, 2013, 79, <http://www.campusincamps.ps/projects/02-the-square/>.

This experimental education initiative helped refugees make public their attachments to both historic Palestine and their current condition in the camp. In the geography of dispossession visibly, refugees reclaiming the spaces that currently landmark their daily life, such as camps, contribute to commemorating Palestine and its history - what they knew and what they lost. Thus building a community and sense of belonging in the diaspora became an embodied and communal act of remembering.

The participants' sense of belonging to their camps does not normalize their conditions, but creates a sense of pride and ownership of their collective commons and alters outsiders' perceptions of life as a refugee. Living alongside other refugees allows Palestinians to connect over a shared struggle and increases the necessity for a right of return. At the same time, the Campus in Camps initiative reveals the lack of one unified narrative when it comes to return. Some imagine a full return to Palestine, others feel more connected to their camp and imagine a future in it, and many imagine a combination of both. From all of the participants' visions, we can assume this: Return is neither a finite nor irreversible term.

Through the creation of independent and personal definitions to terms in the collective dictionary as well as the reclamation of public spaces during the initiatives, Campus in Camps forged a new framework for understanding the present and historical conditions of exile. Refugee camp communities were able to create their own narrative in exile while also altering the perception about a future in Palestine.

## Conclusion

### Evaluating Senses of Place

Today there are more than 13 million Palestinians dispersed across the world in one of the largest and most far-flung diasporas. In my thesis, I attempted to examine how the spaces Palestinians currently occupy are not just spatial locations, but also sites of power struggles, displacement, annexation, absorption, and resistance. By examining the relationship between nationalist narratives of return to Palestine and the realities of life in exile, I unraveled Palestinian's complex and evolving relationship with their sense of place and belonging.

Each chapter of analysis served to answer a unique question all contributed to my central research question. There are many aspects that affect Palestinian's senses of place and belonging, including but not limited to personal experiences, cultural processes, social interactions, and identities. I explored my research questions through both a historical and contemporary lens by examining the perceptions and experiences of Palestinians that have emerged and shifted since the Nakba.

By each chapter focusing on a different method of analysis, I captured a wide scope of Palestinian beliefs and experiences with place. In addition, I go beyond treating the issue in its narrowest form, solely the question of whether or not Palestinian refugees will or should return to their former homes and villages, but discusses the various other grievances and issues being negotiated and contested between the parties throughout the diaspora. However, I acknowledge that due to time and space limitations, I could not capture all of the ideas and voices that exist around a sense of place as articulated by Palestinians across the diaspora.

## Conclusions

My thesis set out to answer four interrelated questions regarding sense of place and belonging in the Middle East region. My first and central question to guide the majority of my research is a correlational question, asks how has the protracted Palestinian refugee situation shaped conceptualizations of Palestinians' sense of place and belonging. My first chapter sought to answer in what ways do the contingencies of life in refugee camps and exposure to political violence contribute to Palestinians' (dis)connections with the nation and homeland. My second chapter discussed how as displaced people do Palestinians affirm their "identity" as Palestinians. My last research question which my third chapter answered was how this sense of place will be passed down to the subsequent generations of Palestinian refugees.

In my first chapter I tested my hypothesis that regardless of differences in living conditions and exposure to political violence, the salience of the belief in the right of return among Palestinian communities in exile unites them as one cohesive, transnational, united refugee category. Through an examination and analysis of existing scholarly literature that address the various right of return movements and attitudes in five locations: Jordan, Lebanon, the West Bank, Gaza, and Israel's 1948 territory, as well as quantitative survey data on public opinion of Palestinian refugees in these locations, I found my hypothesis to be true according to BADIL's survey.

The BADIL survey and their subsequent analysis argue that the results indicate that while there was slight differentiation in the results around the feasibility of return in each location, this variation is marginal, and the right of return transcends the political, economic, and living conditions in each location, and derives from an inherent Palestinian belief shared by the majority of refugees. However, I found that while the individual living circumstances of refugees

may only marginally affect their belief in return's feasibility, their sense of rights in their current location impacts their priorities and vision for what return could look like if realized. For instance, where displaced Palestinians living within Israel's 1948 territory can return to visit their villages, those across borders in Jordan, Lebanon, and the Occupied Territories, for the most part, cannot. This leads to a different set of rights to contest day-to-day as well as their priorities when considering a return in the long term. However, despite these different sets of rights, all Palestinian refugees expressed a desire to return to their homeland.

I expanded on the nuances of Palestinian beliefs and attachments to place in my second chapter of analysis, wherein I explored Palestinian articulation of place on social media, specifically Twitter hashtags. I had hypothesized that due to prolonged displacement and continuous distance from the 1948 exile, Palestinians affirm their identity by emphasizing their status as refugees to sustain the Palestinian national community in exile, as well as their collective right to return to their national homeland, Palestine. I found through three hashtags - #RazanAlNajjarr, #GreatMarchOfReturn, and #FreePalestine - Palestinians were able to affirm their identity in a way I hypothesized, in addition to allowing Palestinians to make their memories of Palestine and lived experiences public on social media. Hashtags are symbolic places for Palestinians, especially those in Gaza, to participate in communal acts of remembering. I concluded that these hashtags are a function of collective memory and collective claims-making.

In my final chapter, I analyzed the website "Campus in Camps", which hosts the archive of projects produced by Palestinian refugee youth over two years from 2012-2014. I hypothesized that despite the distance from their ancestors' initial displacement in 1948, Palestinian youth hold the right of return as an inherent part of their identity to protect their

national cause from erasure. I found this to be true as the participants of *Campus and Camps* had never stepped foot in Historic Palestine and do not remember their family's villages and cities, but they remain emotionally and spatially attached to it. I also found that although home and homeland are related concepts, they are not synonymous. Palestinians hold dynamically evolving attachments to both their homeland as well as their camps and communities in exile, which unsettles the common understanding of Palestinian belonging. *Campus in Camps'* collective dictionary highlights the importance of rethinking traditionally held assumptions about return and nationalist discourse.

My main hypothesis was that the protracted refugee situation has caused a transformation of a Palestinian sense of place from a local rootedness in particular towns, villages, and neighborhoods to an imagined sense of belonging to an abstract Palestinian nation and homeland. I predicted this would be articulated through a collective identity rooted in the sacred belief in the right of return. From the conclusions I've drawn from each of my chapters, I argue that because of the longevity of the Palestinian refugee crisis, Palestinians do feel a sense of belonging to their villages in Palestine, they also feel deeply attached to the place they reside, whether that be in refugee camps in occupation or abroad. In the BADIL survey, on social media, and through *Campus in Camps'* projects, refugees pushed back against the commonly held assumptions and impositions of nationalist discourse.

My thesis finds that the alignment of people and place is more complicated than just Palestinians being attached to their or their ancestors' original place. Spatial locations are grounded in an understanding of the realities of boundary erosion, diaspora, and dispersal, mobility, and movement.<sup>139</sup> The ability of Palestinians both living inside Israel's 1948 territory

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<sup>139</sup> Steven Feld and Keith H. Basso, Michael, *Senses of Place*, Vol. 100. School of American Research Press, 1996: 6.



and outside of it to feel connected to Palestine reveals that the experience of displacement is no less the source of powerful attachments than are experiences of profound rootedness.

Furthermore, even those displaced in and after 1948, have forged roots in new homes that are different from their homeland. This sense of belonging to a place outside of Palestine does not normalize their conditions in exile but allows Palestinians to move beyond the traditionally enforced language that the right of return is finite and lets them envision a future where they do not have to sacrifice one place for another, but have both.

Though commonly assumed to be holding this status temporarily, according to UNHCR statistics at the beginning of 2019, approximately 78 percent of all the refugees displaced worldwide find themselves in a situation of protracted, long-term exile.<sup>140</sup> Thus my findings are not only salient when thinking about Palestinian refugees, but can be applied to future scenarios for analogous protracted refugee crises around the world. Understanding that refugees living in long-term displacement may desire both re-entry to their origin country while also maintaining a relationship and future in their host community. A right of return as established in International Law should not be considered terminable. Instead, it should only build upon the broader human rights concept of freedom of movement.

My thesis attempted to address the interplay of identity and geography by examining Palestinians' perceptions of place and the right of return in the West Bank, Gaza, Lebanon, Jordan, as well as IDPs within Israel's 1948 territory. Due to time and space constraints, there are gaps in my thesis. If I were to continue my research, I would further unravel Palestinians' relationship with place not just in the Middle East region, but also in the wider global diaspora. I would be interested in other commemorative practices, aside from Gaza's Great March of

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<sup>140</sup> UNHCR, "Protracted Refugee Situations Explained."

Return, in different countries that invoke attachments to land and Palestinian cultural heritage. Furthermore, I acknowledge the opinions expressed in the BADIL survey, tweets, and Campus in Camps' projects are a limited sample and do not necessarily reflect the entire reality of Palestinian refugees and refugee youths. I would hope to deepen my analysis of Palestinian senses of place by either capturing a wider sample size in these locations or expanding my analysis to more than five locations.

My findings transcend the stereotypes of nationalist discourse, where refugees are reduced to stoic embodiments of exile awaiting the right of return to their land. By highlighting the voices and experiences of Palestinian refugees, I drew attention to how the realities of life in exile have produced new forms of attachment to place and unconventional narratives about the right of return. I examined the right of return in a holistic manner and treated discourse on and by IDPs as integral to the general discourse on the right of return. Instead of treating the issue in its narrowest form, solely the question of whether or not Palestinian refugees will or should return to their former homes and villages, I shed light on the many other grievances and issues being negotiated and contested between the parties throughout these locations. By doing this I contributed to the understudied area of whether an emplaced sense of rights contributes to how refugees in protracted exile construct a history and identity in exile, and how they articulate a sense of belonging, both to a diasporic community and to a Palestinian homeland.

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