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Punctuated Humanitarianism: Palestinian Life between the Catastrophic and the Cruddy

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With a more than sixty-seven-year displacement, the Palestinian refugee case is an extreme instance of a widespread phenomenon: the need for humanitarian organizations that are oriented toward emergency to respond to circumstances that are "protracted."[1] Humanitarian practice does change as needs on the ground change, but long-term need and displacement poses both definitional and practical challenges for this work. The broad trajectory of Palestinian refugee experience has moved from "crisis" to chronic needs—what Elizabeth Povinelli calls "cruddy" conditions. Povinelli specifically contrasts suffering that is "catastrophic, crisis-laden, and sublime" with that which is "ordinary, chronic, and cruddy."[2] Palestinians share experiences of poverty and immobility with others around the world who are part of what is sometimes referred to as the "precariat."[3] It is this sort of suffering, which often persists below the threshold of an "event," that Povinelli terms cruddy.

Even though they are common, protracted situations strain the limits of the humanitarian imaginary, and also of humanitarian resources. Humanitarian actors cannot alleviate the causes of people's suffering, but in crises they can effect a change in the circumstances in which they are living. In the chronic conditions usually facing Palestinians, it often seems that humanitarian actors cannot do even that. Humanitarian purpose becomes murky in circumstances where people are not in immediate risk of dying, but also where their difficult lives cannot be much improved. What can, and should, humanitarians do when nothing they do seems likely to have much effect?[4]

The longevity of the Palestinian refugee problem makes it an exemplary case through which to consider what happens to humanitarian purpose and practice as acute crisis shifts to chronic need. This case also provides a window into the full trajectory of humanitarian assistance in the post–World War II era. My current research investigates the length and breadth of the Palestinian refugee experience to explicate both the features and dilemmas of long-term humanitarianism and the ways the experience of living with assistance over so many years shapes community and political life.

A key part of the Palestinian experience is that the movement to the chronic is not a linear one. Palestinians have experienced long periods of persistent poverty, marginalization, and political stasis that have been repeatedly punctuated by times of acute crisis: the 1967 Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip, the civil war in Lebanon with its assaults on Palestinian camps (1975–90), the blockade of Gaza (2007–present), the conflict in Syria (2011–present). The emergency circumstances produced by each crisis are sometime thereafter transformed (again) into chronic conditions of need and restriction. One of the challenges that humanitarian actors face is being buffeted between the catastrophic and the cruddy and trying to respond alternatively to both situations. This is, that is, a punctuated humanitarianism.

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Punctuated humanitarianism has consequences for both providers and recipients. For providers, these consequences include: confusion about purpose, frustration with having to cover the same ground multiple times, and anger with the apparent incapacity (or unwillingness) of political actors to resolve the underlying conditions that make emergencies repeat and chronic need persist. When the smoke clears from a latest round of catastrophic violence, humanitarians make the rounds to see what remains: of lives people were living and of the projects which their agencies have supported. When the president of American Near East Refugee Aid (ANERA), a humanitarian agency that has provided assistance to Palestinians since 1968, went to Gaza immediately after the ceasefire began following seven weeks of Israeli assault in summer 2014, he reported that: "Our preschools are a mess. We renovated approximately 50 over the past three years. . . . Initial assessments reveal that about 60% of the schools have sustained damage. . . . Without cement and other building materials our hands are tied."[5] Humanitarian actors may be mobilized by emergency, may understand better how to act when faced with a crisis to which they can respond directly, but they suffer the losses of these cycles of destruction. This is the humanitarian double condition produced by the *returned* (and ever-returning) crisis: a renewed clarity of purpose along with a growing sense of being trapped in a cycle of futility.

Living, long-term, with humanitarianism also creates distinct challenges (and opportunities) for recipients. Just as providers are uncomfortable with their purpose over an extended period of time, recipients worry about the deleterious effects of long-term need on their societies and psyches. For recipients, punctuated humanitarianism further means that people move in and out of different relationships to the humanitarian apparatus. In moments of crisis (which can themselves be extended), available assistance expands. United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA) reports, for instance, that 80 percent of Gaza's population is dependent on food aid.[6] In such circumstances, even if people view the aid they receive as inadequate, they feel connected to the assistance regime. In the chronic conditions in Wihdat camp in Amman, Jordan, in contrast, many people I spoke with professed no real connection to humanitarian services, even as they lived in a camp, sent their children to UNRWA schools, and, sometimes at least, received healthcare from UNRWA clinics. What they felt to be their most acute problems—poverty and lack of opportunity—they managed on their own. This feeling of being on their own in facing life's fundamental challenges contributes to a certain nonrecognition of the "chronic" services that are part of people's lives. As one camp resident put it to me, contrasting current conditions with a past when UNRWA provided rations: "Today we are men and fathers. We run after the loaf of bread. And the loaf of bread here in Jordan is round . . . so it can drive away. So it will keep on going away and you will keep chasing after it. And this is it. If you work, you eat and live. If you sit down, you'll be hungry. And this is our life here in Jordan."

Even as crises generate renewed humanitarian responses, sometimes a crisis can limit humanitarian access. For instance, during the War of Camps (1985–88) in Lebanon, a siege imposed on Palestinian refugee camps near Beirut meant that UNRWA could not provide its usual services. Remembering those days, people describe near starvation conditions. Images from Yarmouk camp in Syria during the recent conflict (2011–present) paint a similar picture. Even when humanitarians can access people in crisis, as in Gaza during the Israeli assaults of 2009, 2012, and 2014, they are often

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limited in the help they can offer. In Gaza they have been able to provide food, but not safety.

For both recipients and providers the challenges of long-term, punctuated humanitarianism produce tremendous frustration and can make people feel defeated. But defeat is not the only response. Humanitarian actors and recipients have also met these circumstances with creativity and experimentation, seeking ways around the impasses of the Palestinian present (impasses that have been different in different "presents"). A distinctive feature of the Palestinian "humanitarian condition"[7] is that the vast majority of humanitarian workers providing aid to refugees, and other Palestinians in need, are themselves Palestinian and most often refugees. The fact that there are Palestinian aid workers is not in and of itself remarkable; almost all humanitarian agencies hire local staff. Peter Redfield has explored the challenges Médecins Sans Frontières has faced as it has tried to reconcile the different statuses of international and local staff.[8] The predominance of Palestinian workers is, however, unusual. In UNRWA, by far the largest agency providing assistance to Palestinians, 95 percent of the staff are Palestinian refugees.[9] This demographic dominance does not obviate the hierarchies of humanitarian action and the gap between workers on the ground and planners in the metropole, but it does impact the dynamics of humanitarian labor.

The entirety of ANERA's staff in Gaza are Palestinians. And when assaults such as summer 2014 "Operation Protective Edge" happen, they are its targets, its victims, and the first responders. From 10 July until 27 August, Rania El Hilou—the ANERA communications officers in Gaza—wrote a daily journal about her experience under attack.[10] Reading this blog is one way into the double experience of victim and humanitarian in the midst of catastrophe. The blog is itself part of the work of a communications officer to narrate for the world—and for potential donors—the experiences of Gazans under assault. And therefore it is, of course, not an unmediated expression of experience, but is doing the work of producing a humanitarian narrative. The entry for 25 July, already well into the assault, states:

> Every time I write this journal, I want to start it with, "I'm still alive." We survived another day. Nothing ever gets any better. . . . My aunt called to say that she has allowed displaced people from Shajaʿya to camp out in her backyard. She said they were in need of everything and wondered if we had some clothes we could donate. I put together a bag of things and was able to find a taxi to drive it over to her place. This is a time when we have to come together and take care of each other.

This post describes the apparently contradictory, but frequently mutually occurring, *contraction* and *expansion* that occurs in a crisis. There is the narrowing of focus to survival: I'm still alive. In another post (4 August) El Hilou describes this contracting horizon as a widespread condition: "One thing that struck me today is how people's dreams have shrunken to the basic necessities of life. They want water to drink. They want to bathe. They want food. One elderly man was terribly worried about not being able to get medicines for his diabetes. And all of them just want to go back to their own homes." But along with this contraction, catastrophe also expands networks of mutual care and concern. What she recounts about Gaza in 2014 echoes things I heard from people about the aftermath of 1948, when many refugees to Gaza found initial shelter in the homes and lands of native Gazans. In those stories I also heard about the tensions that

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emerged fairly quickly as the displaced overwhelmed the existing structures of mutual support. And, as the catastrophic begins to blur back into the cruddy, we should expect these tensions in Gaza now as well.

In other postings, El Hilou directly talks about the challenges of being a humanitarian worker also living under assault. She begins by talking about her husband's work:

> My husband works for UNRWA as an architectural engineer. He was called in today to work on installing indoor and outdoor showers at the UN schools where displaced people are taking shelter. The issue of hygiene is a growing health problem and infections are starting to spread. So, I am glad that my husband can go and make a direct difference to suffering people. But I am very scared, because conditions are extremely dangerous. Yesterday three humanitarian relief workers were killed, two of whom are from the UN. This morning a school was bombed.

Unlike international humanitarian workers, Gazan humanitarian actors do not have the option of leaving the scene of attack—in the sense that the entire Gaza Strip was under assault. But they too have to repeatedly make the choice to expose themselves to degrees of vulnerability: by going out to work rather than sheltering at home. In going out to work, Gazan humanitarian workers distinguish themselves from other Gazans under assault—not in terms of value, but in terms of experience. The imperative to "do something" which motivates so much humanitarian labor is in this case also a means of having a different experience of the assault: to not *just* be a victim, but also be an actor.

As a communications officer El Hilou's work doesn't put her into the field in the same way. For her the danger is "getting totally cut off from the world." With a generator at home she was able to get a certain amount of electricity each day, despite the fact that the power plant was damaged. But, she wondered,

> how long will the fuel hold out? I have started to take handwritten notes, keeping my notepad near me all the time and writing with it held up close to my face so I can see what's on the page. This way I capture my thoughts and have them ready either to type out quickly or to relate to a colleague in Washington (30 July).

In this worry about isolation, her experiences link her to the rest of the population. But in her access to a venue in which to amplify and narrate her experience, her experience remains distinct.

In the last post in her journal, El Hilou recounts the reopening of the ANERA office once the ceasefire began: "After our greetings, hugs and handshakes in the office this morning, we immediately got to work with calls and coordination of relief deliveries. This is the fuel that keeps us all going. We all consider ourselves survivors. We exist. Why do we exist? Because our existence has a meaning. That meaning is to help the people of Gaza to recover and rebuild their lives and the dignity they deserve" (27 August). Part of what humanitarian work does is enable El Hilou—and others like her—to struggle against the narrowing of horizons, visions, and expectations, that crisis can produce. Even as humanitarianism is a form of intervention with a self-consciously limited aim, working as a humanitarian actor, perhaps especially while one is a humanitarian victim, can be part of an effort to pursue a continued expansion of what it means to live, and what it means to give value to Palestinian lives.

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NOTES

[1]The UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), for instance, estimates that two-thirds of the global refugee population experience protracted displacement. See Roger Zetter and Katy Long, "Unlocking protracted displacement," *Forced Migration Review* 40 (2012): 34–37.

[2]Elizabeth A. Povinelli, *Economies of Abandonment: Social Belonging and Endurance in Late Liberalism* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2011), 3.

[3]On precarity and "the precariat," see Jan Breman, "A Bogus Concept?," *New Left Review* 84 (2013):130–38; Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2004); Michael Denning, "Wageless Life," *New Left Review* 66 (2010): 79–97; and Gabriel Gorgi, "Improper Selves: Cultures of Precarity," *Social Text* 31 (2013): 69–81.

[4]Ilana Feldman, "Looking for Humanitarian Purpose: Endurance and the Value of Lives in a Palestinian Refugee Camp," *Public Culture* 27 (2015): 427–47.

[5]Bill Corcoran, "Gaza Trip Report," September 2014, accessed 1 December 2015, http://www.anera.org/stories/gaza-trip-report-september-2014/.

[6]"Gaza Strip Emergency," UNRWA, accessed 1 December 2015, http://www.unrwa.org/what-we-do/gaza-strip-emergency?program=43.

[7]Ilana Feldman, "The Humanitarian Condition: Palestinian Refugees and the Politics of Living," *Humanity* 3 (2012): 155–72.

[8]Peter Redfield, "The Unbearable Lightness of Expats: Double Binds of Humanitarian Mobility," *Cultural Anthropology* 27 (2012): 358–82.

[9]"UNRWA Programs," UNRWA, accessed 1 December 2015, http://www.unrwausa.org/page.aspx?pid=394.

[10]Rania el Hilou, "Crisis in Gaza: A Daily Journal," July–August 2014, accessed 1 December 2015, http://www.anera.org/stories/crisis-in-gaza-2014-a-daily-journal/.

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