1. Studying the Palestine Arab Refugee Problem

The scholarly literature on the Palestine Arab refugee problem and UNRWA is vast but deeply uneven and highly politicized. Despite many thousands of published items, only it may be argued that only a handful are truly scholarly works or display penetrating insights. Moreover, despite countless diplomatic and political histories of the period, refugee relief—as opposed to the real or putative origins of the refugee crisis—plays only a small role in the narrative. And yet refugee relief, in the form of UNRWA, has become one of the primary engines of both continued international involvement and modern Palestinian identity.

Another difficulty in writing about Palestine Arab refugee relief is the unevenness of the documentation. Surprisingly, publicly available United Nations materials are not extensive. Available records include, for example the General Assembly and its various debates, and public discussions regarding the many United Nations organizations and commissions, including the UNPRP, the Economic Survey Mission, Conciliation Commission for Palestine, and the early years of UNRWA. These provide superficial descriptions of the politics surrounding the refugee issue. But internal UN documents such as field reports, memoranda, planning, budgeting, and personnel files remain difficult to access. The UN’s internal decision-making processes thus remain obscure.

There is, however, no lack of such primary documentation for the UN’s Palestine Arab refugee programs. The Ford Foundation funded an inventory of UNRWA documents in 1985 by the Refugee Documentation Project at York University that located hundreds of meters of UNRWA documents. These included various refugee registration files, photographic documentation, and administrative documentation. But unlike archives maintained at the United Nations in New York, access to UNRWA archives remains carefully controlled by the organization itself. These archives have been primarily used by a small number of sympathetic scholars and by UN
personnel writing in advocacy or academic capacities, such as those document- ing Palestinian property claims in anticipation of eventual repatriation or compensation schemes, or allegedly restoring the “lost visibility” of pre-1967 refugee society. Research on Palestinian society, UNRWA itself, and the evolution of relief organizations have not been priorities for those accessing UNRWA documents, to the detriment of historical understanding.

But any look at the modern debate over Palestine Arab refugees—both the origins of the problems and international responses—must take into account two facts that are not often recognized. First is that the debate was originally shaped by scholars with direct experience with refugee relief, including with the AFSC. Second, and more significantly is that in recent decades two entirely parallel, competing narratives have developed that are drawn from many of the same materials but shape them to reach utterly different conclusions. The competing narratives over the Palestine Arab refugee problem are a microcosm of those that describe and shape the Arab-Israeli conflict as a whole.

EARLY SCHOLARSHIP ON THE REFUGEE CRISIS

In-depth studies of the Palestine Arab refugees emerged in the early 1950s, some of which still have unique value, since they do not suffer as greatly from the overburden of later polemical scholarship. One early work was a doctoral dissertation by Channing B. Richardson, written at Columbia University under the supervision of the important Middle East historian J. C. Hurewitz. Richardson had been a conscientious objector during World War II, serving in the Civilian Public Service program, and later joined the Quakers. In 1945 he joined the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration and worked in displaced persons camps in Germany. After returning to the United States, to begin his doctoral work, he accepted an assignment with the AFSC to administer a refugee camp in Gaza under the auspices of UNRPR.

While in Gaza, Richardson published a piece that described the origins of the UNPRP. He stressed the inadequacy of the United Nations Disaster Relief Organization and the originality of the UNRPR approach, with respect to the public-private partnership, the speed of implementation, and both the autonomy and political independence of the organizations providing aid on the ground. But most significantly, already in 1950 Richardson clearly stated about one of the most vexing problems facing the relief organizations: