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‘An International Palestine’: UNRWA and Palestinian Nationalism in the refugee Camps, 1967–82

My CBRL Travel Grant enabled me carry out extensive and in-depth doctoral research during my time in Beirut. I visited two major archival institutions: the Institute for Palestine Studies (IPS) and Jafet Library at the American University of Beirut (AUB). My main findings at the IPS came from its extensive back catalogue of the UNRWA official newsletter, Palestine Refugees Today. This was vital for answering questions about how UNRWA formally depicted its role vis-à-vis Palestinian politics and nationalistic agitation in the refugee camps. The newsletter showed that UNRWA continuously marketed itself as a stabilizing and pacifying force in the camps. This in turn enabled me to reconsider earlier findings I had made regarding how Western donor states and Palestinian refugees each perceived UNRWA.

I also came across unexpectedly useful documents, on a range of disparate topics, at the IPS. Records relating to diet and nutrition in the refugee camps in the 1960s added a new perspective to my earlier findings about Palestinian grievances regarding UNRWA rations at this time. Additionally, a wide range of documents detailing the response to the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon and subsequent Sabra-Shatila massacre illuminated the uncertainty of UNRWA’s role in the wake of the PLO’s departure from the country.

At AUB, my research focussed on the Palestine Political Posters Collection, which holds posters from a range of nationalist organizations across the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s. In the absence of national or organizational archives, this collection is vital for understanding the historical ideology and strategy of the Palestinian nationalist movement. The posters provide illustrative evidence of the various organizations’ internationalist tilts, their perceptions of the UN and how they represented the refugee camps politically.

The Palestine Oral History Project, the other major source for my research at AUB, is currently being finalized and is, unfortunately, not yet available in its entirety. Nevertheless, I was able to have several useful conversations with AUB archivists working on the project, to get a sense of its scope and the topics it covers. I also saw previews of some of the video interviews, indicating the combination of gratitude and criticism that typically characterized the refugees’ relationship with UNRWA.

Finally, I was able to spend a short amount of time in Shatila and Burj al-Barajneh refugee camps, speaking to Palestinian refugees about their experiences and historical interactions with UNRWA. These conversations confirmed my hypothesis that the relationship between UNRWA and the refugees has always been highly politicized, and that UNRWA’s interactions with the Palestinian nationalist movement have occurred within this framework. My time in the camps was especially useful for helping me plan the next stages of my research.