

Living as Enduring

The Struggle for Life against the Limits of Refuge among Gaza Refugees in Jordan

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Introduction

The Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan is currently home to three million refugees. While Syrians make up almost one-third of that population, the vast majority of the Kingdom's refugees are Palestinian. Forced from their homes in Palestine in 1948 and 1967, Palestinian refugees now number over two million. About 160,000 of those refugees are known as ex-Gazans. Although they hold the same refugee status as other Palestinians in the country—they are registered with the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA)—ex-Gazans are nonetheless a unique community. Displaced from the Gaza Strip in 1967, they arrived in Jordan as *de jure* stateless and were never offered Jordanian citizenship. Instead, ex-Gazans were categorized as Arab foreign residents and thus excluded from the socioeconomic and political rights enjoyed by Palestinian citizens of Jordan. For most ex-Gazans, their exclusion has been the central challenge of life in refuge. Without full access to the opportunities granted to Palestinian refugee-citizens of Jordan, they have been forced to struggle against the limits of a status that complicates their efforts to establish the most basic livelihoods.

This chapter argues that the legal inclusion of ex-Gazan refugees as foreign residents in Jordan has failed to provide the necessary conditions for establishing a viable and meaningful life in exile. To do so, it examines the

restrictions of their status and considers some of the ways ex-Gazan refugees struggle to endure life on the margins and constitute their own refuge. In my approach, I do not frame refuge as the realization of any particular rights. The Palestinians with whom I worked did not describe their struggles in such terms. They neither demanded citizenship nor did they mobilize against state policies of exclusion. For them, the effort to carve out a meaningful existence in the context of prolonged displacement was described simply as the effort to “make a living.” Following my interlocutors’ lead, I provide an analysis that reframes refuge according to the struggles of ex-Gazan refugees to establish what, in the context of interminable exile and marginalization (Pérez 2020), can be a viable and dignifying act of living. I see refuge, in other words, through what ex-Gazan refugees seek to create: a living adequate for overcoming their exclusion and enduring exile. I thus look at the efforts taken by refugees within the limits of their legal status and argue that refuge is grounded in acts of endurance that challenge ex-Gazans’ exclusion as noncitizens and establish forms of living they can claim as their own—an effort I call “living as enduring.” Drawing on the insights of existential anthropology, I suggest that living as enduring represents a form of agency characterized by endurance, striving, and refusal (McGranahan 2016). It encompasses what Allan (2018: 94) has described as a micropolitics of survival in which refugees challenge social and economic exclusions through an ephemeral, interactive politics of everyday practice.

Methods

This chapter is based on ethnographic research I conducted between June and December 2016 in the Gaza refugee camp in Jarash. It reflects sustained participation in daily life among multiple families in the camp along with in-depth formal and informal interviews with seventeen participants. Concerned with the possibility of ordinary life in a context of significant deprivation, much of my research practice involved repeated interactions with specific ex-Gazan individuals and families. This included daily visits to homes and work sites along with several overnight stays with families. Participants included both ex-Gazan women and men and fell within the ages of eighteen and seventy-five. Interviews for this research focused on a number of thematic areas, including work, social relationships, education, and health. To situate these themes within the participants’ life trajectories, I also conducted several oral history interviews. The effort to understand the routines of daily life in the camp led me to collaborate with a photo journalist on a visual ethnographic essay in the camp (Pérez and Boffetta 2018). Some of the research in this essay draws on the engagements produced through this specific approach to the question of statelessness and everyday

life. All of the participants in this research have been assigned pseudonyms to ensure their anonymity.

Ex-Gazan Refugees in Jordan

The majority of Palestinian refugees in Jordan arrived during the Palestine War of 1948. Known by Palestinians as *Al-Nakba* or “the tragedy,” the conflict with Zionist forces drove approximately 700,000 Palestinians from their homes to neighboring states, including Lebanon, Syria, and Jordan. The majority of Palestinians displaced during the war found shelter on the East Bank of Jordan and in areas of central Palestine. After the war, which resulted in the conquest of almost 80 percent of historic Palestine by the newly established Israeli state, the Hashemite monarch, King Abdullah I, sought to expand the Kingdom by appropriating the areas of Palestine held by Jordanian forces. To do so, King Abdullah officially annexed central Palestine and issued an addendum to the 1928 Law of Nationality, which extended Jordanian citizenship to all Palestinians including refugees and residents on both the West and East Banks (Massad 2001: 39).

While the majority of Palestinians displaced in 1948 fled to Jordan, about 250,000 made their way to the Gaza Strip. For these Palestinians, the postwar context provided a different set of circumstances. Defended by the Egyptian military, the Gaza Strip was the only western area of historic Palestine unconquered by Zionist armies. This left the coastal strip under Egyptian administration after the war. Yet whereas King Abdullah moved to claim Palestinian territory and its inhabitants as part of Jordan, the Egyptian government never attempted to bring Gaza under its sovereignty. Instead, it maintained an administrative role that, while influencing political, economic, and legal structures in Gaza, did not seek to permanently transform the territory into Egyptian territory, or its population into Egyptian subjects (Feldman 2008: 7).

Jordanian control over the West Bank and Egyptian rule in the Gaza Strip continued until the 1967 war. During this conflict, the Israeli army seized large swaths of territory, including the Egyptian Sinai Peninsula, the Syrian Golan Heights, the Jordanian-controlled West Bank, and the Gaza Strip. In addition to the Israeli occupation of Arab lands, the war produced a new wave of Palestinian refugees, many of whom were already displaced in 1948. Fearing the Israeli assault on Gaza, several thousand Palestinians made their way to the East Bank of Jordan, joining over 200,000 Palestinian refugees fleeing the West Bank. Together, the new arrival of refugees constituted a significant expansion of the East Bank Palestinian population and led to the creation of six new UNRWA refugee camps. Yet the displacements of 1967 did not simply add more refugees to the Palestinian community in

the Kingdom. The arrival of West Bank and Gaza Palestinians also created two distinct groups of refugees defined by their geopolitical origins and national status. For Palestinians fleeing the West Bank, their migration to the East Bank did not affect their legal status. Already Jordanian citizens under the 1954 Law of Nationality, they were classified as internally displaced refugees or *naziheen*. Gaza refugees, however, entered the Kingdom with a different status. Because Gaza was ruled by Egypt until 1967, the Jordanians treated them as Egyptian subjects temporarily residing in the Kingdom. The fact that Egypt never extended its citizenship to Palestinians in Gaza did not matter. Nor did the fact that all Gazans, refugees and residents, were stateless. For the Jordanians, Palestinians fleeing Gaza were Egypt's responsibility and thus had no path toward Jordanian citizenship. Instead, they were granted legal refuge under foreign resident status and permitted to remain in Jordan until they could return to Gaza.

The Included Excluded: Ex-Gazan Refugees as Stateless Foreign Residents

Ex-Gazan refugees are legally categorized as foreign residents in Jordan. As a form of limited inclusion, their status allows them to reside legally in the Kingdom and provides access to both public services and some economic opportunities. For example, the Jordanian state has granted ex-Gazans special residency cards and five-year renewable passports to ease daily interactions with government agencies and facilitate travel abroad (Kvittingen et al. 2019: 19). The government has also allowed all ex-Gazan children to enroll in national primary schools without cost and has permitted ex-Gazan children under six years of age to access free health care services in public hospitals. As foreign residents, ex-Gazans are also allowed to work in certain areas of the private sector and to join the public sector on a contractual basis (Kvittingen et al. 2019: 22). Through these opportunities and others, the Jordanian state *includes* ex-Gazan refugees as foreign residents within the country. It renders them legible through a category that precludes their total exclusion and affords them legal refuge in exile.

The opportunities extended to ex-Gazan refugees as foreign residents are not without limit. Although they provide particular forms of social and economic mobility, they also entail several constraints that prevent ex-Gazans' full inclusion into Jordanian society and result in critical limits on their livelihoods. For example, ex-Gazans are excluded from education subsidies at public and private universities. This means that any ex-Gazan seeking postsecondary education must pay foreign tuition rates, which are considerably higher than national rates. While provided healthcare support at government hospitals through the Civil Insurance Program, ex-Gazans

must cover between 50 and 60 percent of the costs and are fully responsible for major treatments, including surgeries (Kvittingen et al. 2019: 22). Given the low income of ex-Gazans and lack of access to health insurance through employment, healthcare expenses can be prohibitively expensive. Although ex-Gazans are permitted to work in the private sector, as noncitizens they cannot apply for Jordanian practicing licenses or join professional syndicates, which effectively excludes them from several areas of the labor market, including journalism, pharmacy, dentistry, accounting, and teaching (Kvittingen et al. 2019: 22). In addition, the fact that ex-Gazans need annual security clearances to work in hotels, banks, and other sectors of the service industry makes these positions rare opportunities. It is also worth noting that ex-Gazans are prohibited from several civil and political rights, including the right to join unions and, more critically, the right to vote. Given the duration of their exile in Jordan, the denial of these rights constitutes an important form of exclusion that precludes their ability to shape and contest policies that continue to impact their lives.

Today, more than fifty years after their arrival, the restrictions ex-Gazans face as foreign residents continue to complicate the possibility of refuge in Jordan. As a legal form of exclusion, their status constitutes the basis of a shared experience of immobility or “stuckedness” that has transformed temporary refuge into a condition to be overcome rather than enjoyed. According to Hage (2009: 100), “stuckedness” is the experience that life is no longer moving, the feeling that one is caught in a situation in which one “suffers from both the absence of choices or alternatives to the situation they are in and an inability to grab such alternatives even if they present themselves.” To be stuck, to feel routinely immobilized by legal restrictions, is what many ex-Gazan refugees must confront as noncitizens in Jordan. Faced with the limits of their status and the politics of prolonged containment, the context of refuge has not provided the opportunities they seek in life. On the contrary, ex-Gazan refugees must struggle to make their own refuge in a situation where nothingness often prevails (Dunn 2018).

To see how ex-Gazan refugees constitute their own refuge, it is necessary to consider how they struggle against obstacles in an effort to endure exile through particular forms of living. Thus, in the following section, I provide an analysis that reframes refuge according to the struggles to establish what, in the context of marginalization (Pérez 2020), can be a viable act of living. In this discussion, I locate refuge in the lives ex-Gazan refugees seek to create: lives adequate for enduring exile. I thus look at the efforts taken by refugees within the limits of foreign resident status as a form of living that they seek to define. This is not a singular conception of life shared by all. It is, rather, an ongoing social project (Povinelli 2011) launched from restrictive conditions but meant to establish a life one can claim as one’s own. Refuge here can be understood as an existential practice (Jackson 2005) that I call

“living as enduring,” which does not deny but instead reformulates exile. It is an agential struggle to establish forms of living capable of enduring marginalization and the effects of prolonged displacement.

In this framing, agency exceeds the binary of resistance and acquiescence. Instead, I see agency in the very capacity to endure the hardships of exclusion and to strive toward possibilities beyond given obstacles. Such an approach reflects an interest in understanding the relationship between effort and limit in precarious situations. It is a matter of what Jackson has called “well-being” and invites us to think about the kinds of lives people seek to achieve and the contingencies and constraints that make that effort such a challenge. More specifically, it asks us to think about how people act in the world and what its structures and possibilities demand of them. As Jackson (2005: xv) suggests, “human well-being involves far more than simple adjustment to a given environment, natural or cultural; it involves endless experimentation in how the given world can be lived decisively, on one’s own terms.”

In the following section, I discuss the struggles of two ex-Gazan refugees, Shadi and Rami, with whom I spent considerable time during my research in the Gaza camp. Coming from distinct backgrounds and struggling against different circumstances, they both confronted various restrictions on their efforts. For Shadi, his exclusion as a noncitizen was experienced in the perpetual effort to find stable work and escape the trappings of poverty. For Rami, it was the barriers to education that led him to realize the immobilizing effects of his status. Yet, in their struggle to work against the limits of their exclusion, both Shadi and Rami saw the ability to endure as an act of agency necessary for establishing a life in exile they could call their own. Through endurance and striving, they asserted their capacity to act within a world of constraints and make a living that would carry them through the hardships of indefinite exile.

Enduring Exile, Making Refuge

When ex-Gazan refugees discuss the challenges of nonnational status, they often speak in terms of living. Whether reflecting on the barriers to education, employment, or healthcare, they frame their exclusion as the inability to make a living. For this reason, many ex-Gazans use the expression “*bidna nai’sh*,” or, “we want to live,” to address their predicament. On its own, the phrase says nothing about the particular life ex-Gazans seek in Jordan. In expressing their demand to live, in other words, ex-Gazans do not offer a shared vision of the kind of life they are trying to establish. Instead, the refrain underscores the desire to engage in the very act of living, the efforts that constitute a life in terms they can call their own while in exile. Living,

in this sense, is about the capacity to act in such a way that both intent and outcome align. It is also about the ability to live beyond survival and endure the *long durée* of their exile (Feldman 2018).

In my research with ex-Gazans, I found the refrain “we want to live” useful for thinking critically about the struggle to live in the precarious context of exile. It drew my attention to the relationship between effort and limit in the narratives ex-Gazans offered about their struggles. It also revealed the significance of endurance and struggle in the meaning of agency.

Shadi

Shadi was an ex-Gazan refugee I met while working in the Gaza camp. Throughout our interviews and interactions, he stressed both the efforts made in the pursuit of a better life and the hardships he endured in the process. Born in the Zarqa camp, Shadi knew poverty at an early age. It took the combined efforts of his father, uncles, and male siblings to keep the family afloat. When Shadi entered the first grade, he took his first job collecting stale bread from neighborhood bakeries and homes. He would sell the bread to local meat and dairy producers as feed for their animals. The job was Shadi’s first foray into the informal economy and came with the pressure of contributing to the family’s income. The work was not easy. It required digging through scraps of bread to find pieces to sell. It also demanded long hours on the streets in the heat and cold. Despite the difficulty, Shadi endured. From bread collecting, Shadi moved on to working several odd jobs, including carpentry and managing his own food cart. But Shadi’s extensive work trajectory took a critical turn when his family moved to the Gaza camp. In the camp, he began working for his father’s falafel shop and found that the effort to earn money and support his family were incompatible with the demands of an education. Shadi thus quit school and eventually returned to Zarqa to work with his uncles and earn more money. As a full-time laborer searching for more promising work, he had to confront the limits of his nonnational status. “Along the way,” Shadi explained, “I realized how my identity as a Gazan worked against me. If employers asked, as they often did, for a national number or a college degree, I knew I wouldn’t get the job.” The restrictions forced Shadi to take whatever job he could find. His options were few.

During our conversations about his struggles to earn an income, Shadi offered a complex narrative. On the one hand, he acknowledged that life without citizenship was a difficult and frustrating experience. It often led him to take jobs he did not want simply because his options were limited. Thus, the limitations on work taught him not only about the restrictions of his status but also about the difficulties he would have to accept in the quest for a decent living. On the other hand, the hardships of his labor allowed

him to develop a distinct sense of agency through endurance. His capacity to endure the hard work of selling bread as a child, of working alongside a carpenter, and of managing his own food cart with his brother, for example, was evidence of his ability to struggle and, ultimately, thrive. Indeed, for Shadi, it was his ceaseless efforts to make a living that allowed him to find his current job. When we met, Shadi was working for an international company that paid a steady and decent salary. It was the best job he had ever held. With good income, Shadi told me he could finally imagine the possibility of a more promising future. It was the first time that employment offered a chance to pursue new opportunities unconstrained by his status and to form a life capable of enduring his exile.

As Shadi spoke about his new job, he emphasized the significance of his earlier struggles with work. For him, those challenges were critical for developing a distinct capacity to endure his exclusions and “struggle along.” According to Desjarlais (1997: 19), to “struggle along” is to proceed with great difficulty and implies strenuous efforts against opposition, hitting up against a world filled with challenges. In Shadi’s work narrative, he struggled and, along the way, developed a capacity to take on further hardships even when the future remained uncertain. This, in my view, demonstrates a unique agential capacity. It underscores how the limits of statelessness and the struggles to endure them reflect an agential engagement with the world. Agency here is not necessarily a form of resistance. Shadi does not seek to contest the limits he faces through organized political actions against the state. Nor does he situate his claims against the state in terms of rights or citizenship. Instead, he refuses those limits through enduring the constraints of exile and achieving his own refuge. Refusal, in this sense, is an “insistence on the possible over the probable and is aligned with hope” (McGranahan 2016: 323).

Shadi’s efforts to achieve stable and adequate work in a context of significant restrictions and uncertainty underscore the fact that certain structures are insufficient for determining agency. Engaged in what Jackson (2005: x) describes as the existential struggle to “strike a balance between being an actor and being acted upon, between doing whatever will make life worth living and succumbing to forces that render life difficult to live,” ex-Gazans sometimes refuse the structures of the world and seek more than it has afforded them.

Rami

Such a struggle was apparent in the lives of many ex-Gazans like Rami, who confronted, yet endured, these constraints. Striving against the debilitating restrictions of his status, he maintained a creative flexibility that allowed him to make a living in exile. Rami was born in Saudi Arabia while his

father worked in the oil economy. Eventually, his family returned to Jordan and purchased a home on the border of the Gaza camp. Like other ex-Gazan refugees, he enrolled in the UNRWA school and developed most of his social ties in the camp. As a student, Rami performed well: “It was easy for me. It was *very* easy for me. I would discuss physics [in secondary school] with the physics professor casually, for example. It was something that came extremely easy to me.” Rami eventually graduated from secondary school with a high GPA and very high scores on the national educational exam, the *tawjihi*. He then began preparing for college. Rami wanted to pursue a higher education. Like his older brothers and sisters, he saw education as the next step in his life and had the ambition to pursue it. But the circumstances were different for him. Now that his family was in Jordan, his father did not have enough money to pay for college education. Perhaps more importantly, because Rami was a nonnational, he did not qualify for government scholarships and could not afford the tuition rates he would have to pay as a foreign resident. Rami had reached a limit and was uncertain how to proceed.

The possibility of paying for his education seemed untenable for Rami. There were few work opportunities capable of paying him enough to afford the costs of tuition. Unwilling to give up on his education, Rami made the difficult decision to enroll in the UNRWA university program. Rami wanted to study engineering, and the UNRWA university offered degrees only in the educational sciences. But the idea of abandoning his education seemed worse than abandoning his dreams of becoming an engineer. Rami applied, was accepted, and began his education.

Rami struggled during his first year at the university. The degree program was not what he desired, and it affected his plans for the future. Rami reflected, “I could easily say that it was the worst year of my life. I was extremely sad. I was studying something I didn’t want to [study]. In the first semester, every weekend that I came back home, I told my parents that I was not going to return on Sunday.” After the first year, Rami said he adjusted. The shift in his education was challenging, and it complicated his ability to envision where it might take him. Nonetheless, Rami endured. He worked hard in his classes and decided to pursue a degree in educational psychology, an uncertain move that did not fit into life as he imagined it but might bring him closer to a better future.

Rami eventually graduated from the UNRWA university. He then found a job working with a youth empowerment organization in Amman. Every day, Rami would take a combination of taxis and buses to reach the Jordanian capital for work. Then, after a long day, he would return to his family’s home near the Gaza camp. It was a decent job, but Rami found it stifling. Despite the pay and opportunity to interact with foreigners, there was no upward mobility, and the work was unchallenging. For almost two years, Rami

again endured his new reality. It was not a final step for him, but he was unsure what he might do next. Without citizenship, he knew his work options were limited and that stable employment would not come easy. Most ex-Gazans work in the camp or temporarily in the cities. Rami wanted neither. After much deliberation, he decided to pursue a new path. In the camp, Rami met several foreigners working on youth programs. From them, he learned about a US organization that helps students apply for scholarships to attend American universities. Rami visited the organization and learned about the highly competitive Soros Foundation Scholarship. Although he believed his chances were slim, the potential outcome was worth the effort. Rami applied and, to his surprise, passed the first round of admissions. Encouraged by his success, Rami felt a glimmer of hope. Now more than ever, he thought his future could be better and, indeed, it got better. One night, while sitting with his friends in the Gaza camp, the email arrived: he was awarded the scholarship and would soon attend Washington University in St. Louis for a master's degree in social work.

The news of his award was a major transformation for Rami. It reinforced the idea that his hardships were not without significance. More specifically, it confirmed his belief that making a living from the position of the excluded requires effort, endurance, and experimentation. Faced with the limits of his status, Rami's success with the scholarship showed him that any opportunity was an opportunity worth taking. It might not be the one he desired. It might demand more from him than he was prepared to give. But, in the end, it was the struggle necessary for a people trapped in exile.

Conclusion

The conditions of refuge for ex-Gazan refugees are far from adequate for enduring exile. Legally included as foreign residents in Jordan, their status also presents a host of restrictions that make the possibility of life an extraordinary task. Denied the right to their homeland in Palestine and marginalized as noncitizens in Jordan, ex-Gazan refugees thus remain a liminal population (Kits 2005) living the experience of indefinite exile. While the hardships of their lives cannot be minimized, it is also not enough to characterize their situation as without possibilities. Ex-Gazan refugees throughout Jordan make diverse efforts to live while in exile. More specifically, ex-Gazan refugees demonstrate a significant capacity to endure their exclusion and constitute their own refuge in exile. This was visible in Shadi and Rami's accounts. Both struggled against their exclusions from work and education, and both described their struggles as evidence of their own capacity to endure and act. Through their endurance and striving, in other words, they

demonstrated their agential engagement with an exclusionary world and established a sense of living that could carry them through the difficulties of exile.

Much work in refugee studies has been done to highlight the agency of refugees (Allan 2013; Dunn 2018; Feldman 2018; Gabiam 2016; Malkki 1995; Peteet 2005; Ong 2003; Tang 2015). These are important contributions that challenge the depoliticized representation of refugees (Malkki 1996) and broaden our understandings of the meaning of refugee agency and politics. Whether in the “burdened agency” of Georgian refugees (Dunn 2018) or the “politics of living” among Palestinians under humanitarianism (Feldman 2018), the focus on what refugee communities do to endure and overcome marginalization and deprivation demonstrates the significance of a politics of survival. These are not practices formulated in the extraordinary conditions of widespread protest or mobilizations. They are, rather, the subtle workings of everyday efforts that refuse the limits of an exclusionary world and thus entail a political stance—that is, an effort to redefine or redirect certain outcomes or expectations (McGranahan 2016: 334). Operating within the everyday, these responses, however un/successful, reveal forms of agency grounded in survival that often exceed conventional frameworks for thinking about politics and constitute what Allan (2018: 100) has called the “minor politics” of the mundane.

Attentive to the politics of survival, my analysis demonstrates that the agency of ex-Gazan refugees inheres within the daily struggles to get by and, in some cases, thrive. While not dismissing the importance of organized resistance among refugees, I have tried to reveal how ex-Gazans can be agential in other ways. Indeed, in the context of fifty years of exclusion in Jordan, the very ability to endure conditions of deprivation and strive toward outcomes that exceed the limits of noncitizenship constitutes a critical form of refusal and thus agency. In this chapter, I have therefore taken ex-Gazans’ assertion “we want to live” and used it to frame what I call “living as enduring.” As a form of agency, this conception represents a way of thinking about how acts of living can secure a meaningful experience of refuge in the context of prolonged displacement. It offers an opportunity to consider what it takes—the demands, the efforts—for refugees suffering conditions of long-term displacement to endure their exclusion and achieve some measure of control over their lives.

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