Decolonizing Data Relations: On the Moral Economy of Data Sharing in Palestinian Refugee Camps

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ABSTRACT

Background *This article interrogates the critical intersection of measurement, datafication, and value extraction in humanitarian settings, drawing on empirical examples of data sharing in Palestinian camps in Lebanon.*

Analysis *Building on decolonial theory and post-humanist perspectives, the article offers a critical rereading of the moral economy as historically situated transversal practice and explores how the nonlinear transition of lived and embodied knowledge into and out of data (re)configures the calculus of reciprocity, justice, and fairness in the anticolonial struggle of Palestinians.*

Conclusion and implications *The article introduces the concept of "ethico-political substance" to problematize the historical entanglement of social ontologies, coloniality, and power-knowledge and to show a constitutive split between data and its subjects, which continues to undermine the political possibilities of datafication to this day.*

Keywords *Decolonization; Moral economy; Data relations; Ethical substance; Ontology*

RÉSUMÉ

Contexte *Cet article examine l'intersection critique de la mise en données, de l'extraction de valeur et de la mesure dans des contextes humanitaires, en se fondant pour ce faire sur des exemples empiriques de partage de données dans des camps palestiniens au Liban.*

Analyse *Cet article a recours aux études décoloniales et à des perspectives post-humanistes afin d'offrir une relecture critique de l'économie morale en tant que pratique transversale située historiquement et d'explorer comment la transition non-linéaire de savoirs vécus et incorporés vers des données et en sens inverse (re)configure le calcul de la réciprocité, de la justice et de l'équité dans les luttes anticoloniales des Palestiniens.*

Conclusion et implications *Cet article introduit le concept de « substance éthico-politique » afin the problématiser les enchevêtrements historiques entre diverses ontologies sociales, la colonialité et le savoir-pouvoir et de démontrer un écart constitutif entre les données et leurs sujets qui continue à miner les possibilités politiques de la mise en données.*

Mots clés *Décolonisation; Économie morale; Rapports entre les données; Substance éthique; Ontologie*

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Introduction

Current critiques of datafication increasingly draw on historical analyses to point out disquieting continuities with colonial logics of extraction, exploitation, and enclosure in contemporary data regimes (Couldry & Mejia, 2018; Mann & Daly, 2019; Thatcher, O'Sullivan, & Mahmoudi, 2016). The critical purchase of these contributions notwithstanding, they all too often assume the framework of the state and the infrastructure of advanced platform capitalism as the universal backdrop of data power, leaving critical nuances and colonial incursions in the Global Souths unexplored.[1] In Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Arab world, datafication runs up against markedly different political economies and infrastructural arrangements, marred by corruption, overstretched electricity networks, and substantive gaps and inconsistencies in available data due to over-bureaucratized and opaque institutional procedures and unaccountable political and business elites (Atwood, 2016; Mbebe, 2001; Simone, 2004; Sundaram, 2009). Such conditions significantly alter the rationalities and asymmetries of power in data relations, not least because those in control of its exploits are not necessarily the state or private corporations but rather intergovernmental organizations and humanitarian actors, such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) or the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), non-governmental organizations (NGOs), civil society groups, and data activists (Gutierrez, 2018; Latonero, 2018; Taylor, 2015).

Attending to the specific context of non-governmental politics, this article interrogates the critical intersection of measurement, datafication, and value extraction in humanitarian settings, drawing on empirical examples of the moral economy of data sharing in Palestinian camps in Lebanon. Moral economy, as a general field of inquiry, explores how social pressures shape, compromise, override, or reinforce the governing rules, norms, and dispositions of economic activity, resulting in popular protest and the collective action of "the crowd" (Roberts, 2002; Sayer, 2004; Thompson, 1971). The concept is most closely associated with scholarship in anthropology, history, and political science that challenges functionalist readings of political economy grounded in the idea of self-interested individuals, contrasting it with qualitative evaluations of the unspoken norms, commitments, and values organizing social transactions and exchange (Fassin, 2009). This article uses moral economy as an organizing framework to explore how the non-linear transition of lived and embodied knowledge in and out of data (re)configures the calculus of reciprocity, justice, and fairness among the Palestinian refugee population, opening up lines of tension and conflict when mutual investments, expectations, and returns run out of balance or are no longer shared. Its overall aim is twofold: first, to provide a historically situated qualitative analysis of the material agency of data in configuring patterns of sociality and collective life-making, and, second, to suggest alternative ways of thinking about the relation of data, subjectivity, and ethics with respect to social and political claim-making beyond the specific context of humanitarian governance.

Situating moral economy in modern colonial paradigms

Responding to the enduring condition of colonial occupation in Palestine, the analytical framework of this research draws on decolonial theory (Anzaldúa, 2015; Césaire,

2000; Dussel, 2002; Maldonado-Torres, 2007; Mignolo, 2009) and feminist, post-humanist perspectives (Barad, 2003; Braidotti, 2016; Harraway, 1988). What unites these theories into a shared set of concerns is their rejection of the totalizing ontologies and power structures built into modern colonial knowledge and the commitment to produce knowledge beyond strict disciplinary impositions and boundaries. As a methodological device, decolonial and post-humanist scholarship does not consider the colonial present as exceptional and situated "elsewhere" but as integral to socio-spatial relations across multiple terrains and scales (Radcliffe, 2017). Both draw on postcolonial theory, critical race studies, new materialism, political ecology, and non-Western philosophies to shift and redraw the geopolitical locations of knowledge production to reanimate critiques of racialization, territoriality, and the epistemic violence of binary thinking inherited from Enlightenment thought.

The division of political and moral economy into separate fields of inquiry is itself indicative of the stubborn persistence of conceptual dualisms that have been constitutive for modern colonial knowledge. It implies a categorical split between the ethical and the political along bipolar registers of value, in which the material and the immaterial, the calculable and the incalculable appear fundamentally opposed. Such binary registers not only facilitate the subordination of locally situated, embodied values to the abstract, universal laws of the market (Scott, 1976; Thompson, 1971; Venn, 2009), they also reify the idea of the human as a prime hermeneutic agent, capable of moral reflection, while perceiving its environment as a passive backdrop, a mere extension or resource, that lacks any intelligence and agency in its own right.

This article introduces the concept of *ethico-political substance* to develop a critical rereading of the moral economy as historically situated, transversal arrangement that links a multiplicity of calculating agencies into a lived and embodied measure-value relation that defies any rigid distinction between the material and the immaterial, human and non-human, knowing and being inherited from the substance dualism of Cartesian thought. As a heuristic device, ethico-political substance summarizes the complex set of materializing relations that sustain processes of world building and that both enable and constrain possibilities for existence and recognition within bordering regimes. Based on this rationale, the analytical focus centres on the question of how historically specific onto-logics of sociality are imagined and operationalized in humanitarian data practices and their situated effects.

Methodological approach

The methodological tools employed in this study combine historical analysis and long-term observational fieldwork conducted over several stages. The initial phase lasted from 2008 until 2012 and focused mainly on the Nahr el-Bared and Beddawi camps in North Lebanon, as well as Shatila and Mar Elias, two camps located in the Lebanese capital of Beirut. This phase was part of my PhD research at Queens University in the United Kingdom. Subsequent follow-up work was conducted in Nahr el-Bared, Beddawi, and Shatila in 2015 and in Nahr el Bared and Burj Barajneh in 2017. The fieldwork included participant observation, open-ended interviews, and structured focus groups with all major intergovernmental organizations, NGOs, local representatives of the refugee population, and, above all, ongoing conversations with the refugees

themselves. The initial phase of the research (2008–2012) was part of the Conflict in Cities Program at the universities of Cambridge, Exeter, and Queens in the United Kingdom and was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council of Great Britain. The follow-up work was conducted in my capacity as Assistant Professor of Digital Media and Social Communication at the Lebanese American University (LAU) in Beirut without additional funding.

Historicizing the moral economy of data relations in colonial Palestine

As of 2019, 58 Palestinian camps are spread across the Arab region, housing approximately 1.7 million refugees (UNRWA Communications Division, 2019). Camp residents make up one-third of the total refugee population, which counted 5,442,947 people in 2019 and are considered to be those on the lower end of the socio-economic spectrum. The camps are in many respects the living embodiment of a complex entanglement of social ontologies, geopolitics, and knowledge power inherited from the colonial era, not least because they were themselves the result of measuring instruments at the hands of British powers, who utilized cartography and novel surveying techniques as a means for achieving value extraction, social control, and territorial sorting (Mbebe, 1992). The vast body of literature on the colonial dispossession of historical Palestine that began in 1858 (Doumani, 1999; Fakher Eldin, 2014; Fischbach, 2003; Gavish & Kark, 1993; Islamoglu, 2004; Khalidi, 2006; Pappe, 2006) describes in great detail how the colonial dispossession and displacement of Palestinians from their ancestral lands was aided by the invention of new methods of counting and measuring space and populations, most notably the census, private property, and cadastral maps. Together these large counting infrastructures facilitated the gradual reconstruction of the defeated Ottoman Empire alongside new political boundaries and divisions that facilitated the silent appropriation of commonly held land resources by Jewish settlers and, ultimately, the new Israeli state (Fakher Eldin, 2014; Fischbach, 2003; Gavish & Kark, 1993; LeVine, 2005).[2]

The critical intersection of private property with racialized registers of citizenship opened up new possibilities for managing the social and spatial life of this population.[3] It enabled the British to conceal the politically motivated transfer of land rights in support of Zionist aspirations under the pretext of modernizing the Ottoman land system, promising greater transparency and productivity in the use of land (Fakher Eldin, 2014; Fischbach, 2003; Gavish & Kark, 1993; LeVine, 2005).[4] The datafication of individual and collective life worlds, in this context, provided the key political technologies for configuring political possibilities and potentials during a decisive period of geopolitical transformation, ushering in a whole new way of seeing, knowing, and delimiting space and social relations that fundamentally undermined the ability of Palestinians to affirm their historical rights and presence in Palestine. About 700,000 people were forcefully displaced in 1948 from their homeland as a consequence (UN General Assembly, 1951, p. 24).

Data, substance, ethics: The need for new paradigms

The complicity of property, the census, and the map in colonial dispossession comes as a powerful reminder of the complex entanglement of social ontologies and knowledge/power from the pre-digital era. It recalls how modes of knowing are inextricably

bound up with modes of being in ways that deeply implicate data in the production of ethico-political substance, around which legal and political subjectivities are formed. To recall, substance here should not be mistaken as an essence. Rather, it refers to the complex set of materializing relations linking objects, designs, environments, and bodies into historically situated measure-value relations that both enable and constrain possibilities for existence within the registers of market and state. In the context of the discussion here, the notion of ethico-political substance helps to emphasize the material agency of data in this process. The ways in which the results of the census, the survey, and the map brought their own measure of value to bear on the lived and embodied land relations allowed for the fundamental rearrangement of the prime substance around which senses of ownership and belonging could be articulated and enforced. Their intersectional dynamic added a critical new layer of materiality to the entangled web of social contracts and obligations, enabling new modes of association and attunement between people and their environment—centred on racialized, ethnonational markers and abstract legal title deeds. As Andrew McRae (1993) writes, the map reconstructed rights as something that could be clearly and objectively measured, determined, and demarcated in a manner that precluded competing, loosely held customary claims. Land ownership was reducible to facts and figures, a conception that inevitably undermined the matrix of duties and responsibilities that had previously defined modes of sharing and using land.

The historical entanglement of settler-colonialism and knowledge power recalls the instrumental role of datafication in the reproduction and maintenance of a political anatomy of the body, premised on mechanics of power that split and fragmented possibilities for resistance, political agency, and recognition within bordering regimes (Pugliese, 2010). The lack of a sovereign state or territory has intensified this instrumental role of data even further for the descendants of the first generation of Palestinian refugees. It has turned socio-demographic records into one of the few resources left to affirm their existence and to enforce the commitment of the international community to find a fair solution for the conflict over Palestine (Bocco & Al Husseini, 2010). Today the added complication is that the management of refugee data is spread across a wide range of governing agencies and jurisdictions, including intergovernmental bodies, local and international NGOs, and donors, as well as the various Arab governments hosting Palestinians in exile. The disjunctive matrix of overlapping and at times fundamentally opposing fields of sovereign decisions has rendered the political possibilities and strategic purchase of refugee data into a highly unpredictable and ambivalent force, something knowingly unknowable.

The United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), the main agency in charge of protecting the welfare of the refugees, holds one of the largest repositories of refugee files. It keeps detailed records of the health, educational, and socio-economic conditions of all families receiving social services and support. But many more register with the agency simply for the purpose of affirming their refugee status, which the UNRWA automatically assigns to everyone registered under its wing.[5] Israel has been lobbying for years, not least in the U.S. congress, to stop the UNRWA's administrative practice (Lynch & Gramer, 2018; Mandhai, 2018). From Israel's point of view, passing on refugee status

over generations merely perpetuates the "refugee problem" and keeps the political aspirations of the refugees "artificially" alive (Lynch & Gramer, 2018; Rubin, 2012).[6] Should these demands succeed, critics warn, the number of Palestinian exiles could be reduced from 5,442,947 to 500,000, which would effectively render the refugee population out of existence, and, along with that, diminish their historical right to justice, which is affirmed in numerous resolutions of the United Nations (Lynch & Gramer, 2018).

The highly contested status of refugee numbers established an inextricable link between the physical substance of the Palestinian body as a political project and its data, such that any attempt to violate or redirect the hopes, expectations, and returns invested in refugee data can quickly be perceived as an attack on the population because of this ontological insecurity. This insecurity, and concern over the numbers among Palestinian refugees, has resulted in a moral economy of data sharing in the camps with a series of tensions, paradoxes, and contradictions that severely limit the possibilities for strengthening the political efficacy and voice of the refugees through data-driven activism and participatory research.

The moral economy of data sharing in the camps of Lebanon

Lebanon is home to twelve of the 58 Palestinian camps, which accommodate about 174,422 Palestinian refugees (Yan, 2017). The exact number remains in dispute, even though the Lebanese government has recently conducted the first ever census of the camp populations with the aim of establishing greater transparency and efficiency in servicing the camps (Daily Star, 2018).[7] While some openly welcomed the initiative, others were deeply wary of the political motivation behind the decision, so much so that they refused to participate and actively obstructed the work of the surveyors. As one interviewee explains: "The last time they came to count us they have taken away our lands" (Interview, 2017).

The resistance of parts of the population is indicative of the politically charged history of datafication in the lives of Palestinians. Every attempt to measure and document their lives is read through the matrix of wider geopolitical interests and the historical experience of displacement that holds a central place in the political memory of refugees. At the same time, the increasing pressure to maintain visibility and attention for fear of one day being rendered out of existence and invisible has left the camp population with no other choice but to submit to the daily and ongoing pressures to be mapped, calculated, and recorded. Clare Birchall (2016) described such conditions of involuntary data sharing as "shareveillance" (p. 1) to refer to a state of data sharing that becomes "protocological" (Galloway, 2004, p. xviii) which is the default position, since the terms and conditions and rules of engagement are always already predetermined and there is no way to opt out (Birchall, 2016). The moral economy of data sharing in the camps is caught up in a similar disempowering dynamic. Refugees are experiencing research fatigue; they are not only routinely called upon to provide vital information about their lives in exchange for rent support, food stamps, medical aid, and access to micro credit provided by international NGOs, they are also confronted with dozens of researchers, academics, filmmakers, and activists regularly flocking into the camps to support the Palestinian cause. The dependency on international support and attention has locked refugees in an environment of compulsory data sharing

in which their ability to raise their voice and influence critical decisions remains inextricably bound to the imparting of vital knowledge that may eventually be used against them or that conscripts them into political projects that fundamentally undermine their interests or cause. This is not quite informed consent.

Participatory methods, long hailed as a way of overcoming the extractive logic of datafication, have done little to change the situation (Cornwall & Jewkes, 1995; Fals Borda & Rahman, 1991; Reason & Bradbury, 2001). Rather, they conjured a whole new range of conflicting measure-value relations in which collective investments and returns could be flexibly redistributed according to the fluid calculus of reciprocity, entitlement, and justice of a few powerful individuals. Youth activists in the camps, for example, recall numerous moments in which self-appointed community leaders redirected funds generated through collaborative mapping projects aimed at identifying much-needed infrastructure repairs. Such projects did lead to important investments, for example in new electricity generators or water tanks. In some camps, however, they ended up serving only a few neighbourhoods because the community representatives in charge of overseeing the work repurposed parts of the money to further their own interest, catering above all to areas under their direct political influence (Interview, 2017). In another instance, the mapping process was completely hijacked when those in charge of verifying data silently manipulated the information provided for constructing new housing compounds, selectively adding square metres to individual homes or increasing the value of selected businesses in exchange for favours, thereby corrupting the allocation of space and donor funds. Thus, rather than ensuring greater transparency and accountability in community self-governance, as initially promised, the collaborative mapping projects ended up feeding resources into the hands of those in positions of power to control the distribution of vital resources and information in the camp.

Crowdsourcing ethics: The informal economy of data sharing on WhatsApp

Reading the historical and contemporary practices of data sharing together reveals that the political promise of datafication failed Palestinians on all fronts. It neither secured them the continuous attention and support of the international community, nor did it improve their dire living conditions. The lack of return on their investment left the refugees with a deep sense of mistrust, dispossession, and betrayal, which further eroded their confidence in data as an enabling and empowering force. Every attempt to measure and map refugee lives opened new, unanticipated potentials for value extraction that allowed for new territories of influence and privilege to be created and fundamentally undermined the promise of visibility, transparency, and accountability that led to the data being shared in the first place.

As discouraging as these experiences are, they also show that the possibilities for undue value extraction, dispossession, and enclosure are not bound to specific economic rationalities or ethico-political dispositions and arrangements—not to the neoliberalizing dictum of platform capitalism, the ethos of collaboration in humanitarian practice, or participatory approaches in activist research. They are an inextricable part of the material agency of data—of the ways in which they configure and enact modes of being-in-common, including the multiplicity of boundary articulations, divisions,

and the distributions of agency they afford. Mark Hansen (2015) eloquently summed up the ethical implications of this situation when he wrote:

> What is at issue here is the calculated extraction of data that, though generated by user activity, operates to serve the interests of the network … or more exactly, the "special interests" controlling the network. … Whatever politics will ultimately emerge from the theorization of twenty first century media will have to grapple with the thorny issue of how to preserve (or restore) the commonality, accessibility, and openness of media in a world dominated by special interests whose livelihoods are strictly coupled to their success in appropriating data for their own private gain. (p. 74)

Before moving on to respond to Hansen's (2015) claim with some general lessons learned in the camps, this article will close with a small vignette about the strategies and tactics youth activists in the camps use to reclaim control over data flows. Frustrated about the ineffectiveness of previous mapping initiatives, a group of youth activists set up a mobile task force for resolving emerging problems by interacting directly with the community on the ground. The main infrastructure to collect information on emerging issues and disputes are Facebook and WhatsApp groups managed through personal accounts (Interview, 2017). The activists do not rely on scheduled public events for mobilizing people into action. Whenever issues come up—someone stealing electricity from their neighbour, for example, or building a home on someone else's land—the group shows up in full force and addresses the conflict directly with the respective parties, building on their reputation and moral standing in the community to act as key arbiters. What distinguishes the self-assigned legitimacy and influence of the youth activists from their political leaders is the impacts they are able to achieve on the ground. It earned them the trust of the camp population and also the respect of local and international organizations, so much so that they are regularly consulted before the implementation of donor funds.

The activist network stands out as a striking example of how the self-generating and self-legitimizing force of moral economies can provide a critical alternative to the analytical frame of "social movements" and "grassroots initiatives" that are often used to account for collective agencies provoked into existence by the shared experience of harm. The activists certainly share a common vision with their communities to secure fairness and justice, but this measure of fairness does not follow a set agenda or a preconceived register of values and goals. It is precisely from their refusal to lay out a path of action and to define a common standard of practice that they draw their political efficacy and force. This stubborn resistance has turned these Facebook and WhatsApp groups into a powerful, self-generating social and technical infrastructure for the deliberation of justice in the arrangement of camp affairs.

Conclusion

The real time, tactical network established by youth activists in Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon alters normalized conceptions of ethics and agency, both with respect to data activism. But it also calls for rethinking the function and role of data within the moral economy of social transactions and relations. It bespeaks an idea of

activism that no longer confines itself to producing knowledge differently, as former participatory practices have done, but rather enacts a different way of knowing altogether. This type of data activism in a moral economy sense is a form of knowing situated in a different and wider distributive arrangement of sensibilities, stretched across networks, that allows for immediate responses when lines of trust or commitments to shared values and obligation are broken or out of synch. Responsibility here is no longer a calculated effort to be performed (Barad, 2010) but a quality derived from the inherent openness and ability to respond to the violence of enclosures and divisions that data performs and a distinct attunement to the politics of counting. These divisions, as Bruno Latour (2004) reminds us, are deeply invested with a biopolar logic inherited from Cartesian thinking. This logic establishes a constitutive split between data and the world on the basis of normative distinctions between the objects of science and technology on one hand and the subjects of politics and law on the other, foreclosing the possibility for unmediated lived and embodied relations between data, subject, and the social realities it represents. Such binary divisions conjure ontologies of the social that rigidly separate knowledge about things and power over people and ensure they can be managed in different places—the political chamber and the laboratory—while rendering the juridical-political model of the social contract as the only and absolute matrix to understand power in society (Tavares, 2008).

The radial decentering of knowledge/power away from its former centres—the state, the academy, and science—into instruments of capital markets, humanitarian agencies, or data activists has thrown this constitutive split into crisis. It created the curious paradox that the subject of rights and the object of knowledge are becoming ever more indistinguishable, yet without a juridico-political model in place that enables individuals and populations to effectively respond to the "queer captures and modulations" (Clough, Gregory, Haber, & Scannell, 2015, p. 148) that the ongoing self-measuring activity of datafication affords. This critical gap in the ethico-political imagination has left data in an ambivalent position. They are neither a thing, nor a person, or a doing, while containing elements of all. The bounded "substance" of the political subject, meanwhile, diffracts into an infinitely scalable assemblage of data fragments—irreducible to its fleshed existence, while at the same time not fully autonomous or sovereign. The resulting conundrum establishes data as a critical site where the relation between the political and the ontological, knowledge and being, human and nonhuman subjectivity are currently (re)negotiated and (re)configured, and where new boundaries and divisions are drawn between subjects and objects of knowledge, materiality, and the symbolic, and ultimately structure and agency. The challenge ahead no longer revolves around the question of, "Who is the subject of rights in data?" but rather, "How do we think and imagine the substance around which rights in data are established?" and "What notions of justice, agency, and subjectivity are required for articulating an appropriate response?" Addressing these questions will take a collective effort of decolonizing data from the pervasive grip of modern paradigms.

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Notes

1. This wording follows Stefania Milan and Emiliano Trere (2018) who was inspired by Bonaventura De Sousa Santos (2014) and speaks of the South as a plural instead of using the common notion of the "Global" South. This is to recognize the plurality and diversity of the South(s) in all their particularity and cultural richness.

2. The Ottoman state carefully distinguished between the rights to use, tax, and generate revenue from natural habitats and resources, allowing for multiple claims to exist in the same piece of land (Islamoglu, 2004). This distributive and collectivist regime of land rights fundamentally contradicted the logic of possessive individualism enforced by the British mandate powers, placing severe obstacles to the validation of ownership titles once the Ottoman Empire was dissolved.

3. Land that had no legally recognized owner was transferred back to the colonial administrators who put it up for sale based on racialized quotas. These quotas are aimed at redistributing land rights equally between the Muslim and Jewish population, in line with Britain's commitment to the national dream of Zionist settlers (Institute for Palestine Studies, 2016, Jewish Virtual Library, n.d.), opening the way for European Jews to take over Palestinian land long before the formal establishment of the state of Israel.

4. Britain's commitment to facilitating the foundations of a Zionist state was first expressed in the infamous Balfour Declaration (1917), in which the British government openly expressed its support for the establishment of a "national home for the Jewish people" (Institute for Palestine Studies, 2016, Jewish Virtual Library, n.d.) in Palestine. This informal political patronage invested Britain's mandate to lead the former Ottoman province to national independence with a series of tensions and contradictions from which it never recovered. It laid the foundation for the escalation of violence between Palestinians and Jewish settlers coming from Europe, which ended with the partition of Palestine. It transformed what was meant to be a transparent and egalitarian system for the even distribution of land rights between all ethnic and confessional groups into a vehicle for legitimating Zionist-settler aspirations, as it provided a legal and political basis of Jewish claims to Palestinian land. For a detailed analysis of the long-term implications of the Balfour Declaration, see the article collection "Balfour Declaration at 99 years," published by the Institute for Palestine Studies (2016).

5. Ilana Feldman (2007, 2018) and Al Husseini (2000) provide insightful accounts on the significance of UNRWA registration cards as a key symbol of the Palestinian national struggle. The first generation of refugees regarded food ration cards as a legal justification for their right to return to the lost homeland. It transformed the card from a functional, bureaucratic document into a unique piece of evidence attesting to a physical link with Palestine. Over time, it was read as a certificate of Palestinian identity in its own right.

6. The Trump administration appears ready to reset the terms in Israel's favour, and in 2018 has stopped its annual contribution of U.S.$300 million to the UNRWA, leaving the agency with a budget deficit of U.S.$270 million this year. Plans to dismantle the agency and refer the welfare of the refugees to the UNHCR and other United Nations bodies are currently under review (Al Jazeera, 2018; DeYoung, Eglash, & Balousha, 2018)

7. It is important to bear in mind that the Lebanese state does not recognize the refugees as part of its sovereign responsibility and, hence, has excluded the refugees from all its administrative registers and official maps. This has left the critical task of documenting and keeping track of the changing conditions in the camp to local and international NGOs and the UNRWA, the main welfare provider for the refugees. Thus, the decision to conduct a refugee census marks an important shift in policy by the Lebanese government.

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