The Politics of Governance and Urban Marginality: A Camp Studies Perspective

Dorota Woroniecka-Krzyzanowska

Department of Middle East and North Africa, University of Lodz, Poland

Abstract: Designed to provide temporary shelter to the displaced, in protracted refugee situations camps become places of long-term residency and undergo processes of urban change. The complex realities of protracted encampment challenge the dichotomy between the city (as a norm) and the camp (as an exception) that underpins dominant theoretical models of refugee camps. Instead, the theoretical lens of urban margins allows us to circumvent this binary and analyse the camps from the perspective of their relation to the city and the state. Rather than a specific location, this article approaches urban marginality as a condition produced by unequal power relations behind the enforcement of a particular urban order. Based on two years of ethnographic fieldwork, it draws on the case of Palestinian refugee camps in the West Bank. Unlike the majority of studies on Palestinian camps that focus either on top-down politics of exclusion or political agency of camp residents, the article examines how different actors, interests and modes of exercising power (both formal and informal) intersect in camp space and produce, as well as resist and subvert, the condition of urban marginality.

Keywords: urban margins; Palestine; urban camps; Palestinian refugees; urban agency

Introduction[1]

Designed to provide temporary shelter to the displaced, in protracted refugee situations refugee camps become places of long-term residency and undergo processes of urban change. The complex realities of protracted encampment challenge the dominant representation of camps as temporary spaces of emergency. Not only has such representation shaped the popular perception of these spaces, but it also tends to underpin much of the research on camps and to inform most common directions of inquiry. For one, the many studies that follow Giorgio Agamben's (1998) concept of the camp as a space of exception set 'outside of the places and outside of the time of a common, ordinary, predictable world' (Agier 2002, 323) tend to overlook the relations between the camps and their surrounding areas, the city and the (host) state (for criticism of this approach see Martin, 2015). In real life situations, however, refugee camps are rarely completely isolated as new networks expand between them and their surroundings and, particularly the protracted camps, become incorporated into existing political, urban and economic systems (De Montclos and Kagwanja 2000). These processes occur at multiple levels and can vary in terms of publicity and degree of official endorsement, depending on the political climate (Zetter 1999). To understand these processes there is a need for an approach that goes beyond the fixed dichotomy between the city (as a norm) and the camp (as an exception).

Focusing the theoretical lens on the urban margins offers an approach towards protracted encampment that allows for an analysis of camps from the perspective of their relation to the city and the state (Agier 2012). It does not mean losing sight of the features that are specific to camps, but permits them to be theorised in relation to other urbanities emerging at the margins of cities the world over. Rather than a specific location or territory, I understand urban marginality as a condition produced by unequal power relations behind the enforcement of a particular urban order and as resulting in economic, political and social marginalisation (Al-Sayyad 2004). Here, urban margins are not a synonym of irrelevance or exclusion, but 'gray spaces' that 'are neither integrated nor eliminated' (Yiftachel 2009, 243), where the state is unable or unwilling to claim responsibility and maintain control. Neither fixed nor determinate, gray spaces are constantly produced, affirmed and challenged by actors involved in their operation. By investigating the process of 'gray spacing' in the camp context — the actors, dynamics and mechanisms involved, as well as the results it produces on the ground — the article responds to the call of this special issue to search for a middle position between condemning and romanticising urban margins; between the emphasis on structural constraints of urban inequalities and the sole focus on the potential for urban

agency at the margins. The need for such a middle position applies also to the field of camp studies, torn between the negative approach to camps as 'total institutions' and the 'political turn' that problematises them as political spaces and focuses on the political agency of their residents (Pasquetti 2015).

This article aims to empirically-develop such a middle position for the study of governance in Palestinian refugee camps in the West Bank, Palestine, and is based on nearly two years of ethnographic fieldwork, conducted between 2010 and 2017. The overarching question of the project has been: how does a protracted refugee camp function within local, national and regional structures? Within the rich scholarship on Palestinian camps, studies that give a comprehensive account of camp governance — that is, include external and internal actors, as well as formal and informal mechanisms of governance — are still rare (Hanafi and Long 2009; Hanafi 2010). While this article provides a historical perspective on the governance of West Bank camps, it focuses on the mechanisms of gray spacing that have shaped the relations between the camps and the Palestinian state structures following the Oslo Accords of 1993 and 1995, as well as formal and informal governmentalities that developed there. The theoretical perspective of urban marginality, this article argues, is particularly relevant to the study of camp governance in the context of protracted exile thanks to both the emphasis on inter-relations rather than imposed structures and the dynamic approach that allows us to capture change.

As of the end of 2016, among all refugees under UNHCR mandate, 60 per cent lived in urban areas and two-thirds were in protracted refugee situations, which means that forced migration is becoming an increasingly urban and long-term phenomenon (UNHCR 2017). These statistics do not include some five million Palestinian refugees falling under the mandate of UNRWA, a UN Agency dedicated to Palestinian refugees, one-third of whom continue to reside in refugee camps[2]. Destitute and lacking adequate assistance, often with very limited rights or simply undocumented, the displaced dwell on the margins of the 'host' cities. As argued by Al-Sayyad and Roy (2004, 5), to better understand the contemporary cities, particularly in the global South, there is a need to overcome the bipolar thinking about formality and informality, and instead explore 'the differentiation that exists within informality'. Then, the relevance of an urban approach to protracted camps is not limited to the field of camp studies, but rather – particularly the protracted camps – can be studied 'as laboratories of the politics at the margins' (Martin 2015, 16). The section that follows lays the theoretical groundwork for such an approach in the study of camp governance.

An Urban Perspective on Protracted Camps

As Abourahme (2015, 201) has pointed out, the reading of camps has been dominated by 'a rigid A/not-A binary, or today an exception/norm binary', so that they tend to be defined either 'by constitutive absence' or through 'an affirmation of the very *presence* denied'. Proponents of the former perspective tend to invoke Agamben's famous concept of the camp

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[2] For basic information on Palestinian refugees, see the UNRWA website: https://www.unrwa.org/palestine-refugees, accessed: 15 May, 2018.

as a site of exception and analyse it as an ultimate exercise of biopolitical power (Diken and Laustsen 2005; Giaccaria and Minca 2011) that precludes the possibility for meaningful political action (Bauman 2002). Inspired by the 'exceptionality paradigm' and compared against the city as a norm, the camp has been defined as a non-place (Auge 1995), a 'non yet city' (Agier 2002) or an un-urban space (Malkki 2002). Criticism of this approach has led some scholars, what Pasquetti (2015) called a 'political turn' in camp studies, to advocate for more agency-oriented approaches to camps, portraying the camps as hyper-politicised spaces (Turner 2016), sites of resistance against marginalisation (Peteet 2005; Sanyal 2011; Ramadan 2013), spaces where new forms of politics (Feldman 2015; Martin 2015) or citizenship (Sigona 2015) may emerge. While both approaches prove useful for understanding different aspects and/or instances of encampment, the problem lies with the rigid application of the binary. As Oesch (2017, 111) has shown in his research on Palestinian camps in Jordan, we should rather approach protracted camps as spaces of ambiguity: 'zones of indistinction between exclusion and inclusion'.

The framework of ambiguity allows us to investigate 'the reality of indeterminate, messy and mutable boundaries between legality and illegality', between citizens and non-citizens, that the traditional approaches to citizenship often fail to grasp (Redclift 2013, 309). Particularly in the context of protracted exile and somehow regardless of formal citizenship, 'the transgression between the space of the camp and the host territory is messy' (Sanyal 2014, 560; see also Gabiam 2016). It is not only that the physical boundaries between the two are often difficult to determine, because the camp 'spills over' or is swallowed by the city around it; the living conditions, poverty, informal economy, marginalisation and neglect seen in the camps resemble informal self-settlements and neighbourhoods of the urban poor (Martin 2015). Also, from the perspective of urban margins, citizens living in impoverished neighbourhoods are not by definition more privileged than camp refugees (Sanyal 2014; Pasquetti 2015), but rather the two fall into a broader category of gray spaces that 'are neither integrated nor eliminated, forming pseudo-permanent margins of today's urban regions' (Yiftachel 2009, 243). Here, the interesting question is not where the protracted camps fall on the camp-city continuum, but rather how the different gray spaces are produced and sustained, as well as what modes of political action develop there (Bayat 2010).

It is now well-established that rather than by exercise of a single state sovereign (as Agamben's model suggests), the camps are governed by multiple, partial and at times conflicting sovereignties (Misselwitz and Hanafi 2009; Sanyal 2011; Ramadan 2013; Woroniecka-Krzyzanowska 2017). In fact, Ramadan (2013) argues, the marginalisation and exclusion of camp communities is often the result of the absence of the state rather than a direct exercise of state power. The majority of studies that address the matter of camp governance focus either on how external actors, such as governments or humanitarian organisations, exercise their power over the camps, or how the residents resist and/or subvert these efforts. Less is known about the mechanisms of self-governance, internal camp politics or means of social control that develop in the camps in relation to the legal and political frameworks imposed on the camp (with the exception of Hanafi and Long 2009; Allan 2014). As pointed out by Bulley (2014), camp communities are often unproblematically portrayed as cohesive groups acting collectively and bound by solidarity. It is therefore necessary to

analyse how the different governmentalities, interests and modes of exercising power (both top-down and bottom-up) intersect within the camp space: how the different actors contribute to and condone, as well as resist and subvert, the gray spacing of camp communities. Before answering these questions, I will first present a brief historical perspective on the governance of West Bank camps and a short note on methodology.

The Context and Methodology

As a result of the war for the establishment of the Israeli state, between 1947 and 1948 approximately 750,000 Palestinian Arabs were forcefully displaced from their homes and sought refuge in neighbouring countries (Cleveland and Bunton 2013). Some refugees who had reached the West Bank, then under the control of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, took shelter in refugee camps established in the region. A year later, in 1950, United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) was established, but according to its mandate, it was neither responsible for administering the camps nor for maintaining security, law and order, which remained the domain of host states and the relevant authorities. Despite its limited mandate, the Agency soon emerged as *de facto* administrator of the camps and began to organise life there by providing the basic infrastructure and replacing tents with standardised shelter units. The Jordanian government granted citizenship to all residents of the West Bank, refugees and non-refugees alike, but kept UNRWA in full charge of the camps (Mishal 1978).

The situation changed in 1967 following the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip. In the absence of a host government it could cooperate with, the Agency assumed extracurricular social and administrative responsibilities in the camps to fill the void created by the occupation. On the local level, the Camp Service Office headed by a camp officer, popularly referred to as the 'director of the camp', assumed a powerful position in camp communities and took the role of a *de facto* local authority (Misselwitz and Hanafi 2010). Although each camp was assigned a civil servant paid for by the Israeli authorities, his role was limited to administrative tasks such as issuing birth certificates (Tuastad 1997). Until the outbreak of the first Palestinian uprising, or the *intifada*, in 1987, the autonomy of UNRWA's operations inside camp boundaries — with the exception of security matters that remained under strict control of the Israeli military — remained largely unchallenged.

Following the establishment of the Palestinian Authority (PA) in the mid-1990s, the question of the camps' political and administrative integration into the emerging Palestinian state structures became a subject of careful political consideration. While the following section discusses this matter in greater detail, it is important to mention here that the picture was further complicated by the reality of territorial fragmentation of the West Bank. The post-Oslo system of power-sharing between the PA and the Israeli authorities added yet another layer to the complicated matter of camp governance, with only 18 per cent of the West Bank, and nine out of nineteen camps, placed under the full jurisdiction of the PA, including in regard to security and policing. According to the 2007 census, the Palestinian population of the West Bank was estimated at around 2.2 million, of which 68.6% lived in urban, 26% in rural and 5.4% in camp locations (PCBS 2009). The camps continue to have higher poverty

rates than other locations (PCBS 2015), tend to have higher unemployment rates and a slightly lower labour force participation rate (PCBS 2016).

This research project started as a case study of al-Am'ari, a Palestinian refugee camp established in 1949 near Ramallah, where I conducted nearly two years of ethnographic fieldwork between 2010 and 2017. As a former professional fencer, throughout my fieldwork I volunteered for al-Am'ari Youth Center (AYC) and taught fencing to their female and male epee teams. The ability to participate in daily life of the Centre was crucial for my understanding of camp life and politics, as AYC is the main social and political institution in the camp. During all research trips I either lived inside the camp or in its immediate vicinity and developed very close relations with a number of families. For this study I relied on participant observation and informal conversations with both leaders of local camp organisations and 'ordinary' residents of al-Am'ari. With both of these groups I conducted in-depth interviews: thirty-three with male and twenty with female residents of different ages, education and political affiliations. Later, the research project evolved to include interviews with representatives of state and non-state institutions that played both a direct and indirect role in the governance of camps — such as UNRWA, the PA, the PLO and local municipalities — as well as refugee organisations and the leadership of Balata, Tulkarem and Kalandia camps.

Palestinian Camps in the Palestinian Land: The Quest for Separation

Al-Am'ari camp was established in 1949 at what then had been the outskirts of the town of al-Bireh. Gradually, as the town began to expand, the camp became incorporated into its urban tissue. However, with the tightly squeezed, multi-storey concrete houses, irregular facades covered with graffiti and posters, electrical wires criss-crossing in a hectic fashion and litter piling up in the narrow alleys, the camp space stands in stark contrast to the relatively affluent towns of Ramallah and al-Bireh. Here, the geographical marginality evolved into spatialised social and economic marginalisation. At first sight, al-Am'ari resembles a poor urban neighbourhood encountered the world over. Then what makes it different? What makes it a camp after nearly seven decades have passed? Seemingly innocent, these questions are intrinsically political and have been of prime concern for Palestinian refugees and the Palestinian political movement. The physical appearance of the camps, constructed by the Palestinian national movement as symbols of the Palestinian refugee cause and the demand for return, has been highly politicised, with any significant steps towards urbanisation being met with caution, opposition and – initially – outward rejection (Feldman 2015; Gabiam 2016). Under the reality of protracted exile, constant population growth and the need to secure the best possible living conditions, the spatial development of the camps was impossible to avoid. In this scenario, a crucial means of maintaining the camps' political status was through administrative and legal exceptionalism, a matter that became particularly urgent following the establishment of the Palestinian Authority.

As the previous section has shown, over the years the camps were consolidated as separate administrative entities (*de facto*) governed by a dedicated international body, UNRWA, and exempted from the system of local governance. This status quo was challenged by the launch of the Palestinian state-building project. Following the establishment of the PA, all residents of the West Bank and Gaza Strip were granted Palestinian citizenship, which put refugees residing there in the rare position of being Palestinian refugees living under a Palestinian state. Following intense debates among leaders of West Bank camps and Palestinian politicians, the camps have not been integrated into the emerging system of local governance. Instead, an alternative system of local governance, the Popular Committees[3], was formed in the mid-1990s to secure the camps' status as separate administrative entities and to affirm the position of the PA as a host country. The director of the Popular Committee of al-Am'ari stressed the political importance of this move:

> The [Palestinian] Authority is a host country for the Palestinian [refugees]. We, the refugees living in the West Bank camps, we are hosted by the [Palestinian] Authority, we are present in these places temporarily, these places are outside the control of the [Palestinian] Authority (al-Am'ari camp, 2015)

Importantly, the Popular Committees were placed under the authority of the Department of Refugee Affairs (DORA) in the Palestine Liberation Organization, not the emerging Palestinian Authority. The by-law issued by DORA regulates all aspects of the PCs' operations, including financial matters and their relations with other state and non-state actors. Unlike other camp-based organisations, such as women or youth centres, licensed and controlled by the Ministry of the Interior according to the NGO law, the Popular Committees have no formal status under the PA. Accordingly, in the entire institutional structure of the PA, from the local to the national level, there is no body that deals with refugees or refugee camps in the territories under its jurisdiction.

Following the new political reality introduced by the Oslo Accords, 'UNRWA's future had been uncertain with proposals ranging from complete dissolution to gradual handover of responsibilities to the PA' (Misselwitz and Hanafi 2010, 366). Uncertainty around its future led to budget cuts that forced the Agency to scale down its services to refugees[4]. The

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[3] In the history of Palestinian political movement in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, the term 'Popular Committee' (Arab. *al-lajnah ash-sha'abiyah*) refers to different bottom-up organizations that emerged from the Palestinian civil society since early 1980s and served as important platforms of self-organization during the years of direct Israeli occupation. Particularly in the course of the first intifada, Popular Committees played a significant role in organizing popular resistance and assisting communities struck by the harsh Israeli anti-insurgency policies. Here, however, I refer to the system of Popular Committees that was officially established as a form of local governance in the camps of West Bank and Gaza Strip following the Oslo Accords.

[4] As UNRWA's budget relies on donations, the continuity and scope of Agency's operation depends on donors and political climate around the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (Gabiam 2016). The 2018 decision by the Trump administration to end US financial aid to the Agency, which in 2017 counted

decrease in services was followed by the erosion of UNRWA's authority in the camps. The Palestinian leadership, as discussed earlier, has been determined to affirm the status of the PA as a host country to the refugees – and the relationship with UNRWA was an important part of this effort. As a UN Agency dedicated to Palestinian refugees, for both the refugees and the Palestinian public UNRWA has become a symbol and guarantee of the Palestinian refugee cause and the right of return (Feldman 2008; Gabiam 2016). Therefore, despite existing tensions[5], Palestinian political bodies have been consistent in their support for the continuity of UNRWA's existence. On the ground, such political calculation translated into the PA's reluctance to interfere in any matters deemed as 'UNRWA responsibility' (Interview with a senior PA official, Ramallah, 2017) or assume responsibility over the well-being of camp populations, even when it was known that the Agency has no longer been able to meet the needs of these communities. As argued by the PA official I interviewed, the PA's policy towards the camps has been an attempt to balance the determination to keep the Palestinian refugee cause alive and the social responsibility towards camp residents as Palestinian citizens.

A Void of Responsibility and Control

Unlike in the classic models, in which the camp is an ultimate exercise of sovereign power, the camps of the West Bank evolved into sites where external actors are unable or unwilling to exercise full sovereignty and control (compare Weizman 2005). As shown in the previous section, the PA has been reluctant to assume control over the camps for political reasons, but it was also unable to fully claim its sovereignty vis-à-vis the camps. Although the Oslo Accords endowed the PA with a number of state-like prerogatives, its control over the assigned territories remained very limited (Khan 2004). While Israel maintains full control over the West Bank, it pursues its own goals of security management and settlement expansion and leaves the responsibility over the Palestinian population to the PA (Gordon 2008). With no single authority able to claim full sovereignty over the camps, they are

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for 1/3 of UNRWA's budget, has put UNRWA's future in jeopardy if other donors do not step in to cover the US withdrawal (DeYoung, Eglash and Balousha 2018).

[5] Since its establishment in 1949, UNRWA's mandate remained vague and reflected the general intention on behalf of the international community to separate humanitarian and political aspects of the Palestinian refugee problem. UNRWA was tasked to provide services to refugees and not political solutions or advocacy, with an underlying goal to facilitate refugees' resettlement in the host countries (Bowker 2003). Such a policy was outwardly rejected by Palestinians, determined to protect their political rights, and generated tensions between the Agency and the refugees (for more see Gabiam 2016). Furthermore, UNRWA's consistent efforts to distance itself from Palestinian politics (for example by controlling the usage of Agency's premises or the performance of its employees) have strained its relations with the PLO and, later, the PA (Bowker 2003). The vague mandate of UNRWA and its *de facto* autonomous operations in the West Bank camps until the mid-1990s, resulted in mutual misunderstandings between the Agency and refugees, with the latter routinely holding UNRWA accountable for all matters regarding camp life (Misselwitz and Hanafi 2009). As shown by Misselwitz and Hanafi (2009), the relationship between UNRWA and the local camp communities in the West Bank has also been characterized by deep mutual mistrust, which apart from the above-discussed political tensions, was fuelled by UNRWA's top-down approach to delivering aid and lack of partnership with local communities that began to change only since the mid-2000s.

governed by different actors who exercise their partial sovereignties in different ways and for different purposes. While in the West Bank the camps were placed at the margins of the emerging state apparatus for strategic and political reasons, the results have been similar to those seen in many informal and/or marginalised communities in the Middle East and beyond: a void of responsibility and control.

The limited ability of the PA to enforce the law in the camps leads to a policy of double standards, in which camp residents are *de facto* exempted from some financial obligations facing West Bankers residing elsewhere. For instance, all businesses operating in the camps are run without appropriate permits, licenses, sanitary control (where applicable) and are not taxed; the camps also have significantly lower collection rates for electricity bills than other West Bank locations (World Bank 2014). Pursuant to the power-sharing arrangement put in place by the Oslo Accords, the combination of actors responsible for security and order varies between different areas. Even in areas under full Palestinian jurisdiction, however, the ability of the Palestinian police and security forces to exercise their authority differs from camp to camp and tends to depend on relations between the PA and respective camp leaders and/or armed groups, as well as the handling of interventions by both sides. As a result, the interventions of the Palestinian police and security forces are rare and often involve clashes with local youth, or even armed confrontations. In al-Am'ari, for example, thanks to the very good relations between the camp and Prime Minister Salam Fayyad (in office from 2007 to 2013), back in the early 2010s police interventions began to increase and camp leadership openly considered the possibility of establishing a police station in the camp. Yet, when in 2017 I asked one of al-Am'ari leaders about the matter, he replied:

> In the past there was an opportunity, but now the younger generation of the camp rejects the idea of a police station in the camp. (…) There were some things that happened in the camp, so that as a result the [Palestinian] Authority lay siege to the camp and dealt with it in the wrong way, began to shoot, fired [tear] gas and arrested some [people]. This made the youth hate the police (al-Am'ari camp, 2017)

In general, the idea of establishing police stations in the camps remains controversial. While opponents of the idea among senior PLO or camp leadership that I interviewed suggested such a step would be a misguided attempt to 'securitise the camps', camp residents also tended to see it as a threat to the camps' political autonomy and to their position as strongholds of resistance against the Israeli occupation (for more on PA security policies in West Bank camps see Tartir 2017).

In the reality of political impasse regarding responsibility and control over camp populations, relations between the PA and the camps have been pushed to the unregulated and unofficial domain. With the lack of formalised links between the camps and the Palestinian Authority, the Popular Committees have played the role of advocates of camp communities' interests by lobbying and pressuring relevant government bodies. For that purpose, the leaders of West

Bank camps established the 'Executive Office for Refugees', an elected body tasked with representing the camps vis-à-vis the authorities:

> All the accomplishments made by the PCs during the time of Yasser Arafat and after him, from the transportation tax to [budgets for] projects, running costs for the PCs, all these things were not achieved by DORA, but by the Executive Office. (…) We work as a unified leadership of the camps. DORA cannot stand up to UNRWA because of the cuts [in UNRWA programs] or shut down UNRWA, but we can. Because they are an official, governmental framework, they cannot shut down international organisations, but we can. (Interview with a senior employee of the Executive Office for Refugees, al-Bireh, 2017)

As emphasised by the interviewee, although the Office (like DORA) operates under the PLO, its less official and bottom-up character allows it to employ stronger and more decisive methods of pressuring and lobbying for camp communities' interests. Despite its effectiveness in getting the attention of relevant ministries, the interviewee admitted that the majority of agreements signed between the Office and the PA institutions are not implemented, due to budget constraints, changing policy priorities and individual leaders' attitudes towards the camps. As explained by a camp leader I interviewed, the relationship is particularly difficult under the current leadership 'that considers the camps places of radicalisation, functioning outside of law, outside the PA, people hating the Authority, troublemakers, dealers of stolen cars, a safe heaven for outlaws' (West Bank, 2017).

Among the local population, the camps also tend to have a bad reputation and be associated with crime, drugs and weapons dealing, and hooliganism. Until this day, research participants from al-Am'ari argued, camp residence is a source of social stigmatisation that may affect one's marriage opportunities, social relations or position at work. Politics and symbolism aside, the camps are densely populated, impoverished and badly administered residential communities, where the living conditions tend to be considerably lower than in their urban or rural surroundings. In the case of al-Am'ari, this contrast is particularly stark, as the camp constitutes an urban margin of the rather affluent city of Ramallah, known in the West Bank for its liberal attitudes and modern outlook. The late 1990s and 2000s saw several incidents where 'many of the symbols and sites of Ramallah's middle-class modernity were vandalised and torched' (Taraki 2008, 72) by camp youth, which could be explained by social disparities that accelerated with the rise of the Ramallah/Al-Bireh middle class in the aftermath of the Oslo Accords. While the camp residents that I interviewed often emphasised that the extent to which their communities are stigmatised is harmful and out of proportion, many also admitted that the lack of real law enforcement inside the camp makes it very difficult to combat any illegal activities that take place there. Among others, this contributes to the camps' further marginalisation and reinforces a negative stereotypes of camp communities as outlaw spaces that no one dares to challenge.

Contrary to common assumptions that portray refugee camps solely as sites of victimisation and suffering, West Bank camps are far from powerless communities. Both in popular and self-perception, the camps are centres of resistance against the Israeli occupation. In many cases, their potential for political mobilisation and high level of arms possession rendered them important sites of political strength; many West Bank camps are currently perceived as bastions of opposition against the PA and its President, Mahmud Abbas. Al-Am'ari is one of them. Over the years, I have observed many strategies through which al-Am'ari leadership exercised their community's 'power of disruption' (Bayat 2010, 11) for various political purposes. The main stage of these confrontations has been at the entrance to the camp from the busy Jerusalem-Ramallah road. During the first *intifada*, the entrance was closed with barrels to prevent stone-throwing on the passing Israeli military and settler vehicles, and became the physical symbol of the uprising in al-Am'ari. Following the establishment of the Palestinian Authority, it became the main stage of protests against the Palestinian government; displays of the camp's strength and actions intended to bring attention to refugee matters and rights. This highly symbolic site, where the camp meets the city, continues to serve as the main stage of political actions that vary from small-scale manifestations to closing down the Ramallah-Jerusalem road and full-blown clashes with the police. It is here that camp residents exercise their power to disrupt and get the attention necessary for an effective political action. But how and by whom are they mobilised? Who runs camp politics? These questions bring us to the matter of camp leadership and internal governance, to which I now turn.

Self-governance and Internal Camp Politics

Over the years the internal institutional infrastructure of West Bank camps has changed significantly. In the 1950s, UNRWA began to establish youth centres to provide sports, social and cultural activities to camp populations. Soon, the centres developed into important sites for social and political participation of camp men, platforms for self-organisation, governance and community work. Until the mid-1990s, when the Oslo Accords introduced a relative freedom of association, they were the only legally-operating and democratically-elected organisations in West Bank camps. In many camps, including al-Am'ari, the centres maintained their strong social and political position following the expansion of the camps' organisational infrastructure post mid-1990s. In the case of most camps, however, the Popular Committees began to gain ground as forms of local authority. Established as service committees to facilitate the work of UNRWA and implement projects for the camps' benefit, their role and responsibilities expanded over time to include political representation of camp communities and advocacy for refugee rights.

While on the ground the Popular Committees act and are (in general) regarded as local authorities, they fall short of three important features when compared to their urban or rural counterparts. First, as they formally do not have the status of a local authority, the PCs are neither legally authorised to issue binding decisions nor have formal power to carry their decisions into effect. It means that the authority of the Committees rests on custom, mechanisms of social control, internal networks of power and influence, and patronage.

Second, the members of the PCs are not chosen through popular elections, but through nomination by a committee formed from past and present members of the local PC, representatives of community-based organisations, PLO factions and respected members of the community. Such indirect elections undermine the legitimacy of the PCs' authority and contribute to the consolidation of local hierarchies. Third, the PCs lack sufficient and stable funding that could elevate their position in the local community as reliable providers of services. Apart from the monthly budgets to cover the running costs, the PCs rely on contributions from external donors or funding from the PA that, despite the existing agreements, has often been withheld or reduced depending on the fiscal situation and political climate. All these factors have undermined the PCs' ability to build their position as a local authority and assume due responsibilities and control.

With no organisation able to claim full authority, the internal camp politics come down to power struggles between different actors of various character, resources, legitimacy and interests. In al-Am'ari the most important actors are: the five community-based organisations (CBOs), the Popular Committee, local branches of political parties (Hamas and Fatah) and their affiliated groups, director of Camp Service Office, the mosque and camp notables. While this organisational picture seems quite diverse, it is important to note that three out of five CBOs and the Popular Committee are under direct control of one person, Abu Ahmad (a pseudonym), who is the director of the al-Am'ari Youth Center, a Fatah politician and a member of the Palestinian Legislative Council. Abu Ahmad is considered a popular leader and the most powerful person in the camp and while he faces opposition, only one CBO is openly challenging his authority. The picture is further complicated by kinship and personal alliances, often difficult to separate in the camp context.

As a result of the local constellations of power and influence, al-Am'ari Youth Center (AYC) headed by Abu Ahmad remains the most powerful and influential institution in the camp. Located at the central thoroughfare of the camp and near its main entrance from the Jerusalem-Ramallah road, the club lies at the heart of al-Am'ari. Three buildings facing a small square — the only open space available in al-Am'ari where the majority of community events takes place — hosts the Management Office, a small sports hall, a small cinema, rooms for respective divisions of the club and the Popular Committee. Near the entrance to the Management Office stands the monument to the martyrs of al-Am'ari, that is, all residents who lost their lives in relation to the conflict with Israel, where both residents and visitors pay their respects during official camp celebrations and major holidays. Unlike many other organisations in the camp, the Management Office – the official seat of Abu Ahmad — is open from morning till late at night and is frequented daily by many people, mostly male, residents and outsiders alike. The Office is where important things happen and decisions are taken in the camp and also where many residents turn to in case of need or emergency.

So how do the internal politics in al-Am'ari work and what makes certain individuals, groups and organisations more powerful than others? While the official organisational structure and the unofficial system of power and influence overlap to a considerable extent, they nevertheless operate according to different logic and mechanisms. The official organisations have by-laws, some external supervision and control (at least formally), overt internal

structure and mechanisms to fill the posts (by elections or nomination). The unofficial system, though not necessarily less formalised as it is often assumed, is a complex and to some extent volatile network where factors such as clan, political and personal loyalties, social capital, financial situation, social recognition (derived, for example, from sacrifice in the name of resistance, education, good reputation or religious authority) are exchanged for power and privilege. The unofficial system operates through patronage networks that form the social and political basis for two main groups operating in al-Am'ari: the group of Abu Ahmad and the group of his opponents. The two groups compete for control over the official organisations that give affirmation and legitimisation of their power in the camp, for both internal and external use. In daily conversations, however, many residents tend to refer to the groups and their patrons when discussing camp politics, and less to the organisations they represent, which highlights the importance of the unofficial system. For example, many residents I talked to spoke about the 'guys of the club' (Arab. *shebab al-nadi*), referring to the group of Abu Ahmad, without differentiating between the Youth Centre and the Popular Committee. Importantly, the significance and prevalence of the unofficial system should partly be understood as a legacy of years of underground and off-the-radar organising during the years of direct Israeli occupation that severely limited opportunities for overt political action in the Palestinian Territories.

In the camp, power and privilege are reflected in the ability to mobilise the camp community, to take decisions and set rules, as well as to enforce them. This ability is produced and secured by clientelism, mechanisms of social control and mediation, and coercion. In the absence of a reliable social security system, particularly after the reduction of UNRWA services in the mid-1990s, camp residents have largely depended on family and community for support. The majority of al-Am'arians do not have public health insurance, not to mention retirement, many cannot afford to pay for their children's education and still many face deep poverty. When families are unable or unwilling to provide the necessary assistance, many residents in need of help turn to camp organisations and powerful individuals. All camp-based organisations, including the PC and the mosque, provide material, financial or other assistance as part of their profile. The skills and connections to solicit assistance from external donors such as private individuals, companies, state institutions or foreign organisations and governments, are an important source of power and influence in the camp:

> [Abu Ahmad] built good relations and people began to consider him a leader, a big responsibility. Maybe if someone else were the director, he could not provide services for people and people would not like to bring their problems to him. It seems that people come because Abu Ahmad is not just the director of the AYC, but also a member of the Palestinian Legislative Council. It gives the club a bigger role. (Interview with the member of the AYC, 2015)

The provision of assistance, particularly if it is repetitive and of limited kind, builds relations between patrons and clients. For these relations to last, they need to be reciprocal in character, which gives some form of control over the more powerful. While clientelism has been widely criticised in Western political thought, the case of al-Am'ari shows that — while

by no means flawless — it may at times be the only available form of basic social security and a tool of maintaining social order.

As explained earlier in the text, in al-Am'ari interventions of the Palestinian police are a rare occurrence and the majority of internal conflicts are resolved through local mechanisms of mediation and social control. The most popular form of conflict resolution is through a *sulha* (Arab. reconciliation) committee, comprised of respected individuals who mediate between different sides on the basis of tradition, religion and custom, or through individuals known for their mediating skills and/or powerful position in the camp. Only when this fails or the offense is too serious — for example, involves gun violence — the matter is typically handed over to the Palestinian police. Following the outbreak of the first uprising in 1987, a local organisation affiliated with Fatah has played the role of an internal police, but its authority in the camp began to diminish in the mid-2000s and is currently very limited. Nowadays, the most serious internal problems, such as for example dealing drugs to camp youth, may involve a show of strength from local military groups, but such interventions are also rather rare. Other mechanisms of social control involve public shaming, for example through gossip or pamphlets distributed in the form of leaflets or published online. In a community with strong social ties and norms, like al-Am'ari, where a good reputation is a requisite for maintaining good social life, such mechanisms are highly effective. This shows how in a situation lacking legal enforcement, the community has developed its own mechanisms of control and maintaining social order.

Although these mechanisms prove, to a considerable extent, effective and internal conflicts in al-Am'ari rarely involve large-scale violence, some problems are difficult to battle and some rights are difficult to claim in the camp; even for the most powerful residents and organisations. To give an example: for some years now, al-Am'ari Youth Center, whose director is the leader of the camp, cannot claim money from tenants renting its property inside al-Am'ari. The social norms of camp solidarity and the character of his authority (based on social standing), block any strategy that, in this case, would involve serious coercion and could turn camp residents against his leadership. In general, calling for police intervention against fellow camp residents, with the exception of major offences, still tends to be perceived as a breach of camp solidarity. Despite internal divisions and tensions, when confronted with what is perceived or constructed as an external enemy, camp solidarity may overrule some important differences — including the political schism between Hamas and Fatah.

As mentioned earlier, the camps are an expedient support base for politicians who take advantage of the camps' reputation as 'strong and dangerous' communities, as well as their *de facto* extrajudicial character, to further their own political interests. At the same time, the majority of the al-Am'ari leadership that I interviewed moved out of the camp and live outside the camp in better conditions than the community they seek to represent and govern. While not surprising, it means that the leaders do not live the difficult conditions of the camp anymore, such as the extreme overcrowding, lack of green space or litter piling up on the streets. On the other hand, however, their outside ties and relations with politically and economically powerful figures in Palestinian society are what allows them to 'get things

done' for the community. Here, the consequence of gray spacing is not only consolidation of local hierarchies and informal mechanisms of governance, but also the informalisation of relations between the camp and state structures. While they may be effective in the short term, these informal governmentalities are difficult to hold accountable and, as Feldman (2015, 244) observed in relation to camp governance, depend 'precisely on holding legitimacy in abeyance, by deferring the question to another time and by turning attention to other matters'. The real change of the status quo in the camps, a research participant with years of experience in West Bank camps has argued, requires a strong political leader, who would have enough legitimacy, charisma and power to challenge the gray spacing of their camp community in a manner that reconciles the demand for political rights of refugees with the daily needs and struggles against marginalisation.

Conclusions

Like shelter solutions for displaced populations worldwide, the Palestinian camps were established in response to a humanitarian crisis and their organisation reflected the logic of emergency. As the situation evolved towards protracted exile, the reality on the ground began to challenge this logic, for example in regard to the spatial development of the camps or the division of responsibilities between actors involved in their governance. While some adjustments were made along the way, a comprehensive redefinition of the camps' status has been restrained by the imperative to protect the political rights of the refugees. Following the establishment of the Palestinian Authority, this imperative has guided the quest for institutional separation that would ensure the political exceptionality of the camps and affirm the PA's status as a host country to the refugees. In the process, the relations between the emergent Palestinian state structures and the camps have been pushed into the unofficial and unregulated domain, which has resulted in the diffusion of accountability for the wellbeing of the camp populations. This diffusion of accountability was substantiated by the lack of a comprehensive strategy that would allow to both address the needs of camp communities and protect their political rights. The lack of such strategy, combined with little prospect for a solution to the Palestinian refugee problem in the near future, leaves gray spacing as *de facto* the main organising principle for years to come. On top of that, the limited sovereignty of the PA, the ongoing Israeli occupation and the weakening of UNRWA, has rendered the camps into spaces where no authority is willing or able to claim full authority.

What does the case of al-Am'ari and Palestinian camps in the West Bank tell us about the politics of governance and urban marginality? First, it shows the merit of a relational approach to urban margins that this special issue advocates. As opposed to perspectives that prioritise analyses of structural constraints or emancipatory politics, this approach focuses on relations between all actors involved in the operation of gray spaces. To understand how a particular camp, or a marginalised neighbourhood, functions within local and national polities, it is necessary to break down the abstract categories of the state or the city and analyse relations between particular institutional and non-institutional actors as mutual and dynamic. Gray spacing is a complex and multilateral process; in the studied case, the camps' status has been produced through relations between the PA and the camps, the camps and

local authorities, but also through the dynamics between the PA and UNRWA, or the PA and the PLO, *in regard* to the camps. Precisely because gray spacing refers to the indistinction between inclusion and exclusion, it is not enough to look at policy, legal or institutional representations of these relations, but to explore the informal politics and mechanisms of 'how things are done' for and in regard to the studied communities.

Second, this article responds to the call of this special issue for a middle position in the study of political agency on urban margins. It has shown the potential for political organising and the mechanisms of self-governance that developed in the camp, but also highlighted important limitations. While they are by no means powerless, the question remains: how can marginalised communities use their power of disruption to achieve durable solutions and change; particularly when their self-governance structures are not recognised as legitimate, and dealt with that way, by state and non-state institutions. Again, the question of legitimacy, rarely asked in the context of camps and marginalised communities, is particularly relevant here. Gray spacing enforces informal mechanisms of governance that, although sometimes effective, are difficult to hold accountable and prove resistant to change (see also Misselwitz and Hanafi 2009). The perspective adopted in this special issue allows us to circumvent the normative binary between the camp and the city and to study the protracted camp as a case of urban marginality, the relevance of which goes beyond the field of camp studies.

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