



Childrens’ Rights Discourse and Identity Ambivalence in Palestinian Refugee Camps

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Side alleys in al-Emir Hassan refugee camp, Amman, Jordan. *Source: Laure Bjawi-Levine collection.*

“My heart is Palestinian, my passport is Jordanian,” answered M’hmed, an 11 year-old refugee boy, as I was asking a group of Palestinian children and adolescents in Jordan what was their nationality. Khaled, a twelve year old also a *mukhayyamji*¹, said “I am a Palestinian registered² refugee with a Jordanian passport.” Others from the group offered similar replies. It was remarkable that these youngsters³ were able to express in a cogent fashion the complex status of Palestinian refugees in Jordan.

This article, based on data collected in two Palestinian refugee camps⁴ in Amman during fieldwork conducted in 2004-2005, explores the relationships between (ambivalence of) identity, discourse of children’s rights, and children and adolescents. These three topics emerged from my research gravitate around history, memory, nationality, citizenship and Jordanian’s politics of assimilation.

Western anthropology has seldom been



Girls and boys and their educators at the Jordanian Women's Union Center in al-Wihdat refugee camp where they participate in children's rights education programs. *Source: Laure Bjawi-Levine collection.*

interested in children and childhood, and anthropological scholarship about Palestinian children remains limited. Palestinian children have mainly been studied in connection to health, psychological and legal issues. In Palestinian refugee camps, children and adolescents represent the majority of the population. Large families are the norm. During the two *Intifadas*, Palestinian children made history by occupying center stage nationally and internationally. As agents of resistance, they readily became iconic heroes among their community and peers.

In the past thirty years, the notion of childhood has considerably varied; the child has not only emerged as being an agent but has also acquired new rights. These new rights are now part of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child which, although problematic in several regards, has been largely ratified and gradually reached many countries and cultures. Children by having rights have become full human beings, also interacting with society. In recent social studies of childhood, the child is no longer seen as a universal category, but recognized as a full agent. As British sociologists Alison James and Alan Prout and Chris Jenks suggest, the child is now constructing, as well as being constructed by, her/his circumstances, an actor to be analyzed in relation to class, gender and ethnicity.⁵

This essay shows how young Palestinian camp refugees in Jordan make sense of their unusual national identity – refugee and citizen – in the specific context of their predicament, and how education on children's rights has had an impact on their perceptions of selfhood. It aims to contribute to a nascent literature on children as agents of social change and to anthropological research on Palestinian children.

The experience of young Palestinian camp refugees in Jordan, who are sheltered from military violence, is different from that of Palestinian children in the West Bank, Gaza, or inside Israel. However, these children and adolescents share a common history, a sense of imagined community and a strong Palestinian identity shaped by the long-term effects of the Israel-Palestine conflict. The young heroes of the two Intifadas have inevitably influenced their peers from the refugee camps in Jordan.

Historical Processes

The intertwined Jordanian and Palestinian histories, largely circumscribed by their colonial past, are rife with division, expulsion, migration, nation building, and politics of assimilation. Not surprisingly, identity in Jordan presents many complexities, which have been well documented⁶. The context in which the young “*mukhayyamjieh*” that I met construct their identity is largely influenced by such historical circumstances and the uniqueness of the space of the camp.

In his work on nations and nationalism, Ernst Gellner⁷ conceived of nationalism as engendering nations and not the other way around. In Jordan though, the nation was constructed before nationalism was born. Transjordan, as a state, preceded the birth of Transjordan, as a nation. The new nation-state would soon include two major powerful, rival ethnic groups in Jordan, Bedouins and Palestinians, holding their own diverging loyalties. On the one hand, Transjordanians of Bedouin origin, keep their allegiance to their tribe, and have become unquestionable new citizens of Jordan. On the other hand, Palestinians⁸ – who pledge theirs to Palestine, have become citizens “with-conditions” in Jordan. Such conditions include in some cases a two-year passport, which does not guarantee full permanent citizenship. The short-term traveling document intensifies the transient condition of camp refugees, who strive for security and protection in their yearning for total assimilation.

In this regard, the most important policy established in 1949 by the Hashemite monarchy grants Jordanian citizenship to Palestinians refugees. However, as noted, this measure carries limitations for several among them, namely refugees from Gaza; also those who remained in the West Bank after 1967 and later came to Jordan; and finally children of Jordanian women married to non-Jordanians, not eligible for Jordanian citizenship through matrilineal descent. This climate of exceptions has fostered inequality and competition between the two main ethnic groups. Basher, a Palestinian refugee working for an NGO, describes the situation. “Today, Bedouins feel threatened by Palestinians who outnumber them. Bedouins are afraid they could lose their privileges to Palestinians.” Those privileges are translated into positions in the Jordanian army and government. There are indeed several Palestinian-Jordanians in the army, but they rarely come from the *mukhayyam*. It is the dream of many young *mukhayyamjieh* to be enrolled in the army, because of the job security it offers, compared to the precarious character of life in the camp.

The many fore mentioned shifts and ruptures in history over a relatively short



A refugee camp mother with her children in al-Wihdat refugee camp. Source: Laure Bjawi-Levine collection.

period of time – only a few decades – have elicited subsequent changes of rules and laws concerning refugee status and citizenship among Palestinian refugees. They have raised the question of who is Palestinian or Jordanian, and created significant divisions – class notwithstanding – among Palestinians living in the Hashemite Kingdom.

In the camps, the majority of Palestinian refugees in Jordan hold Jordanian citizenship, and falls under the umbrella and control of both UNRWA and DPA⁹. Referring to organized spaces, such as hospitals, prisons, (or refugee camps, for that matter), Michael Foucault¹⁰ calls “dividing practices” where several processes are in operation. When these institutions seek to circumscribe and bound the space according to their own agendas.

In a context of fragmentation, the specificity of the space of the camps of Al-Wihdat and Al-Emir Hassan and their culture are central to the experience of young refugees. The camp has epitomized for four generations the *Nakba*, the loss of land – hence of dignity, the abrupt social change from fellah to urban proletarian, the enduring hardship and liminality of the refugee condition, and the unresolved Israel-Palestine conflict. It is not only a habitat for refugees, but more importantly a bastion of Palestinian memory and identity. Its invisible boundaries delimit two distinct worlds in the eyes of camp refugees: Jordanians outside and Palestinians inside. Accordingly, the children expressed their perceptions of these different spheres in a binary, poor inside and rich outside. Their black and white view sounded like a class issue in

that it excluded a large Palestinian population generally well assimilated – who lives “outside” the camp and usually looks down upon camp refugees as lazy, poor and guilty of producing a culture of poverty.¹¹

Outside the camp, the grass is greener, as Zohra, a twelve-year-old camp girl, indicated: “Jordanians have better water than we do in the camp.” While for Furat, a fifteen-year-old camp boy, “Jordanians can go to university and we cannot.” His remark points to a deep concern of many young camp people about their education, as only a very small percentage of camp refugee children¹² make it to college.

For many camp dwellers and their children, the temporary quality of the refugee camp defines three core principles: the right of return, the will to go back, and a declared resistance to permanent exile and oblivion. By remaining in a virtual homeland, a home away from home, has helped to marginalize the refugees who view the camp as an embodiment of Palestinian opposition to political and cultural forces from Jordan, which wants to integrate them, and from Israel, which rejects them.

Making Sense: Paradoxes, Ambivalent Loyalties and Politics of Assimilation

In such a context of instability and fast-changing historical circumstances, how do these children shaped by the Palestinian refugee camp predicament make sense of their complex historico-political environment and national identity? Psychologists working with children in conflict zones have observed that they are capable of develop a sense of their country’s political history.¹³ Palestinian children have shown they were able to construct their personality in relation to nationalism¹⁴. Adolescents, especially, build their identity in fusion with the Palestinian nationalist struggle.

Inside and outside the camp, many Palestinians nourish feelings of exclusion and hold conflicting views of Jordan. Their resentment is partly fueled by the government’s projected national cultural identity, which is Bedouin-Jordanian. Camp refugees pointed out time and time again that the Bedouin-Jordanian minority is favored by government policies and practices to the detriment of the Palestinians who form the majority of the population. The paradox of Palestinian demographics and Jordanian cultural and political representation was often underlying our conversations. Interestingly, the camp refugee lens appeared to focus exclusively on the Palestinian-Jordanian dyad disregarding other Jordanians belonging to ethnic groups such as Circassians, Syrians, Chechens, or Armenians, who remained consistently absent from our conversations. As minority groups, they may not be considered powerful competitors by camp refugees.

Another paradox lies in the legal situation of Palestinian camp refugees – simultaneously refugees and citizens of Jordan. While Jordanian citizenship brings them a legal status and recognition, it also carries tensions when it intersects with their refugee status. As mentioned, the complex policies of citizenship have created a divide among the camp population and, according to the benefits granted, feelings of being

discriminated against because of unequal and inferior standing. Within the camp, these “dividing practices” are tangible as they determine membership and exclusion through a system of registration cards of different color differentiating refugees from the displaced.

Such categories have constituted a formative aspect of the quotidian life of the members of the refugee camp community, including children, who have developed accordingly flexible and ambiguous identities. Children often expressed a lack of Jordanian nationalism, describing Jordan as merely a place of citizenship: “my passport is Jordanian.” A passport is only a piece of paper, a travel document carrying no affect; it is not a part of the body, like the heart which belongs to Palestine. Several children I interviewed were familiar with the concept of passport, for their father or a member of the family worked abroad. Although a passport may not be a marker of citizenship as *hawiyya*, the ID card and both are crucial for camp refugees. The latter brings economic help, and the former freedom to travel. Freedom to travel is extremely limited for camp refugees and their children, considering that attending a funeral of a family member in the West Bank was often problematic. Some children were using either term, inscribing them in what Joseph Massad¹⁵ calls the “juridical discourse”. He argues that in Jordan “the law produces juridical national subjects,” or conversely national identity is a product of the law. That is what the young refugees had just illustrated.

The official government discourse, however, has been one of unity and assimilation heralded by the government slogan “Jordan First” through a wide national campaign. Jordan seeks to project an image that encompasses its various ethnic groups by overlooking any underlying issues of identity at play. Its colonial legacy has largely contributed to fostering additional loyalties among “all” Jordanians, regardless of their ethnic groups. Thus, just like Bedouins and Palestinians have their allegiance, minorities, like Circassians or Armenians and others, also do to their own respective ethnic group.

The “Jordan First” campaign has unveiled salient issues of identity and tensions among Palestinian camp refugees who sharply reacted by saying that “Jordan First” were empty words and that the reality was a far cry from the official discourse. Abu Khaled, a camp refugee parent, compared Jordanian national identity to a saber, a cactus pear, with nothing inside. Although many in the camps shared his views of Jordanian identity being an empty shell, the campaign, however, enabled camp refugees to define and reaffirm their Palestinian identity against the “others”, the Jordanians.

On the world scene, Jordan’s stability is perceived by the international community as crucial, in a region of high tension. While the measures of assimilation adopted by the Jordanian government are deemed to build a stronger nation-state, they are framed by the broader international political and economic processes. These are consistent with the government’s projected image of a country at the “forefront” of the Arab world on issues of democracy, human rights, women, children and social development. Thus, in order to tackle these issues, the Jordanian government has facilitated the

implementation of many education programs, such as the one on children's rights, from UNICEF, and international and local NGOs.

Construction of Selfhood and Influence from Children's Rights

Much has been written about selfhood and many approaches and theories of the individual have been proposed by social theorists¹⁶. Other scholars of human rights and children's rights have questioned the validity of a single concept of identity and childhood, applicable across cultures.¹⁷

From a young age, camp refugees are socialized in Palestinian refugee camp culture. Everyday life in the camp and family narratives reinforce their identity. Notably, the Arabic term *Hawiyya*¹⁸ means both identity and identity card. For camp dwellers, however, *Hawiyya* [the identity card] has primarily been connected to their UN refugee status and hence their welfare. Recently, children's rights education programs provided in the refugee camps, have exercised another strong influence on their sense of self, beside family environment, school and television.

Such programs, based on the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child model, although locally adapted, purport new concepts of childhood and children. These concepts, conceived through the western lens – per the UN Convention, are translated from English into Arabic. As a result, educators and students construct new meanings and understandings which, though somehow confusing, they are able to negotiate by keeping or rejecting what is compatible with their culture, or not.

At this point, the issue of language is essential to my discussion. By becoming a vehicle of new ideas which filters newly acquired concepts such as identity, self, or citizen, the English language creates power and subjection. Asad¹⁹ similarly contends of historical projects translated from one site to the other or from one agent to the other. Thus, a dialectical relationship between English and Arabic has stemmed from the teachings and perceptions of children's rights which has helped localize the UN discourse of children's rights.

I do not intend here to describe the problems of the UN Convention of the Child model in relation to local cultures. I do not dismiss them, but they fall beyond the scope of this article. The new ideas represent a significant shift from the traditional perceptions of the camp family, where children more often than not are subjected to strict patriarchal authority²⁰.

By many children's accounts, rights are empowering. Hakim, a ten-year-old boy, said, "I am happy and feel strong to know that I have rights." The awareness of having rights empowers him. Children's rights teach children to think about themselves as individuals and encourage them to become agents of social change. Sahar, nine-grader, told me "children's rights teach me to depend on myself." The sense of independence characterizes the modern individual.

Anissa, a twelve-year-old, declared, "my rights will shape my personality." True, children may not fully understand the concepts they are uttering, but their remarks

demonstrate the influence of children's rights to help define themselves. I also asked camp children and adolescents how they perceived themselves as individuals. They answered by talking about *karamah*, or dignity, and related it to children's rights. When I asked what was meant by dignity, Ahmed, a fourteen-year-old, explained, "it is to know your own value," which I interpreted as self-esteem. For Furat, a fifteen-year-old, it was, "not feeling like a second class citizen in Jordan." Other young people also invoked honor²¹ when they described their understanding of children's rights.

These responses are strongly influenced by the programs of rights education that use various methods of empowerment. In the UN schools of both camps where I worked, children's rights had been integrated in the curriculum and part of social studies, religion and Arabic courses. In addition, UNICEF and local NGOs organized hold separate workshops for parents and children. They provided parents with counseling and helped them in raising and adjusting to their children by using children's rights principles. Similarly children's workshops were teaching young people how to improve their social skills and self-awareness when dealing with issues related to taboos including body anatomy, sexuality, or female reproduction.

A local NGO was also offering a special program to show children ways to protect themselves from domestic violence and abuse. Children were taught not to fall victims of their parents' abuse and speak out. They feel empowered knowing there are ways to take action, explains Abla, a social worker for the NGO. They learn skills to help them manage their anger, boost their self-esteem and protect themselves. She encourages "self discovery" by teaching camp children expressive art like painting, drawing or drama. "Most children are not aware of themselves and their inner feelings. Those programs teach them to identify and express those feelings," she says.

Another scheme of empowerment is the children's parliament²². It promotes gender equality by having equal representation of boys and girls, including children with special needs. Adolescents, from 13-18 years old, who participate in it are elected for two years and are able to communicate their concerns to the Jordanian government. The parliament aims to create a group of Jordanian children who actively support the promotion of children's rights while they are children, and also commit to do so as adults. Several children parliaments have been established in the main governorates of the country.

Peer to peer learning, is also a method used in some UNRWA classes to develop peer relationship, and empowers students in sharing knowledge. But the most spectacular example of empowerment method is the Human Rights Day Celebration organized by UNRWA which I attended during my fieldwork. It was a cultural performance in which some children and adolescents were actors performing on stage short plays connected to human rights and children's rights; while others in the audience sitting with parents and teachers, were parading UNRWA T-shirts and caps reading "Human Rights Jordan."

Children rights discourse plays a mediating role in refugee camp society as it significantly shapes young minds and subsequent sentiments. These revolutionary

shifts in perceptions of selfhood involve the entire extended family as well. Inevitably, the changes are not taking place without struggles and ambivalence from camp refugees parents. They are simultaneously reluctant to let go of their parental control, and at the same time, look up to their children and invest them with strong hopes of saving the nation, and the heavy responsibility for change. Accordingly, many boys said they wanted to become pilots or doctors. They project themselves in the future as liberators and saviors.

Umm Mahmoud, a local NGO worker in Jabal Nasser, camp involved in children's rights education programs, explained how important it was "to raise the awareness of the youth in the camp." She defined awareness as "a sense of who one is." For Ossama, a 15 year old from Jabal Nasser camp, "children's rights give children a role in society." Children's rights discourse allows youngsters not only to be self-reflective, but also socially engaged. Although rights are not laws, they confer individuals a sense of entitlement for justice.

In contrast, other young camp people expressed frustration and pain at "having no rights at all in the Middle East, and not being valued as full individuals." They reported feelings of exclusion. Data shows that a sense of self has developed through several structural sources, including children's rights education programs, whether these are embraced or not. It further reveals that self-identity presents less tension at home for young boys than girls, as several girls reported.

Conclusion

Concepts like citizenship and nationality, which stem from state and nation, are complex and have often been conflated²³, as I found I asked a group of Palestinian camp refugee children and adolescents in Jordan about their "nationality." The ambivalent identity they expressed, as M'hamed conveyed at the beginning of the article, reflects the problematic character of selfhood and identity in contemporary society.

The entangled histories of Palestine and Jordan have engendered entangled identities. This essay has highlighted the dilemma young camp refugees face: on the one hand, to be assimilated to Jordan, while resisting and denying such assimilation, and on the other hand, to remain loyal to Palestine. My research has shown that their dilemma is articulated through a newly acquired sense of selfhood that children's rights' discourse helps them develop.

Children's rights provide Palestinian camp refugee children with a space in which they perceive themselves in different ways than the ones they have learned from their family and the Palestinian community. Rights education also helps them negotiate their ambivalence, and acquire the confidence of articulating their claims of inclusion in the ruling group.

The Israel-Palestine conflict deeply permeates people's daily lives in Palestinian refugee camps in Jordan. The *Intifada* is indeed a central feature for youngsters who,

unlike their peers in Palestine, live outside the combat zone, but watch it on TV and constantly hear about it. While they are safely protected from fire, they are also unable to directly participate in collective action. Like an albatross, they cannot fly. Their complex position gives way to deep feelings of frustration.

The oscillating movement between nationalistic emotions at the core of their identity (“my heart is Palestinian”), and the anxiety of being validated as citizens by the other, namely Jordan, is destabilizing for young camp refugees. Further, some aspects of children’s rights discourse may seem abstract and hard to grasp for children, thus adding more confusion. In examining the relationship of Palestinian children and the discourse of children’s rights, one may wonder about the merits of such rights. What about the children in Palestine – as in Gaza – who are at the front line of armed conflict, and fall victims of blatant violations of their rights? Or the camp refugee children in Jordan, who are aware of their rights, protected from war trauma, and yet cannot exercise them and thus suffer from frustration?

However, under the grim socio-economic conditions of the camp, with limited social upward-mobility, most camp children praise the challenging power and potential agency for social transformation children’s rights provides them, as they carry hope, which is a promise for change.

I have argued elsewhere²⁴ that the notion of rights used by UNICEF and NGO education programs to socialize Palestinian camp refugee youngsters into young individuals is inherently laden with power. While it constructs children as empowered subjects, it may also essentialize them as “subjects” tout court, in ways made to fit the hidden political arrangements of these institutions.

Ultimately, camp refugee youth in Jordan find themselves in a bind. Their strong feelings of national identity are of the “wrong” kind: Palestinian instead of Jordanian. Although Jordanian assimilation is officially encouraged, and part of a national project, from a camp refugee child perspective, it has failed to produce true equality between Palestinians and Jordanians. After six decades of residence in Jordan, it has enabled Palestinian identity to remain deeply rooted in the camps, as the children expressed.

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Endnotes

- ¹ Camp dweller.
- ² “Registered” vs. “non-registered” refers to official registration with UNRWA.
- ³ My use of the words “children and adolescents” or “children” invariably describes young individuals 9-18 years old.
- ⁴ Al-Whidat and al-Emir Hassan camps.
- ⁵ Jenks, Chris. 1996. *Childhood*. London. Routledge. Prout, Alan and Alison James. 1990.(eds). *Constructing and Reconstructing Childhood*. Basingstoke: Falmer Press
- ⁶ Brand, Laurie. 1995. “Palestinians and Jordanians: A Crisis of Identity,” in *Journal of Palestine Studies*. 24/4. Layne, Linda, L. 1994. *The Dialogics of Tribal and National Identities in Jordan*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. Nasser, Riad 2005. *Palestinian Identity in Jordan and Israel. The Necessary "Other" in the Making of a Nation*. Routledge. Massad, Joseph A. 2001. *Colonial Effects. The Making of National Identity in Jordan*. NY. Columbia University Press.
- ⁷ Ernst Gellner, 1983. *Nations and Nationalism*. Oxford Basil Blackwell.
- ⁸ Exact figures of both groups are not available as the country seeks to present a unified image of its population and there is no official census data on Jordanians of Palestinian descent in Jordan. Palestinian estimates indicate over 3 Million.
- ⁹ Department of Palestinian Affairs.
- ¹⁰ Foucault, Michel. 1977. *Discipline and Punish. The Birth of the Prison*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- ¹¹ See next section for the ethnic combination of Jordan.
- ¹² 1%, according to a UNRWA teacher.
- ¹³ Cole, Robert. 1986. *The Political Life of Children*. Boston: Atlantic Monthly Press.
- ¹⁴ Garbarino, James, Kostelny, K & Dubrow, N. 1991a. *No Place to be a Child: Growing up in a War Zone*. Lexington, MA. Lexington Publishers.
- ¹⁵ Massad, Joseph A. 2001.
- ¹⁶ See Freud 1920/1943, Mead 1934, Sartre 1943, Goffman 1959, Taylor 1985, Giddens 1991, Crapanzano 1992, Dwyer 1991.
- ¹⁷ Boyden, Jo. 1990.”Childhood and the Policy Makers: A Comparative Perspective on the Globalization of Childhood,” in Prout and James (eds) *Constructing and Reconstructing Childhood*. Basingstoke: Falmer Press.
- ¹⁸ *Dhatiya* also means identity from *dhat*, self, and *al-ana*, means the ego.
- ¹⁹ Asad, Talal. 1993. *Genealogy of Religion*. Baltimore/London: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- ²⁰ Sait M. Siraj. 2004 “Have Palestinian Children Forfeited Their Rights?” *Journal of Comparative Family Studies*. 35/2. University of Calgary.
- ²¹ There are two words for honor in Arabic. The honor of a man is *sharaf*, and that of a woman is *ard*.
- ²² It is an initiative of the Jordanian Women’s Union, also supported by UNICEF. It was established in 1996as a model parliament for children and adolescents. It promotes children’s rights and democratic practices.
- ²³ Gellner.
- ²⁴ Brown, Richard H. and Laure Bjawi-Levine. 2002. Cultural Relativism and Universal Human Rights: Contributions from Social Science of the Middle East,” in *The Anthropologist*. 14/7.