

BOOK REVIEW

Irfan, Anna. *Refuge and Resistance: Palestinians and the International Refugee System*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2023.

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Reviewed by Eliza Helmers

In this text, British historian Anna Irfan explores the evolving relationship between Palestinian refugees and the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA). She begins her analysis in the immediate aftermath of *al-Nakba* – the violent displacement of Palestinians in 1948 – and continues until the 1980s. According to Irfan, UNRWA’s role as a Palestinian quasi-state within the camps has received limited scholarly attention. Her investigation aims to correct this oversight, asserting that UNRWA played a part in promulgating the internationalist bent of the Palestinian liberation movement. Irfan contextualizes UNRWA and the refugee experience using the settler colonialist paradigm, framing the foundation of Israel as an imperialist endeavor that rendered Palestinians – a preexisting national group – stateless. Indeed, Irfan, a historian of the modern Middle East, specializes in colonial displacement and Palestine studies in her work at the University College London (UCL). She undertook extensive ethnographic and historical research in preparation for this project, collecting testimony from members of the *Nakba* generation and visiting UN registries and archives in Jordan, Lebanon, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, and the United States. The resulting investigation provides valuable insight into the contested history of an international regime and those who have daringly resisted it.

The introduction reviews the structure of UNRWA and explores its embodiment of two forms of internationalism. First, UNRWA is mandated by the UN General Assembly (UNGA), which can be accurately described as internationalist, given that all member states are equally represented.

Yet, UNRWA receives most of its funding from Western members of the UN Security Council (UNSC), the collection of whom are often imperialistically referred to as the “international community.” According to Irfan, the dually internationalist UNRWA is often characterized by its donors as purely humanitarian

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and the refugees it serves as passive aid recipients; in reality, the agency is hyper-politicized and has frequently been forced to react to Palestinian grassroots organizations. In fact, in many respects UNRWA resembles a political regime, as it administers healthcare, education, and identity cards to camp Palestinians. However, it has no authority over security measures, no territorial claims, and is forced to negotiate with various international and regional powers, including host states, donor states, and the Palestinians themselves.

Then, Irfan begins tracing the history and institutionalization of Palestinian refugeehood. In Chapter 1 “Becoming Refugees,” she reviews the circumstances surrounding *al-Nakba*, the establishment of UNRWA in 1950, and the organization’s works program. In the aftermath of their displacement, Palestinian refugees were deeply suspicious of UNRWA’s early jobs initiative, viewing it as a plan to permanently assimilate them into Arab host countries. The refugees’ resistance to this was such that, by 1957, UNRWA abandoned this policy – evidence of Palestinian agency and activism. In Chapter 2, Irfan explains that those living in the camps were, however, initially reluctant to engage in open political protest, traumatized by *al-Nakba* and cognizant of their vulnerability as stateless people. This was confounded by the Arab regimes’ suppression of patriotic activity, subjugating Palestinian nationalism to the cause of pan-Arabism. However, after *al-Naksa* in 1967, Palestinians turned inward and framed their struggle for liberation in explicitly Palestinian terms, concurrent with the rise of the *Fida’iyyin* and the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), which gained immense influence within the camps. As such, there was a form of Palestinian self-rule in these spaces, which became centers for political mobilization.

In the following chapters, Irfan focuses more closely on UNRWA, particularly its positionality within scaled political landscapes and its relationship to Palestinian identitarianism. In Chapter 3, Irfan further explores the way in which UNRWA stands at the nexus of variant interpretations of internationalism and regionalism, given that it is beholden to host states, the PLO, and even the refugees themselves. According to Irfan, Israel and Arab states interact with UNRWA in fundamentally similar ways, with all parties seeking to maximize their services and minimize their autonomy. In the following chapter, she explains that, unlike the apolitical humanitarian organization envisioned by donor states, Palestinians conceive of UNRWA as a political regime, an insufficient equivalent to the nation-state established for Jewish Israelis. With this state-like paradigm in mind, many refugees expect the organization to protect their political rights and criticize it for failing to do so. Relatedly, UNRWA services are generally conceptualized as entitlements rather than charity, meaning that service cuts are often greeted with outrage. Thus, refugees are generally supportive of UNRWA’s existence but criticize its operations. Finally, in Chapter 5, Irfan explores the way in which UNRWA’s state-like

actions, particularly its issuance of identity cards and establishment of a uniform educational system, have unified the Palestinian experience and helped maintain a trans-geographic Palestinian identity.

Toward the end of her book, Irfan delves into the PLO's relationship with UNRWA, which reflects the complexity of local geopolitics. In Chapter 6, she explains that, during the 1970s, Palestinian activism became more internationalist in nature by aligning itself with decolonization movements across the Global South. Then, Irfan traces the PLO's interactions with UNRWA and the process by which the PLO was formally recognized by the UNGA in 1974. The PLO took many of the positions of the camp refugees, recognizing UNRWA's services as essential while criticizing the way it performed these services, and it used UNRWA's infrastructure to carry out its own activities. As such, Irfan asserts that Israel, Arab host states, and the PLO all treat UNRWA as a political entity, even as donor states and UN leadership emphasize its fictional apoliticism. In the epilogue, Irfan explains that scholarly investigation into UNRWA is highly valuable, as it sheds light on the development of Palestinian nationalism, deceptive binaries splitting this history into one of "Arab states versus Israel," and misleading portrayals of refugees as passive aid recipients.

In particular, this exploration demonstrates that grassroots political organization among Palestinians has been deeply influential in molding UNRWA policy.

Discussions related to Israel–Palestine are highly polemical, often fraught with accusations of bias.

Despite this difficult environment, Irfan maintains a balanced perspective. Yet, it is important to note that using settler colonialism as an interpretive framework for Israel–Palestine remains controversial and may evoke criticism from some outside the field of Middle Eastern Studies. Overall, this is a strong piece that provides particularly valuable insight into the way in which Palestinians perceive UNRWA and how exposure to this organization has molded aspects of the Palestinian experience. There are, however, structural limitations to Irfan's research – in 2014, she was denied entrance to the Israeli-occupied territories and has since been unable to return. This, in conjunction with the civil war in Syria, limited her fieldwork to Jordan and Lebanon, which undermines her claims of universality among the five territories administered to by UNRWA.

Overall, this study would be suitable for students and scholars focusing on Palestine, humanitarian intervention, and Middle Eastern politics more broadly. Events in Israel and the Gaza Strip in 2023–2024, particularly the withdrawal of funds by donor states in response to accusations of terrorism against several UNRWA workers, make this book particularly relevant.