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The Dilemmas of Local Development and Palestine Refugee Integration in Jordan:

UNRWA and the Arab Development Society in Jericho (1950–80)

Jalal Al Hussein

Abstract

In this article, Jalal Al Hussein analyzes the relations UNRWA maintained over three decades (1950–80) with the Arab Development Society (ADS), a Palestinian philanthropic non-governmental institution specialized in agricultural development and vocational/technical training operating in Jericho, West Bank. Based on ICRC and UNRWA archives, it first provides a novel insight into the internal debates that unfolded among Palestinians, both refugees and non-refugees, about how to envisage refugee socioeconomic status between, on the one hand, minimal integration in the name of the right of return for refugees (as championed by camp refugees), and quasi-assimilation (as promoted by local assistance institutions, UNRWA, and their international donors) on the other. It also highlights the ideological and operational commonalities between UNRWA and the ADS that allowed for joint working partnerships. Assessing the modalities of such partnerships, the author shows how financial, operational, and political challenges (mainly the refugees' opposition to any initiative likely to threaten their right of return and interim refugee status) limited their outcomes before finally bringing them to an end. Overall, this article explains why, despite UNRWA's embeddedness in the local context, its ties in the local institutional context have remained limited.

Keywords

UNRWA; Jordan; Palestine refugees; right of return; human development assistance; agriculture; resettlement; vocational training.

A number of academic studies have been devoted to the history of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA).¹ Generally geared to institutional approaches, such studies have analyzed key dimensions of the agency's mandate, including: its relations with its stakeholders, including the UN system, host and donor countries, and the refugee communities; the development of its bureaucracy and internal politics between international and local employees, and between headquarters and the five field offices;² its impact on permanent solutions to the Palestine refugee issue; and the evolution of its mandate from short-term relief and collective socioeconomic resettlement in the 1950s toward a more individual so-called human development approach since the early 1960s that facilitates individual reintegration through educational, medical, and social relief, and camp improvement and income-generating activities. One aspect of UNRWA's history remains understudied: its relations with civil society organizations, whether the social activity centers for youth, women, and persons with disabilities it established in refugee camps during the first two decades of its existence,³ or larger non-governmental organizations (NGOs) sharing the same human development approach to Palestinian refugee communities. This article investigates UNRWA's relations with larger NGOs, noting that such organizations have been relatively few and their relations with UNRWA sporadic and inconsistent.⁴

The Arab Development Society (ADS) (*Jam'iyyat al-mashru' al-insha'i al-'Arabi*) was established in 1945 by Musa Bey 'Alami (1897–1984), a scion of

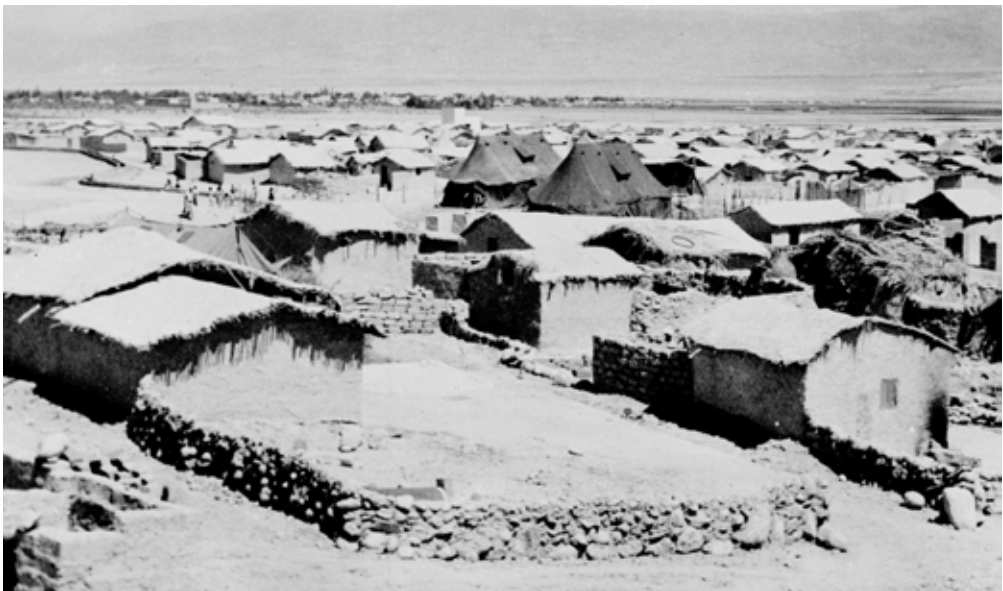


Figure 1. “Prior to the Israeli occupation of the West Bank in 1967, Aqabat Jaber was the largest camp in the area with more than 60,000 Palestine refugees. In 1967, thousand fled the war east across the Jordan River. UNRWA still provides its services to the 2,600 Palestine refugees still living in Aqabat Jaber camp.” © UNRWA photo, undated.

a notable Jerusalemite family who held political positions in the Palestine Arab leadership during the British Mandate. Funded by the Arab League and run by a board composed of prominent Palestinian personalities, the ADS initially aimed to help Arab village communities resist the Zionist movement's expansion across Palestine by modernizing their agricultural, health, and education infrastructure. During the 1948 Arab-Israeli war, the ADS activities were suspended; they resumed in 1949 in the Jordanian-controlled area of Jericho in the Jordan Valley (close to the Israeli border) with a new focus on the socioeconomic rehabilitation of Palestinian farmers who had become destitute in exile. Many of them lived in the refugee camps of 'Aqbat Jabr and 'Ayn al-Sultan that had been established near Jericho by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) – one of the “voluntary agencies” tasked in December 1948 with registering and providing for refugees’ basic needs under the guidance of the UN Relief for the Palestine Refugees (UNRPR).⁵ UNRWA, which took over on 30 April 1950 with a new mandate combining long-term socioeconomic reintegration and short-term (and declining) relief, and the ADS thus shared similar concerns for the long-term well-being of refugees, irrespective of the course of the Arab-Israeli conflict. This prompted them to establish working relationships, notably through technical and financial support and joint livelihoods projects.

Based on the analysis of archival documents from UNRWA (1960–80), the ICRC (1948–50), and ADS internal reports and secondary sources, this article investigates such relationships over three decades (1950–80).⁶ It takes as the main research issue the extent to which the agency’s support for the ADS local developmental initiative on behalf of Palestine refugees paved the way for the increase of human development assistance and self-reliance beyond emergency relief-based humanitarianism. How were the commonalities and differences between the two organizations’ ideological underpinnings and operational modes of operations coordinated and to what outcomes and impact? How was the apparently apolitical notion of human development reconciled with the refugees’ unflinching claims for their right of return?

Tackling those questions, the article first shows how, in early 1949, at a time when the Palestinian refugees still expected a prompt return to their homes in Israel/Palestine, the idea of socioeconomic reintegration of the refugees through employment and vocational/technical education was developed in place of humanitarian assistance (what would today be named the “humanitarian/development nexus”). This occurred simultaneously both within the United Nations system on the one hand, and by Palestinian notables from Jerusalem supported by the Jordanian authorities, on the other. The article then explores the ideological, political, and operational factors that made it possible for the ADS and UNRWA to develop an operational partnership despite initial refugee opposition and reluctance within the agency itself. Finally, after examining the implementation and outcomes of such a partnership, the article reflects on the opportunities and limits of partnerships between UNRWA and its local institutional environment.

Toward an ADS/UNRWA Partnership: Early Refugee “Reestablishment” Plans in Jordan

In September 1949, about eighteen months after the outbreak of the first Arab-Israeli conflict and with the failure of the UN-sponsored Lausanne peace conference to settle the refugee issue, the UN Conciliation Commission for Palestine (UNCCP) established the Economic Survey Mission (ESM). The ESM was tasked to find practical ways to facilitate the repatriation, resettlement, and economic and social rehabilitation of the refugees pursuant to the provisions of Article 11 of Resolution 194 (III) of the UN Assembly General (December 1948) and to promote economic conditions for peace and stability in the Near East.⁷ However, due to Israel’s unwillingness to discuss the issue of refugee repatriation, the ESM limited its mission to the economic and social rehabilitation of the refugees in their main Arab host countries.⁸ Its recommendations, which served as a basis for the drafting of UNRWA’s founding through General Assembly Resolution 302 (IV) of 8 December 1949, were sustained by the “more-work-less-relief” formula and the handover of the agency’s relief services (including education and health) to the host authorities by December 1950. Recognizing that the refugees – the vast majority of whom resided in Arab host countries bordering Israel – still held as a matter of right and justice to their return to their homes, and opposed long-term resettlement in lands further away from Palestine, the ESM suggested that the only immediate constructive step in sight was to give able-bodied men an opportunity “to work where they now are.”⁹ Since the region and its populations were considered to be not ready for large-scale development, the ESM recommended the implementation of internationally subsidized small/medium scale “relief work” projects, mainly in agriculture (afforestation, road construction, irrigation, and the like). Such relief work would employ refugees as a first measure toward their gradual rehabilitation and removal from the ration lists within nine months after the start of the projects. Public works, according to the ESM, would also add to the productivity of national and regional economies and lay the basis for subsequent larger developments offering a permanent livelihood to more people in the years to come.¹⁰

The ESM socioeconomic approach was largely informed and supported by international stakeholders, including the UNCCP and the voluntary agencies. While the UNCCP privately agreed, as early as March 1949, that return looked like an elusive option despite the Arab leaders’ “unrealistic calls for a full return of the refugees,”¹¹ the ICRC president indicated to the UK foreign secretary in September 1949 that “now resettlement [outside Israeli-controlled Palestine] is the crucial issue and the relief supplies . . . no more than a palliative.”¹² Two months later, he publicly urged the UN General Assembly to take firm decisions concerning the reestablishment (later called reintegration or resettlement as from 1950) of the refugees.¹³ The ICRC stance was not only based on pragmatic views, namely the impossibility of the large-scale return of the refugees; it was also underpinned by more “Orientalist-like” developmentalist considerations regarding the future of the Palestinian society as a whole: The end of the “pre-1948 regime of *Effendis* [notables] and *fellah* [farmer] required,” as an



Figure 2. “Aqabat Jaber camp for Palestine refugees near Jericho was once home for 45,000 persons. After the 1967 Arab-Israeli conflict, most inhabitants fled east across the Jordan River. Today, only 2,700 remain in the camp.” © UNRWA photo, undated.

advisor to the ICRC put it, “immense education efforts amongst refugees”; beyond relief, it was crucial “to take advantage of the exile of these uneducated Arabs and teach them the basics of cleanliness and hygiene, of children’s education, of civic-mindedness and to train cadres amongst the most educated of them.”¹⁴

The reestablishment approach was also promoted as early as March 1949 by certain segments of the host’s civil societies in the territory of Palestine then under the military control of Jordan – “Arab Palestine” (later the “West Bank”). Emphasizing the need to wrest camp refugees from the grip of destitution and idle dependence on relief aid, local charities attempted in 1949 to counter the refugees’ opposition to any initiative unrelated to their right of return and convince them to access local labor markets.¹⁵ More ambitiously, “Arab [non-refugee] circles in Jerusalem” informed the UNRPR in May 1949 that they were preparing an agricultural reestablishment plan in the Jordan Valley that aimed to durably improve the lives of camp refugees: the Arab Development Society (ADS) project, to be discussed below.¹⁶ It is no coincidence that such initiatives originated from Jordan-controlled territories. Since December 1948, King Abdallah I of Jordan had initiated steps unparalleled in the Arab world to integrate into his kingdom Palestinians (refugees and non-refugees) on both the east and west banks of the Jordan River under his control. Such steps included granting them Jordanian citizenship beginning in December 1949 as a prelude to the annexation of “Arab Palestine” (the West Bank) in April 1950. Presented as a



Figure 3. “This refugee camp near the ancient city of Jericho sheltered over 50,000 Palestine refugees in the aftermath of the 1948 Arab-Israeli war. Today, the scene is similar, but the camp is almost deserted – population, 3,700. In the face of the June 1967 hostilities, the refugees fled to east Jordan where they became refugees for the second time in their lives. Although thousands applied for permission to return after the fighting was over, few permits were granted to the inhabitants of the camps near Jericho on the West Bank.” Photo by Myrtle Winter Chaumeny. © UNRWA.

temporary arrangement pending the implementation of Resolution 194 (III), and more particularly the return of the refugees to their homes, such integration aimed to boost the country’s drive toward institutional and economic development.¹⁷ Jordan was also the only Arab host country that fully supported the ESM works approach and actively engaged UNRWA in the industrial and agricultural development of the country. The creation in 1951 of the Jordan Development Bank that aimed (until 1966–67) to encourage economic development and raise the living conditions of the Jordanians, including the “Jordanians of Palestinian origin,” best illustrates Jordan’s (temporary) assimilationist approach.¹⁸

The Arab Development Society was thus created with the permission and blessing of Jordanian authorities in June 1949. Its initial objective was to set up a farm that would house and employ refugees for land reclamation (up to four thousand acres) and agricultural production (animal husbandry, fruit trees, vegetables, and cereals) in barren state lands northeast of Jericho that had been considered unfit for agriculture by the British Mandate authorities. However, encouraged by previous experiences of fresh water pumping in nearby areas,¹⁹ ‘Alami was confident that his project would “open up great possibilities for developing vast areas in Jordan, thereby giving hope and work to the refugees now stagnating in the camps.”²⁰ The sale of the farm’s products would in turn allow for the establishment of vocational education facilities to promote access for young refugees to the local job market.



Figure 4. “Every morning and evening these women go to fetch water from Elisha’s fountain [‘Ayn al-Sultan] for their families who live in Aqabat Jaber, which lies in the shadow of the mount of temptation near Jericho. Displaced from their homes in Palestine in 1948, a large number of refugees stayed here in the Jordan valley because of its many springs which provide them with water. Elisha’s fountain provides water for this camp, as it did for the ancient city of Jericho more than 6,000 years ago. As a result to the 1968 Arab Israeli war, only 2,273 persons out of 52,000 remain in the three camps in Jericho, most of them concentrated [across] the Jordan River into east Jordan.” © UNRWA.

Unfortunately, when the ESM toured the region in September 1949, the ADS was still struggling to pump sufficient water suitable for irrigation. Its hydrological experts rapidly concluded that the project was not promising and did not select it as suitable for international support.²¹ Suspecting that the ESM decision reflected less on any technical concerns than on the aim of Western powers to resettle the refugees as far as possible from the borders with Israel, the ADS continued to pursue its pumping efforts.²² These eventually came to fruition in January 1950: irrigation water was found in sufficient quantity and the construction of the farm began. Echoing the ICRC grand narrative of social development in situ replacing relief as laid out above, the ADS enshrined its project within the regeneration of the Palestinian people as a whole – a regeneration that did not suppress Palestine’s traditional agrarian society, but sought to empower its main actors, the farmers. As the triumphal ADS put it:

Following a war that pushed 1,000,000 of his people into homeless squalor, the Arab has found his world more closely united than it has been for 1,000 years . . . he admits the incompatibility of feodary and progress; he has noted the relationship of feudalism to ignorance, poverty to feudalism, foreign control to poverty and ignorance to foreign control. He is determined to raise his world above all of it. Today, his attention is directed to a search for the bootstrap that will achieve this end In the desert that is the valley



Figure 5. “Aqabat Jaber camp, 1973.” Photographer unknown. © UNRWA.

of the River Jordan, close to the spot where John the Baptist baptized Jesus, Arabs look at a humming little settlement . . . and know that this, on a small scale, is the route they must sooner or later travel.²³

The Basis for a Durable ADS/UNRWA Partnership: Shared Narratives, Practices of Refugee Rehabilitation, and Host Country Development

By 1952, the ADS had reclaimed 620 acres of barren land and related irrigation systems, planted more than fifty thousand forest and fruit trees, constructed many kilometers of asphalt roads, and built a model farm to house camp refugees participating in the project. The farm eventually consisted of sixty buildings equipped with electricity and sewerage systems including housing units for use by workers and trainees, and facilities for the ADS administration and medical and educational activities. The deliberate contrast with the tent or shack housing of the nearby refugee camps was striking.²⁴ In the next ten years, the land reclaimed by the ADS reached one thousand acres, new methods of irrigation suitable for subtropical irrigation were introduced, and modern poultry and dairy farms began selling their products on the local and regional markets. Some two thousand refugee heads of families were then employed in the farm, and some 160 boys aged eight to eighteen years were given full-board accommodation for academic education, followed by three years of training in agriculture and craft trades such as carpentry, mechanics, tailoring, weaving and shoemaking.²⁵ Trained graduates were expected to become self-reliant by accessing the local labor market or, alternatively, prosperous Arab countries such as Libya, Iraq, and the Gulf countries where there was high demand for labor.²⁶



Figure 6. “Refugee conditions, Ein El Sultan, West Bank.” ©1973 UNRWA.

The successful development of the ADS attracted the attention of UNRWA. The ADS was indeed one of the only local social institutions in the Near East engaged in activities that were in line with the “resettlement” projects that the UN General Assembly tasked the agency to implement in the early to mid-1950s in lieu of relief assistance: land reclamation, social inclusion, and construction of permanent housing and livelihoods (training and placement) projects.²⁷ Both institutions, as the UNRWA commissioner-general would write to Musa ‘Alami in 1968, had similar goals, namely “equipping young refugees with the technical knowledge they need to lead productive lives.”²⁸ They also shared a keen awareness of the long-term societal impact of their educational programs on the regeneration of the Palestinian community as a whole. UNRWA’s operational interest in the ADS also lay in the fact that some of the latter’s activities covered gaps in its own delivery of services. For instance, the children trained at the ADS were predominantly refugee orphans, a category whose specific needs were not targeted by UNRWA.²⁹ Moreover, in the mid-1950s, the ADS started delivering relief and micro development services in the form of providing drinking water and works projects, and setting up of small businesses and agricultural cooperatives to West Bank frontier villagers who had not lost their homes but had lost their only means of livelihood as a result of the 1948 conflict. They had been registered as “other claimants” by the ICRC and then by UNRWA, receiving only half of the ration provided to eligible refugees with specific funds.³⁰

Shared developmental approaches to the refugee issue and operational complementarity swept away voices within UNRWA that continuously questioned the relevance of engaging in partnerships with the ADS. As UNRWA’s chief education

services put it in 1968, what was the relevance of the agency supporting “skilled farmers without a land [that would be turned into] agricultural slaves . . . in the Jordan Valley, this freak of nature, 400 meters beneath sea level.”³¹ What is more, UNRWA was plainly aware of the rural-urban transition that had affected the refugee communities since their exodus: predominantly farmers in 1948, a majority of them (and more so among their children) had resorted to employment as workers in construction and small industry or as technicians and white collar workers in the fast-expanding towns and cities of the Middle East and the Gulf countries.³² UNRWA facilitated that transition and was therefore not necessarily in line with a project like the ADS whose prime goal was, in its own words, “not to produce white collared young men seeking office jobs and lazing about in the towns . . . [but to] produce cultivators (*fellahin*) better equipped with agricultural knowledge and experience.”³³

Reluctance within UNRWA to engage in agricultural projects was compounded by the failure of governmental vocational training centers in the region (al-Qaddura center in Tulkarm in the West Bank and the Bayt Hanun center in the Gaza Strip) to find decently rewarded employment for its graduates, in the agricultural sector particularly. The ADS also lacked evidence that its graduates found durable employment. While they were expected initially to remain and work in the Jordan Valley, the dearth of agricultural employment there and in Jordan more generally, compelled them, as the ADS believed, to seek employment in the fast-growing economies of Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries, as well as in South America.³⁴ However, the ADS did not monitor their whereabouts. This, as an UNRWA official put it, made it hazardous for UNRWA or any donor to engage in common projects with it.³⁵ Brushing off such critiques, UNRWA commissioner-generals generally held that what was needed was to improve the ADS training services and encourage native citizens to help their development.³⁶ Supporting this would also show ADS’s international supporters, some of whom were also UNRWA donor countries, that the agency was “at least doing something in that direction.”³⁷ Internal UNRWA opposition to partnerships with the ADS, however, may explain why they were few and why not much was done to sustain them when they faced challenges, as we will see below.

Another factor of rapprochement between UNRWA and the ADS was their common positioning vis-à-vis donor countries on the one hand, and refugee communities on the other. Both ADS and UNRWA were subsidized by Western states and private institutions that, in the 1950s, made them appear to Jordanian opposition parties (including communist, Ba’thist, and Islamist parties) as pawns serving Western political agendas – stemming the spread of communism in the region and preserving the state of Israel. This did not help UNRWA or the ADS to convince the refugees of the apolitical nature of their actions, despite continuous awareness campaigns stressing that their developmental programs did not prejudice the provisions of Article 11 of Resolution 194, namely, in refugee parlance, the right of return.³⁸ Reflecting on its various works and larger-scale resettlement plan of the 1950s, UNRWA mainly ascribed their failure, beyond the meagerness of the physical resources and funding made available for development, to the refugees’ reluctance to engage in any project

likely to involve permanent resettlement given their “strong desire to return to their homeland . . . that springs mainly from the natural longing of the people for their old homes, strengthened and encouraged by . . . resolution (194) of the General Assembly.” Such attitudes also “influenced the policies of Near East Governments,” which eventually abandoned the idea of implementing them – including Jordan after the mid-1950s.”³⁹ For both the refugees and their host countries, the preservation of UNRWA and its general programs became one of the main guarantors of the United Nations’ commitment to ultimately solve the refugee issue through the implementation of the right of return.

The ADS, whose leader Musa ‘Alami belonged to the discredited former ruling Palestinian elite, was not immune to refugee criticism. ‘Alami’s publicly held views that the choice under the present circumstances was not one between settlement and return, but between demoralizing life in camps and the restoration of dignity and usefulness as productive members of society, were considered patronizing and serving Western agendas. Camp refugees, who were already resisting UNRWA’s attempts to transform their tents into housing units refused to settle in the farmhouses, lest this lead to the dismantlement of the camps and be interpreted as a renunciation to their right of return. These houses eventually only hosted orphan students and trainees – an “Arab boys’ town” as it came to be known.⁴⁰ Tensions with camp refugees reached a critical point in 1955–56. Triggered by rumors that Jordan would join the pro-Western, anti-communist Pact of Mutual Cooperation (the “Baghdad Pact”), anti-government demonstrations and riots erupted across the country. Refugee communities participated in those activities under the banner of opposition to resettlement. Government institutions and UNRWA, whose storehouses in Hebron were ransacked, were not the rioters’ only target: in Jericho, a crowd of some thirty-five thousand persons, mainly camp refugees, stormed the ADS facilities and set them on fire, while shouting hostile slogans calling its management “imperialists” and “traitors.”⁴¹

Such hostile stances subsided in the late 1950s, when UNRWA abandoned its collective reintegration schemes and related handovers of UNRWA services, opting for a more gradual individual reintegration approach based on academic and vocational/technical education and inclusion in the local or regional economy.⁴² The refugees approved of such an approach since it did not seem to threaten their refugee status and its main symbols: the refugee camps and its high concentration of UNRWA relief, educational, and health installations. As UNRWA confirmed in 1957:

Although the desire of the refugees for repatriation and their opposition to permanent resettlement continue unabated, there are signs among them of a growing appreciation of the desirability of self-support and of rehabilitation, in the broad sense of an improvement in their conditions of life and prospects for the future. This shift is noticeable not only in the increased demands for assistance in individual self-support projects, but also in the substantial rise in interest in vocational training of all types and even in the frequent requests for more and better housing.⁴³

The refugees' new approach, allowing for upward social mobility in the context of exile, prepared the ground for the safe elaboration and implementation of livelihood projects.

The ADS-UNRWA Partnership: Technical and Financial Support and Joint Livelihood Projects

Relations between UNRWA and the ADS took two main forms: unilateral logistical administrative and financial support from UNRWA to the ADS; and joint livelihood projects aimed to promote the inclusion of youth refugees in the labor market. In retrospect, the unilateral support provided by UNRWA on behalf of ADS was the most impactful component of their relationship, proving instrumental in guaranteeing the development of the latter's educational and commercial activities despite occasional host authority intrusions. Such support first consisted of the agency regularly encouraging its refugee school students to attend the ADS vocational training center and exchanging trainers with ADS. More significant was UNRWA using its international agency status for the tax-free import of material and cattle needed by the ADS for the expansion of its commercial farm and vocational training facilities. This arrangement ended in October 1959, when the Jordanian authorities decided that they would no longer accept to clear goods for UNRWA involving commercial transactions.⁴⁴ UNRWA also served as a funds transfer platform whenever international donors (such as Switzerland, Denmark, and Ireland in 1966–67) expressed interest in financially supporting the ADS, but could not do so because their internal regulations did not allow them to fund private entities. Finally, UNRWA proved decisive in guaranteeing the ADS's survival in the wake of the 1967 war that had resulted in the exile of 'Alami to Beirut and the destruction of part of the facilities. UNRWA appointed a liaison officer tasked with assisting the ADS administrative staff in the absence of 'Alami, repaired damaged material, and purchased its agricultural products. The idea of a (temporary) UNRWA custodianship of the ADS was even considered by both parties, but Israeli occupation authorities opposed it.⁴⁵ While the latter were supportive of the "integrationist" dimension of the ADS project and appreciated UNRWA's support for it, they insisted that, as an NGO, the ADS had to operate under their direct aegis.⁴⁶ A compromise was eventually reached, whereby UNRWA support to the ADS would assume the looser label of "provisional sponsorship." Such a designation also suited 'Alami since it affirmed that the ADS administration should in principle remain "in Arab hands."⁴⁷

Attempts to establish formal UNRWA-ADS joint ventures in the fields of technical and vocational training were less successful. Three of them were implemented, but were either delayed or ended shortly after their inception. Project 1 in 1955 consisted of UNRWA funding five years of schooling and vocational training for UNRWA-registered refugee children at the ADS. Project 2 in 1966–67 provided for UNRWA to channel Swiss Technical Aid funds to the ADS on the condition that the ADS allocate such funds for the training of UNRWA school students in its vocational center. Project 3, the largest project, extended the "emergency" aid delivered by UNRWA to the ADS in the wake of the 1967 war: UNRWA was to directly contribute as a sponsor to

the running costs of the ADS training center, combined with a three-year enrollment of some forty UNRWA-registered boarding students. The mixed outcomes of such projects are due to a variety of factors that compounded the inherent difficulties originating from a sensitive context marked by the protracted Arab-Israeli conflict, chronic instability, and the political dimension of the refugee issue.

The UN's "Original Sins"

Despite apparent ideological and operational commonalities between their mandates, relations between UNRWA and the ADS remained strained. Notably, this was due, according to UNRWA officials, to 'Alami's "imperious attitude," as he tended to ignore UNRWA's operational advice.⁴⁸ This attitude may be explained by 'Alami's resentment of the agency and the entire UN system that originated from the ESM decision to reject his project as unrealistic in 1949. The belief either that UN officials were not fully competent or that their decisions served a hidden pro-Israeli political agenda or both continued to haunt 'Alami. Another explanatory reason for his uneasy attitude toward the agency is the opinion he may have held (together with most refugees and host country officials) that the true nature of UNRWA's existence was less the expression of the international community's support for the Palestine refugees than an unquestionable entitlement owed to the Palestinians at large for the predicament that befell them in 1948 and the United Nations' responsibility in it.

Financial Issues

Financial constraints have from the outset plagued UNRWA's existence. Essentially based on voluntary contributions of the members of the international community (as an expression of its temporary status), its budget has rarely allowed it to develop specific projects outside the already difficult fulfilment of its quasi-governmental education, health, and relief responsibilities. For example, Project 1 was prematurely abandoned a few months after it was launched in 1955, as UNRWA felt that its limited educational budget could not sustain the five-year financing of academic and vocational education of refugee children.⁴⁹

The Refugee Status Requirement

A concern that affected all three projects was the donor country requirement that at least half of the child beneficiaries of the projects be persons duly registered as bona fide refugees (or their descendants),⁵⁰ and not "economic refugees," registered by both the ADS and UNRWA, such as the frontier villagers or needy Jericho villagers trained by the ADS.⁵¹ Concern was also heightened by the significant number of fraudulent registrations with the agency, including host community families with forged former Palestinian IDs, undeclared deaths, and duplicate refugees.⁵² The preparation for Project 2, for instance, dragged on for several months until UNRWA made sure that the Swiss contribution would be spent on a population of children at least half of whom were bona fide registered refugees.

The Multiple Significations of UNRWA’s Eligibility Regulations

The incompatibility between UNRWA’s eligibility regulations and the refugees’ multi-dimensional attachment to UNRWA services played a key role in the failure of Project 3. UNRWA eligibility rules excluded refugees who received free residential training in sponsored training centers from the ration program.⁵³ Most trainees affected by the suspension of the rations protested and angrily left the ADS center without the required prior authorization.⁵⁴ In so doing, they fell under another eligibility rule that permanently froze assistance to trainees interrupting their training without prior permission.⁵⁵ This further fuelled the refugees’ anger at both the ADS and UNRWA, demonstrating the importance that UNRWA’s active ration card had come to play in refugee communities. It provided access to relief assistance and, as the agency itself acknowledged, a tangible asset upon the strength of which substantial sums could be borrowed.⁵⁶ It also constituted, especially in Jordan where refugees were citizens, a formal proof of their refugee identity and possible evidence for their claim to return to their original homes. In June 1969, claiming that the “alteration of the refugee status of the trainees’ families had resulted in such difficulties in recruitment and in retaining trainees of the ADS, and in general to such frictions,” the ADS decided that it was preferable to forego UNRWA’s support.⁵⁷ Despite conciliatory steps by the agency, including a possibility to revert the training leavers to their prior status as recipients of rations, the ADS refused to rescind its decision, thereby formally ending their partnership.

UNRWA-ADS relations did not recover after the failure of Project 3. During the 1970s, UNRWA had little contact with the ADS and even stopped playing its traditional role as a channel for international funds.⁵⁸ Nevertheless, the ADS remained under its radar: In 1980, Musa ‘Alami, then eighty-three years old, fell ill, which raised concerns about the society’s future. UNRWA proposed to take over temporarily the management of its vocational training center with ‘Alami’s consent and to provide additional funding, pending its handover to any future local entity or UN body.⁵⁹ Eventually, Arab solutions were found to ensure the sustainability of the ADS. A new Palestinian director was appointed and the society somehow returned to its original foundations by benefitting from the support of the Joint Jordanian-Palestinian (PLO) Fund for the Steadfastness of the Palestinian People in the Occupied Homeland, a body created by the Arab League in the wake of the 1978 Baghdad Arab summit to help local institutions resist Israeli occupation. UNRWA welcomed these developments with some relief.⁶⁰

Conclusion

Since its inception, UNRWA has constituted a lifeline for the Palestine refugees despite recurrent budgetary challenges, acting as a quasi-governmental institution directly providing essential basic services to an ever-growing number of beneficiaries, from 957,000 individuals in 1950 to nearly 6.4 million in 2021.⁶¹ Throughout the years, it has established operational standards for its educational, health, relief, and social services that have inspired host country authorities to institute similar programs across the Near East and prompted them to conclude

operational partnerships with UNRWA, in Jordan especially. However, UNRWA's relations with its local institutional environment (especially with institutions that shared the same belief in refugee socioeconomic rehabilitation) have remained underdeveloped, limiting the scope and overall impact of its humanitarian/developmental action in the host countries. The in-depth analysis of the operational ties the agency maintained over two decades with one key local non-governmental institution operating in the West Bank, the Arab Development Society, provides key information in this regard, showcasing the relatively limited importance local institutions came to play in UNRWA's development strategies and practices.

The key commonalities between UNRWA and ADS activities and objectives prompted the agency to provide unilateral logistical, administrative and financial support to the latter. Such support at times proved essential for the survival of the ADS, as when it played a key role in rehabilitating its damaged facilities in the wake of the 1967 Arab-Israeli war. However, establishing durable project-based partnerships proved to be more difficult. Among the constraining challenges lay financial and administrative issues traditionally faced by developmental projects such as insufficient funding, host authorities' restrictions, targeting and, to some extent, lack of commitment from segments of UNRWA's own staff. More intractable difficulties stemmed from the refugee communities' opposition to any developmental initiative or eligibility regulation that appeared to threaten their refugee status and/or their entitlement to humanitarian services. The combination of those challenges contributed to distance UNRWA from any long-term partnership with local institutions and to prioritize relations with governmental entities. Reflecting on UNRWA's experience with the ADS in 1980, the agency's commissioner-general acknowledged that its experience with the ADS brought its officials to "exercise great caution in expanding . . . activities . . . by stepping into the shoes of existing NGOs."⁶² Such distancing has proven durable; despite UNRWA's calls for greater collaboration with its local institutional environment since the mid-2000s, partnerships have remained very limited.

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Endnotes

- 1 The main historical studies on UNRWA are: E. H. Buehrig, *The UN and the Palestinian Refugees: A Study in Nonterritorial Administration* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1971); Milton Viorst, *UNRWA and Peace in the Middle East* (Washington: Middle East Institute, 1989); Benjamin Schiff, *Refugees unto the Third Generation: UN Aid to the Palestinians* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1995); Francesca Albanese and Lex Takkenberg, *Palestinian Refugees in International Law* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020). Since the early 2000s, a series of articles have widened the scope of research on UNRWA, including anthropological approaches and new topics such as refugee protection and refugee participation in refugee camps. Several were included in: Sari Hanafi, Leila Hilal, and Lex Takkenberg, eds., *UNRWA and Palestine Refugees: From Relief and Works to Human Development* (London: Routledge, 2014); and “UNRWA and the Palestinian Refugees 60 Years Later,” special issue of *Refugee Survey Quarterly* 28, no. 2–3 (2009).
- 2 The field offices are in: Jordan (east bank), the West Bank, the Gaza Strip, Lebanon, and Syria.
- 3 These centers were established in 1952–53 to provide some social activities (sports and voluntary work for male youth, embroidery, and other traditional crafts for women) in isolated camps where there was little chance of obtaining work and establishing social relations with the host communities. Later, in the 1960s, centers were established for disabled people. Today, most of these centers function independently from UNRWA, except in Jordan where they remain under the agency’s umbrella.
- 4 UNRWA’s historical archives contain only one file documenting such relations in the series Re 300 (V) “Projects for Sponsorship”: the Musa Bey Alami – Arab Development Society, Part I (1960–67), Part II (1968–75), and Part III (1976–80).
- 5 Besides the ICRC that operated in today’s West Bank and Israel (for the Jewish refugees and the Arab displaced persons that remained in Israel), the League of Red Crescent Societies operated in Lebanon, Syria, and Jordan (East Bank), and the American Friends Service Committee in Gaza. All three agencies began their relief operations in December 1948 and handed over their services to UNRWA on 30 April 1950.
- 6 The ICRC archives have been accessible for researchers since 1996. I consulted the ICRC archives at the ICRC headquarters in Geneva in 1998 on behalf of the Institute of Palestine Studies for an analytical report on the ICRC archives about its missions in Palestine as a delegation during the first Arab-Israeli conflict and for relief assistance for refugees and non-refugees (February 1948–50), and as the Commissariat of the ICRC for the Palestine Refugees in the current West Bank and in Israel proper under the umbrella of the UNRPR (December 1948 – June 1950); see Jalal Al Hussein, “Red Cross Palestine Refugee Archives (1948–1950),” in *Reinterpreting the Historical Record: The Uses of Palestinian Refugee Archives for Social Science Research and Policy Analysis*, ed. Salim Tamari and Elia Zureik (Jerusalem: Institute of Jerusalem Studies, 2001). There are no specific regulations for accessing UNRWA archives. I consulted the UNRWA-ADS archives in Amman in 1997 within the framework of an academic program conducted by the Centre d’études et de recherches sur le Moyen-Orient Contemporain (CERMOC). UNRWA, which participated in the program in a supervisor capacity, opened its archives to involved researchers.
- 7 See United Nations Conciliation Commission for Palestine (UNCCP), *Final Report of the United Nations Economic Survey Mission for the Middle East: An Approach to Economic Development in the Middle East*, UNCCP, UN doc. A/AC.25/6, 28 December 1949, 16. UN General Assembly Resolution 194, Article 11, resolved that “the refugees wishing to return to their homes and live at peace with their neighbors should be permitted to do so at the earliest practicable date and that compensation for the property of those choosing not to return . . . should be made good by the governments or authorities responsible.” Moreover, the UNCCP was instructed to “facilitate the repatriation, resettlement, and economic and social rehabilitation of the refugees and the payment of compensation.”
- 8 The ESM team, who toured the region in September 1949, was headed by Gordon Clapp, chairman of the Tennessee Valley Authority in the United States.
- 9 United Nations Conciliation Commission for Palestine (UNCCP), *Final Report*, UN doc. A/AC.25/6, 28 December 1949, 15–20.
- 10 Such larger developments were to fall under the responsibility of the host governments, UNCCP, *Final Report*, 3, 19.
- 11 As UNCCP members put it in a meeting with the ICRC even before the start of the Lausanne

- Peace Conference, in March 1949; see Lettre de Escher à P. Ruegger (Pdt CICR), 6 March 1949, ICRC Archives: series G.59/I/GC/E, box 845, file: "Correspondance avec le Commissariat."
- 12 However, the ICRC warned the UN General Assembly about the limited time frame set by the ESM for the termination of relief as a result of socioeconomic rehabilitation (nine months); disturbances were to be expected. "Troisième rapport général d'activité du Commissariat du CICR pour l'aide aux réfugiés en Palestine (période du 1er octobre au 31 décembre 1949)," 91–98, ICRC Archives, series G.59/I/GC/E, box 858.
 - 13 "Troisième rapport général d'activité."
 - 14 In: Personal and confidential document by Max Wolf (advisor ICRC), 26 July 1949, ICRC Archives, series G. 59/I/GC, box 840, file XIV: "Correspondance diverse 1948–1950"; and Major Lüscher, "Rapport sur l'organisation des camps," 20 December 1948, 11, in ICRC Archives, series G.59/I/GC/E, box 860.
 - 15 Such as the General Committee to Care for the Affairs of Displaced Arabs in Palestine based in Nablus; see Bahjat Sabri, *al-Lajna al-'amma li-l-'inaya bi-shu'un al-nazihin al-'Arab fi Filastin min khilal milaffat baladiyyat Nablus wa awraqiha* [The general committee to care for the affairs of displaced Arabs in Palestine from the files and documents of the Nablus municipality] (Nablus: al-Najah University, 1991).
 - 16 "Note sur l'entretien du Dr Gloor avec M. le Dr M. al-Husseini," in ICRC Archives, series G. 59/I/GC/E, box 854, file X: "Correspondance diverse 1948–1950," subfile "Correspondance diverse, novembre 1948 au 30 juin 1949." The UNRPR, whose mandate was limited to the administration of relief aid, nevertheless provided the ADS with a small financial contribution for the initial development phase of its project.
 - 17 In December 1948, pro-Hashemite Palestinian notables gathered in Jericho and proclaimed their wish to see Jordan annex what remained of Palestine; such a resolution was upheld in other similar conferences in Ramallah and Nablus and would lead to the granting of citizenship to the Palestine refugees on both sides of the Jordan river (and to indigenous West Bankers). King Abdallah also attempted to reach a peace deal with Israel until the early 1950s; see Avi Shlaim, *Collusion across the Jordan: King Abdallah, the Zionist Movement, and the Partition of Palestine* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998).
 - 18 See *Annual Report of the Director of UNRWA 1 May 1950–30 June 1951* (A/1905 add. 1), par. 84.
 - 19 In nearby lands owned by Muhyi al-Din Effendi Husayni, fresh water had been successfully dug for in the 1930s. See ADS, *The Arab Development Society – Jericho* (Jerusalem: Commercial Press, 1953), 12. Other further experiences of water pumping and salt and mineral extraction from the Dead Sea were successfully conducted during the British Mandate period on Palestine. See Nadi Abusaada, "Consolidating the Rule of Experts: A Model Village for Refugees in the Jordan Valley, 1945–55," *International Journal of Islamic Architecture* 10, no. 2 (2021): 366.
 - 20 ADS, *Arab Development Society – Jericho*, 13–14.
 - 21 UNCCP, *Final Report of the United Nations Economic Survey Mission for the Middle East II* (Technical Supplement), December 1949, 70. The ESM did not totally condemn the project, but believed that irrigation water for this tract of land could better be obtained by conserving the surplus waters of Wadi Qilt (in the hills closer to Jerusalem) and conducting the water to the tract by means of a concrete-lined canal.
 - 22 ADS, *Arab Development Society – Jericho*, 12.
 - 23 *Bootstrap: The Arab Development Society's Jordan Valley Project* (Beirut: Near East News Association, 1953), foreword.
 - 24 ADS, *Arab Development Society – Jericho*, 18–21. The ADS aimed to provide a scheme of refugee resettlement alternative to the UNRWA's, which manifested itself in building more permanent structures than tents or temporary shacks set up in many refugee camps. See, Abusaada, "Consolidating the Rule of Experts," 374.
 - 25 Successful trainees were offered scholarships to gain higher education in universities such as the American University of Beirut and Brigham Young University in the United States. See Mohammad Qutob, "Resilience through the Decades: The Arab Development Society," *This Week in Palestine* 278 (June 2021).
 - 26 ADS, *Arab Development Society – Jericho*, 22.
 - 27 Following the failure of the ESM "relief works approach" to employ a substantial number of refugees (15,000 whereas the refugee labor force was estimated at 250,000), the UN General Assembly Resolutions 393 (December 1950) and 513 (January 1952) invited UNRWA to reorient its efforts toward

- larger-scale resettlement schemes, notably through direct interventions to increase the economic absorption capacity of the local economies (including the expansion of vocational training), install refugee communities in empty territories of the Sinai, Syria, and the Jordan Valley, and promote the emigration of refugees to other Arab countries.
- 28 Letter dated 30 January 1968 from the Deputy-Commissioner-General, J. Reddaway to Musa 'Alami, in UNRWA Archives, series Re 300 (V): "Musa Bey Alami – Arab Development Society, Part II (1968–1975)" (hereunder referred to as UNRWA Archives II).
 - 29 As acknowledged by UNRWA in *Annual Report of the Director of UNRWA 1956–1957* (A/3686), par. 9–10.
 - 30 In 1955, the frontier villages population totaled about two hundred thousand inhabitants living in 111 villages (ADS, *Arab Development Society – Jericho*, 23). The UNRWA standard definition of the Palestine refugee stipulates that it is "a person whose normal residence was Palestine for a minimum of two years preceding the conflict in 1948, and who, as a result of this conflict, lost *both* his home and his means of livelihood." The limitation of services to frontier villagers and to other economic refugees (Jerusalem poor, Gaza poor, and compromised cases in Lebanon) to half-rations was decided upon by the ICRC and the other voluntary agencies and pursued by UNRWA after May 1950. See UNRWA, *Consolidated Eligibility Instructions*, 1 November 1961.
 - 31 See Chief Education Services (van Diffelen) to G. P. Cassels (Chief, UNRWA operations – West Bank), 2 January 1968, UNRWA Archives II.
 - 32 The few refugee agricultural settlements set up with the assistance of UNRWA and the Jordanian authorities failed to become self-reliant; see Pamela Ann Smith, *Palestine and the Palestinians, 1876–1983* (London: Croom Helm, 1984), 158–62.
 - 33 ADS, *Arab Development Society – Jericho*, 25.
 - 34 See letter from Musa 'Alami to Deputy Commissioner, 21 January 1968 (UNRWA Archives II). The letter did not give any indication about the number of alumni who had migrated or found jobs in Jordan.
 - 35 UNRWA official John Defrates recognized that UNRWA shared the same monitoring difficulties: "They have the same difficulty which we share to find out what happens to the young ones when they leave the training center." Letter from Defrates to Norman Bentwich, Jewish Society for Human Services, 8 October 1965, in UNRWA Archives I.
 - 36 Letter from Commissioner-General to Director of Liaison Europe and D.C. (New York), Subject: Information on Musa Alami and the Arab Development Society, 12 March 1963, UNRWA Archives I.
 - 37 Executive Cabinet Meeting of 31 November 1968, in UNRWA Archives I. Associations called Friends of the ADS were established in the 1960s in the United States and Great Britain. Qutob, "Resilience through the Decades." Founded by the former commissioner-general of UNRWA, John Davis, in 1968, the American Near East Refugee Aid (ANERA) also offered political and financial support to ADS. The initial ADS funders were non-governmental British (Oxfam) and U.S. (Ford Foundation) organizations as well as the U.S.-sponsored Point IV Program that aimed to provide technical and financial support to the economies of countries "threatened" by the rise of communism.
 - 38 Such reassurances were a mainstay of all UN General Assembly resolutions about UNRWA in the 1950s, when the focus was on resettlement and the handover of UNRWA services to the host countries.
 - 39 UNRWA, *Annual Report of the Director of UNRWA 1954–1955* (A/2978), par. 35. The number of reinstalled refugees, that is, who were thinned out of the rations lists, remained low, at 24,000 in 1957, while the number of registered refugees was at 933,500 persons. UNRWA, *Annual Report of the Director of UNRWA 1954–1955* (A/3686).
 - 40 See Cecil Hourani, "The Arab Development Society's Project in Jericho, Jordan," *UNESCO International Social Science Bulletin* 4 (1953); and H. A. Fisher, "Up Go Walls at Jericho," *New York Herald Tribune*, 2 May 1954, republished in ADS, *Arab Development Society – Jericho*, 54–55, 62.
 - 41 Based on Musa 'Alami and ADS witnesses in: Geoffrey Furlonge, *Palestine Is My Country: The Story of Musa Alami* (London: John Murray, 1969), 188–89; Amelie Marie Goichon, *Jordanie réelle (I)* (Paris: G. P. Maisonneuve and Larose, 1967), 473–76. These events reported in the Jordanian media referred to wide-scale damage suffered by the

- ADS facilities (*al-Difa*’, 19 December 1955). The damage resulted in the ADS temporarily losing export markets. Financial support from the U.S. oil company ARAMCO enabled the ADS to resume its operations.
- 42 From 1969–70, the education program became the first program in terms of budget.
 - 43 UNRWA, *Annual Report of the Director of UNRWA 1956–1957* (A/3686), par. 39.
 - 44 See letter of UNRWA Director, John H. Davis, to Musa ‘Alami, 1 July 1959, UNRWA Archives I. UNRWA would thus only be allowed to import material used for its educational activities. This incident triggered a heated exchange of letters between UNRWA and ‘Alami, who seemed to accuse the agency of having played a role in Jordan’s decision.
 - 45 See memorandum drafted by Musa ‘Alami, “UNRWA’s Custodianship of the ADS Projects,” 25 July 1967.
 - 46 See for instance “Minutes of the Meeting Held at the Area Office in Jericho [. . .] on 3 October 1967 between the Arab Development Society and UNRWA,” in UNRWA Archives, series Re 300 (V): “Musa Bey Alami – Arab Development Society,” Part I.
 - 47 See letter from Deputy Commissioner-General to Cassels, 3 January 1968, UNRWA Archives II.
 - 48 Interoffice Memorandum from AD/ADM to Director, 30 April 1960, UNRWA Archives I.
 - 49 See “Memorandum – From Chief, Education and Training Division to Director,” 17 May 1960, UNRWA Archives I.
 - 50 This, as the UNRWA deputy commissioner-general clarified, was a principle already applied in other cases of support with local organizations. Letter from Deputy Commissioner-General Reddaway to Geoffrey Furlonge, subject: Swiss Technical Cooperation, 14 September 1966, UNRWA Archives I.
 - 51 In November 1960, the ADS delivered academic instruction (seventy-nine children) and vocational training (eighty-one students) to seventy-eight bona fide refugees, seventy-one frontier villagers, and eleven needy West Bankers. Letter from Area Officer to Deputy-Commissioner-General Reddaway – Survey, 10 November 1966, UNRWA Archives I.
 - 52 In September 1949, the percentage of “false refugees” was estimated at 5 percent of the number of registered persons in Gaza; less than 10 per cent in Lebanon and Syria; and 30 percent in “Arab Palestine” (West Bank and in Transjordan, in UNCCP, *Final Report of the United Nations Economic Survey Mission for the Middle East* (A/AC.25/6, part I), 1949. Efforts to “rectify” ration lists were made difficult in Jordan because of the pressures exerted by the refugees on the host authorities. The latter interrupted all investigations on the grounds that continuing them threatened public security – as explained in *Special Report of the Director Concerning Other Claimants for Relief* (A/2978/Add.1), par. 73.
 - 53 UNRWA, *Consolidated Eligibility Instructions*, 1 November 1961, Chapters I and IV.
 - 54 This affected twenty-two interns; sixteen other interns were classified as Children Registered for Services (CRS) and were on the waiting list for receiving rations.
 - 55 UNRWA, *Consolidated Eligibility Instructions*, Chapters I and IV.
 - 56 *Annual Report of the Director of UNRWA 1953–1954* (A/2717), par. 63. The general distribution of rations whereby all refugee families below a certain level of income were entitled to rations was replaced in 1982–83 by the more restrictive Special Hardship Cases regime whereby only the poorest refugees belonging to specific vulnerable social categories (such as female-headed families) received rations.
 - 57 See Note for the Record of Commissioner-General Michelmore, 17 June 1968, UNRWA Archives II.
 - 58 See letter from Debrates (UNRWA Deputy Public Information Office) to Save the Children Sweden (STC), January 1974, UNRWA Archives II.
 - 59 See DUO/West Bank (Skinner) to Commissioner-General, 2 September 1980, UNRWA Archives, series Re 300 (V): “Musa Bey Alami – Arab Development Society,” Part III (1976–1980) (hereunder UNRWA Archives III).
 - 60 Interoffice memorandum Deputy Commissioner-General to Director Education, 18 December 1980, in UNRWA Archives III.
 - 61 See UNRWA, “What We Do: Relief and Social Services,” online at www.unrwa.org/what-we-do/eligibility-registration (accessed 1 March 2023).
 - 62 Interoffice memorandum Deputy Commissioner-General to Director of Education, 18 December 1980, UNRWA Archives III.