

ARTICULATING THE EXCEPTION: X-MISSION



X-Mission explores the logic of the refugee camp as one of the oldest extraterritorial zones. The camp is part of a larger family of extraterritorial spaces, known to be “in,” but not “of,” the contexts in which they are located, and may therefore be viewed as an exemplary site for the study of the endless incisions into the body of a nation. Refugee camps are created in moments of crisis as juridical zones of exception, whereby populations are placed under international human rights laws and relinquish their political and civil rights. The camp is an extreme form of extraterritoriality, where populations are suspended from the legal order that governed their lives, to be defined and regulated according to the humanitarian conventions of the United Nations and the volatile domain of international politics.

Taking the Palestinian refugee camps as a case in point, *X-Mission* engages with the different discourses that give meaning to this exceptional space – the legal, symbolic, urbanist, mythological and historical narratives. The refugee camp emerges as what Eyal Weizman calls “a site where the politics of a troubled geography is folded into a reduced, bounded space elsewhere,”¹ producing an intense microcosm with complex relations to homeland and to related communities abroad. Given the importance of the interconnectivity among these separated pockets of Palestinian populations, the video attempts to place the Palestinian refugee in the context of a global diaspora and considers deterritorialized models of belonging which have emerged through the networked matrix of this widely dispersed community. However prominent the Palestinian exile is in terms of scope, political complexity and deep historical significance, I am aware that this is also a glaringly overrepresented situation, to which it has become exceedingly difficult to make any meaningful contribution. I should clarify that, whatever contribution is aimed at here, this is not directed towards backing up, or challenging, existing positions in the conflict.

My initial impulse for a possible approach was to find a way to speak of the Palestinians without falling into the inevitability of positing them in relation to Israel or to the conflict. The intention here would not be to deviate from the problems or to depoliticize the subject matter, but to avoid the trap of tired binary arguments, allowing me to rethink the case in relation to the other texts I have developed around the global networks of contemporary migrant communities in previous video essays (*Remote Sensing*, *Sahara Chronicle*). As someone with no personal ties to the ideological geography of the Middle East, I am most interested in studying this refugee case through the lens of knowledge gained in the analysis of globalization, transnationalism and other forms of political extraterritoriality – such as the al Qaeda

network and the US anti-terrorist paradigm – which have had a decisive impact on the Palestinian condition today. This may be the reason for starting the video with images of Afghan refugees from 1989 – the moment the focus shifted from Cold War adversary to so-called militant Islam – and with images made in Afghanistan by the UN Refugee Agency in 2001.

This is the crucial time frame for this video, particularly since the events of 9/11 have been used to impose a state of exception and, through political rhetoric, to legitimize measures that encroach upon the rights of any potentially suspicious person who fits the profile of a Muslim non-citizen man, regardless of his origin². Under these conditions, the production of citizenship unfolds through practices of racialized, gendered surveillance and suspicion, endless interrogations and a self-appointed authority to send someone into exile; here, the boundaries of who merits the status of civilian become narrow. More implicitly, *X-Mission* is about the precarious statelessness that is growing up around us. The state of exception that is thought of as a temporary intervention in times of emergency tends to be consolidating and self-perpetuating. It seems to me that, today, the Palestinian camps should be examined in the light of all these new developments.

Although I made three fieldtrips to Palestinian camps in Lebanon, Jordan and the West Bank, documentary images of camp life have been deployed sparingly in this video. The narrative relies strongly on a series of interviews made with professional experts, interspersed with multiple-layer video montage deriving from both downloaded and self-recorded sources. The speakers are explicitly labeled The Lawyer, The Architect, The Journalist, The Anthropologist, The Historian, The Refugee, etc., unmistakably speaking from a particularly informed position. Together they comprise an intricate web of discursive interrelations.

When it comes to the refugee question, it is essential to understand the legal superstructure. Palestinians are of particular interest here, because their case is not only the oldest and largest refugee case in international law, but it also helped to constitute the international refugee regime after the Second World War. This case exemplifies how international law itself failed to maintain a framework of protection, first depriving the Palestinians of their political rights as citizens – by turning them, perhaps too quickly, into a voiceless mass of refugees – and subsequently by dispossessing them of the right to international protection guaranteed to all refugees. The Palestinian refugees are the exception within the exception.

1 Eyal Weizman in conversation with Médecins sans frontières founding member Roni Brauman, Columbia University, New York, 2008.

2 Human Rights Watch report on 9/11 detentions, quoted in Leela Fernandes “The Boundaries of Terror, Feminism, Human Rights, and the Politics of Global Crisis” in *Just Advocacy?* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press), eds. Wendy S. Hesford and Wendy Kozol, 2005, 66.



THE POST 9/11 PARADIGM HAD A STRONG IMPACT ON OLD AND NEW REFUGEES IN THE MUSLIM WORLD.





Because it was the United Nations that created the “problem” of the Palestinian refugees in the first place, it set up a regime of heightened protection for them, explains Susan Akram (*The Lawyer*).³ From the beginning, in 1948, the Palestinians were to have two agencies devoted exclusively to them: the UNCCP, entrusted with a complete international protection and resolution mandate, and UNRWA, whose job was to provide food, clothing and shelter.⁴ Because the Palestinians were seen to be taken care of, the charter of the UNHCR – the UN High Commissioner for Refugees founded in 1950 – had a special clause excluding the Palestinians from its mandate. When it became clear that the UNCCP was unable to resolve the Palestinian conflict, its funding was substantially truncated, which incapacitated it in its role as protector. Within four years, the Palestinians were left without this international protection or that provided by the UNHCR to all other refugee groups around the world. This means that they have no agency for interventions on an international level and no access to the International Court of Justice. The protection gap has never been closed, not least because the absence of any legal framework has been very convenient to the power politics behind negotiations. Under the guise of fiscal prudence, a major refugee case was maneuvered outside international law, where it has remained parked for decades.

This exceptional condition has made the Palestinian refugees especially vulnerable to arbitrary re-impositions of the state of exception, as a recent incident in Nahr el Bared, a camp in Northern Lebanon, demonstrates. Nahr el Bared is one of the twelve existing Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon to have been founded in 1948 and subsequent years; several others have been destroyed. Allocated by the UN, the plot of land near the Syrian border first hosted tented settlements which were replaced by cinder block houses as and when the refugees could afford to build them. The urban fabric grew organically without a master plan, expressing a form of life altogether indifferent to strategic urban planning. Fifty years later, the population has multiplied but the surface of the camp has not been allowed to increase, resulting in one of the most densely populated places on earth. In juridical terms, this is UN territory, but it is Lebanese for matters of security and Palestinian in terms of identity.

For Sari Hanafi (*The Sociologist*), Nahr el Bared is the epitome of how the Lebanese authorities conceive of such extraterritorial space: “The camp is located outside the city of Tripoli but they allow no infrastructure to connect the camp to the city; they

marginalize it, govern it by emergency law and then abandon it. This is the very condition under which the refugee camps in Lebanon are turned into a place where other extraterritorial elements, like al Qaeda, can come and establish their microcosm.”⁵ In the summer of 2007, the Lebanese Army breached international convention and entered Nahr el Bared to eradicate a small number of foreign Islamists who had settled in the isolated camp. The operation grew out of all proportion and, instead of securing the refugees’ habitat, the army razed the whole camp to the ground and declared it a zone of exception. The 40,000 refugees lost all their belongings and had to flee to another overpopulated camp in the region. This is how easily, when an international protection mandate is lacking, the UN juridical status is suspended by the self-authorized imposition of another regime.

But, rather than focusing on the stratified and often ambivalent apparatus of sovereignty that rules this space, I suggest we pay attention to the flexible process through which the refugees have begun to reinscribe themselves into the political fabric. While the battle over Nahr el Bared was still underway, a community-based reconstruction committee was established to research the state of the camp before its destruction and to draw up an accurate plan that would serve as a basis for negotiations.⁶ In a collective process supported by volunteer architects, the camp dwellers defined the shapes and limits of their plot in order to recreate them. The reconstruction of the camp poses the interesting question of how the refugees themselves would plan their housing and urban organization if they had a say. Despite the many general complaints about the lack of space and sunlight in the camps, it turned out that, for the dwellers, the architectural form of the old camp made a lot of sense. For example, when people from the Palestinian village of Safuri arrived at the camp in 1948, they settled next to each other and named the neighborhood after their village. They wished to preserve this arrangement because it relates to their origins, to their right of return and to their sense of community. Usually, families own the roof of their building, which allows them to add another floor for the next generation. Another feature they want to retain is that the camp is, to a great extent, a pedestrian zone made of an intricate system of bending alleys. In Islamic society, and particularly in the crowded camps, the alleys are used as semi-public, semi-private spaces where women and children can enjoy a sense of enclosure and privacy.

The Lebanese state and army, however, have altogether different plans for the reconstruction of Nahr

3 The circumstances of the founding years of these institutions are extracted from a video interview I conducted with Susan Akram, Professor for International and Human Rights Laws at the Boston University Law School in February 2008.

4 UNCCP, the UN Conciliation Commission on Palestine, was established in 1948 and UNRWA, the UN Relief and Work Agency in 1949.

5 Interview conducted with Sari Hanafi, sociologist at the American University in Beirut, himself a Palestinian refugee in Beirut in December 2007

6 Interview conducted with Ismael Sheikh Hassan, architect and urbanist involved in the Nahr el Bared reconstruction committee, December 2007 in Beirut and July 2008 in Tripoli.





el Bared. In the organic system of narrow alleys, they see an obstacle to entering the camp with their vehicles, perceiving it as a military zone, when in fact it is an urban zone. "Armies shouldn't do planning," Ismael Sheikh Hassan (The Architect) argues, "because they want to solve political issues through urban design." The result is a good security plan, perhaps, but a city where nobody wants to live. The international donor community for the reconstruction supports the plans of the refugee collective and opposes the imposition of Lebanese state power on UN land – so this represents a rare occasion in which an extraterritorial community has found a way to elude state power and to implement its political decisions. The master plan for the first 120 houses is being drafted, with construction due to start in January 2009.⁷

The common struggle to define the refugee space suggests that the camp, in this instance, is not the site of what Agamben calls "bare life," existing outside of all political and cultural distinctions; on the contrary, it is a highly juridical space of dispossession and repossession. These endeavors have created an informal political domain that evades sovereign decisions, to reveal a place where the Palestinian refugees – who are literally placed on the outer reaches of international law – can unfold self-authorized, constructive means through which to re-inscribe themselves into the wider political fabric which is composed, by now, of a complex mix of post-national considerations.

Post-national ideas have gained momentum through the relentless proliferation of transnational and extraterritorial spaces in which people live or work with few guarantees of their security or dignity. For a growing number of people, life is now about finding a way to survive in the cracks of our system of nation states. The refugee comes forth as living proof of just how fallible and incomplete the world organization of nation states truly is. This is why I turn to supranational concepts – which are able to tackle massive statelessness – and to forms of post-national resistance and agency.

Half of the Palestinian community lives outside of their home territory, either in camps in the Middle East or as migrants scattered across the world. "How the Palestinians negotiate the space now and build a nation outside the territory should not be perceived only as negative, as a trap, as being outside of something" suggests Beshara Doumani (The Historian).⁸ "Their transnational experience is also the most important resource they have in order to build a future for themselves in which – whether or not they get a state – they can live a dignified life and have rights like any other human being. How they do that can be seen as a laboratory for other groups of people,

whether they are refugees or migrant laborers or people who simply find themselves outside certain spaces that they have long known."

Somewhat out of phase with their transnational condition, the Palestinian's political language continues to focus on self-determination through territorial sovereignty. However, many Palestinians have started to wonder whether the national project should be the ultimate goal or whether it should only be regarded as a vehicle for attaining rights and the ability to survive in the world and, if the latter, whether this vehicle is capable of doing so at a time when the nation state itself is in decline and proves to be a place in which people do not necessarily attain civil rights.

In the meantime, like any other major diasporic society, the Palestinian community has devised all sorts of ways to build a transnational network that allows them to negotiate the juridical zones that they are not allowed to enter, or in which they are forced to stay, by breaking them, overcoming them and finding ways around them. Across Borders, a web project hosted by Birzeit University in the West Bank, links eleven refugee camps in the region. Given that the terrestrial connection between Palestinian cities is often disrupted and that refugees in Lebanon are not allowed to visit the West Bank, it is all the more important for camp dwellers to be informed about the circumstances in the other camps. Besides personal and collective stories, the website diffuses daily news relative to Palestinian camp life in the West Bank, Gaza, Jordan, Syria and Lebanon. It is often the only way for people to know how their relatives are doing and if problems have occurred in and around the camp. The site also receives many visitors and commentators from abroad and Shaadi, who maintains the site in Deheishe camp near Bethlehem, is something of a virtual cosmopolitan whose worldliness is acquired, in large part, via technology.

On a different note, this video essay reflects on the artist's mission as a particular sort of fieldwork. Most obviously, perhaps, *X-Mission* can be understood as a witness report from the field, inserting artistic research into a wide range of scholarly and humanitarian field works. Humanitarian officers are never simply on a field trip, they are on a mission, which implies that their visit is for purposes beyond the simple collection of information. They go with the aim of making a direct intervention, relieving suffering, helping people recover from disaster, providing medical and educational assistance or witnessing injustice; a mission can, therefore, be understood as the kind of fieldwork that embraces a moral component. Adi Ophir argues that "contemporary technologies of disaster are "in the moral" in the same way that scientists are said to be "in the truth," which does not necessarily mean to act morally (in the same way that a scientist may err and still be "in the truth"); it means that a certain atten-

7 This first unit was commissioned by the EU but their funding was insufficient. Saudi Arabia contributed the difference.

8 Beshara Doumani, University of California Berkeley, interviewed in Tripoli, July 2008.



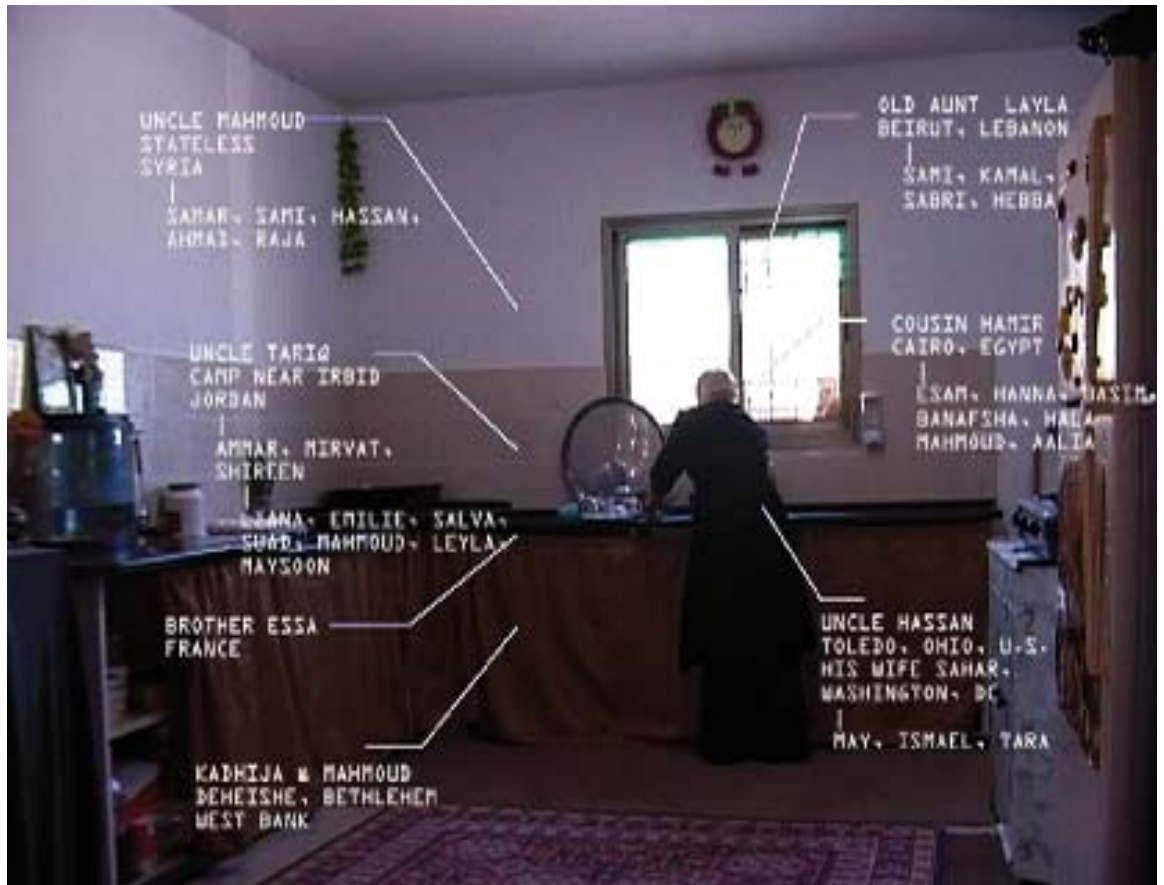
tion to moral considerations becomes inevitable.”⁹ Seen from this perspective, the camp as a response to crisis is always already a place for morality, not because it is placed above and beyond its political, economic, or religious meanings, but because of the existence of a complex apparatus of rescue and relief.

My video essays investigate the condition and organization of survival in the world, but they are not meant to contribute to an abstract relief program of sorts; they don’t mean to rescue anyone. The area that constitutes “the moral” in society is a complex humanitarian apparatus run by the state, the market and civil society at large, which consists of a fairly structured assemblage of power and knowledge, including spatial arrangements, means of communication, means of data collecting and processing, organizational procedures and discursive practices. It is into all these practices my videos intervene. In terms of representational politics, the struggle for autonomy is the focus of my approach to this most fragile form of life, which borders on “bare life,” where human agency is taken for the fundamental rhetorical practice.

Aside from intervening in rhetorical conventions of human rights discourse, *X-Mission* reports on a distinct tendency in the art world to converge aesthetic pleasure and moral mobilization. Since the early ’90s, the art market has channeled an astounding quantity of participatory projects with “communities in crisis” towards privileged global art consumers. We might indeed ask why the global art world should be considered the appropriate stage for the concerns of a disenfranchised community when it remains unclear whether increased representational visibility is necessarily linked with political agency. Drawing on Ophir’s ideas, a possible explanation is that art projects with a strong social commitment provide a special opportunity for the “moralization” of the market-driven art world and its civil audience. On the other hand, when it comes to large international exhibitions that are perceived by city and state governments as image-enhancing, such art projects present an opportunity for the politicization of a morally-motivated civil society. How *X-Mission*, or any of my videos for that matter, operate within these parameters is difficult to monitor. Their intention is to make an aesthetic contribution to current discourses that form and inform complex geopolitical developments while reflecting on how art participates in making them intelligible.



9 Adi Ophir, “The Sovereign, the Humanitarian, and the Terrorist” in *Nongovernmental Politics*, (New York: Zone Books), ed. Michel Feher, 165.



THE PARADIGM SHIFTER

