



Humanitarian aid, socio-spatial dynamics, and the evolution of refugee camps in the Gaza Strip

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Abstract

Palestinian refugee camps are among the oldest and most evolved protracted displacement contexts. This research unpacks the evolution process of the Palestinian refugee camps in the Gaza Strip. The primary objective of this thesis is to analyse the relationship between the prolonged provision of humanitarian aid, socio-spatial dynamics, and the evolution of refugee camps in two studied camp spaces in the Gaza Strip: The Jabalia and the Deir Al Balah refugee camps.

Combining assemblage thinking and critical realism, this thesis discusses the processes of formation and the causal mechanisms influencing the socio-spatial structures in the studied camps. The analysis borrows from the traditional theorisation of refugee camps as a “state of exception” and builds on the notions of “city-like” camps discussed by contemporary scholars.

This study utilises qualitative research methods, including semi-structured interviews, documentary analysis, and field observations, to triangulate the data and inform the in-depth analysis. Semi-structured interviews are the primary data collection method, allowing for detailed conversations and reflections from participants.

This thesis identifies and analyses socio-spatial paradoxes in the studied camps, developing and introducing the concept of the “state of paradox”. It unpacks the relationship between these various dynamics, fragmented governance, and living conditions. It critically discusses the role of UNRWA as the lead humanitarian agency in the case of Palestinian refugees, examining how its activities over time have contributed to the human development of refugees and the built environments of camps.

This thesis contributes to the broader debates on the evolution of refugee camps in protracted displacement contexts by providing insights from the understudied refugee camp context of the Gaza Strip. It identifies and discusses the determinants of the evolution process of the studied camps from their establishment in 1948 until before the October 2023 war.

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List of Abbreviations and Acronyms

AFSC: American Friends Service Committee

ARA: Access Restricted Area in Gaza

CBO: Community-Based Organisation

CSO: Civil Society Organisation

DORA: Department of Refugee Affairs of the Palestine Liberation Organisation

FAFO: Norwegian Institute for Applied Sciences

HCT: Humanitarian Country Team

ICCG: UN Inter-Cluster Coordination Group

ICIP: UNRWA's Infrastructure and Camp Improvement Program

ICRC: International Committee of the Red Cross

INGO: International Non-Governmental Organisation

IASC: Inter-Agency Standing Committee

NGO: Non-Governmental Organisation

OCHA: United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs

oPt: Occupied Palestinian territories

PCBS: Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics

PLO: Palestine Liberation Organisation

PNA: Palestinian National Authority

RC/HC: UN's Resident Coordinator/Humanitarian Coordinator

UN: United Nations

UNGA: United Nations General Assembly

UNHCR: United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

UNRPR: United Nations Relief for Palestine Refugees

UNRWA: United Nations Relief and Works Agency

YAC: Youth Activities Centre

List of Spoken Terms from the Narrative of the Palestinian Refugee Camps

I provide and explain the following terms using the interpretations of how refugees living in the Palestinian refugee camps used these words, and not necessarily entailing the exact original meaning of the word. This list of terms provides a guide to some of the most commonly used terms by refugees, explaining the meaning associated with them. They are expressive of the long history of displacement experienced by the Palestinian people, as well as the richness of experiences within that history and the themes that are explored extensively in this thesis.

- **Al Mukhayyam المخيم:** The refugee camp. The word relates to خيمة Khayma, which means the tent used to provide temporary shelter.
- **Al Mua'skar المعسكر:** The refugee camp. The word was initially derived from military narratives, as it could mean an army camp, a training camp, or a detention camp. It became a common name for refugee camps in the narrative of Palestinian displacement. Both terms (Al Mukhayyam المخيم) and (Al Mua'skar المعسكر) are used interchangeably in the narrative of the Palestinian refugee camps, even though they originate from different word meanings.
- **Al Nakba النكبة:** The catastrophe. Expresses the mass forced displacement and expulsion of Palestinians following the 1948 Arab-Israeli war.
- **Al Zaytoon الزيتون:** Name of an old neighbourhood in Gaza City. The literal translation of the word means the Olives.
- **Al Toffah التفاح:** Name of an Old neighbourhood in Gaza City. The literal translation of the word means the Apples.
- **Bent/Ibn Al Mukhaia ابن/بنت المخيم:** Means the son/daughter of the camp. Refugees use this term to express their pride in belonging to the refugee camp.
- **Blukkat بلوكات:** Residential blocks in the refugee camps. They were essentially developed from the layout of the camps' blocks assigned by the UNRWA during the early stages of establishing the refugee camps.
- **Byout Al Toub بيوت الطوب:** Mud-brick houses. The Palestinian refugees use the term to refer to the initial houses that the UNRWA built in the refugee camps.

- **Ghorba** غُرْبَة: It means being far from home, and often carries negative connotations associated with being away from family, loved ones, and familiar surroundings. The word also indicates loneliness and has been used to express the feeling of refugees who were exiled, and also expresses the feelings associated with leaving the refugee camp.
- **Mukhtar** مختار : Is the extended family leader or chosen one to represent the clan, the village, or the neighbourhood. Each extended refugee family in the camp has a Mukhtar, who is supposed to represent the family with the service providers and contribute to resolving the family's issues.
- **Surra** صُرَّة: Word used to refer to the bundle of clothes and shoes that were wrapped together and provided for each refugee family during the early years of displacement. Those bundles came from abroad, mainly from Europe, and were provided to refugees as part of the material assistance.
- **Tawteen** توطين: The term means permanent resettlement of refugees in their hosting states/territories.
- **To'mah** طُعْمَة: The term was used to refer to the UNRWA's space or the service centre that provides ready-to-eat and cooked food.
- **Waja' Qalb** وَجَعَ قَلْب: Means getting something painstakingly. Refugees use the term to express the difficulties and suffering of obtaining aid or living in displacement.
- **Yohawit** يحوِّط: The word means fencing a space and to preserve it and bring what benefits it. The refugees used the word to express the act of anyone in the camp who fences an empty piece of land, usually near their tent or shelter, for their later personal use, usually by expanding their shelter.
- **Zinqo** زِينْقُو: The corrugated steel is used primarily to cover the roofs of the houses in the camps. People use the term to express that those people using this material for roofing are living in miserable shelter conditions. They say: "They live in Zinqo".

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1. CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

1.0 A research project

“People of the refugee camps have patience and resilience. I am proud of being one of them. I lived with them under زينقو “Zinqo” (corrugated steel). I am proud of my old family house that was built with a roof of corrugated steel panels, and it has not changed for 40 years ... I define myself as the بنت المخيم “Bent Al Mukhaiaim” (daughter of the camp) with great pride. Even in international conferences, I always define myself as the daughter of the Jabalia refugee camp and tell the audience my story of living in a refugee camp.” (Fatima, 2021, Interview 03)

The above quote expresses the pride and attachment to the camp. An attachment encapsulated by misery, and the desire to tell the story of living in a refugee camp. Camp spaces represent the paradoxical combination of pride and misery, resilience and vulnerability, evolution and restrictions, determination and limitation, and the making of lives in indefinite temporariness. For me, the initial idea and motivation for this research are twofold. Firstly, for many years, I lived in a town near a large refugee camp in the Gaza Strip, the Jabalia camp, and had daily interactions with refugees there. The refugee camp was part of my daily life; I shopped at its market, drove my car on its streets, and commuted to various places in Gaza City, passing through the camp. I visited the health clinics in the camp for medical treatment; I sat in cafes with friends and attended cultural events. I loved being in the camp with friends and family, feeling the intimacy and warmth. People in the camp are friendly and generous despite the hardship, and they greet everyone who passes by. In the camp, people feel a sense of solidarity and familiarity; they know each other very well, and they are familiar with one another’s extended families and their stories.

The camp space is complex: it is both happy and sad, rich and poor, evolved yet stagnant. When you walk through the camp, you hear the sound of children's laughter coming from the impoverished alleys, you smell the coffee from the street peddlers, and you hear the

noise of cars, motorcycles, and street sellers calling to sell their goods. You see families together at funerals and weddings, passing by you in the camp streets to offer their condolences to the deceased family members and their congratulations to the marrying family members. At night, internal camp alleys are dark, but the lights that show joy and hide the misery decorate the main streets and the camp outskirts. Ironically, for many people who lived in my town and the adjacent towns, going to the camp, or Al Mua'askar المعسكر as many people call it in the local language, feels like going to the city centre, to the capital of the area, where you could walk in the crowded streets, find anything you need, and participate in cultural and social activities. I have friends from the camp who are highly educated, culturally aware, and intellectually capable; carrying the weights of displacement and misery, but aspiring for a better future. From this experience, I developed an interest in understanding the camps' spaces, how they have evolved from stereotypical tent camps to resemble cities, and how people have created their lives within these spaces as refugees under humanitarian management.

Secondly, when I began this study, I had been working as a humanitarian worker in the Gaza Strip for over ten years. Throughout my career, I have been involved in implementing humanitarian interventions in refugee camps and urban displacement contexts. Being part of NGOs that provide services to vulnerable people, I have been exposed to experiences associated with seeing the other parts of the camp, the hidden misery and poverty in the houses and the refugee families. The deteriorated infrastructure and housing conditions have consistently been evident in every assessment or project. I have always questioned the impacts of humanitarian actors' actions under prolonged displacement conditions. I wanted to know about the limitations and opportunities for improvement, the dynamics that could influence these actions, and how these actions contribute to the current socio-spatial spectacle in the places where they are implemented. Through my identities as a humanitarian worker and as a resident of Gaza who had interacted with the camp for a long time, I developed this research idea and interest.

Motivated by these considerations, this research aims to explore the socio-spatial evolution of refugee camps in the Gaza Strip and the relationship between this process and the prolonged provision of humanitarian aid interventions. Through conducting data collection and analysis for this research, I capture particular moments in the refugee camps' history and analyse the socio-spatial environment that has developed throughout more than seven decades of the camps' existence. The research is unique in that it unpacks the historical evolution of refugee camps, identifies and analyses the socio-spatial dynamics of their evolution, discusses various governance structures, highlights living conditions, and critically engages with the role of humanitarian aid responding to protracted displacement in urban refugee camps. It identifies the determinants of the evolution process of the studied camps from their establishment in 1948 until the October 2023 war, examining the accounts that led up to their socio-spatial composition and the conditions that prevailed throughout the prolonged displacement.

In this thesis, socio-spatial dynamics in the context of refugee camps represent a complex and reciprocal relationship between refugees' social lives, interactions, and cultural practices and the physical spaces they inhabit. It is about how refugee spaces (re)shape social structures and identities, and conversely, how refugees actively modify and add meaning to these spaces, transforming them beyond their initial temporary organisation (Hanna *et al.*, 2022). They include various social and cultural norms of refugees and the host community and policies of space organisation, which are affected by the geopolitical circumstances and the geographies of these spaces.

Analysing the socio-spatial dynamics involves unpacking the components of the social and physical spaces of the refugee camp under study. This includes understanding social systems, practices, and the home refugees created, as well as the architectural forms of the camp space and the practices of re-appropriation or reconfiguration of the physical space to create the lived camp space (Abu-Aridah & Henn, 2024). Interactions of the socio-spatial dynamics in refugee camps also involve the humanitarian management and the top-down organisation initially introduced for humanitarian logistical efficiency, refugees' adaptation

and agency to meet their social needs and cultural values, and the reconfiguration of the displaced community and space to create the urban system (Al-Homoud & Samarah, 2025). In other words, understanding the socio-spatial dynamics involves unpacking the reciprocal interactions between social norms, relations, identities, the associated power dynamics and governance roles, and the physical space that includes houses, roads and alleyways, commercial and other public spaces, as well as the wider composition of the camps' neighbourhoods.

Following this initial introduction to the research and its underlying motivations, the remainder of this chapter is divided into three main sections. The first section sets out the research problem and rationale. The second section provides the research aim and questions. The last section explains the structure of the thesis, providing a brief description of each chapter.

1.1 Research problem and rationale

In contemporary studies and literature, scholars have argued that protracted refugee camps in various contexts have developed town-like or city-like features (Agier, 2011; Sanyal, 2012; Ramadan, 2013; Sanyal, 2014; Saleh, 2020). As I discuss in Chapter Two, many of the contemporary scholars critically approach Agamben's (1998, 2005) conceptualisation of refugee camps, moving away from his notions of the "state of exception", "bare life" and "biopolitics". However, as I argue throughout the thesis, inherited features from the exceptional conditions of the "state of exception" still persist when analysing refugee camps, particularly in the Palestinian context. Thus, this research interrogates Agamben's juridico-political exception in the context of Palestinian refugee camps, combining the legacy associated with the "state of exception" with the city-like features of these evolving spaces to develop a holistic understanding of them, which depicts both their origin and continued socio-spatial movement.

Refugee camps in conditions of protracted displacement often develop ties and become entangled with their surrounding cities and towns. Particularly in the Palestinian refugee

camps in the Middle East, many scholars discuss how the boundaries between the camp and the city blur, while the analysis of refugee camps highlights features similar to their surrounding urban settings (Ramadan, 2013; Sanyal, 2014; Abourahme, 2015; Martin, 2015; Saleh, 2020). Nonetheless, only a few studies have discussed and analysed Palestinian refugee camps in the Gaza Strip. The refugee camps in the Gaza Strip represent one of the most protracted displacement crises and yet are among the most understudied refugee camp contexts, due to the strict security restrictions and instability of the political context that made the Gaza Strip a difficult-to-reach area for many researchers (Saleh, 2020; Tayeh, 2022).

Theoretically, this thesis mainly contributes to the city-camp literature by introducing the concept of the **“state of paradox”**, drawing upon Agamben’s (1998, 2000) foundational theorisation of the camp as a "space of exception," juxtaposed against the "city-like" depictions of camps explored by scholars such as Agier (2002, 2008, 2011), Sanyal (2014, 2017), Carter-white & Minca (2025), and Jansen (2016, 2018). The discussion employs urban theories of space formation to explain camp dynamics as informed by Henri Lefebvre’s (1991) spatial theories to unpack the ongoing tensions between top-down "conceived space" and bottom-up "lived space". I build upon existing juridico-political frameworks and urban discussions to introduce the concept of the "state of paradox" as a theoretical contribution that helps capture the inherent socio-spatial contradictions of Palestinian refugee camps. These contradictions are reproduced in the unique camp environment, where the "state of exception" persists even as camps become permanent, city-like settlements, resulting in a perpetual oscillation between the temporary and the permanent, and the conceived and the lived.

In my theoretical analysis, I discuss literature that critically engages with humanitarian action as the central driver in the evolution of Palestinian refugee camps. Building on the work of Barnett (2011), Fassin (2012, 2023), and specifically Ilana Feldman’s (2018) concepts of the "humanitarian situation" and "humanitarian condition," I analyse the deep

impacts of long-standing humanitarian intervention, particularly by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA)¹ since 1948.

There is a gap in understanding the role of humanitarianism in responding to the protracted urban displacement contexts and the shifting priorities of the displaced population. In particular, there are fewer studies that analyse the role of aid and the evolution of refugee camps in a “stateless” context under overlapping sovereignties. To capture and analyse the contentious role of humanitarian aid in the evolution of camps under these conditions, and to contribute to debates on the urbanisation of camps, I present and discuss camps evolution and the role of the UNRWA in the Gaza Strip.

Humanitarian aid, particularly through UNRWA, has been among the leading factors in creating and (re)shaping socio-spatial structures in the refugee camp space, which endured multiple shifting governance structures. By discussing and highlighting the role of UNRWA as the leading aid organisation in the Gaza Strip, I contribute to discussions on the shifting roles of humanitarian actors, their interactions with various entities, and their fluctuation between emergency crisis response and the work of addressing chronic conditions and needs. I frame this analysis drawing on Feldman’s (2018) notions of the “humanitarian situation” and the “humanitarian condition”, extending on her work to explain the evolution of the refugee camps and the shifting humanitarian mandates.

Policy discussions suggest that humanitarian organisations still struggle to strategically and operationally provide effective interventions in protracted displacement contexts, specifically in urban areas (Guterres, 2010; D’Onofrio, 2018; Sanderson, 2019).

¹ The **United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA)** was established by a UN General Assembly resolution 302 (IV), in December 1949, beginning operations in May 1950, with a core mandate to provide direct relief and works programs for Palestine refugees displaced because of the 1948 Arab-Israeli war and their descendants. Its humanitarian and development mission is derived and periodically renewed solely by the UN General Assembly, reflecting the evolving needs and political situation of the refugees, particularly extending to emergency services for those displaced by the 1967 war and subsequent conflicts. UNRWA delivers essential services in education, health, relief, microcredit, and emergency aid to millions of registered Palestinian refugees across Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, the West Bank (including East Jerusalem), and Gaza, consistently recognised by the General Assembly for its vital role, without engaging in political negotiations or durable solutions (UNRWA, 2025).

Humanitarianism has long been a subject of debate, and for many, it remains unclear whether the role of humanitarian actors should be limited to the basic provision of aid or extend to more developmental approaches and promote structural changes (Feldman, 2009). Humanitarianism has been depicted as a tool used by nation-states to confine and control refugees (Agier, 2011). At the same time, humanitarian aid has contributed to political outcomes, where refugees have pursued their aspirations, existence, and recovered their identities and lives under humanitarianism (Feldman, 2018), which facilitated the creation of urban features in refugee camps (Sanyal, 2012 & 2014). For many, the urbanisation of refugee camps under humanitarian action is distinct from the evolution of towns (Jansen, 2016) and has been characterised as incomplete (Agier, 2002, 2011). The uncertainty of everyday practices in such contexts of humanitarian urbanism reproduces issues of poverty and insecurity, informality, corruption, inequalities and rebellion (Jansen, 2016).

Empirically, I contribute to filling the gap in studying the city-like refugee camp features in the Gaza Strip context, recognising the particularity of the Gaza Strip as a case. Refugee camps in the Gaza Strip can be placed on the extreme end of the chronic displacement spectrum due to the high instability of the geopolitical conditions, the specific features of juridico-political exception, the prolonged evolution of the camps, and their level of entanglement with surrounding cities. Studying refugee camps in the Gaza Strip offers a unique opportunity through the existence of complex layers of sovereignty governing displacement in a stateless context. Both official and non-official entities exercise control and management in this context with layers of exception and authority. Nonetheless, the analysis of refugee camps in the Gaza Strip offers an avenue to identify the most critical and substantial socio-spatial factors associated with the evolution of refugee camps, and provides the opportunity to draw concrete lessons that are more broadly beneficial to understanding the dynamism between prolonged provision of humanitarian aid, socio-spatial structures, and camps' evolution.

I approach these discussions through the philosophical paradigms of critical realism and assemblage thinking, creating a robust ontological and epistemological framework to understand how these protracted displacement spaces are continuously produced and governed. I suggest analysing the protracted fluid-stable, temporary-permanent, exceptional-normal camp spaces via combining assemblage and critical realism meta-theories (Rutzou & Elder-Vass, 2019), in order to capture and analyse the formation of the social-spatial structures and their causal mechanisms. Such a combination helps capture the oscillation between the fluid emergency “humanitarian situation” and the relatively stable and chronic “humanitarian condition”.

The critical realism – assemblage ontological nexus helps unpack the temporality of the camp and highlights the temporary-permanent conditions. I employ this dual ontological perspective to examine the complex reality of protracted refugee camps. As detailed in Chapter Two, this ontological foundation is distinct from the thesis's theoretical framework, as the latter is rooted in city-camp literature, urban spatial production, and humanitarian studies. Through the lens of critical realism, I conceptualise the camp as a space produced by deep causal mechanisms, which this research seeks to unpack. Rather than merely describing empirical conditions, I utilise a critical realist research paradigm to retroductively trace these daily realities back to their generative mechanisms: the historical architecture of displacement, social legacies and norms, Gaza's geopolitical constraints, and the structures of international humanitarianism. Furthermore, I integrate Assemblage Theory to analyse the camp as a fluid network of human and non-human elements. This allows for an examination of the dynamic relations between built structures (including shelters), the physical environment, UNRWA policies, collective memory, and human bodies. Ultimately, combining these ontologies reveals the camp not as a passive byproduct of conflict, but as an active, evolving, and fluid-stable entity. This synthesis provides the essential ontological underpinning for understanding the “state of paradox” conceptualised in this thesis.

1.2 Research aim and questions

To contribute to addressing the empirical, policy, and theoretical gaps presented above, this thesis aims ***to understand the evolution process of refugee camps in the Gaza Strip and the relationship between this process and the prolonged provision of humanitarian aid interventions***. Addressing such an aim requires proper identification and understanding of the socio-spatial structures in camps, unpacking their mutual influence on governance and living conditions, and the reciprocal interactions with humanitarian aid. Therefore, this research has three main questions that help to fulfil this aim as follows:

- *What socio-spatial dynamics have influenced the evolution of refugee camps in the Gaza Strip?*
- *How do socio-spatial dynamics, governance structures and living conditions mutually shape each other in the refugee camp environment?*
- *How does the prolonged provision of humanitarian aid through the UNRWA affect and get affected by the socio-spatial dynamics of refugee camps in protracted displacement?*

The question of camps' evolution and the associated socio-spatial dynamics are at the apex of this research, which is the overarching goal. This research specifically seeks to understand how refugee camps in the Gaza Strip transform physically and socially during protracted displacement. Unpacking the socio-spatial dynamics associated with this evolutionary process brings the primary thematic lens of governance into focus. This research conceptualises the prolonged provision of aid, primarily through the UNRWA, as the dominant structure within the camps, which has governance implications. By framing long-standing humanitarian action as a form of spatial and political management, the research hierarchy positions UNRWA's mandate not merely as an external influence, but as the central, quasi-governmental authority that dictates the trajectory of camp development.

Living conditions and everyday socio-spatial dynamics represent the on-the-ground lived experience that reciprocally contribute to mechanisms of camp evolution. The research questions also seek to unpack this hierarchy of structures from the lived experience upward. The research identifies the fundamental socio-spatial dynamics unique to the Gaza Strip. It also examines the reciprocal relationship between refugees' socio-spatial realities and the top-down humanitarian and governance structures. It analyses how these continuous tensions between the refugees' everyday spatial production and UNRWA's and governing authorities' administrative interventions ultimately shape the long-term evolution of the camp environment.

I conducted this study in the context of the Gaza Strip, which comprises eight refugee camps of various sizes and levels of complexity. The website of the UNRWA states that the total number of registered refugees in the Gaza Strip was around 1.6 million in 2023, comprising around 70 per cent of the population, with around 48 per cent of those refugees living in one of the eight refugee camps in the Gaza Strip.² In particular, I examine the socio-spatial dynamics and the role of humanitarian aid, focusing on the UNRWA, in two of these camps: the Jabalia and Deir Al Balah refugee camps.

I utilise qualitative research methods to collect and analyse data to answer the above research questions. I employ a combination of methods, including field observations, documentary analysis, and semi-structured interviews. Interviews are the primary data collection method, allowing for in-depth conversations and reflections from participants.

The interview data I collected for this research and the images I have taken represent a unique, rare resource that captures the era of refugee camps in the Gaza Strip before the October 2023 war. The October 2023 war, which continues during my writing of this thesis, has radically changed all aspects of the scene in refugee camps and in the Gaza Strip in general. The impact of the 2023 war has been beyond catastrophic on every aspect of life in

² <https://www.unrwa.org/where-we-work/gaza-strip>

the Gaza Strip, causing unprecedented damage to the socio-spatial environment. The October 2023 war marks a significant shift in socio-spatial structures, and the study of these consequences, potential interventions, and impacts is largely beyond the scope of this research.

In this study, I focus on the conditions of the refugee camps that existed from 1948 until just before the October 2023 war, highlighting the role of the various socio-spatial dynamics and focusing on the reciprocal interactions between these dynamics and the aid apparatus. I suggest that the findings I present in the empirical chapters of this thesis are instrumental for any further studies that aim to understand the conditions, causal powers, and different dynamics of the refugee camps in the Gaza Strip context and beyond. The findings also highlight lessons learnt and understandings of refugee camps in protracted displacement in general and suggest new philosophical and analytical framings to study and analyse the camp space. This framing suggests using a combination of assemblage thinking and critical realism philosophical frameworks (Rutzou & Elder-Vass, 2019) to conduct the explanatory research in refugee camps, considering that the protracted refugee camp situation oscillates between emergency “humanitarian situation” and chronic “humanitarian condition” (Feldman, 2018), where city-like features are negotiated and affected by the inherited “state of exception”.

1.3 Structure of the thesis

Having provided the story of my experience that motivated me to undertake this research, and having briefly outlined the research problem and rationale, as well as the aim of this research and its questions, this section provides a synopsis of the chapters that follow. Broadly, this thesis is divided into two main parts. The first part (Chapters Two to Four) provides the theoretical and contextual material for the research, analyses relevant concepts, and builds the methodological and analytical frameworks. The second part (Chapters Five to Eight) presents the empirical material to answer the research questions, analyses and discusses the findings and presents the contributions of this thesis. The last section of each empirical chapter, “Discussion and Conclusion”, first reflects on how the

ontological combination of critical realism and assemblage thinking underpins and explains the findings. The section then presents the crux of the discussion and the findings, linking them back to the theoretical framework presented in Chapter Two. After this introductory chapter, the thesis is divided as follows:

Chapter Two: *Theorising Refugee Camps and Humanitarian Aid* provides the theoretical framework for this study. In this chapter, I present concepts from multiple disciplines and critically engage with the literature on refugees and refugee camps. I organise this theoretical framework chapter into three main sections. The first section introduces critical realism in the context of refugee camps and examines discussions on the interplay between structure and agency, providing reflections on the refugee camp context. I then introduce the ontological conceptualisation employed in this thesis, which utilises a combination of assemblage thinking and critical realism in studying refugee camp spaces. I present this combination to help capture the origin and (re)formation of socio-spatial structures in the camps, unpacking the causal mechanisms to provide a more comprehensive picture of reality. The second section critically engages with the definitions of refugee camps and the figure of the refugee. It builds on the city-camp literature and the discussion around the “state of exception” and “bare life” and argues that refugee camps can be conceptualised as “city-like” spaces. Then, in the final section of the chapter, I define and discuss humanitarian aid, providing critical accounts of aid provision in urban refugee camp contexts, and introducing the notions of the “humanitarian situation” and the “humanitarian condition” that inform the discussion in the following empirical chapters.

Chapter Three: *The Gaza Strip, Refugee Camps, and International Humanitarian Aid* contextualises the thesis by introducing the history and geography of the Gaza Strip and its emergence as a political geography. It outlines the chronology of the refugees’ crises in the Gaza Strip. It presents the urban features of refugee camps and their situation during the time of data collection. The second section of this chapter tracks the history of international humanitarian interventions in the Gaza context, while critically highlighting variations in these interventions that occurred during different political stages. This section introduces

the UNRWA, its history, mandate, and services as the leading international humanitarian agency that operates for refugees in Gaza. In the third section of this chapter, I provide a contextual overview of the two camps I studied, Jabalia and Deir Al Balah, justifying their selection and introducing the idea that the refugee camps in the Gaza Strip are crowded and entangled with their surrounding urban areas. The final section of the chapter briefly highlights the impact of the 2023-2025 war on the Gaza Strip's infrastructure. It particularly discusses the potential impact on refugee camps and the possible consequences of banning the UN organisation for Palestinian refugees, the UNRWA.

Chapter Four: *Research Methodology* presents the qualitative research methods used in this study. It provides the rationale for selecting the research methods, building on the research philosophy discussed earlier, to investigate the nuances between aid, socio-spatial dynamics, and the evolution of refugee camps. The chapter also provides details of the aim and research questions, highlighting the role of a multi-methods design and the generative comparative methodology used to study the two camp cases. The chapter explains how I utilised those multi-methods of documentary analysis, field observations, and interviews to capture and fulfil the aim and answer the questions. In this chapter, I explain how the collected data was handled and analysed via thematic coding while dealing with transcribing and translating from another language. The chapter highlights the challenges I faced during the conduct of this research, providing reflective insights into my positionality and experience as a researcher, as well as the insider/outsider dynamics negotiated throughout this research journey.

Chapter Five: *Socio-Spatial Dynamics of Refugee Camps in the Gaza Strip* addresses the first research question by examining the socio-spatial dynamics that shaped the evolution of the refugee camps. The chapter has two main sections and a discussion and conclusion section. The first section tells the story of the camps' formation, utilising assemblage thinking and analysing the human and non-human, as well as the material and non-material, components of the socio-spatial structures in the early years of the camps' inception. The second section deploys the “city-like” lenses utilising critical realism’s conceptualisations

of social structures and normative social institutions to identify socio-spatial factors that evolved and influenced the refugee camps and their temporary-permanent situation. It highlights the causal mechanisms and the camps' inherited features that contributed to creating what I termed a "state of paradox". In the discussion and conclusion section, I reflect on the utilisation of the combined critical realism and assemblage ontologies to highlight the entwined formation and causation. The sections then present the main analysis and discussion of the findings, speaking back to the theoretical framework and city-camp concepts.

Chapter Six: *Governance Structures, Living Conditions and Socio-Spatial Dynamics in the Refugee Camps* answers the second research question by analysing the relationship between socio-spatial dynamics, governance structures and living conditions in refugee camps. It is divided into two main sections and the discussion and conclusion section. The first section discusses governance and the roles of leading organisations and normative social institutions, which have been influenced by the "state of paradox". The second section critically represents the interactions between socio-spatial dynamics and their structures, and the evolution of living conditions in refugee camps, delving into the "city-like" camps and highlighting salient issues related to overcrowding and economic activities. I utilise the notions of oscillation between "humanitarian situation" and "humanitarian condition" to encapsulate the dynamic situation, drawing on comparisons between the two studied camps. Finally, the discussion and conclusion section revisits the ontological paradigm, reflecting on the findings from the empirical material. Then, it highlights the links between the findings presented in the chapter and the theoretical framework.

Chapter Seven: *The UNRWA and Humanitarian Aid in the Refugee Camps* is the third empirical chapter that addresses the third research question through a critical discussion of the interplay between the studied camps' socio-spatial dynamics and the provision of humanitarian aid and humanitarian management. The chapter has two sections and a discussion and conclusion section. The chapter focuses on the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA). It critically discusses the agency's role and interactions with the

socio-spatial structures as a humanitarian refugee organisation, highlighting contradictions in the agency's existence, mandate, and relationship with the refugee community. Throughout this discussion, I highlight the UNRWA's role in forming the camps and shaping the causation structures. The chapter highlights UNRWA's evolution and the impact of its work on both material and non-material aspects, particularly the refugees' social structures and the role of health and education services provided for the refugee population. The chapter also analyses how humanitarian management affected the camp space and draws on findings that highlight the impact of aid on the economy and the agglomeration of services in the studied space. It also discusses the UNRWA's initiatives to enhance the built environment of the camps, which were pioneered in response to deteriorating living standards. I conclude the chapter by discussing and building on lessons from the UNRWA's humanitarian work in the context of urban camps. The last section, discussion and conclusion, returns to the thesis's ontological perspective to discuss the findings from this chapter. Then it links the discussion in this chapter back to theoretical debates on humanitarianism and humanitarian urbanism.

Chapter Eight: Conclusion, the chapter synthesises the arguments presented in the thesis and suggests the theoretical, policy, and empirical contributions I make through this research. In this chapter, I also draw lessons on the implications of humanitarian management in urban refugee camps, while discussing avenues for generalisation and policy adaptation in protracted refugee crises. The chapter highlights potential areas for future research. The chapter also reflects on the impacts of the October 2023 war situation on the studied context.

2. CHAPTER TWO: THEORISING REFUGEE CAMPS AND HUMANITARIAN AID

2.0 Introduction

This research aims to understand the evolution process of the refugee camps in the Gaza Strip and the relationship between this process and the prolonged provision of humanitarian aid interventions. This entails unpacking the distinct components of the refugee camp's socio-spatial dynamics and unfolding their structures and assemblages, which encompass both the tangible and intangible aspects, as well as the human and the non-human. The research identifies and discusses the interplay between socio-spatial dynamics to uncover the underlying mechanisms at work within the studied camps. It examines how various structures and agents have interacted at different points in time while documenting refugees' experiences, especially concerning the humanitarian management of the camp.

This research adopts **critical realism** as the overarching research philosophy. It employs complementarity between its ontology and assemblage thinking ontology to provide a workable understanding of the reality of refugee camp spaces in the Gaza Strip under protracted displacement. This reality is characterised by oscillation between periods of fluidity and formation, and relative stability and causation, where there is ongoing movement in the temporality of the space, with camps seen as both temporary and permanent at the same time. The critical realism-assemblage ontological nexus (Rutzou & Elder-Vass, 2019), is instrumental to understanding these fluid-stable and temporary-permanent reality. It also helps unpack the paradoxes created through tension between camps as “state of exception” (Agamben, 1998, 2000) and as city-like spaces (Agier, 2002, 2011; Sanyal, 2012, 2014b; Jansen; 2016, 2018; Martin et al., 2019), as I unpack below in this chapter and throughout the thesis.

Besides being shaped by the relevant academic theories from city-camp literature, humanitarianism, and urban studies, the theoretical framework of this research is also informed by my personal experience as a humanitarian aid worker and my interactions with refugees in refugee camps, recognising that the researcher's identity and practical insights

are crucial for developing hypotheses and ensuring the validity of their findings (Maxwell, 2012).

In this chapter, I introduce and discuss the concepts associated with the research's theoretical framework, providing the theoretical underpinnings that encapsulate the empirical findings of this study. I built this theoretical framing by utilising notions and discourses from interdisciplinary research and literature. Specifically, I critically engage with traditional literature on refugees and refugee camps, discussing the associated concepts that include the “state of exception”, “biopolitics”, “bare life”, and “city-like”. Throughout this chapter and the thesis as a whole, I also engage with critical discussions related to humanitarianism to discuss humanitarian aid provided in protracted urban displacement contexts. I also build on urban theories to explain the formation of these controversial spaces. The discussions that inform my theoretical framework guide the development of my assumptions and research questions, which I formulate to test and critically engage with the dominant theories and knowledge, aiming to introduce a more comprehensive understanding of the socio-spatial reality of the studied refugee camps and associated humanitarian aid.

By unpacking the socio-spatial dynamics and analysing their influential roles, I critically contribute to the theoretical discussions presented in the **city-camp** literature, while engaging with **urban theories of space formation and critical analysis of humanitarianism**. In this chapter, I particularly engage with the work developed by various scholars and thinkers who have discussed and explained the camp space, including the work of Giorgio Agamben, who provided the foundation for theorising refugee camps. I also analyse the city-like depiction of refugee camps as discussed by Agier, Sanyal, Minca, Jansen and others, to build on these discussions in the empirical chapters. The theoretical framework for this study builds on this body of literature to understand how the studied refugee camps were formed and have evolved. I particularly engage with the theorisation of the camp space as a place of exception, as well as a place with city-like features, to analyse the different socio-spatial structures of the studied spaces. Moreover, I borrow the work of

Henri Lefebvre to understand that urban spaces are continuously produced, reflecting that on the production of space in the refugee camps through the ongoing tension between the “conceived space” and the “lived space”.

Furthermore, this research critically engages with and builds upon the contemporary narrative on humanitarianism, presented in this chapter through a discussion of the work of Barnett, Fassin, and Feldman to analyse the role of humanitarian action in the Palestinian context. In particular, I engage with Illana Feldman’s work in relation to the Palestinian refugee case, borrowing from her conceptualisation of the “humanitarian situation” and the “humanitarian condition” to analyse the role of humanitarian actors and the evolution of refugee camps in the studied cases. I approach these discussions by bringing the combination of critical realism and assemblage thinking research philosophical paradigm, with its ontological and epistemological stances, to the discipline of refugee camp studies.

This chapter is organised into three main sections. The first section introduces critical realism as an ontological and epistemological research paradigm in the context of refugee camps. Critical realism philosophy also informs this research methodology, which I will revisit in Chapter 4. In the first section, I examine the interplay between structure and agency, providing reflections on the refugee camp context that inform this theoretical framework. The last part of the first section introduces the ontological conceptualisation used in this thesis to apply the assemblage theory and critical realism in refugee camps. The second section critically engages with the city-camp body of literature, and the definitions of refugee camps and the refugee figure, arguing that refugee camps can be conceptualised as “city-like” spaces while considering their exceptional realities. This allows for the implementation of the ontological understanding of these spaces through a combined assemblage thinking and critical realism paradigm to unpack the formation of the camp and the underlying causal mechanisms, as I discuss in detail. The last section of the chapter critically engages with literature on humanitarianism, providing essential accounts on aid provision in urban and chronic displacement, reflecting on associated policy debates. The section introduces the concepts of “humanitarian situation” and “humanitarian condition”

in the context of the Palestinian refugee camps. Finally, the chapter concludes by summarising the theoretical underpinnings of this study, providing two propositions that synthesise the literature I discussed in support of applying the theoretical framework.

2.1 Critical realism: Ontologies and epistemologies for the context of refugee camps

This section provides an overview of critical realism as an ontological and epistemological research paradigm for this study. It explains how utilising its ontological and epistemological stances in this research is beneficial to unpack the causal mechanisms that affect and are affected by the dynamics in refugee camp spaces. Then, informed mainly by the work of Dave Elder-Vass, the section defines the concepts of causation, norm circles, and emergent properties and delves into critical realism's perspective on the interplay between structure and agency, utilising this discussion to reflect on the context of refugee camps. Finally, the section presents the ontological account used to envision the camp, combining assemblage thinking with critical realism, as adopted for this thesis. It discusses this combination to bring the role of the spatial dimension more strongly into focus, along with the social structures, highlighting its importance in understanding the fluidity and formation of refugee camps and how this formation can be linked to the causal mechanisms in the studied spaces.

The philosophy of critical realism enables us to acknowledge that there will always be an “ontological gap between what we experience and understand” and what truly happens through the deep, uncovered mechanisms that possess the properties of producing or influencing events (Danemark *et al.*, 2005, p. 39). Thus, by adopting a critical realist philosophy for this research, I acknowledge that there is a version of reality with an objective ontology that simultaneously consists of subjective interpretations of the phenomena being studied (O'Mahoney & Vincent, 2014). This version of reality is understood based on critical realism's explanation of reality, which enables us to capture and identify the mechanisms that constitute the world. In other words, it is the reality that exists objectively, but our knowledge of it is based on the understanding of the properties that societies and people

possess (Bhaskar, 1978). The research philosophy of critical realism recognises the existence of underlying mechanisms and structures that shape and influence studied phenomena, thus offering empirical research the opportunity to identify and unpack these structures. To achieve the aim of this research, it is essential to elucidate the causal mechanisms that explain the interactions between different social and political structures, the spatial urban camp environment, and the humanitarian interventions occurring in the refugee camp spaces. This will help identify possible influential factors of a successful future intervention. Thus, in the context of studying refugee camps, critical realism helps uncover the causes of the camps' inception and the structures and mechanisms that influenced their evolution process. These include social and governance structures within the camp space, spatial arrangements, and the overall geopolitical and economic factors that interact with the humanitarian apparatus, contributing to the continued reshaping of the camp space and the refugees' living experience.

In critical realism's realist ontology, our world is composed of entities, each of which is composed of other entities. Each entity at its level possesses 'causal powers' or 'emergent properties' that are produced by mechanisms dependent on how these entities are organised (Elder-Vass, 2010). As Elder-Vass (2010) illustrates, entities are objects or things, such as business organisations, human individuals, trees, and animals, and so on. Down to each entity, there are sets of its parts, and these parts are formed of other parts, all the way down to the basic fundamental components of the world. This set of parts is structured in a relational way, not just aggregative, which gives properties to the entity they form (Elder-Vass, 2010). Entities at each level have their own causal mechanisms and powers, although they are a collection of sets of lower entities, which Elder-Vass defines as the concept of emergence.

Social structures have the same concept of emergence. In such a definition, social entities or structures are wholes that are non-reducible and are, at the same time, conveyors or carriers of their non-reducible causal powers. So, in Elder-Vass's (2010) theory of emergence, higher-level entities have emergent properties/causal mechanisms that do not

exist in their individual parts and, at the same time, cannot be produced if these parts are aggregated together or arranged in different forms (Groff, 2012).

In the context of this study, this ontological paradigm, which explains the emergent causal power of social and material structures, can be used to explore the causes and evolution of socio-spatial dynamics within refugee camps. It helps identify whole structures—whether social or material, human or non-human—and explains their unique causal powers. This analysis is substantial in theorising and unfolding the urban or “city-like” conception of a refugee camp. In this thesis, I bring the ontological conception of critical realism to the city-camp analysis. This allows identifying and explaining the mechanisms of interplay between the different structures at the specific camps being studied. The refugee camp itself can be viewed as a higher-level entity that has a mutual influence with its surrounding geopolitical environment. Further down, various entities exist within the camp, shaping its socio-spatial arrangement and exerting mutual influence both within and beyond the camp space. These entities include social structures such as refugee social groups, families, political representations, committees, and governance structures. They also include spatial elements such as shelters in the camp, the streets, the specific geography or arrangements within the space, and so on. These entities are assembled at the camp's formation and are reassembled via the influence of causal structures and events throughout the evolution of refugee camps. As I explain later in this section, such an ontological stance aligns with the assemblage thinking of the city, which helps define the formation and the building blocks of a refugee camp.

From another angle, critical realism adopts a constructivist epistemology. This epistemological stance presumes that understanding reality is not direct but is governed by social constructs of concepts, languages, interests, and practices (Erickson, 2018). Under critical realism, research is committed to epistemological relativism, where knowledge is always socially produced and fallible (Danemark *et al.*, 2005; Buch-Hansen & Nielsen, 2020). Thus, our knowledge of the world is framed under particular conceptual and theoretical frameworks and always has limitations (Buch-Hansen & Nielsen, 2020). Through

this epistemological stance, and because knowledge is always fallible, researchers can be reflexive and exercise “judgmental rationality” by opting for a particular mediated and constructed description of reality based on a preference for a particular competing belief or theory (Buch-Hansen & Nielsen, 2020, p. 114). Thus, through the lens of critical realism, I can view refugees, refugee camps, and other socio-spatial entities in this research environment as objects of scientific inquiry that are socially constructed and defined.

Through this critical realist epistemological philosophy, one can identify existing theories and experiences as significant to this research and its analysis process, as these existing theories can be used to find the best explanation for reality (Fletcher, 2017). Thus, building on this epistemological stance, I develop the discussion of the findings in this thesis by drawing on the theorisation of camps as places of exception, as well as city-like spaces. I also critically engage with the existing literature on humanitarianism, offering different perspectives and a discussion of how humanitarianism has provided Palestinian refugees with the opportunity to re-establish their identities and claim their rights.

The critical realism framing helps us acknowledge that our knowledge of the studied reality is also “conceptually mediated” and the researcher’s observation is always “theory-laden” (Danemark *et al.*, 2005, p.41). Thus, studying refugee camps and humanitarian aid as interdisciplinary, theoretically informed phenomena requires consulting various disciplines and concepts to develop the theoretical framework for this research. In the second section of this chapter, I build on the conceptualisation of city-camp literature, space production, and humanitarianism presented by various scholars such as Agamben, Agier, Lefebvre, Sanyal, Malkki, Fassin, Barnett, Feldman, and others.

In the following subsection, I develop the discussion that explains how structures, particularly social structures, are formed and co-produce causal mechanisms and illustrate the interplay between these structures and human agents from a critical realist perspective.

2.1.1 Structure and agency in the context of refugee camps

The critical realist paradigm helps explain the ongoing tension between structure and agency in the social world. Critical realism embraces a holistic approach to avoid dualism between structure and agency by focusing the analysis on the dynamics and interactions between them. In this thesis, I develop my conception and explanation of the interplay between structure and agency, drawing on Elder-Vass's (2010) critical realism work, which offers a solution to the problem of causation between structure and agency. Building on the concept of emergence, Elder-Vass (2010) reconciles the causal relationship between structure and agency. In his work, he provides the opportunity to understand the social world as:

“composed of many overlapping and intersecting groups, each of which has the causal power to influence human individuals. But in each case these powers depend on interactions between individual members of the group, and this argument thus depends in turn on the claim that human individuals themselves also possess causal powers – human agency. Social events, then, are produced by the interaction of both structural and agential causal power”. (Elder-Vass, 2010, P.4)

However, this paradigm upholds a traditional dichotomy, acknowledging that people and structures are different entities (Bhaskar, 2014; Elder-Vass, 2010), while simultaneously focusing on relations, connections, and the interplay that occurs over time between structures and agents (Buch-Hansen & Nielsen, 2020).

From this critical realist perspective, social realities are shaped by overarching patterns, rules, and configurations. Those include different systems, political and economic power relations, as well as social institutions and cultural norms (Elder-Vass, 2010). Individuals' behaviours are influenced by these social structures, which provide the framework under which social life is conducted and persists over time and across generations. Structures exist independently of human perception and significantly influence human agency and social outcomes (Archer, 1995). Social structures possess emergent properties that make

them non-static and act as causal powers that influence individuals and groups (Archer, 1995 & Elder-Vass, 2010). Social structures, here studied in the refugee camp environment and in our social world in general, are characterised by having enduring effects on shaping human agents who, in return, reproduce and transform these structures over time (Fletcher, 2017).

In general, critical realism builds its structure-agency approach on the concepts of stratification and emergence. Both agents and structures can be found in different ontological strata, and possess unique emergent properties, meaning that they are “fundamentally different” and “causally irreducible” (Buch-Hansen & Nielsen, 2020, p.54). Structures and agents are distinct, yet they are in continuous interaction through a dialectical relationship. Agents acquire properties that are unique to them through their venture into social structures. In contrast, any social structure cannot possess agents’ properties. At the same time, structures evolve from interactions among agents and hold emergent properties that agents cannot possess (Archer, 1995; Elder-Vass, 2010; Buch-Hansen & Nielsen, 2020).

Adopting Dave Elder-Vass’s theorisation of structures and agency for studying refugee camps is instrumental in ontologically underpinning the empirical findings in this thesis. This provides a foundation for understanding and explaining the work of particular structures such as “norm circles” and “normative social institutions” in refugee camps, as well as “organisations”, as I highlight and define below. These structures co-interact with each other and the refugee agents, who negotiate their agency within these structures, in the context of refugee camps.

In addition, Elder-Vass’s contributions to linking critical realism with assemblage thinking (Rutzou & Elder-Vass, 2019) are substantial for this research. As this research is also concerned with the spatial dimensions of the studied camps, the relationship between social structures and spatial structures is better analysed and explained by bringing in assemblage thinking. I will discuss and illustrate this theoretical combination at the end of this section.

For Elder-Vass (2010), “emergent properties” and the “causal powers” of Bhaskar are identical in terms of critical realism’s account of causation. I use both terms interchangeably throughout this thesis. Entities at higher levels, according to Elder-Vass’s relational concept of emergence, are composed of parts which are organised in a particular form that produces causal effects. As such, the interplay between these causal powers co-determines the social events. So, social events are co-determined by the emergent properties/causal powers of the involved entities. This allows us to realise that human agents and social structures are unique entities that possess emergent properties and interact in ways that co-produce social events (Elder-Vass, 2010). For Elder-Vass, the agency of human individuals is similar to that of other social structures, in a way that the causal powers of human individuals are co-determined by the ongoing interactions between humans’ biological powers and their social contexts, which form particular dispositions that are translated into behaviours (Elder-Vass, 2010). In other words, human agency is emergent and co-determined at the different levels of our ontological world, including our social structure and environment, and also by “our own uniquely human powers of conscious reflexive thinking and indeed by biological factors” (Elder-Vass, 2010, p.194).

This definition of agency is constructive in understanding the actions of refugee agents in a displacement context. It offers the potential to understand and explain agents’ actions during times of crisis and when survival has been the priority at the very onset of the refugee camps, and helps investigate how refugee agents have built up and co-determined their living conditions by navigating different levels of social structures in their environment.

Although refugees and all human beings have their emerging powers as entities, they do not solely determine the nature of the social event. Social events result from many interactions and factors, including human individuals. The causal effectiveness of the human agent is contingent upon the mechanisms they interact with, as well as the causal effectiveness of the social structures (Elder-Vass, 2010). According to Elder-Vass (2010), there are two main types of social structures, which I will utilise in this thesis to explain the findings and various interactions observed at the studied camp spaces. These are:

- ***Normative Social Institutions***

As defined by Elder-Vass (2010), these institutions are the product of the causal power of certain groups, known as **norm circles**. Norm circles involve human agents who pursue and commit to a particular social norm. Norm circles are intersectional, so an individual can belong to multiple circles that have their own causal influence. Thus, an individual's behaviour can be judged or sanctioned based on their belongings and conformity to or deviation from a particular norm (Elder-Vass, 2010). In a refugee camp, there are various norm circles that can help us understand human actions and the social dynamics relevant to this study. For example, besides being part of the norm circle of displacement and refugeeeness, refugees are simultaneously members of their extended family or clan. Some of them are also members of groups that believe in a political view or are part of a social movement or committee. Spatially, norm circles can exist when refugees occupy a specific street or area and attend the same refugee service centre or when they share a particular challenge, such as living in crowded housing conditions or not having access to running water, etc. These spatial arrangements and the associated social structures are detailed in the empirical findings of this thesis.

- ***Organisations***

Organisations are Elder-Vass's second main type of social structure with their own emergent properties. Organisations are composed of individuals and practices, and roles are assigned to each individual in an organisation. Organisations shape the roles that are, in turn, normative structures of norm circles. Individuals in an organisation present themselves and their behaviours on behalf of the organisation. Those individuals would behave differently if they were not part of an organisation. Thus, according to Elder-Vass (2010), the behaviour of individuals at this level can be understood as a causal effect related to the organisation rather than the individual. In other words, the behaviour of individuals can be understood based on their internal roles and relationships within the organisation.

In that sense, it can be said that social structures, such as organisations, exercise their actions via human agents. However, it is not the social structure alone that determines an individual's actions. Instead, these actions are co-determined via the causal powers of

many other entities at various levels. Elder-Vass (2010) points out that human choices affect their actions and causal powers; however, this is controversial, as humans cannot make uncaused choices because the process of choosing is a social event governed by causality. For Elder-Vass (2010, p.145), organisations are assemblages that depend on roles assigned to their member, which makes them “fundamentally dependent on normative social institutions and thus the causal powers of norm circles”.

When we return to look at the context of refugee camps, we recognise that organisations are important in the socio-spatial interplay. Organisations like local government entities, Community Based Organisations (CBOs), International Non-Governmental Organisations (INGOs), UN Agencies like the UNRWA, and many others work via norm circles and work in the camp environment via a combination of causal powers that are influenced by norms internal to the camp space, as well as norms that are cast from above in the geopolitical space. These powers co-determine the choices of the human agents in these organisations and those dwelling in the refugee camp space.

Based on the above, this thesis investigates and explains the relationship between different structures and agents in the camp space, building on the discussed critical realism accounts of structure, agency, emergent properties, norm circles, and organisations. These conceptualisations are instrumental in understanding the evolution of a refugee camp in a particular context, which will be investigated by considering the formation of the studied space along with its subsequent evolution. The discussion above, along with the presented theoretical framework, suggests that understanding a refugee camp space is linked to how well we can identify and conceptualise the various entities and socio-spatial structures, as well as understand their causal mechanisms and powers at play. In addition, as I illustrate later in this chapter through the “city-like” conception of the camp and the combination of critical realism with assemblage thinking, I pursue the identification and understanding of the human and non-human, material and non-material socio-spatial formations and causal mechanisms. This pursuit eventually helps underpin the empirical findings considering the refugee camp's similarity to a “city-like” environment.

In this thesis, I bring the social and spatial structures together to understand the interwoven causal relationship between both. There is an inseparable connection between the social and the spatial, where space itself can be seen as the material product of a social creation with a continued socio-spatial dialect that reshapes it (Marji & Kohout, 2022). It is also recognised that the built environment contributes to human behaviour and its interaction, as it provides or limits access to the places where those interactions can occur (Marji & Kohout, 2022). People co-produce and re-appropriate their “lived space” through their social experiences, memories, and culture (Lefebvre, 1991), as refugees also do in their camp space, as I discuss in the next section. Thus, bringing both the social and spatial aspects into the study of refugee camps provides more holistic insights into the understanding of the formation and evolution of these spaces. I present in the next subsection the ontological combination of assemblage thinking and critical realism I utilise to explain the socio-spatial dynamics and their structures and provide avenues for analysing the formation of refugee camp spaces and their evolution.

2.1.2 The camp, the assemblage, and critical realism

As I discuss in the next section, refugee camps are “city-like” entities and can be envisioned as assemblages with emergent properties. The ‘urban turn’ in refugee camp studies depicts the camps as “city-like” spaces that benefit from the concepts and analysis offered by urban theory, bringing to the forefront the complexity and variability in studying the protracted refugee camp environment (Elorduy, 2021). There is almost an emerging consensus among contemporary scholars that protracted refugee camps exhibit city-like traits and similar features, including size, density, heterogeneity, and the presence of social hierarchies (Elorduy, 2021). The “city-like” and associated urban concepts draw more attention to the spatial aspects, allowing for the analysis of the agency of both the refugee dwellers and the built environment of the refugee camps (Elorduy, 2021). I utilise these urban discussions, presented in more detail in the next section, to analyse the socio-spatial structures in the refugee camp spaces. I discuss how refugees re-appropriate their camp space through their daily practices, strategies, and engagement with different structures and organisations, to urbanise their camps.

In this vein, I incorporate the ontological stances of assemblage thinking into the conceptualisation for this thesis. This helps identify the material and non-material, the human and non-human, and the tangible and intangible components that comprise the studied spaces (Anderson & McFarlane, 2011). Employing assemblage thinking to explore refugee camps helps theorise the camp on the move and brings together subjects and objects, temporality and permanence (Abourahme, 2015). It facilitates the conception of the socio-materiality of the phenomena, envisioning spatiality with potential, generative in its nature, by holding the momentum for political, economic, and historical events (McFarlane, 2011).

There is complementarity between assemblage and critical realism, as articulated by the work of Rutzou and Elder-Vass (2019), who make a significant contribution in this regard. They build their argument on DeLanda's work and the fundamentals of critical realism, arguing that the concepts of causal powers should be used in conjunction with the typology of structures to fulfil the need for social formation and causation stories. Thus, the ontologies of both structure-oriented critical realism and process-oriented assemblage are combined to conceptualise social outcomes that are, respectively, produced by relatively stable structures and the processes of more transient objects. Rutzou and Elder-Vass's (2019) synthesis remains one of the most unique contributions to combining critical realism and assemblage theory. They state that

“assemblage theory is a process-oriented ontology driven by what we call *the problematic of origin*, which forefronts explanations of how things come to be the way they are. Critical realism, by contrast is a structure-oriented ontology driven by *the problematic of casual power*, which forefronts explanations of how things have the capacity to influence the world” (Rutzou & Elder-Vass, 2019, p.402).

Assemblage thinking is more concerned with the “process” of becoming within an urban place, acknowledging the complexity of its socio-spatial aspects (Kamalipour & Peimani, 2015). Thus, while critical realist scholars develop explanations of social phenomena

through the analysis of existing structures and entities, assemblage thinking is more attentive to the origins and formation processes, encouraging researchers to think of new emerging/fluid entities or phenomena (Rutzou & Elder-Vass, 2019). Critical realism indeed incorporates historical accounts, but it assumes that there are pre-existing, stable structures that could change over time. However, in assemblages, structures have yet to exist and are inherently unstable, fluid, and heterogeneous (Rutzou & Elder-Vass, 2019, p. 404). This perspective is fundamental to the study of refugee camps, allowing us to capture the history and origins of camp formation, which did not exist as a space before displacement. This allows us to analyse and highlight the forces and powers that existed at the onset of displacement, which have produced the processes and structures that have made the camp evolve and become more stabilised.

These are essential accounts for understanding the conception of refugee camps. Combining assemblage and critical realism together helps understand the forces at play and their impact, both when the camp space opens up and when its various socio-spatial structures stabilise and (re)form under mechanisms of formation and causation. In other words, in addition to the understanding of the current causal mechanisms and structures underpinned by critical realism ontologies, one can utilise this combination to provide an analysis of the formation of the camp and its various socio-spatial structures. Such an approach of examining formation with causation is more helpful to explain the evolution of refugee camps in protracted displacement and how they developed to become paradoxical spaces, depicted as “city-like” entities or a city yet to be made (Agier 2002, 2011), oscillating between fluidity and stability, featuring temporariness and permanence, inclusion and exclusion, political identity and biopolitics, as I discuss in the next section.

2.2 Theorising refugee camps

2.2.1 The state of exception

The combination of critical realism and assemblage theory, as outlined above, provides an ontological underpinning that is suggested throughout this thesis for studying refugee camps. However, it is essential to critically engage with the existing literature's discussion

of dominant conceptualisations of refugee camps and how these relate to one another to inform the development of the theoretical framework for this thesis. In this vein, the work and the concepts presented by the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben have been very influential in defining refugees and refugee camps, as his work has significantly contributed to academic discussions of refugee camps. For Agamben (1998), the camp is a space devised by sovereign powers under the “state of exception” to control unwanted and undesired populations of refugees. Under this concept, he argues that in times of crisis, sovereign powers (governments) suspend the normal rules of law and declare a “state of exception” where, through this suspension, normal legal order and protection are not exercised by the state (Agamben, 2005). The creation of the “state of exception” is claimed to be a temporary emergency procedure that aims to protect the state, which is unable, at this particular moment, to deal with the issue of refugees. In these terms, the camp as space starts and opens up as an instrument by the sovereign power (nation-state) to strip the undesired subjects (refugees) of their political and legal statuses.

However, the ability to exercise the “state of exception” is integral to the notion of sovereignty (Agamben, 1998). Informed by Carl Schmitt’s definition that the “sovereign is he who decides on the state of exception” (Ibid, 1998, p.24), Agamben argues that the sovereign state is one that can be at the same time inside and outside the juridical order through the state of exception. It is a political and legal *paradox* that is significant in its form of exercising sovereignty. In other words, those modern states have the legal power to impose a suspension of the validity of the rule of law by stating, “I, the sovereign, who am outside the law, declare that there is nothing outside the law” (Agamben, 1998, p.28).

This language in literature on refugee camps, considering Agamben’s arguments, highlights the existing and continuous relationship between colonialism and encampment (Sanyal, 2017). This is because the camp space opens up when the “state of exception” is declared, which is a fundamental measure of the “dominant paradigm of government in contemporary politics” (Agamben, 2005, p.2). It is the colonial modern state power that creates the camp as a modern institution and temporary military tool or facility to respond to emergencies

and, at the same time, be a place of separation, containment, and political oppression for unwanted populations (Martin *et al.*, 2019). As Agamben (1998, 2000) points out, the “state of exception” devised under emergency measures suspends refugee camps in both space and time, where refugees are included (in the humanitarian sphere) by being excluded (from the political sphere).

Given the colonial history associated with Palestine and the displacement of Palestinian refugees, some scholars argue that the question of Palestine is a question of the camp (Abourahme, 2025), arguing that all Palestinians experience some form of encampment and displacement. As Weizman (2007) argued, the Israeli occupation functions through an institutionalised “state of exception” to separate the unwanted population while maintaining sovereign power. Thus, the exception is not a temporary emergency as Agamben argues, it is a permanent structural feature of a colonial project. In the Palestinian case, particularly the refugee camps, the “state of exception” has become the permanent foundational law for the colonised.

Refugee camps in the Palestinian context are inseparable from the ongoing reality of colonialism in Palestine, as camps are theorised as instruments of control and spaces of anticolonial struggle (Abourahme, 2020; Alnajada, 2025). However, the camp in its very existence in the Palestinian case and in the language of its inhabitants became a material and political challenge for the colonial project (Abourahme, 2025). As I discuss below, refugees inhabiting the camp constructed their own counter-narrative by insisting on their status as political subjects and viewing their camps and the aid provided by UNRWA as an arena of political concern (Feldman, 2018).

Central to Agamben’s concept of the state of exception is the notion of “homo sacer”. The concept of the “home sacer” is derived from ancient Roman law, describing a person who is banned and can be killed by anyone without consequence. This person cannot also be sacrificed, as their inclusion in the humanitarian results from their exclusion from the juridico-political. This depiction of the *paradoxical* life of the “home sacer” is termed as a “bare life”. When the state of exception becomes the dominant rule, those pushed into that

state live in the realm of “bare life”. According to Agamben’s (1998) paradigm, the refugee camps are devised by modern nation-states under the “state of exception” to suspend the law and reduce refugees to “bare life” by combining the “bio” with the “political” (Saleh, 2022). Thus, a “homo sacer” is excluded from the normal political order, rendered into “biopolitics”, and their mere living is reduced to the space that offers them survival. Furthermore, the management and control of the “homo sacer” as unwanted human beings manifests in places such as refugee camps, where governments enforce the “biopolitical” status on refugee subjects to control and govern the displaced population (Agamben, 2000). In Agamben’s own words, the homo sacer’s

“entire existence is reduced to a bare life, stripped of every right by virtue of the fact that anyone can kill him without committing homicide; he can save himself only in perpetual flight or a foreign land. And yet he is in a continuous relationship with the power that banished him precisely insofar as he is at every instant exposed to an unconditional threat of death” (Agamben, 1998, p.196).

A refugee, according to Agamben, is a “homo sacer” that occupies and exercises a “bare life” position under the modern nation-state order. The “homo sacer” concept denotes that a refugee’s life is not important, and they are permanently deprived of the state’s rule of law and protection (Agamben, 1998).

However, Agamben (1998) still suggests it is hard to conceptualise a refugee figure politically in the contemporary global political system. Citing Hannah Arendt, Agamben (1998) acknowledges that a refugee is a human being of rights who is disquieting to the sovereign state because their figure breaks the links between nationality and nativity, as well as between citizen and human. It was after the First World War that the link between nation and birth started to loosen and break. Principles for denationalisation were introduced and practised while the citizenship of a human became questionable, as she/he should be able to prove their worthiness (Agamben, 1998). Thus, the rights of the man (human being) and the rights of the citizen became separate, rendering the “bare life” to the margins of nations

so that it could be reclassified within another new form of identity (Agamben, 1998, pp. 144-148).

The main Agambenian argument here is that camps, whether concentration camps (that Agamben discussed) or refugee camps where refugees dwell and live, are the creation of the “state of exception” and are a product of its paradox. Thus, in Agamben’s accounts, we cannot deny that refugee camps exist outside the normal order, where refugees are reduced to “bare life”, and their rights are suspended in a state of limbo. As Agamben writes:

“The state of exception, which was essentially a temporary suspension of the juridico-political order, now becomes a new and stable spatial arrangement inhabited by the bare life that more and more can no longer be inscribed in that order.” (Agamben, 1998, p.188).

The Agambenian view of refugee camps and refugee subjects has been hegemonic, influencing the discussions in refugee camp studies. However, scholars in the past few decades have presented more empirical and contextual concepts and theorisation, arguing that the political and legal representations of refugees and camps are not necessarily completely accurate, nor do they capture the holistic picture in all refugee camps in protracted displacement contexts (Sanyal, 2012; Ramadan, 2013; Sanyal, 2014b; Martin *et al.*, 2019). Furthermore, some empirical studies suggest that refugee camps can be understood as a contrast to Agamben’s theory, as they demonstrate the emergence of political will (Martin *et al.*, 2019), with refugee agents able to recover their agency by creating both their political and physical space (Sanyal, 2014). Most importantly, it is argued that Agamben’s theorisation tends to neglect the agency and resistance of refugees themselves because he portrays a refugee as a political victim, passive and devoid of agency, which perpetuates the narrative of helplessness and victimhood (Chatty, 2010).

Moreover, in the contemporary empirical literature, it is widely argued that Agamben’s concepts, developed from a juridico-political perspective, fall short of providing a comprehensive understanding of the various qualities of refugee camps, particularly their

urban features (Abourahme, 2012; Ramadan, 2012; Sanyal, 2014; Saleh, 2022). Avoiding the simplification associated with Agamben's view, empirical research on refugee camps reveals that these places are complex and vary widely in their governance, living conditions, and, in some cases, their legal frameworks. As such, intersectionality in the camp spaces has been overlooked and not addressed in Agamben's perspectives, as refugee sites are places where social identities, gender, class, and race intersect and influence access to resources and protection. Failing to grasp and analyse these intersecting dynamics will always result in an incomplete understanding of these complex spaces (Yuval-Davis, 2006).

Despite these critical accounts, Agamben's discussion and analysis still take us to the root cause of the problem of refugeeeness and provide a well-established foundation for identifying, understanding, and further discussing the circumstances that led to the inception and subsequent evolution of refugee camp spaces. Agamben's juridico-political conceptions offer a starting point for tracing and discussing how refugee camps have evolved and how different actors, including governments and humanitarian aid organisations, perceive and interact within these spaces accordingly.

To unpack and trace various analyses of refugee camps and provide a working theory for this thesis, the remainder of this section discusses the contemporary camp studies literature, with a focus on the "city-like" conception. This thesis argues that the "city-like" conception, based on recognition of urban features in refugee camps, is instrumental to our understanding of these spaces, which helps support the empirical findings presented herein. However, I suggest that such new conceptualisations should not completely abandon the "state of exception", in order to leave room to explain the *paradoxical* nature of these spaces. Acknowledging the exceptional features of these spaces and the evolution of their urban traits simultaneously offers the avenue to analyse how the contradictions in the built environment, socio-spatial interactions, and relationships have been established in the camp space throughout the camp's formation and evolution.

2.2.2 City-like refugee camps

As refugee numbers increase and more camp spaces open up, researchers from around the world have become more interested in studying and theorising refugee camps to bring about knowledge that helps tackle the global refugee crisis. The proliferation of these studies, particularly in the past three decades, can be linked to the explosion of refugee numbers and camps worldwide due to increased conflicts and climate disasters. By the end of 2024, nearly 123.2 million people worldwide had been forced to flee their homes, with 75% of them hosted in low- and middle-income countries (UNHCR, 2025).

As a result, more research on refugees and refugee camps is being produced. Scholars, including anthropologists such as Michel Agier, Liisa Malkki, and Ilana Feldman, as well as urban and intersectional researchers like Romola Sanyal, Bram Jansen, Adam Ramadan, Nasser Abourahme, and Diana Martin, among others, have introduced different analytical perspectives influenced by the hegemonic theorisation of refugee camps introduced by Giorgio Agamben. Their analysis and the associated conceptualisation of refugee camps are informed mainly by their empirical work in refugee settlements worldwide. Some of those prominent researchers argue that refugee camps are similar to cities where agency, solidarity and a new political order are exercised (Martin *et al.*, 2019). For them, refugee camp spaces emerge, informalize, and evolve, influenced by the everyday practices of their own dwellers (Agier, 2011; Ramadan, 2013; Sanyal, 2014; Jansen, 2018). For example, based on his studies of refugee camps in Kenya, Jansen (2018) suggested considering a different form of urbanisation in refugee camps that he termed “humanitarian urbanism”. This approach enables us to recognise the distinct forms of urbanity and how camps evolved under conditions of uncertainty and indefinite temporariness, with refugees contributing to the evolution of their camp spaces (Jansen, 2018).

Furthermore, by studying the exodus from wars in Colombia, Sub-Saharan Africa, and the Palestinian territories of the West Bank, Agier (2002, 2008, and 2011) has made substantial contributions to refugee camp studies and the theorisation of camp spaces. His arguments still, to some degree, engage with the notions inspired by Agamben’s work, like “bare life”,

depicting refugees as subjects stripped of their rights and sometimes their agency. Thus, refugee camps are seen as a sociological phenomenon of spatial distancing and exclusion (Agier, 2011). For Agier (2002), refugee camps represent new forms of “warfare” that, on the one hand, result from what he characterised as low-intensity wars, causing exodus, suffering, and losses. On the other hand, refugee camps are a manifestation of the humanity and compassion of the world’s military superpowers, which have been exercised through the apparatus of humanitarian aid (Agier, 2002). Both features of the camp are provisional, but for Agier, they have perennial human conditions. This means that refugee camps are devised as military-humanitarian facilities to be occupied by refugees and asylum seekers and have become permanent spatial arrangements in our everyday landscapes.

Nonetheless, Agier extends the analysis of the camp space beyond Agamben’s political and legal conceptions by offering urban perspectives and comparing the refugee camps with a city that has complex and precarious social, spatial, and governance structures (Agier, 2002, 2011). Agier (2002) has developed a theory of refugee camps based on two hypotheses. The first hypothesis is that refugee camps are the formulas used to create a space for the “humanitarian management of the most unthinkable and undesirable population on the planet”, keeping the refugees on continuous experimentation of segregation from what is considered to be the ‘normal’ political and social world (Agier, 2002, p.320). In his second hypothesis, Agier introduces the concept of a “city-camp”. In a “city-camp”, the camp sites are formed through an “enduring organisation of space, social life and system of power that exist nowhere else” (Agier, 2002, p. 322). These camps come to resemble cities. For Agier (2002), they are complex, agglomerating large numbers of heterogeneous inhabitants with special humanitarian governance in a large and dense settlement. In more recent accounts, Agier (2011, pp. 133-134) also suggests that refugee camps can be considered “camp-towns” with paradoxical mechanisms associated with the victimhood of refugees, who are reduced to humanitarian beneficiaries, and space features identical to those in towns, including “heterogeneity, complexity, gathering, concentration.”

Contemporary scholars apprehend the urbanity of the camps, arguing that in many protracted displacement cases, there are blurred boundaries between camp spaces and the urban neighbourhoods, with urban structures emerging to counter the imposed “state of exception” (Carter-white & Minca, 2025). This urban-like status can even attract inhabitants, as the camp begins to offer things associated with urban life. This city-like status "has been argued to actively entice individuals to move to the camp and develop new urban survival strategies [...] and forms of citizenship [...] that are unavailable ‘outside’” (Carter-white & Minca, 2025, p.36).

In this thesis, I adopt the idea that refugee camps in the Gaza Strip are **“city-like”** and employ this concept to recognise and facilitate the analysis of urban features in refugee camps. Refugee camps are becoming more flexible and intertwined with their economy and culture, which are both stabilised and transient (Agier, 2011). The refugee camps can transform into towns via a transformation that could start new “resilient towns” and end the stereotypical image of the refugee camps (Agier, 2011). It is because of the refugees' political action and solidarity, manifested in their refusal of “bare life” status, that refugee camps have seen the transformation in their spaces and materiality to reproduce their social and spatial elements (Agier, 2011). According to Agier (2011), emerging tactics within refugee camps disrupt the hegemonic sovereign powers of control and segregation to create both the political and urban sense of the city. During prolonged displacement, camps evolve into communities that resemble towns, characterised by diverse political, cultural, and social relationships (Agier, 2011). In this sense, refugee camps evolve, occupying relatively large areas that are denser and have more permanent structures inhabited by sometimes socially heterogeneous populations (Agier, 2002).

However, to understand what constitutes an urban space in the camp and what makes a refugee camp resemble a city, I borrow from urban geography and interdisciplinary studies to provide a definition of the city/urban space. These aspects of the definition inform the discussion on the city features of the studied camps in the empirical chapters. The definition of the city from an interdisciplinary perspective has moved beyond the relations to

population size or infrastructure. It is a dynamic process (Soja, 1996; Brenner, 2014) and entails understanding the urban city as nexus between economic and capital accumulation functions, culture, and social relations that are continuously reproduced (Lefebvre, 1991).

Space is not only physical, but it is also a social construct moulded by human interaction, mirroring the unique values and power hierarchies of the society that inhabits it. For Henri Lefebvre, urban spaces are continuously produced, shaped and provided by meanings through humans and societies, and represent a tool for shaping the social and political power (Lefebvre, 1991). Through this process of urbanisation, a spatial triad is produced, where urban spaces are categorised into: ***perceived space***, representing the everyday material and physical space, including networks, routes, and the common sense and everyday perception of space; ***conceived space***, the abstract official form of the space bossed by governments, planners and developers through the maps, lines, zoning laws, used by the governors to organise and control a society; and the ***lived space***, where the space is directly felt and experienced, resembling the memory, imagination, and culture, as people create the meaning and re-appropriate their spaces (Lefebvre, 1991).

Building on Lefebvre's (1991) spatial triad, lived space represents the experiential dimension of the trio. It arises from the constant negotiation between physical environments (perceived space) and planned designs (conceived space). Ultimately, it functions as the site of everyday human agency, embodying the complex social structures and personal histories that define life in (urban) space.

In this study, I focus my analysis on the processes and dynamics that led to the creation of the lived space in the studied refugee camps, unpacking the various socio-spatial dynamics that shaped the interactions between the conceived and perceived spaces to produce the lived space. The lived space in the refugee camp is the synthesis of physical reality (perceived space) and spatial design and ideology (conceived space), manifesting the day-to-day experience of its residents. It is the primary domain of the inhabitants, representing a space that the human imagination and needs constantly seek to reshape, reclaim, and make its own (Lefebvre, 1991).

Contemporary literature and comparisons drawn between the camp and the city analyse how refugees dwelling in camps in protracted displacement camps re-appropriate their space to create their “city-like” camp, reproducing their cultural meaning, memories, physical environment, and social practices. They reproduce their “lived space” by challenging the “conceived space” and reappropriating the “perceived space” imposed earlier by the humanitarian apparatus and the sovereign states' regimes. Physically, refugees upgraded and personalised their shelters, adding rooms, expanding their courtyards, painting and decorating and turning their temporary shelter into homes (Malkki, 1995). A practice that has been clearly noticed in the Palestinian refugee camps (Badawy *et al.*, 2016; Saleh, 2020). Through customary rules and improvised expansions to public spaces, refugees create their own plans of alleyways, adjust, add or remove fencing, as I discuss in the practice of تحويط Tahweet in the empirical chapters, challenging the originally conceived and perceived spaces and defying the top-down rigid grids (Jansen, 2016). In the city-like camps, refugees rezone and repurpose their residential plots, introducing another function to harness the livelihoods that the camp space can offer or simply to create a mixed-use urbanism. In refugee camp space, “distinctive architecture emerges that starts as a practical aid landscape but is inhabited by people’s routines, strategies and actions over time that contest, alter and change these initial bureaucratic spaces into lived spaces” (Jansen, 2016, p.02). Palestinian refugees also practised this repurposing to create their lived space, as I discuss in the empirical chapters.

In the traditionally conceived space, the camp is a space of biopolitics (Agamben, 1998), where refugees are recipients of aid and assistance. Fundamentally, the camp is defined as a tool of the sovereign state, a direct product of its power to exclude, with its function defined through the biopolitical process. As Carter-White & Minca (2025, p. 282) argue, the associated biopolitics of the nation-state “manifests itself through a series of processes of exclusionary inclusion of groups and individuals who are deemed not to belong to the nation, and who are, therefore, ‘retained’ as a potential threat to its (mythological) communitarian integrity”.

Despite the fact that the conceived camp space is meant to manage the undesired and unwanted refugee population (Agier, 2011), the city-like lived space of the camp opens up opportunities for "social and cultural vitality" (Carter-White & Minca, 2025, p. 36). In the urban camp space, political identities are formed, social hierarchies are structured, and a form of citizenship emerges as refugees become dwellers of the evolving neighbourhoods of the city-like camps (Carter-White & Minca, 2025). In essence, Lefebvre's "lived space" shows that even in the most constrained and "conceived" environments, human social life will always find a way to reproduce its "lived space" (Lefebvre, 1991). Refugees take the camp, a space of exception and confinement, through their daily practices, and transform it into a "city-like" space.

Refugee camps in protracted displacement have undergone urbanisation, in which the "perceived" physical space is repurposed to accommodate the increased diversification and concentration of inhabitants, their practices, facilities, and resources, in a non-agricultural context similar to cities (Jansen, 2020). Through humanitarian care, different services, infrastructure, and activities of concentration in the camps, new forms of informal economy and employment emerge (Jansen, 2020). Thus, through their evolution under protracted displacement, the camps lived space turn into economic centres through the creation of informal economy and markets as observed in refugee camps in Kenya (Montclos & Kagwanja, 2000; Oka, 2011), Zaatri in Jordan (Dalal, 2015; Alsayel, 2015) as well as the Palestinian refugee camps in the Middle East (El Masri, 2020; Saleh, 2020; Aburamadan, 2022). Informal economies in the city-like camps are created through spontaneous spatial practices, which were not originally planned, practised by refugees and through their economic agency to create an economic and social parallel world (Agier, 2011).

Scholars draw on the urban informality debates to link refugee spaces and cities, simultaneously challenging the notion that refugee camps are solely places of "biopolitics"(Sanyal, 2012, 2014b) . Refugees in the camps are agents who can recover their agency by reconfiguring their physical and political space, utilising practices similar to those

of the urban poor (Sanyal, 2012, 2014b). Realising that informality extends beyond economic activities and housing, as it is a form of governance, a connection between different economies and spaces, Sanyal (2014b) explains that refugee camps under prolonged displacement circumstances could resemble slums in the developing world, as the agency of refugees is the key to explaining the production of camp space. Thus, to understand 'refugeeness', Sanyal (2014b) suggests that the theory of 'bare life' is insufficient, and research should focus on the questions and practices of urbanity and informality in these camps, where refugees have negotiated and reclaimed their agency and practised their politics. Such urban informality and practices of agency in the "city-like" refugee camps are becoming the norm, not the exception, diminishing the state of temporariness and making camps "another geography of urban colonial relations, where subjects produce new forms of politics..." to pave the way to claim citizenship or to practice a different vision of life and rights (Sanyal, 2014b, p. 570).

This stance aligns with the discussions on urban informality, suggesting that we recognise informality as a site of critical analysis with its economic, spatial, and political dimensions (Banks *et al.*, 2020). Such a shift of perspectives offers a focus on informality as an ongoing process that reveals the true political and economic power structures of a city or an urban space. As Banks *et al.* (2020) analyse, the practices of informality extend beyond the practices of the urban poor. From this lens, informality in refugee camps, the dense and self-built cities, cannot be understood by looking at poverty or housing alone. It is a direct, physical, and spatial product of a political reality including statelessness, protracted displacement, occupation, and the legal gap created by the mandates of UNRWA.

Thus, in such a context of the Palestinian refugee camps, informality has taken multiple shapes associated with the various dimensions mentioned above. For instance, in terms of political governance, UNRWA provides services such as health and education, but not political governance of the space. This gap has created fragmented authority and has been filled by the Palestinian Authority and various leaders of community structures and leaders (Hanafi, 2010; Woroniecka-Krzyżanowska, 2019). In addition, due to informal expansions

and shared economic and political processes, Saleh (2020) argues, the distinction between the camp and the city in the Gaza Strip has become blurred, leaving the Gaza Strip itself to function as one "large enclaved refugee space" (Saleh, 2020, p.3). Discussions of informality are not the main focus of this thesis, but the gap in camp governance and informal practices are among the causal mechanisms that significantly affected the socio-spatial dynamics. Thus, I briefly discuss and reflect on informality under the discussion of the socio-spatial dynamics associated with the fragmented modes of governance and the land and property market in the studied refugee camps.

The relationship between the refugee camp and the city has been discussed and adopted by many other contemporary scholars who have contributed to the field of refugee camp studies. This scholarly move is termed by Martin *et al.* (2019) as "post-Agambenian" camp studies. It has provided multifaceted working definitions and theories of a refugee camp, attempting to debunk Agamben's views on the "state of exception," "bare life," and "biopolitics". Especially in a protracted refugee crisis, refugee camps build economic and social ties with their adjacent cities while the physical boundaries between the camp space and the city blur, and the camp becomes entangled with its urban surroundings (Doraï, 2010; Ramadan, 2013; Sanyal, 2014a; Sanyal, 2014b; Abourahme, 2015; Oesch, 2020).

This stance is specifically present in the analysis of researchers who have studied the Palestinian refugee camps in the Middle East, such as Doraï (2010), Ramadan (2013), Sanyal (2012 and 2014a), Abourahme (2015), Martin (2015), and Saleh and De Meulder (2019). These studies try to link the refugee camps with their hosting urban settings. Nonetheless, very few of these studies have focused on the refugee camps in the Gaza Strip. Recognising the particularity of the Gaza Strip refugee camps, they can be used to draw analogies with other contexts, as some of these Gaza camps represented more evolved forms of "city-like" spaces that are entangled with their hosting environments. I present the context of refugee camps in the Gaza Strip, with their historical evolution and typology, in Chapter Three.

Although refugee camps can be "city-like", they are not yet complete cities, as the occupation of space remains precarious, and their evolution represents incomplete forms

of urbanity (Agier, 2002). Refugees living in these camps are still struggling with a chronic tension between their identity as political subjects and their presence in the camp space as “bare life”, where the latter is easier to manage from the perspective of the United Nations and other humanitarian organisations (Malkki, 2002). Such tension in refugee camps hinders their development into complete cities despite resembling some features of the city. Agier writes:

“The camp, then, is comparable to the city, and yet it cannot ‘reach it’. An economy that could exist since people show they are willing to work (and, for many of them, to remain where they are), a social division which adapts to the plurality of constraints, an occupation of space which, however precarious, gives meaning to an originally desertic place – everything is potential but nothing develops, ... Even when stabilized, the camp remains a stunted city-to-be-made, by definition naked.” Agier (2002, pp. 336-337).

Nonetheless, according to Jansen (2016), there is ambiguity in drawing the analogy between camps and cities because it fails to capture the regulations of control characterised by permanent temporariness. Acknowledging social diversity, hybrid governance, and economic stratification, Jansen (2016) suggests that refugee camps urbanise under the management and control of the humanitarian bureaucracy in what he calls “humanitarian urbanism”. In Jansen’s humanitarian urbanism, refugee camps exhibit different forms of urbanity that impart a permanent feature to the refugee spaces and mobility to the camp inhabitants. Refugee camps are settlements of uncertainty with urbanity that are characterised by poverty and rebellion, insecurity and informality, and inequality reproduced by everyday practices (Jansen, 2018). Despite this professed ambiguity around the analogy between camps and cities, theorising refugee camps as “city-like” is instrumental for this study as well as for the contemporary discourse on refugee camps because it helps draw comparisons on how these spaces evolved compared with their adjacent urban centres, and helps analyse the socio-spatial features that make the camps distinct or similar to surrounding cities.

Recognising the notable and unique characteristics of the Palestinian refugee camps and the Palestinian refugee case in general, this research also draws on the efforts of urban scholars, primarily from the Middle East, to conceptualise Palestinian refugee camp spaces. This group of researchers has taken a critical approach to Agamben's concept of the "state of exception" and "biopolitics" in refugee camps. They have employed urban concepts to analyse the camps' spaces, including temporality and assemblage (Ramadan, 2013; Abourahmeh, 2015; Alqub & Matar, 2024). Such works read the Palestinian refugee camp space as an urban assemblage formed through the interplay between the practices of the camp's dwellers, materiality, and temporality. Furthermore, and building on this work, the "city-like" conception helps envision the camp as an assemblage, borrowing from urban assemblage thinking, which is instrumental in unpacking the formation and fluidity of the urban refugee camp space. Viewing refugee camps as assemblages helps scholars and researchers depart from their static view (Ramadan, 2013; Abourahme, 2015; Oesch, 2020; Alqub & Matar, 2024) to explore the evolution of the camp space and its complex internal and external interactions. As Ramadan (2013) argues, there is a need for a more geographically sensitive approach to unpack the complexities of the camp space.

Based on the discussion in this section, I adopt the perspective that refugee camps, especially in the Palestinian case, have "city-like" features. Theorisation of camp space as "city-like" is substantial and, specifically, of practical importance because it helps identify and understand the formation of the camp as an assemblage and builds on that formation to study different structures, institutions, and the agency of the camp's dwellers. The "city-like" depiction draws on urban theory, discussions on governance, and most importantly, the ongoing tension between structure and agency, which helps understand the contextual complexities of each unique refugee camp space. Nevertheless, from legal and political lenses in the Gaza Strip context, this thesis also argues that proper theorising of the camps and their evolution should not wholly depart from Agamben's "state of exception". As explained above, Agamben's views can help explain the origins of the refugee camp issue and still aid in understanding the roots of the contradictions and paradoxes in these spaces. The "state of exception" should be taken as the starting point of the analysis and as the main

cause that provoked the actions of the agency and the resilience of refugees. Camps have indeed been developed into “city-like” structures, but at the same time, they still inherit the “state of exception” and “bare life” that have enormously influenced their evolution as well as the struggle of the refugee agents. Particularly in the case of the Gaza Strip, refugees and refugee camps have inherited layers of colonialism, juridico-political exceptions, geographical confinement and restrictions, and continued oppression, which makes the “state of exception” an integral notion that characterises the studied spaces.

In the following and final section of this chapter, I critically engage with the literature on humanitarianism and aid in order to examine the role of humanitarian aid organisations as the leading actors in the refugee camps, and the impacts of these actions on the dynamics and evolution of the camp space.

2.3 Humanitarianism, urban displacement, and refugee camps

The main contribution of this thesis speaks to the body of city-camp literature, with a focus on humanitarian action and humanitarianism as the main driver/influential factor in the evolution of camps. Nonetheless, because of the long-standing presence and significant impact of humanitarian action on refugee camps in the Palestinian context, I discuss the literature on humanitarianism in this section. The aim of the discussion is to define humanitarian action and draw on the political and historical context of humanitarianism, which was introduced to Palestine following the 1948 Nakba. This discussion informs the analysis of the mandate and role of humanitarian actors, particularly the UNRWA, in relation to the management and evolution of Palestinian refugee camps. As discussed in the previous sections, notions of urbanity in refugee camps materialise under humanitarian care or “humanitarian urbanism” and through a bottom-up process of everyday living of refugees (Jansen, 2016 & 2020). In the Palestinian case, particularly in refugee camps, Palestinians have lived their entire lives under the impacts of humanitarianism (Feldman, 2018). Thus, due to its significant role, humanitarianism is another important dimension of this study's conceptualisation. My discussion and analysis of humanitarianism is particularly linked to understanding and theorising the role of humanitarian aid

organisations and their impact on the lives of displaced people in protracted displacement conditions, rather than discussing the various and deeply contested critiques of humanitarianism.

From policy and practical perspectives, humanitarianism is defined by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) as “the independent, neutral, and impartial provision of relief to victims of armed conflicts and natural disasters” (Barnett & Weiss, 2011, p. 9). Humanitarianism is governed by four core humanitarian principles: humanity, impartiality, neutrality, and independence (Barnett & Weiss, 2011; The Sphere Handbook, 2018).

Generally, humanitarian aid is action-oriented, characterised by being short-term, and is implemented via external resources rather than focusing on leveraging internal capacities (Otto & Weingärtner, 2013). However, in the context of refugee camps in protracted displacement, providing humanitarian aid for extended periods is inevitable. Once a refugee camp has been established, it is challenging to determine when it will close, affecting both refugees and humanitarian actors alike. For the UNHCR, a durable solution for refugees should be realised to close a refugee camp. According to the UNHCR (2025b), there are three possible durable solutions: voluntary repatriation to the country of origin, local integration in the country of asylum, or resettlement to a third country. Being unable to realise a durable solution for refugees is not necessarily linked to the continuation of the hostility or the conditions that caused the displacement. Instead, realising these solutions is contingent on the willingness of sovereign powers who created the “state of exception” and the capacity of the humanitarian aid apparatus. In the absence of such willingness, humanitarian mechanisms that respond to emergencies have seen dramatic growth in the size and diversity of their expertise in the contemporary humanitarian system (Agier, 2002). There are hundreds of NGOs, UN agencies, and research institutes from different fields funded by the ‘modern nation states’ to produce an extraordinarily complicated “city-camp” space that is supposed to protect and physically maintain the lives of the ‘modern warfare’ victims (Agier, 2002).

In protracted refugee camps, aid is introduced from the outset and continues during the development of “city-like” features, presenting another source for ongoing criticism of how humanitarian aid organisations work in urban contexts. Researchers, as well as some practitioners, have called for a re-evaluation of humanitarian approaches to be adapted and tailored to the specific contexts in which they operate. Particularly, debates among policymakers and practitioners of alternatives to humanitarian approaches in urban displacement have increased in recent decades. Many humanitarian organisations have been grappling with the new ‘urban’ protracted challenges that require strategic and operational shifts regarding how aid can be effectively delivered (D’ Onofrio, 2018; Sanderson, 2019; Guterres, 2010). Similarly, some scholars and practitioners concur that significant evidence and research gaps persist regarding the documentation of local actors’ experiences, the recovery mechanisms of affected populations, and the long-term impacts of humanitarian interventions (Brown *et al.*, 2015; Haysom & Pavanello, 2011). Moreover, Brown and Johnson (2015) suggest that most research evidence on urban humanitarian response is based on perceptions of international humanitarian actors, while overlooking the humanitarian experiences of local actors. In addition, humanitarian funding structures are built on either humanitarian or development intervention, as most attempts to manage urban protracted crises neglect the humanitarian-development nexus, adopt arbitrary top-down approaches, and lack a clear vision of the context and environment (Dadu-Brown *et al.*, 2015).

Some scholars and humanitarian practitioners have promoted a handful of concepts and approaches to address the knowledge gap and pursue a more effective urban humanitarian response. For example, D’Onofrio (2018) asserts that humanitarian responders should not ask what a city can do to support their interventions. Instead, they should seek ways to support the city’s response to urban displacement. Twigg and Mosel (2018) argue that traditional humanitarian responses often overlook or misunderstand ‘informality’ in urban contexts where the interrelations between formal and informal systems and actors are not adequately captured. They suggest engaging with ‘informality’, as discussed in the previous section, to achieve greater accountability towards the affected communities in urban

settings. Similarly, Sanyal (2014b) suggests using urban literature to study refugee camps, particularly the debates on urban informality, which allows us to understand the links between refugee spaces and their host cities.

From another perspective, some humanitarian practitioners promote new engagement and response approaches to be tested and piloted in urban displacement contexts. For instance, the Global CCCM Cluster (2014) introduced the centre approach where a community centre is established to serve the displaced and host vulnerable communities, while Parker and Maynard (2015) presented the area-based Approach that was introduced by the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) in 2010 to bridge the divide between the provision of the short-term humanitarian needs to the displaced and the longer-term development needs. Finally, Sanderson (2020) suggests three key principles as general best practices for humanitarian organisations to engage in urban humanitarian responses: humanitarian actors need to consider longer-term views of the impacts of their actions; should engage in urban complexity that embodies multi-faceted needs and multi-sectoral responses; and should aim at more collaboration with local actors and among international responders (Sanderson, 2020).

In academic discussions, humanitarianism and its definition and aims have been a central topic of debate among scholars, including Michael Barnett, Didier Fassin, Lisa Bhungalia, and Illana Feldman. According to Barnett (2011), the impulse to help others is found in all major religions, which include notions of compassion and charity. Nonetheless, humanitarianism as a concept began to emerge in the 19th century through the efforts of Henry Dunant, who founded what became the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) (Barnett, 2011). Michael Barnett (2011) detailed three historical ages of humanitarianism, exploring the shifting relationship between aid, political power, and morality. The first is the age of ***imperial humanitarianism (to 1945)***, which was a foundational era full of the deep contradictions of humanitarianism as an instrument of imperialism. Humanitarianism was a key part of the civilising mission rooted in the ideas of Western nations and the duty to bring civilisation to the people of the world. In this first age,

humanitarianism was seen as part of a package of progress delivered by imperial powers. The second is the age of ***neo-humanitarianism (1945-1989)***, emerging during the height of decolonisation and the Cold War following World War II. In that era, aid was rarely given based on need alone, and humanitarianism became a political tool of superpowers, used to win political allies in the newly independent Third World nations. In the period of *neo-humanitarianism*, donor governments used aid to advance their positions in the global ideological struggle. Aid was no longer about explicit civilising missions, but it remained deeply political. The third age is the age of ***liberal humanitarianism (1989–Present)***, which emerged by the end of the Cold War and the diminishing of the geopolitical constraints associated with the previous era. This age has seen the rise of international humanitarianism, characterised by the growth in the influence, number, and size of international humanitarian NGOs and UN agencies. In this age, humanitarian actors together formed their own powerful global networks, professionalised and accessed billions of dollars through governmental and non-governmental contributions.

The third age, humanitarianism today, is seen as the liberal age of humanitarianism (Barnett, 2011), grounded in fundamental human rights, democracy, and the rule of law. However, many scholars have questioned and criticised humanitarian intervention as a new tool for Western imperialism, or as Didier Fassin describes it, “altruistic imperialism” because the “even well-intentioned initiatives of humanitarian organisations rely on the dissemination of liberal values with little consideration for the meaning of local norms and moralities” (Fassin, 2023, p.104). Fassin, in earlier work, discussed how humanitarianism created the humanitarian reason to govern precarious lives (Fassin, 2012). Thus, humanitarian action, despite being neutral, moral, and apolitical response to suffering, creates an alibi for political inaction (Fassin, 2012), or even as an extension of political violence and the regimes of war and policing (Bhungalia, 2015).

Criticism of humanitarian aid has increased in recent decades, also among philosophers and researchers who have studied refugee camps, including those discussed in the previous section. For instance, Agamben (1998) argues that aid organisations can only deal

with figures of “bare life” in an environment of segregation between what is humanitarian and what is political, so that the rights of a person and a citizen are two different, distant things. Thus, aid organisations indirectly maintain alignment with the powers they are meant to oppose (Agamben, 1998). From another perspective, Agier (2011, p. 200) describes the humanitarian apparatus as “the left hand of the Empire.” It is the hand that heals when the other hand strikes. It follows devastation with aid, while the other hand drops bombs. Humanitarian operations are militarily programmed to count survivors, anticipate the numbers of displaced, plan and erect shelters, and provide survival assistance (Agier, 2011).

The critique of humanitarianism entails that modern humanitarian action depoliticises social issues by focusing on the symptoms of a crisis, such as displacement and hunger, while allowing its root causes, such as war and occupation, to remain unaddressed. Thus, humanitarianism provides a moral response that substitutes the needed political one, allowing powerful states to appear compassionate while avoiding the difficult and costly political work required to solve the crisis itself (Mavelli, 2017). By framing inequality, persecution, and injustice as suffering, humanitarianism reduces complex political issues to technical, medical, or logistical problems (Fassin, 2012). This transforms people from political subjects with rights and agency into passive victims or “bare life” to be managed.

Furthermore, as Bhungalia (2015) argued, humanitarianism and humanitarian aid, particularly in Palestine, have become sophisticated mechanisms to manage the Palestinian population instead of supporting their liberation. It became a tool to mitigate the suffering caused by occupation, serving as a quick fix to prevent the total humanitarian collapse and revive the occupying power of its legal and financial responsibility (Bhungalia, 2015). Focusing on the work of the US Agency for International Development (USAID), Bhungalia argues that the foreign aid regime in Palestine is not a neutral, benevolent force; instead, it is a component and tool to manage the violence and police Palestinian everyday life (Bhungalia, 2015).

According to Feldman (2009), humanitarianism is always subject to debate in its objectives and actions. It is unclear whether humanitarian organisations should focus solely on

alleviating direct suffering or take developmental actions aimed at more structural changes (Feldman, 2009). In her discussions on humanitarian action in Gaza, Feldman (2009) highlights that humanitarian activities can vary from the simple provision of food or healthcare services to education and the undertaking of structural development activities.

For Palestinians and the Palestinian refugee camps, the impacts of humanitarianism on their lives in protracted urban camps have been complicated and mostly under-researched (Feldman, 2009). There have been contentious and contradictory arguments on the particular impacts of aid on Palestinian refugees. For example, one of the few studies conducted in the context of Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon shows that the actions of humanitarian organisations have created an environment of doubt and suspicion, which undermines collective political action in the refugee community (Issa, 2019). Issa (2019) claimed that aid has created a one-directional regime of surveillance and visibility, demanding full disclosure of refugees' lives and observation of their living conditions, which induces unequal power relations and mistrust within the refugee community. This is because aid workers, who are often refugees themselves, are assigned by humanitarian agencies to monitor others while simultaneously being monitored, which has created and perpetuated a cycle of mistrust (Issa, 2019). As presented above, according to critical realism's concepts, these aid workers represent aid organisations and act on their behalf, while simultaneously belonging to the norm circles of refugees and the displaced community. However, Issa's contentious argument contradicts the notion of a "community of trust" presented by Jabareen and Carmon (2010). They explain that, despite the hardship and devastation, communities in Gaza have maintained their cultural norms and retained their old values, allowing them to feel, know, and relate to each other, and thus trust one another. These findings were strikingly salient in the refugee camps they studied.

In her more recent book titled "Life Lived in Relief: Humanitarian Predicaments and Palestinian Refugee Politics", despite the critique of humanitarianism, Illana Feldman argues that the humanitarian presence and governance opened the opportunity for the Palestinian refugees to turn suffering into a political concern. Feldman (2018) explains:

“Palestinians have declared refugees to be political subjects, made the humanitarian space and humanitarian activity (“feeding and sheltering refugees”) a matter of political concern, and insisted that their protests and refusals are political acts. Contrary to Arendt’s diagnosis, the Palestinian instance shows the refugee category and condition to be world forming: a ground for initiating action, a means of enacting plurality, a way of being in common, and a space of relation” (Feldman, 2018, p.233)

Feldman's (2018) central argument is that Palestinian refugee politics is fundamentally discordant, defined by the persistent, necessary, and burdensome tension of using a humanitarian status (the refugee status), often framed as passive suffering and defeat, as the primary ground for active political claims, national liberation, and statehood. According to Feldman (2018), Palestinians are caught in a constant struggle to simultaneously use the language of suffering to gain international visibility as grievable subjects while also forcefully rejecting the reduction of their existence to a mere humanitarian problem. Their politics is not just about pain, but about insistence on existence, forcing the world to repeatedly acknowledge that their humanitarian crisis is, and has always been, a political one. In such discourse, the refugee issue and refugee subject became central to the national identity as Palestinians have drawn on diverse political languages, including the humanitarian obligation itself (Feldman, 2018).

Nonetheless, Feldman acknowledges the limitations of the humanitarian system. As, Palestinian refugees have had no choice but to engage in reconstructing their social, economic, and political lives from within the humanitarian system, their efforts are complicated by geopolitical conflicting goals and timelines, creating constant tension. They also face criticism from outsiders about how they should act and feel conflicted themselves about the right way to live. Ultimately, Palestinians want their lives to be valued for more than just their suffering, an aspiration that the humanitarian system alone simply cannot fulfil (Feldman, 2018).

Drawing on the contexts of Palestinian refugee camps, and to offer a better analytical approach for studying refugee camps in protracted displacement, Feldman (2018) suggests conceptualising both humanitarian aid providers and aid recipients as being in continuous movement between what she calls the “humanitarian situation” and “humanitarian condition”. Feldman (2018) analyses these statuses of humanitarian aid, particularly reflecting on Palestinian refugees in the Middle East. These statuses represent “punctuated humanitarianism” and reflect the shifts in perceptions and modes of operation of the humanitarian apparatus between the acute and chronic phases. The **“humanitarian situation”** represents the pressing need to mobilise humanitarian assistance in response to a crisis and provide lifesaving support. It is about how people and organisations respond to human suffering, recognise the crisis, and define and label the category of refugee and the techniques of delivering and managing aid (Feldman, 2018). The **“humanitarian condition”** is manifested in protracted displacement and the establishment of aid relations under circumstances and conditions that pose operational and existential challenges to the biopolitical approaches of humanitarianism, which are originally designed to offer survival rather than promote the development of people affected by crisis (Feldman, 2018). As Feldman (2018) explains, the “humanitarian condition” highlights how people live for long periods of time in a humanitarian context, with the humanitarian activities in the background of their consciousness.

There are continuous and repeating shifts between the emergent and the chronic, the fluid and the static in the prolonged existence of the humanitarian crisis. Thus, refugees live their lives in a state of oscillation. Feldman (2018, p.16) articulates such movement particularly in the case of Palestinian refugees as they navigate their lives while shifting between condition and response, where “long-term chronic poverty, marginalisation, and political stasis are repeatedly punctuated by times of acute crises”. Combining assemblage with critical realism ontologies, as discussed above, helps explore and analyse such oscillation through capturing the formation and causation of the various socio-spatial structures at those different shifting periods.

Feldman's (2018) conceptualisation also offers potential to analyse and understand humanitarian aid actions and mandates in the Palestinian context. Throughout the thesis, and particularly in Chapter Seven, I discuss and analyse the role of the UNRWA as the leading humanitarian aid provider in Gaza refugee camps, to understand how these prolonged aid provisions have affected the dynamics of refugee camps and had lasting effects on their political, social, and urban characteristics, particularly during periods of "humanitarian situation" and "humanitarian condition".

Feldman's conceptions and arguments are central to this thesis, particularly the fact that although humanitarian interventions often have short mandates and temporary funding streams and limited horizon for planning, the longer presence of humanitarianism in the Palestinian case "has provided a space in which people who are governed as a population can mobilize tools that would seem to be the prerogative of citizens" Feldman (2018, p.138). Although it seems paradoxical, the humanitarian space has been an important tool for Palestinians to claim their rights, and they have always considered humanitarianism as their right (Feldman, 2018).

For the Palestinian situation, analysis of humanitarian action should be traced to its political roots to understand the manifestations resulting from such action because the humanitarian issue in Palestine, especially in Gaza, is a symptom of the broader political situation (Feldman, 2009). This can be clearly depicted in the work of the UNRWA, the leading humanitarian aid agency mandated to support and alleviate the suffering of Palestinian refugees. The UNRWA was subordinated by the UN's General Assembly (UNGA) to oversee and implement relief and works programs that alleviate the suffering of Palestinian refugees in the Middle East region (Bocco, 2010; Ryseck & Johannsen, 2009). Nonetheless, as I discuss in detail in Chapter Seven, the UNRWA is not a protection-based organisation and has no obligations to provide durable solutions for the Palestinian refugees (Bocco, 2010).

There have been mixed perceptions among Palestinians of the humanitarian and relief efforts. Feldman (2009) found that refugees in Gaza continue to reflect on their mixed

perceptions of the aid and the effects of the humanitarian relief they initially received more than sixty years ago. Palestinians see humanitarian aid as a right, but still contentiously consider that availing of such a right, the “biopolitical” right, may hinder their political aspiration to statehood and achieve the refugees' right to return (Feldman, 2009). Feldman (2009) argued that seeing Gaza as a pure humanitarian problem and intervening on this basis underscores the main issue of refugees in Gaza and undermines their political rights to return home.

This has also been the case for the UNRWA. In a more recent work, Feldman (2018) emphasises that Palestinians have consistently expressed conflicting opinions regarding the agency. On one hand, some say the existence of the UNRWA aims at normalising the humanitarian approach to the Palestinian issue and undermining the possible political solution. On the other hand, many insist that the existence of the UNRWA represents an acknowledgement of the political claims of the Palestinians and signs the responsibility of the international community to their struggle (Feldman, 2018). Nonetheless, the prolonged presence of the UNRWA offered displaced Palestinians the means and the space to rebuild their society and recover and reproduce their identity and traditions (Bocco, 2009). To a considerable extent, the presence of UNRWA has been seen as an integral part of the national project and a manifestation of the Palestinians' political aspirations to implement the right of return, “Haq al Awda” or “حق العودة”, and institutionalise the Palestinian national identity.

According to Bocco (2010), the UNRWA operates like the “blue-state”, a UN system providing a “quasi-state” function by serving millions of refugees and employing tens of thousands under its operations. The agency can be seen as a parallel provider of public services that administers refugee affairs by service provision and mediation alone, and without coercive power (Bocco, 2010). Despite the criticism faced by the agency regarding its operations, UNRWA's existence represents a Palestinian national project, providing a lifeline for Palestinian refugees and a salient sign of the international community's failure to resolve the Palestinian refugee issue (Bocco, 2010).

Currently, there are more than 5 million Palestinian refugees registered with UNRWA and receiving its services in the Middle East. Among those refugees, around one-third, which comprises 1.5 million, live in 58 UNRWA-recognised refugee camps across the five areas of UNRWA's operation, including the West Bank, the Gaza Strip, Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon. Although the agency's mandate is humanitarian, it has been renewed every few years.

Nonetheless, the UNRWA's attention to the urban environment and its associated qualities in refugee camps has been relatively recent. The agency's attention to the built environment resulted from the accumulated challenges caused by overlooking the urban dimensions of the camps. Thus, only in the past two decades has the agency started to investigate a better understanding and organisation of the camp spatial environment to intervene and improve it (Misselwitz & Hanafi, 2010; Budeiri, 2014; Tayeh, 2022). Before that, the UNRWA and most of the donor community mainly employed pure humanitarian response mechanisms to provide services to refugees in these urban camps, considering refugees as passive aid recipients, neglecting the fact that they have political agency and that they resemble urban residents needing similar kinds of services provided to ordinary people.

In this thesis, I analyse and critically discuss the role of UNRWA as a humanitarian organisation working to support Palestinians in the protracted displacement context, which faces growing challenges in dealing with emergency and chronic needs. This context of long-term refugee camps can be better addressed and analysed by recognising the movement between the needs of the crisis and the entitlements associated with the chronic static conditions. Thus, in my analysis of the camps' dynamics and humanitarian aid, I employ Feldman's (2018) notions of "humanitarian situation" and "humanitarian condition" to understand and support the empirical findings for this thesis, particularly when discussing the prolonged role of humanitarian aid and the UNRWA in the studied refugee camps.

Furthermore, to analyse the empirical findings, I employ the philosophical ontological lens that combines assemblage thinking with critical realism to help unpack the formation of socio-spatial structures at times of crisis, "humanitarian situation", and the reshaping of these structures through their emergent properties during periods of stasis, "humanitarian

condition". Through these analytical lenses, I discuss how refugees re-appropriated their camp space, introducing urban forms of living by challenging the camps' "conceived space" and modifying the "perceived space" to create the "lived space" (Lefebvre, 1991). I utilise this combination of theories and the underlying concepts to contribute to city-camp literature and better explain how camps' socio-spatial structures came to be, have been challenged and reshaped by frequent crises and acute events, by refugees' actions and fragmented governance, producing causal mechanisms under continued oscillation between the "humanitarian situation" and the "humanitarian condition".

2.4 Conclusion

In this study, I introduce the combination of critical realism and assemblage thinking to offer a complementarity of ontologies to analyse and explain refugee camps. This ontological understanding is instrumental in unpacking both the formation and causation stories of the studied phenomena (Rutzou & Elder-Vass, 2010), as camp evolution is characterised by periods of fluidity and formation, as well as periods of stability and causation. These ontologies, and the theoretical framework I developed mainly through the theorisation of refugee camps, city-camp literature, critical discussions of humanitarianism, and urban theory, are essential for tackling and answering the research questions. This understanding helps unpack the socio-spatial dynamics present in the refugee camps, how their distinct structures interact and work together, and how these interactions produce causal mechanisms that affect the re-production and re-appropriation of the camp space. I build on this theoretical stance and frame the refugee camps as both "states of exception" and "city-like". This informs the analysis of the socio-spatial dynamics in the studied refugee camps in this thesis and provides the theoretical underpinnings for the empirical findings.

This chapter shows that theories on refugee camps have been largely debated in the past few decades, with the most recent studies departing away from Agamben's concepts, particularly the "state of exception" and "biopolitics". However, in order to formulate a better understanding of the camp and its formation in the Palestinian context, Agamben's juridico-political accounts still offer potential for refugee camp studies, particularly if

combined with newer debates that depict the camp as a “city-like” place to explain its evolution and paradoxes. This thesis synthesises these concepts within a framework utilising critical realism as an overarching research philosophy and combining its ontological stance with assemblage thinking. This is essential to be able to tell both the causation and formation stories in the studied camps, where critical realism is helpful in analysing the more stable structures, while assemblage helps unpack fluid formations or yet-to-be structures (Rutzou & Elder-Vass, 2019). Besides helping recognise the fluidity and dynamism of the socio-spatial structures in the refugee camp context, assemblage thinking also opens the door to understanding the role of the built environment in protracted displacement, with specific socio-spatial assemblages resembling sorts of urban life in refugee camps (Elordy, 2021).

I discuss the philosophical underpinnings of this approach in this chapter, suggesting it as a new ontological angle for refugee camp studies. I utilise this combination, building on the theoretical framework I discussed in this thesis, to unpack and holistically analyse the various socio-spatial dynamics in the studied camps. In particular, this theorisation helps conceptualise the oscillating role of humanitarian aid between the fluid and stable.

I also present the contemporary discussion of refugee camps as urban “city-like” places that benefited from urban theory in understanding the complexities associated with each unique camp context. In protracted displacement contexts, camps become temporary-permanent, fluid-static, and places of exception and places of new political identities. As I discuss in the empirical chapters, some camps’ built environments also show contrast and contradiction between poor alleys and well-established neighbourhoods. In order to unpack the paradoxes of these socio-spatial relations, I suggest tracing the camp back to its original state of exception and unpacking the evolution of its urban space and refugee agency.

In this chapter, I also examine humanitarianism and its contested role discussed in the literature and particularly in protracted urban displacement scenarios. In the discussion, I shed light on humanitarianism in the Palestinian context, and how it can be an enabler for the recovery of identity, culture, norms, and space for raising political concerns (Feldman,

2018). This creates a contradictory role between humanitarianism's apolitical mandate and its manifestation for Palestinians who see the presence of humanitarian actors, particularly the UNRWA, as part of their political rights that should be fulfilled by the international community.

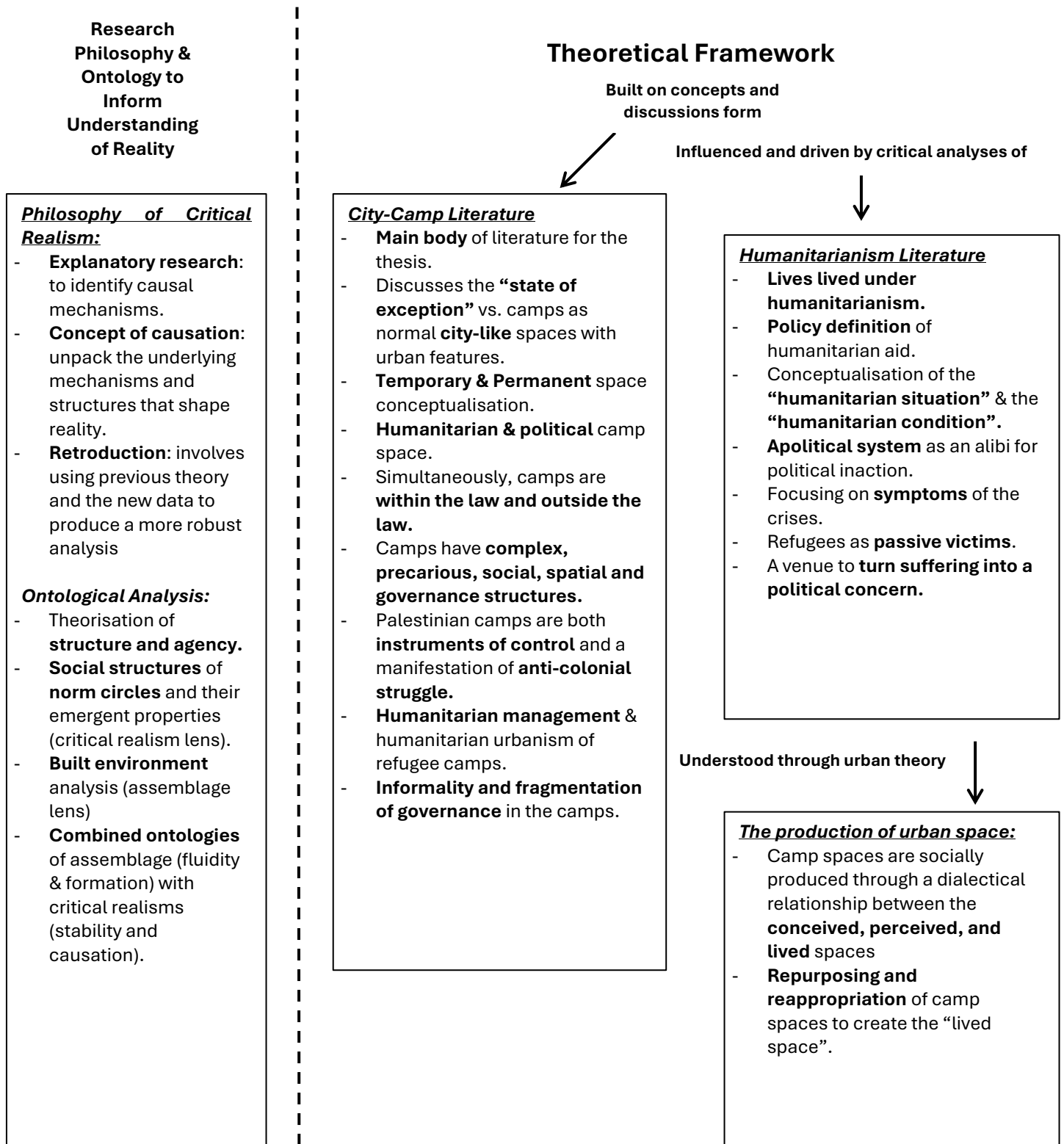
However, as the Palestinian refugee camps became places for both prolonged living and receiving aid, humanitarian work has had to change in unexpected ways over the decades. The primary issue is that humanitarianism is often designed for short-term emergencies to save lives and then move on. When a crisis lasts for a long time, aid workers face new challenges because their methods are focused on immediate needs, not on long-term planning (Feldman, 2018). This necessitates shifts in humanitarian thinking to consider the urban features in humanitarian response. Through the discussion, I present Feldman's (2018) "punctuated humanitarianism", which discusses the oscillation between the acute "humanitarian situation" and the chronic "humanitarian condition" that affected the humanitarian management and the socio-spatial dynamics in the studied camps. These notions are substantial in this thesis for analysing the modes of humanitarian action in protracted refugee camps that frequently experience acute shocks in the Gaza Strip.

While assemblage thinking ontology helps in this research to see the formation and fluidity of socio-spatial structures, with a broader perspective on observing the built environment, critical realism allows us to recognise that there is an objective ontology that, at the same time, consists of subjective interpretations of the phenomena being studied (O'Mahoney & Vincent, 2014). Through this constructivist and interpretivist epistemology, critical realism posits that our understanding of reality is not direct but is shaped by social constructs of concepts, languages, interests, and practices (Erickson, 2018). Based on that, as in critical realism, I recognise that my knowledge of the refugee camps is theoretically laden and constructed via my experience and exposure.

Thus, to produce a better explanation and understanding of the reality of the studied refugee camps, I use retroductive reasoning, building on a combination of these theories and experiences. Retroduction involves considering the manifestation of the phenomena,

utilising the available description and analysis to reconstruct the conditions and circumstances for the phenomena to be the way they are (Danemark *et al.*, 2005). In other words, it involves building on the theories and concepts that have already been developed to build the hypothesis about mechanisms that must exist for a phenomenon to be what it is (Buch-Hansen & Nielsen, 2020). Based on this, I build on my theoretical framework constructed through the city-camp literature, depicting camps as “city-like” and under “state of exception”, critical discussions of humanitarianism, and urban theory, as well as my experience. The summary of the research philosophy and theoretical framework for this thesis is presented in Diagram 2.1. Main concepts and arguments are highlighted through bold text.

Figure 2.1 Theoretical Framework



Based on the theoretical discussion in this chapter, I developed the following two propositions. These two propositions theoretically inform the formulation of my research questions and the associated empirical findings, contending that the studied camp spaces are urban contradicting/paradoxical spaces (proposition one), and that their humanitarian management is affected by the oscillation between emergency and chronic geopolitical and humanitarian circumstances, and the reappropriation of the camp space (proposition two).

1. Palestinian refugee camps are paradoxical and contradictory, evolving into 'city-like' urban spaces, influenced by their 'temporary-permanent' features, and conceptualised as both places of political identity and agency and places of exception.
2. The humanitarian management of the refugee camps has been reciprocally affecting the different socio-spatial dynamics and operates in a continued oscillation between the "humanitarian situation" and the "humanitarian condition", and the ongoing interactions to reappropriate the "conceived" and "perceived" spaces to create the camp "lived" space.

These propositions are essential to frame the research questions, employing retroduction to unfold the mechanisms that influenced the evolution of the refugee camps, recognising that the ontologies in the camp space oscillate between fluidity and stability, formation and causation as described above.

I unpack the social, economic, and political aspects of the city-like lived space of the camp to analyse their manifestation in the studied camps, Jabalia and Deir Al Balah, contributing to the expansion of these propositions and theories I discussed in this chapter. I trace the analysis to the formation of these spaces and the continuity of exceptional legal and political measures by returning to Agamben's concept of the state of exception and combining it with the city-like analysis of lived space to explain the spectrum of temporary-permanent, conceived-perceived-lived refugee spaces. Through this analysis, I introduce the notion of the **"state of paradox,"** in which conflicting and contradictory perceptions,

regulations, and formations of the space coexist and continuously oscillate between the conundrums of the temporary-permanent, co-impacting the production of the camp space. I particularly contribute to city-camp literature discussed above by introducing the concept of the state of paradox that offers an analytical framework that encapsulates and explains the contradictions in the controversial spaces of urban refugee camps. From the critical realism lens, the tension between the temporary and the permanent, and the conceived, perceived and lived spaces, is a main causal factor in creating the paradoxical conditions in city-like refugee camps.

Furthermore, the fluctuation between the emergency “humanitarian situation” and the chronic “humanitarian condition” (Feldman, 2018) in the context of protracted displacement creates dilemmas for humanitarian actors and UN agencies. Under the dilemma of providing temporary aid services through the temporary mandates, humanitarian agencies cater for chronic displacement needs. Thus, this thesis also contributes to the discussions of humanitarianism in the context of refugee camps, suggesting that the humanitarian system is also affected by a state of paradox when responding to emergencies in protracted displacement conditions.

In the next chapter, I provide the contextualisation for this study by presenting political and historical facts from the Gaza Strip. The next chapter also highlights the chronology of the Palestinian refugee crisis and provides a discussion on the inception and continued provision of humanitarian assistance in the studied context. The context chapter sets the ground for analysing the research findings, based on the theories and discussions presented above.

3. CHAPTER THREE: THE GAZA STRIP, REFUGEE CAMPS, AND INTERNATIONAL HUMANITARIAN AID

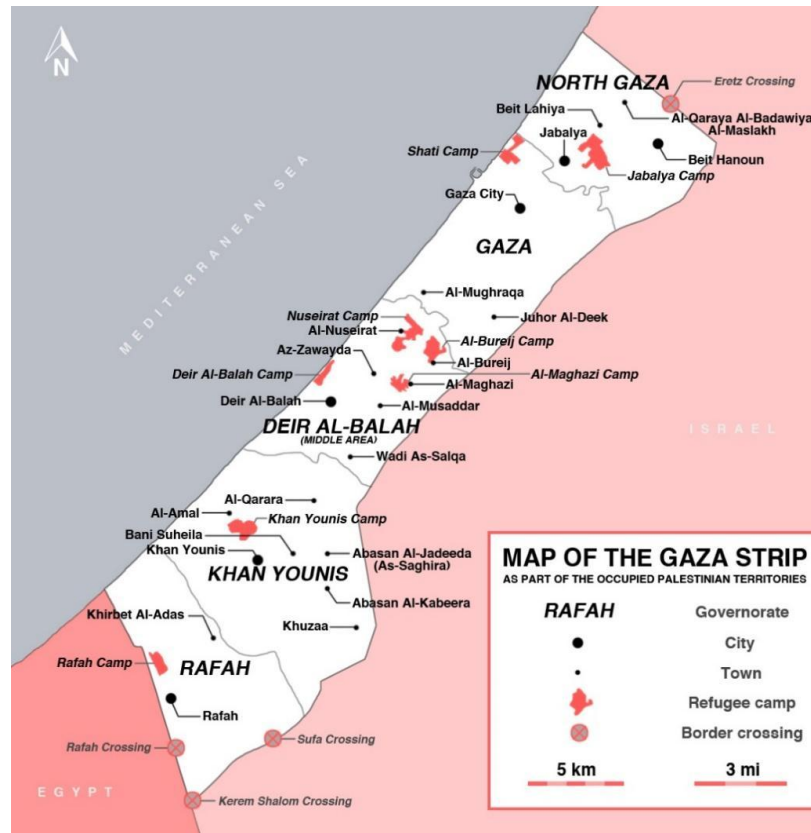
3.0 Introduction

The previous chapter has explored the theoretical concepts and literature on refugee camps and the provision of humanitarian aid in protracted displacement contexts. It discussed refugee camps conceptualised under the “state of exception” and their developed “city-like” features, the notions of “humanitarian situation” and “humanitarian condition”, and the oscillation between fluidity-stability, temporary-permanent in protracted displacement, providing the analytical and theoretical frameworks that underpin the empirical chapters of this thesis. In this chapter, I build the context of the study, introducing the case of the Gaza Strip and the characteristics of the studied camps and their refugee population. This chapter provides the history and geography of the Gaza Strip. It highlights the political stages and draws the context in which refugee camps and the humanitarian aid systems have been introduced.

This chapter is divided into four main sections. The first section contextualises the area of the Gaza Strip, discussing the geopolitical events in the Gaza area over the past century and highlighting the different stages that have impacted the formation and presence of refugee camps. It chronologically describes the Palestinian refugees’ crises and depicts their current situation. The second section provides critical and historical perspectives on the aid apparatus in Palestine. It critically contextualises the evolution of the humanitarian aid system at different geopolitical stages. The section also introduces the specificities of aid in the urban context of the Gaza Strip, focusing on the UNRWA, its history, and the profile and size of its operations. The third section then describes the urban context of refugee camps, highlighting the profiles of the Jabalia and Deir Al Balah refugee camps studied in this research. It also introduces the city-entangled and crowded features of the refugee camps in the Gaza Strip, highlighting the attempts enacted to end the presence of these camps or reduce their density. The last section briefly highlights the current impact of the 2023-2025

war on the infrastructure in the Gaza Strip, particularly the camps and the potential impact of banning the UN organisation for Palestinian refugees, the UNRWA.

3.1 The Gaza Strip: location and history



Map 3.1 The Gaza Strip governorates, cities, towns, refugee camps and the main crossings

Source: www.maps-of-the-world.net

The Gaza Strip lies on the eastern coast of the Mediterranean Sea. It shares its borders with Israel on the north and east sides, and Egypt on the southwest. This coastal plain has an area of 360 km², spanning 41 km, with a width ranging between 6 to 12 km. Administratively, the Gaza Strip is divided into five governorates³ that spread from north to south: the North

³ The governorates trace their origins to the Ottoman era in Palestine and have changed significantly over time. The British Mandate restructured the administrative system. In 1967, the Israeli administration divided the occupied West Bank and Gaza Strip into eight districts. In 1995, the Palestinian Authority established the current 16 governorates. Source: https://ecfr.eu/special/mapping_palestinian_politics/governorates/ (Accessed on 8 April 2025).

governorate, Gaza City governorate, Middle area (Deir Al Balah) governorate, Khan Younis governorate, and Rafah governorate (Alexander, 2007; UN-Habitat, 2014). Map 3.1 above illustrates the Gaza Strip, the governmental administrative divisions and the location of refugee camps.

Based on the latest 2017 census, the total population of the Gaza Strip was 1.9 million, according to PCBS (2018). According to PCBS (2024) projections, the population in the Gaza Strip by the end of 2024 was estimated to be around 2.13 million, with around 40.3 per cent of the total population being less than 15 years old. By the end of 2024, the PCBS (2024) estimated that 66 per cent of the Gaza Strip population were refugees. UNRWA's website, the United Nations agency mandated to provide assistance to Palestinian refugees, based on the last update by August 2023, states that the total number of registered refugees in the Gaza Strip is around 1.6 million (UNRWA, 2023).

Historically, Gaza was considered one of the most ancient cities in the world (Roy, 1988; Meyer, 1997; Filiu, 2014). Its position was strategic for trade movement between Egypt and Syria, and it was considered an essential port in Palestine, which used to serve the southern part of the country (Roy, 1988). It is one of the main cities in historical Palestine and has been a site of active conflict and war in recent history. For example, in 1799, on his way to Acre, Bonaparte occupied Gaza, then it fell successively under the Ottoman Empire and the British mandate (Roy, 1988). Following World War I and the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, Gaza saw different political changes. Initially, the city, like the rest of Palestine, was under the British mandate between 1923 and 1948 (Filiu, 2014), where it was a central district among the 16 subdistricts that spanned over the territory (Alexander, 2007). The Gaza District was one of the six main central districts of the administrative division of Palestine (Filiu, 2014) (see Map 3.2).

During the British mandate, the Jewish population in Palestine nearly tripled (Roy, 1988). In 1947, the UN voted to partition historical Palestine between Arabs and Jews due to rising conflicts over land and resources, with Gaza envisioned as the main seaport for the potential Arab state (Filiu, 2014) (see Map 3.3 for the proposed partitioning plan). The Zionist

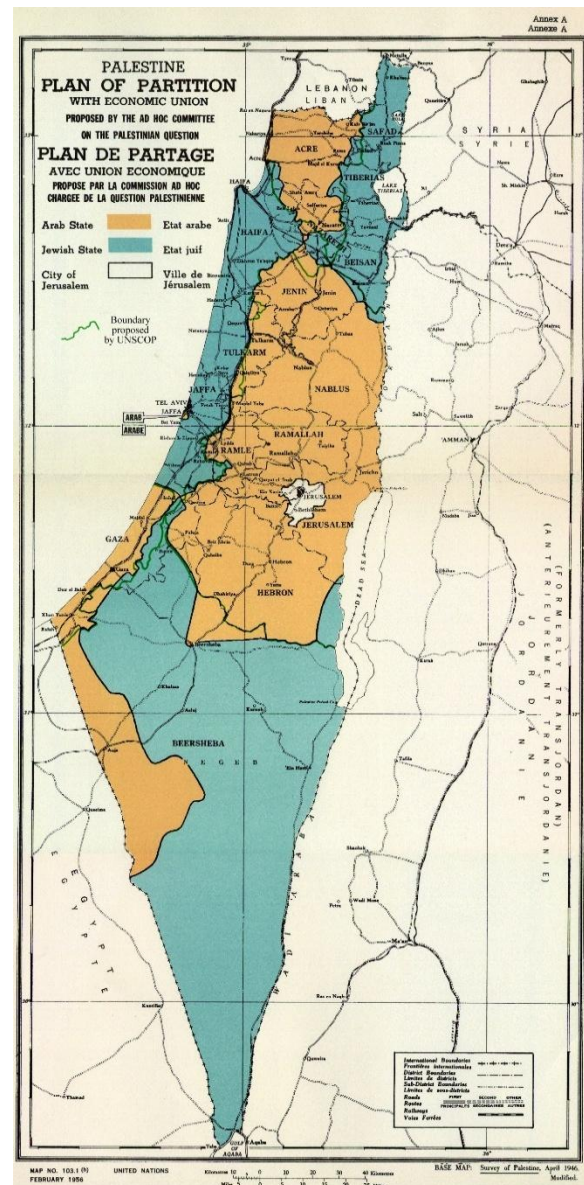
Jewish leadership approved the partitioning plan, while the Arabs rejected it, resulting in the war after the declaration of the state of Israel in May 1948 (Filiu, 2014). The Egyptian army entered the Gaza District, which became an escape for Arab refugees affected by the conflict in the other districts (Cheal, 1988; Filiu, 2014). Israel bombed the Gaza area and its surrounding towns from the air, ground, and sea. However, the Egyptian army managed to remain in control until a ceasefire concluded under the umbrella of the UN in January 1949 (Filiu, 2014). As a result of this war, the Arabs lost control over two-thirds of the Gaza district, with only Gaza City and some of its northern and southern towns and a few farming villages incorporated into a new entity that became known as the Gaza Strip (Roy, 1988).

This entity of the Gaza Strip was defined in the armistice agreement between Egypt and Israel (Roy, 1988; Alexander, 2007) based on the positioning of both armies at the time the ceasefire agreement was reached. The new entity was separated from its agricultural depth and the rest of Palestine and comprised only one-third of the Gaza area proposed in the UN's partition plan. The Gaza Strip came under Egyptian administration between 1948 and 1967, and the remaining portion of mandatory Palestine, renamed the West Bank, was annexed to Jordan as both territories (the West Bank and the Gaza Strip) accounted for 23 per cent of the original area of Palestine.



Map 3.2 Districts and Sub-Districts of Palestine according to the Administrative Divisions (Amendment) Proclamation of 1945.

Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Mandatory_Palestine_1945_subdistricts_and_districts.png



Map 3.3 The UN Partition Plan for Palestine, adopted 29 Nov 1947, with boundary of previous UNSCOP partition plan added in green,

Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:UN_Palestine_Partition_Versions_1947.jpg

During the 1948 war, the Gaza Strip area received an influx of a population of around 180,000 to 200,000 Palestinian refugees (Cheal, 1988; Roy, 1988; Filiu, 2014). This influx of refugees tripled the population of the new territory of the Gaza Strip. I provide more details and discuss the conditions of refugee displacement in Chapter Five of this thesis. The Gaza Strip, with its refugee population, became increasingly demographically and politically significant in the Palestinian cause. It became the centre for Palestinian nationalism; it hosted the first Palestinian National Council and the Declaration of Independence of Palestine (Filiu, 2014). Israel was always uncomfortable with the existence of refugees and the demographic weight of the Gaza Strip, where plans for their expulsion and resettlement outside Palestine have been frequently discussed by Israeli officials (Alexander, 2007; Filiu, 2014). For instance, Ben Gurion, the prime minister of Israel, proposed occupying Gaza in 1955 and deporting all refugees to Jordan (Alexander, 2007). The expulsion of refugees and even the whole Gaza Strip's population has repeatedly been proposed in the narrative of Israeli officials, until most recently, during the 2023-2025 war.

As a result of the absence of a sovereign Palestinian state, the ongoing Palestinian struggle for independence, and the lack of a just solution for the issue of the Palestinian refugees, the situation in the Gaza Strip remained precarious, with frequent conflicts and wars marking the conditions in the area. Following the second 1967 Arab-Israeli war from 1967 to 1994, Israel occupied the Gaza Strip, a period that entailed fluctuating tension that eventually evolved into a massive uprising, known as انتفاضة (Intifadah) in Arabic, on 8th December 1987 (Alexander, 2017). The uprising continued until the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO) signed the Oslo peace agreement with Israel in 1993. The Palestinian National Authority (PNA) was formed based on the Oslo agreement. It took control of most parts of the Gaza Strip after the withdrawal of Israeli troops (Alexander, 2007). The PNA has an elected president and a Legislative Council governing Palestinian autonomous territories in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. The PNA was supposed to be temporary until the creation of the independent Palestinian state in 1999 under the two-state solution and a permanent regional peace agreement, but this has never been realised, and the peace

process, which was supposed to lead to a final status agreement and a lasting comprehensive peace, has failed (IMEU, 2021).

Even after the Oslo agreement, and during the inception and the rule of the PNA, residents in the Gaza Strip were often banned from travelling the main roads that the Israeli Army and settlers in Gaza used (Filiu, 2014). Frequent closures affected the daily lives of Palestinians and crippled the potential for sustainable economic development (Filiu, 2014). The assassination of the Israeli Prime Minister who signed the peace agreement, Yitzhak Rabin, was a turning point in the peace process (Rabinovich, 2018). Consecutive Israeli prime ministers have sabotaged the Oslo agreement, leading to a downward spiral of insecurity and mistrust. Frustration and the collapse of negotiations led to the failure of the peace process in the summer of 2000, which flared into the second uprising (Intifadah) (Alexander, 2007), and undermined the role of the PNA, allowing more radical groups, like Hamas, to have more influence in the interplay of the territory (Filiu, 2014).

The once-promising peace accords did not lead to the establishment of the Palestinian State because of Israeli policies that aimed at controlling the PNA's administered territory through closure and the imposition of movement and trade restrictions. The second uprising of 2000 was more tense and was followed by unilateral disengagement from the Israeli side in 2005, where Israeli troops and settlers withdrew from the Gaza Strip (Alexander, 2007). Despite this disengagement, Israel kept control of all movement of goods and individuals in and out of the Gaza Strip through land, air and sea, which was seen by many international governments and organisations as continuing occupation of the Gaza Strip (Human Rights Watch, 2007; House of Commons, 2007).

In 2006, Hamas won the Parliamentary elections and took control of the Gaza Strip in 2007 after factional fighting with Fateh.⁴ Many scholars have described this event as a breakdown of the unity of Palestinians (Bocco, 2010). Hamas formed a government in Gaza that denounced the Oslo agreement and the peace process, which has caused a tightening blockade and international boycott of this government. Since 2007 in the Gaza Strip, the PNA has had *de jure* governing authority, yet could not exercise *de facto* governance as Hamas took control of power by force (Britannica, 2025). I developed the graph below (Figure 3.1) to provide a chronological account highlighting the political stages in the Gaza Strip from 1923 up to 2007.

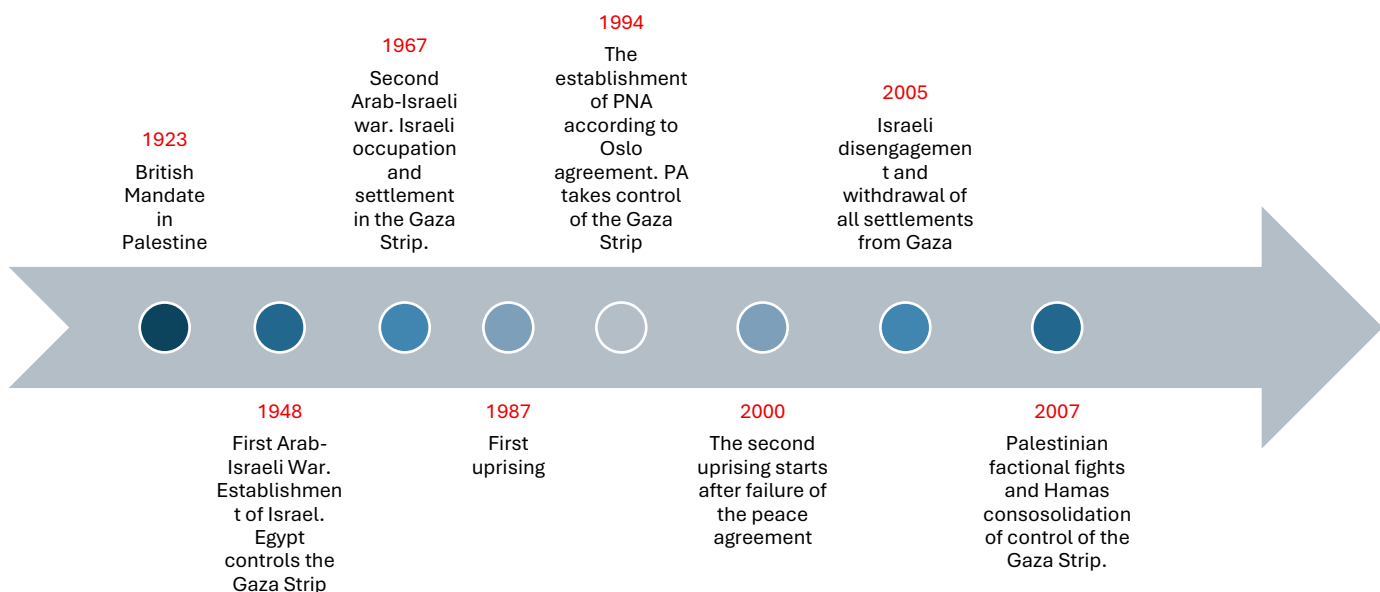


Figure 3.1 Main Political Stages in the Gaza Strip

In the past two decades, since Hamas took control of the Gaza Strip, the political situation in Gaza has been very precarious. The Gaza Strip witnessed many major conflicts between the Palestinian factions' militants and the Israeli Army. These escalations of conflict included the 2008 Gaza war, the 2011 conflict, the 2014 war, and the escalation in 2021. Due to the ongoing conflicts, since 2000 and onward, part of the Gaza Strip's area adjacent

⁴ Formally the Palestinian National Liberation Movement. It is a Palestinian nationalist and social democratic political party. It is the largest faction of the confederated multi-party Palestine Liberation Organisation.

to the perimeter fence with Israel, referred to as the Access Restricted Area (ARA), has been inaccessible. This has limited access to farmlands within 300 metres of the perimeter fence that separates the Gaza Strip from Israel (OCHA, 2013). The ARA zone has extended, shrinking the access to the already scarce land. It included ‘no-go’ areas up to 500 meters from the fence and high-risk areas up to 1500 meters (OCHA, 2018). This has pushed people and their dwellings towards the centre, the seashore towns, and the Gaza Strip refugee camps, increasing the population density in these areas. In the frequent conflicts, the refugee camps were considered relatively safer areas by Palestinians living in Gaza. Compared to eastern parts and the towns of the Gaza Strip, camps are much denser and provide refugees with a sense of intimacy and solidarity.

However, after the October 2023 war, the refugee camps - particularly the large ones in Jabalia and Rafah - became direct targets and battle zones due to their demographic and political weight in the Gaza Strip. Most of the infrastructure and houses built in these camps during the past seven decades were destroyed. This has caused massive devastation to the socio-spatial structures that existed before the October 2023 war and was termed by many commentators as an act of “urbicide”.⁵ For instance, in 2024, in the Jabalia refugee camp, entire residential blocks such as 2 to 5 and neighbourhoods such as Al-Alami, Al-Falluja, and Al-Haouja were utterly annihilated (EMHRM, 2024). The acts and impacts of the complete socio-spatial destruction of these camps and towns during and after the 2023 war are beyond the scope of this thesis. However, as I suggest in the conclusion of this thesis, it is essential to study and understand the acts of “urbicide” of homes, civil infrastructure, and the built environment and their impact on the radical reshaping of the socio-spatial dynamics in the Gaza Strip in general and refugee camps in particular outlined in this thesis.

⁵ According to Coward (2008, p.1), “The term ‘urbicide’ became popular during the 1992–95 Bosnian War as a way of referring to widespread and deliberate destruction of the urban environment. Coined by writers on urban development in America, urbicide captures the sense that this widespread and deliberate destruction of buildings is a distinct form of violence.”

Through the long history of conflict and since the inception of refugee camps in 1948, humanitarian aid organisations have been heavily present to provide relief support and development efforts to the destitute and displaced populations. In the next section, I provide a brief history of the humanitarian aid apparatus in the occupied Palestinian territories (oPt), contextualising the aid provision in the Gaza Strip and the studied refugee camps and highlighting the overall structure of aid operations, drawing particular focus to the UNRWA.

3.2 Humanitarian aid in the oPt and the UNRWA

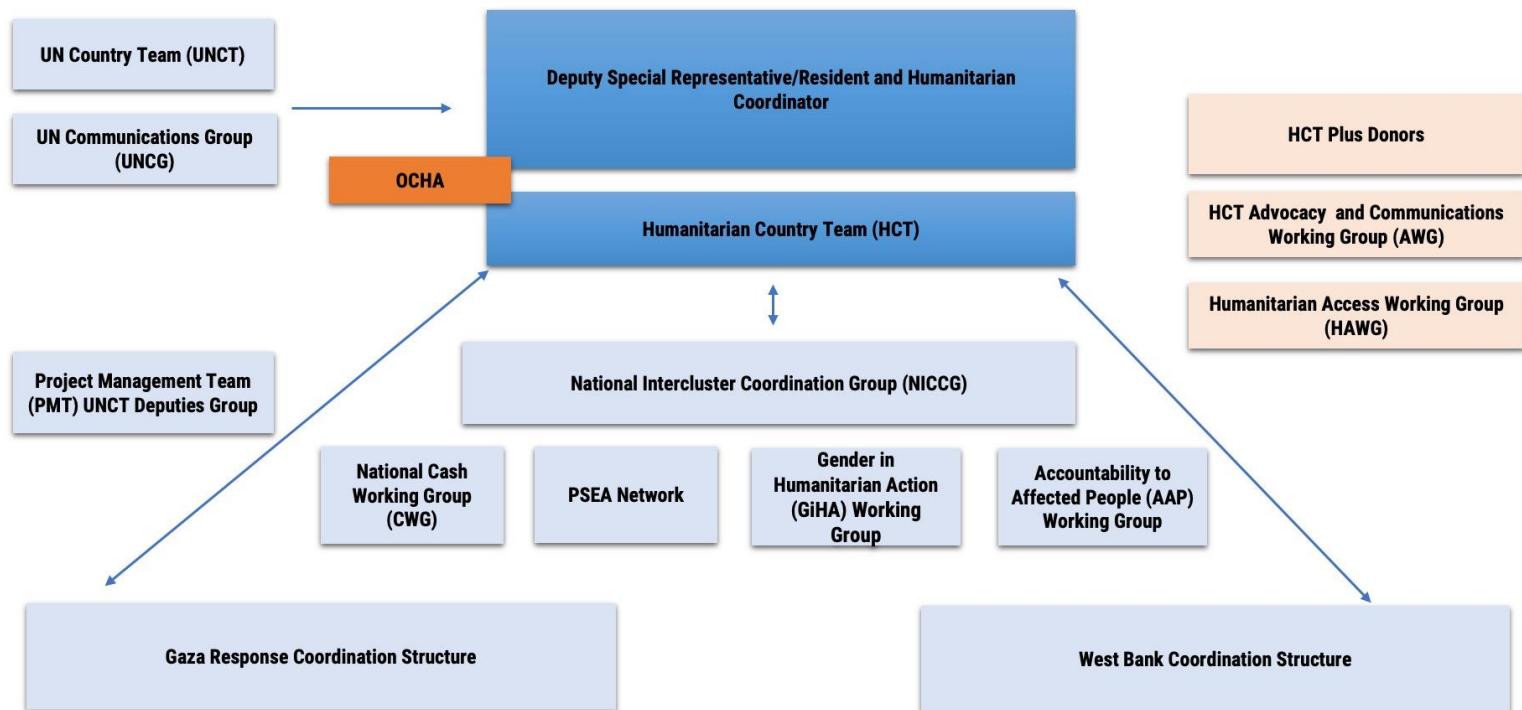
International humanitarian action in the oPt started immediately after the Arab-Israeli war of 1948, depicted as النكبة (Nakba) in Arabic, or catastrophe, in Palestinian history. As discussed above, as a result of this war, Israel seized about 80% of the historical Palestine land, expelling around one million Palestinians as refugees to the neighbouring countries and regions. Palestinian refugees have become dispersed across Palestine's neighbouring countries, including Syria, Lebanon, and Jordan, as well as the West Bank and the Gaza Strip regions. In response to and recognition of the scale of the crisis, the international community, through the United Nations (UN), initiated its response by commissioning organisations such as the ICRC and AFSC to assist refugees. UN aid continued through UNRWA, which was established in the 1950s (Cheal, 1988; Feldman, 2009). A few years after the exodus, when it became clear to the international community that there would be no immediate resolution to the case of Palestinian refugees, the UN General Assembly (UNGA) created the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) to oversee and implement relief and work programmes alleviating the suffering of Palestinian refugees in the Middle East region (Bocco, 2009; Ryseck & Johannsen, 2009).

Because humanitarian action in the oPt has been ongoing since 1948, Palestinians are among the highest per capita recipients of external aid from the international community (DeVair & Tartir, 2009). However, this aid has been conditional and changed according to the geopolitical events. For instance, the number of active international and regional humanitarian agencies in the oPt has dramatically increased since the Oslo Agreement in

1993 (DeVoor & Tartir, 2009). Humanitarian action in the oPt is coordinated by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) through a nuanced and sophisticated coordination system. In the following, I provide information summarised from OCHA's oPt official website prior to the October 2023 war, illustrating the sophistication and technical features of the system of humanitarian aid delivery and its links with various stakeholders. Figure 3.2 is taken from OCHA's oPt website and illustrates the humanitarian coordination structure in the oPt.

Humanitarian action in the oPt is led by the Humanitarian Country Team (HCT), covering the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, and representing the official gathering of humanitarian organisations working in the oPt. The HCT comprises both national and international actors involved in providing humanitarian assistance and protection to Palestinians. The structure comprises representatives from UN agencies, international non-governmental organisations (INGOs), and national non-governmental organisation (NGO) networks.

OPT HUMANITARIAN COORDINATION STRUCTURE



15 August 2024

Figure 3.2 Humanitarian Aid Structure in the oPt

Source: www.ochaopt.org

The HCT is chaired by the Resident/Humanitarian Coordinator (RC/HC), who is typically appointed by the United Nations Emergency Relief Coordinator on behalf of the UN Secretary-General, following consultations with the UN Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC). OCHA supports the HC as the group's secretariat, while organisations such as MSF, the Red Cross, and Red Crescent societies are granted active observer status.

At the field level, the HC, in consultation with the HCT, assigns a lead agency for each humanitarian response sector. These field operations are coordinated through the Inter-Cluster Coordination Group (ICCG), which comprises the leads of sectors and clusters in each of the geographical areas of the oPt (West Bank and Gaza), and is chaired by OCHA. This group meets on a monthly basis in Gaza and in the West Bank. Clusters themselves also lead thematic coordination groups within their sector and specialities. The participants in these thematic groups are the primary national and international stakeholders who specialise in specific areas of expertise. The thematic group's work focuses on aspects of response formulation, including designing and implementing assessments, strategic planning, devising technical standards, and contingency planning.

3.2.1 UNRWA profile and shifts to development

UNRWA is integrated into the humanitarian system and is part of the HCT in the oPt. The agency is the largest provider of humanitarian services and has the largest number of humanitarian staff in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, employing more than 14,500 staff members (UNRWA, 2023b). During the 2023 Gaza war, the UNRWA played a significant technical role in the humanitarian response coordination structure. The agency co-led the Logistics, Food Security, Protection, and Education clusters.

The UNRWA also provides its activities to respond to the Palestinian protracted refugee crisis across the Middle East. To address the needs associated with protracted displacement, the agency has adopted developmental shifts focusing on the human development aspects of the Palestinian refugees. These developmental shifts within the UNRWA required that the agency pursue shifts in funding structures and aid delivery

modalities. Thus, the boundaries between the UNRWA's core programmes' budget and its emergency appeal projects have been blurred, while emergency services and regular programs target the same refugee population, utilising the same systems and assets (UNRWA, 2023b). Recognising the oscillation between the acute and the chronic crisis caused by cycles of conflict and the experience of COVID-19 in the Gaza Strip, UNRWA's same core programme infrastructure, staff, systems, and installations are used as the backbone for the life-saving relief efforts (UNRWA, 2023b).

According to the UNRWA's website, around 6.5 million Palestinian refugees are registered with UNRWA, residing in the Middle East region and receiving its services. Among those refugees, around one-third, which comprises 2 million, live in 58 UNRWA's recognised refugee camps in the agency's five areas of operation, including Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, the Gaza Strip, and the West Bank. Nonetheless, Ryseck & Johannsen (2009) and Bocco (2009) clarify that the number of refugees registered with UNRWA does not represent all Palestinian refugees, and it is estimated that two-thirds of the ten million Palestinian population inside and outside the oPt are refugees⁶. Those refugees who are not registered with UNRWA in the five geographical areas of its field operations are still entitled to receive services from UNHCR (UNRWA, 2007; Bocco, 2009). Figure 3.3 below provides some demographic characteristics of the Palestinian refugees registered with the UNRWA, as of June 2022.

⁶ Palestine refugees are defined by the UNRWA in 1952 as any person and the descendants of those persons whose normal place of residence was Palestine during the period 1 June 1946 to 15 May 1948, and who lost both home and means of livelihood as a result of the 1948 conflict.

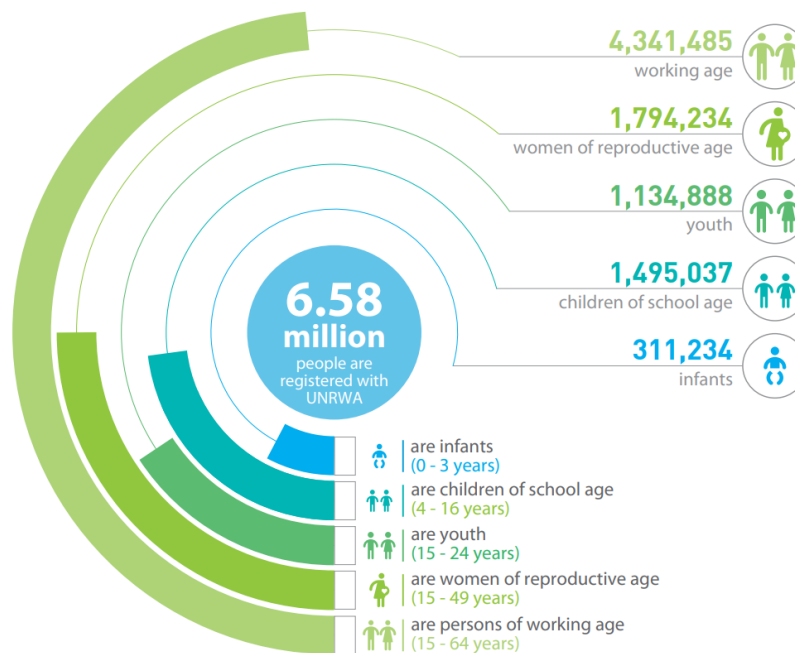


Figure 3.3 Demographic Characteristics of the UNRWA Registered Palestinian Refugees in the Middle East.

Source: UNRWA Strategic Plan 2023-2028

Many of the refugees residing in the five areas of UNRWA's field operations have suffered from additional internal and external displacement experiences that worsened their already devastated living conditions and security. These recurrent displacements resulted from conflicts in the region, persecution by authorities, and demolition of their housing units (Khouri, 2010; Issa, 2019), which has rendered them, in many cases, IDPs and refugees at the same time. Such a complicated situation and the circumstances associated with the Palestinian struggle have created a unique case for Palestinian refugees. Dumper (2010) highlights this fact and lists the following features that summarise the exceptionality of the Palestinian refugee case: "(i) its genesis through the creation of a new state – the State of Israel; (ii) its longevity as a protracted refugee situation; (iii) the sheer numbers of refugees in both absolute figures and as a proportion of the Palestinian population; (iv) the evolution of relief structures outside UNHCR, namely, through UNRWA; (v) the legal complexity due to the lack of a state to return to; and (vi) the reversal of the principle of non-refoulement –

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Palestinian refugees may wish to return to their homeland but are prevented by Israel from doing so” (Dumper, 2010, p.571).

In the occupied Palestinian territories (oPt), namely the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, refugees have originated from the Mandate Palestine as a result of violence and the 1948 war and crossed the 1949 Armistice line that delineated Israel from the oPt (BADIL, 2005). They are registered with UNRWA and enjoy the same individual rights as non-refugees. Palestinians in the oPt are under the jurisdiction of Israel as the occupying power; however, Israel is not recognising its responsibilities and not accepting the *de jure* humanitarian law nor the right of return of Palestinian refugees (BADIL, 2005). Thus, refugees in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip will retain their status until they are able to choose whether to return to their place of origin, take a nationality of a potential Palestinian state or resettle in a third country (BADIL, 2005).

In the Gaza Strip, Palestinian refugees have these ‘unique’ characteristics of refugee status and suffer from ongoing conflict with Israel and devastating socio-economic conditions. UNRWA provides services to 1.4 million refugees in the Gaza Strip. According to UNRWA (2023), the agency employs over 11,800 staff members in Gaza, the majority of whom are from the refugee community. In 2023, there were 278 UNRWA schools in Gaza that served over 290,000 students. In addition, according to the UNRWA’s website, the agency ran 22 primary health care centres, 16 relief and social services offices, and 11 food distribution centres that distributed food to almost one million refugees in the Gaza Strip. Table 3.1 below provides details on UNRWA’s operational size and number of staff in each of its areas of operation.

	gaza		jordan		lebanon		syria		west bank		hq
 Health	staff	964	staff	671	staff	299	staff	431	staff	659	
	health care facilities	22	health care facilities	25	health care facilities	27	health care facilities	23	health care facilities	43	
	served persons	890,541	served persons	443,252	served persons	150,229	served persons	191,253	served persons	251,461	
 Education	staff	9,443	staff	4,557	staff	1,786	staff	1,876	staff	2,215	
	pupils	290,288	pupils	119,781	pupils	39,144	pupils	49,431	pupils	46,066	
	schools	278	schools	161	schools	65	schools	102	schools	96	
 Relief & social services	staff	316	staff	99	staff	117	staff	87	staff	164	
	social workers	68	social workers	24	social workers	45	social workers	26	social workers	48	
	cash and food aid recipients	1,136,351	cash and food aid recipients	77,753	cash and food aid recipients	113,881	cash and food aid recipients	417,807	cash and food aid recipients	135,819	
 Infrastructure & camp improvement	sanitation labourers	500	sanitation labourers	297	sanitation labourers	285	sanitation labourers	124	sanitation labourers	183	
	shelters rehabilitated	427	shelters rehabilitated	0	shelters rehabilitated	591	shelters rehabilitated	0	shelters rehabilitated	31	
	staff	11,889 → 53%	staff	5,963 → 47%	staff	2,929 → 46%	staff	3,018 → 53%	staff	3,708 → 50%	staff 525

Table 3.1 UNRWA's operation profile per field and headquarters in 2021.

Source: UNRWA Strategic Plan 2023-2028

UNRWA and the United Nations Korean Reconstruction Agency (UNKRA) are the two UN agencies that operated outside the mandate of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). UNKRA's primary mandate was broader economic rehabilitation rather than just long-term refugee management, and it successfully completed its work and was closed in 1960⁷. The UNRWA, however, has continued to operate for over seven decades as a direct service provider for Palestinian refugees. Unlike the UNHCR, UNRWA is not a protection-based organisation and is not mandated to provide durable solutions for refugees, with its mandate being renewed by the UN General Assembly every three to five years (Bocco, 2010; de Jong & Aced, 2014). The current international conventions and laws governing the UNHCR's work guarantee legal rights, protection, and the pursuit of durable

⁷ <https://media.un.org/photo/en/asset/oun7/oun7662296>

solutions for refugees worldwide, except for Palestinians residing in the UNRWA's area of operations. It is an "anomalous institutional" feature that has resulted from Article 1D in the Geneva Convention, which states that the convention is not applicable for persons at present receiving assistance or protection from agencies of the UN other than the UNHCR (CJPME, 2010, p.1). By definition, Article 1D applies to the Palestinian refugees living in the UNRWA's area of operations. Such an exception indefinitely extended the temporary-permanent situation of Palestinian refugees living in the Levant countries. As I discussed earlier, the declaration of the "state of exception" and the expulsion of the "unwanted" Palestinian refugees created the need to establish the UNRWA to deal with the consequences of this state. At the same time, the UNGA Resolution 194 (III) of 1948 provided a strong vision for a durable political solution, based on the understanding that the refugee crisis is temporary and that refugees would return to their homes in Israel or receive compensation for the loss and damage to property for those not wishing to return. Throughout the decades of displacement, the application of Resolution 194 became increasingly remote and inadmissible by the Western powers. As a result, the UNRWA found itself in a "paradoxical" situation, serving Palestinian refugees for decades, with a temporary mandate that had to be renewed every three to five years since the agency's establishment (Bocco, 2010; CJPME, 2010). Nevertheless, through its relief and development works, the UNRWA pushes the agenda of human development to promote the protection of Palestinian refugees in its area of operations (UNRWA, 2007).

In the context of protracted displacement, humanitarian agencies have consistently faced challenges and engaged in discussions on linking development objectives with humanitarian response actions. Most research depicts the interlinks between the two, and that all humanitarian actions and aid interventions have a development intent (Stern *et al.*, 2008). Many humanitarian research groups and funding coalitions define humanitarian action as intended to "save lives, alleviate suffering and maintain human dignity during and after man-made crises and disasters caused by natural hazards, as well as to prevent and strengthen preparedness for when such situations occur" (DI, 2019, p. 73). This action is

guided by the application of humanitarian principles, including humanity, impartiality, neutrality, and independence.

However, many argue that the emphasis on development outcomes should be incorporated and manifested in the work of humanitarian organisations responding to protracted crises in urban settings (Dadu-Brown *et al.*, 2017). To operationalise such objectives, aid agencies need to allow for shifts in thinking, working culture, speed of delivery and time span of their projects and funding cycles. These shifts are necessary to deliver longer-term solutions that engage wider stakeholders locally, while also building resilience and enhancing governance practices at the societal level (Otto & Weingärtner, 2013; Hinds, 2015; Dadu-Brown *et al.*, 2017).

Moving from a similar reality of protractedness and recognising the need to combine humanitarian assistance with development interventions, the UNRWA focused its longer-term efforts on the human development of Palestinian refugees. Nonetheless, as I discuss in detail in Chapter Seven, attention to the spatial aspects of the camp spaces was not systematically considered by UNRWA until the inception of its Infrastructure and Camp Improvement Program (ICIP) in the past two decades, which had significant implications for the socio-spatial situation in the camps. In its latest strategic plan for 2023-2028, UNRWA adopts strategic priorities and operational response objectives that primarily focus on the human development of refugees, recognising the need to link traditional humanitarian response actions with the human development agenda (UNRWA, 2023b). The Agency focuses on health and education as the primary levers for the Palestinian refugee community, in addition to services that provide social assistance and livelihood support. Figure 3.4 illustrates the objectives of UNRWA and its strategic priorities.



Figure 3.4 UNRWA's 2023-2028 objectives and strategic priorities for the Palestinian Refugees in the Middle East

Source: UNRWA Strategic Plan 2023-2028

Despite the UNRWA efforts and the sophisticated aid system in the oPt, people in the Gaza Strip have suffered from severe deterioration of their living conditions in the past few decades due to conflicts and Israeli measures that tightened Gaza's closure and imposed more restrictions on the movement of goods and persons. Figures from OCHA (2020) showed that around 1.5 million people, 75% of the population in the Gaza Strip was already in need of humanitarian assistance. According to the World Bank (2023) report that was published in September, just before the October 2023 war, unemployment rates in Gaza Strip were rising, reaching 46.4 percent in the second quarter of 2023 as a result of contracting economy that has been largely affected by the Israeli blockade, where comparatively unemployment in the West Bank was 13.4 percent in the same period. In

addition, PCBS (2019) reports that 57% of the families in the Gaza Strip were using low-quality food and tended to buy the remnants from the market at the end of the day.

These deteriorated conditions highlight the increased critique of the humanitarian system in Gaza, which cannot achieve its desired longer-term outcomes due to the emergency nature of the responses imposed by donors (Haysom & el Sarraj, 2012) and the limitations associated with the short-term, apolitical nature of the humanitarian interventions (Feldman, 2009). This has limited the humanitarian community's ability to deliver longer-term and more sustainable programs for protracted humanitarian crises throughout the decades of displacement. These efforts were also hindered, or as Feldman (2018) argues “punctuated”, by the Israeli measures and the frequent attacks and escalations, especially the massive, devastating wars of the years 2008, 2012, 2014, and the ongoing war of 2023-2025 that caused severe damage to houses and infrastructure. Thus, the conditions of conflict, the failed peace process, and the frequent military escalations left the majority of people in Gaza in dire need of the humanitarian assistance provided via the UNRWA and other smaller humanitarian and UN agencies operating in the urban, densely populated, precarious context of refugee camps.

3.3 The context of urban refugee camps in the Gaza Strip

Scholars from various disciplines and organisations have depicted the Gaza Strip area as dense and urban (Haysom & el Sarraj, 2012; UN, 2012; UN-Habitat, 2014; Asfour & Zourob, 2017; Müller & Tranchant, 2017; Saleh, 2020), particularly highlighting the density of refugee camps as among the highest (Alexander, 2007; UN-Habitat, 2014; Asfour & Zoroub, 2017; Rueff & Viaro, 2010). As I contend in Chapter Two, temporary camp spaces in protracted displacement conditions evolve to resemble “city-like” socio-spatial structures. It is likewise the case in the Gaza Strip, where refugee camps have evolved from “temporary” shelters, comprised of tents or one-room housing units, into expanded “habitats” for the refugee communities (Rueff & Viaro, 2010). Refugee camps in the Gaza Strip are consistently described as overcrowded, both within the housing units themselves and in their neighbourhoods, compared to adjacent towns (AFSC, 2014; Rueff & Viaro, 2010; Bocco,

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2010). As Chapter Six discusses in detail, this overcrowding in refugee camps has led to unfavourable impacts on the camps' inhabitants. This lack of space inside homes, schools, health clinics and other community facilities is associated with frustration, higher unemployment rates, lack of privacy and safety, gender-based violence, poor infrastructure and degradation of the surrounding environment (AFSC, 2014).

When the UNRWA established the refugee camps in the early 1950s, it rented public and private lands near main cities and roads to build the camps, ensuring refugees had access to goods and economic opportunities (Marx, 1992; Bocco, 2010; Rueff & Viaro, 2010). Housing units inside these camps were initially tents, with sanitary facilities provided per group of tents (Bocco, 2010; Rueff & Viaro, 2010). After that, throughout the 1950s, UNRWA allocated each refugee family a plot of land ranging in size from 80 m² to 100 m² to build a core unit, a room measuring 12 m², with an attached sanitary unit (Rueff & Viaro, 2010). Small-sized families received one core unit, while larger families with more than six members received two core units. These units were constructed from cement and bricks, with roofing made from either asbestos or corrugated tin (Marx, 1992; Rueff & Viaro, 2010).

Additional floors were not initially permitted in order to mark the temporary nature of houses in refugee camps. Thus, Palestinian refugees expanded their houses horizontally, occupying pathways and utilising public spaces to accommodate their families' normal growth and the associated needs (Bocco, 2010; Rueff & Viaro, 2010). This horizontal expansion has produced very narrow and sometimes closed-end alleys, which have simultaneously altered the structure of public spaces and caused camps to suffer from overcrowding and a lack of public areas (Rueff & Viaro, 2010; AFSC, 2014). Eventually, from the late 1960s, refugees had no option but to add extra floors to their shelters, creating multi-level houses that accommodated generations of refugees and their extended families (Rueff & Viaro, 2010).

Legally, camp land and property were governed by different successive laws associated with the political systems that governed the Gaza Strip since 1948. According to the Norwegian

Refugee Council (NRC) study titled “A Guide to Housing, Land and Property Law in the Gaza Strip”, published in 2015, these stages included:

- The Egyptian Administration (1948–1967):

Camps’ existence was formalised following the 1948 war. The authorities designated specific state and private lands for refugee shelter. Administrative orders in the 1960s, specifically Order No. 24/1960, clearly outlined camp boundaries and parcel divisions. Crucially, a 1964 decree offered private landowners within camp perimeters the option to swap their property for vacant state land, with the stipulation that refusing the swap resulted in a forfeiture of compensation rights.

- The Israeli Administration (1967–1994):

The stage was characterised by security-driven urban restructuring. After the 1967 occupation, military orders facilitated the widening of camp roads to suppress resistance, resulting in widespread home demolitions. This displacement created a new housing paradigm and necessitated the development of resettlement projects, such as Sheikh Radwan and Tal al-Sultan, which offered displaced refugees 99-year leases on state land. However, acquiring these new rights was conditional upon the refugees relinquishing their claims to their original camp shelters.

- The Palestinian National Authority (1994–Present):

The PNA has adopted a policy of legal preservation and non-interference. Upon its establishment, the PNA opted to retain pre-1967 laws. While the PNA’s Legislative Council attempted to unify laws between the West Bank and Gaza, it remained conspicuously silent regarding camp land. Municipalities provided limited services, and legislation remained stalled as part of a strategic direction, intended to preserve the camps’ temporary political status and protect the right to return. Consequently, the status quo of the camps remains frozen in a complex legal limbo.

The Gaza Strip has eight refugee camps, spread from north to south. The UNRWA is the leading service provider in the eight refugee camps in the Gaza Strip. Table 3.2, on the next page, summarises the characteristics of refugee camps in Gaza along with the services provided as depicted on UNRWA's websites.

Table 3.2 Refugee camps in the Gaza Strip

	Camp Name	Location	Registered Population in 2023	Schools	Primary Healthcare Clinics	Other Services	Other Information
1	Jabalia Camp	North Area – Near to Jabalia Town	113,990	16 School buildings accommodating 25 schools	2 in the camp and 1 in the surrounding areas	2 social services offices, 1 maintenance and sanitation office, and 1 food distribution centre	The camp has a high density of refugees with approximately. area of 1.4 KM ²
2	Beach Camp “Shati”	Gaza Governorate -	85,628	14 School building accommodating 25 schools	1 Health Centre	1 social services office, 1 maintenance and sanitation office, and 1 food distribution centre	Many of the camp residents are fishermen and were particularly affected by Israeli measures of limiting fishing areas and attacks against fishermen, which resulted in the loss of livelihood and casualties.
3	Nuseirat Camp	Middle area	80,194	15 School buildings accommodating 25 schools	2 Health Centres	2 social services office, 1 maintenance and sanitation office, and 1 food distribution centre	/
4	Buriej Camp	Middle area	43,330	9 School building accommodating 12 schools	1 Health Centre	1 social services office, 1 maintenance and sanitation office, and 1 food distribution centre	/
5	Al Maghazi Camp	Middle area	31,329	5 School buildings	1 Health Centre	1 social services office, 1 maintenance and sanitation office,	The approximate area of the camp is 0.6 KM ²

				accommodating 8 schools		and 1 food distribution centre shared with Deir al Balah refugee camp	
6	Deir Al Balah Camp	Middle area	25,569	8 School buildings accommodating 13 schools in total	1 Health Centre	1 social services office, 1 maintenance and sanitation office, and 1 food distribution centre shared with Al Maghazi refugee camp	Like the “Beach Camp”, many of the camp residents are fishermen and were particularly affected by Israeli measures against fishermen which resulted loss of livelihood and casualties.
7	Khan Younis Camp	Khan Younis Governorate	87,816	16 school buildings accommodating 19 schools	3 Health Centres	2 social services offices, 1 maintenance and sanitation office, and 2 food distribution centre	The camp lies north of Rafah city and is just near Khan Younis city, a major commercial centre.
8	Rafah	Rafah Camp	125,304	11 School buildings accommodating 15 schools	2 Health Centres	2 social services offices, 1 maintenance and sanitation office, and 2 food distribution centre	
Totals			593,160	94 buildings accommodating 142 schools	13 Health Centres	12 Social Services Offices 8 Maintenance and Sanitation 9 Food Distribution Centres	

As highlighted in the introduction, I focus on studying two of these camps, Jabalia and Deir Al Balah, drawing comparisons between a large and a small camp in the Gaza Strip to capture different socio-spatial dynamics of evolution. The two camps, like other camps in the Gaza Strip, share many historical and social homogeneities, but, at the same time, have developed or grown differently. I have selected these camps to understand the socio-spatial

differences that have led to their distinct evolution. The following subsections provide information that summarises the camp profile. There is a scarcity of English-language published information about these camps, except for the few available on the UNRWA's website.⁸ However, I used information from Arabic-language resources, along with information from the UNRWA's website, to build the following camp profiles. I provide a more detailed analysis that highlights the justification behind the selection of the two camps in the Methodology chapter, Chapter Four.

3.3.1 *The Jabalia refugee camp*

The Jabalia refugee camp is one of the largest refugee camps in the Gaza Strip, both in terms of area and population size. The camp's area is approximately 1.4 square kilometres. The UNRWA website reported that the population of registered refugees in the Jabalia camp was approximately 120,000 inhabitants as of 2023. However, some argue that this figure did not only include the camp but also expanded to include the refugee-inhabited areas surrounding the camp, like the Beit Lahia Project and Tal Al Za'atar areas. The 2017 Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS) census reported that around 49,000 refugees lived in the original area of the Jabalia refugee camp. It is considered one of the most densely populated areas in the oPt, and it is one of the largest Palestinian refugee settlements in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. The camp is located in the North governorate of the Gaza Strip, about three kilometres to the north of Jabalia town, which the camp was named after. It is the closest refugee camp to the Israeli borders and the Erez crossing point between Gaza and Israel, in the northern part of the Gaza Strip. The camp is also located a few kilometres to the north of the main city of Gaza and on the transport route between the northern towns of Beit Lahia and Beit Hanoun, and Gaza City. According to the UNRWA's website, besides the facilities mentioned in the above table, the UNRWA runs one public library and seven water wells.

⁸ <https://www.unrwa.org/>

Refugees have existed in the areas of Jabalia and its surrounding towns since 1948. However, multiple sources confirm that the camp was officially established in 1954 (Saleh, 2020). The size of the refugee population in the Jabalia camp has been dynamic and has been primarily affected by the conflicts and geopolitical events that have imposed certain measures and security situations. In general, and prior to the October 2023 war, there was an increase in the population size within the camp, except for the period associated with the 1967 war, when displacement resulted in a decrease in the number of camp residents. Based on websites published in the Arabic language, like the Encyclopaedia of Palestinian Camps (2025), the refugees who resided in the Jabalia refugee camp have been diverse and varied. People in the camp occupied different professions, including farmers, occasional labourers, merchants, craftsmen, doctors, lawyers, engineers, etc. The refugees in the camp came from a variety of villages and towns. Those included agricultural villages near the Gaza Strip borders as well as larger towns and cities such as Al-Majdal and Jaffa.

Civil society in the Jabalia refugee camp has been very active. The camp has more than twenty Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) that implement and host various activities benefiting the different categories of the refugee community. These include women's activities centres, youth centres, academic training centres, rehabilitation services for persons with disabilities, and relief and economic support projects implemented by the Palestinian NGOs. The camp also has two cultural centres and a sports club. For many years since its formation, the extremely high population density, overcrowding, and deterioration of the living space have been impacting the living conditions in the camp. Many families in the camp live in substandard houses, and the camp generally lacks open recreational spaces. I highlight these problems and the socio-economic specificity associated with the camp environment in the empirical chapters.

3.3.2 *The Deir Al Balah refugee camp*

The Deir Al Balah refugee camp is the smallest refugee camp in the Gaza Strip. It has an area of 0.17 square kilometres. It is located at the seashore of the Mediterranean Sea, just to the northwest of the city of Deir Al Balah. The refugees in the Deir Al Balah camp settled there in

1948 and lived in tents until the UNRWA replaced these tents with mud-brick shelters during the early 1950s. Before October 2023, according to the UNRWA, around 28,000 registered Palestinian refugees lived in the Deir Al Balah camp.

The majority of refugees who came to the Deir Al Balah camp were from the surrounding areas of the Gaza District and the southern villages. They were mostly farmers and Bedouin communities, with a few coming from northern cities like Jaffa and Lydda (Encyclopaedia of Palestinian Camps, 2025). Many residents of the camp relied on fishing for their livelihoods. Some also worked in farming or as public servants. Unemployment rates are high, similar to other camps in Gaza. However, the livelihoods of fishermen in the camp were particularly affected by the Israeli-imposed measures that restricted the fishing zones to less than 15 nautical miles. These measures have reduced the fish catch and led to deteriorated economic conditions for these families.

Overcrowding is also a major concern in the Deir Al Balah refugee camp. Refugees' houses are very close to each other, and as a result, refugees have expanded their shelters, which limits the width of the streets. Recreational spaces are scarce, and most of the refugees live in substandard housing conditions. In recent years, the UNRWA has sought to radically change the urban situation of the Deir Al Balah camp by piloting its innovative Infrastructure and Camp Improvement (ICIP) program within the camp. In collaboration with various stakeholders and refugees, the UNRWA developed a Camp Improvement Plan that was under implementation prior to the October 2023 war. The plan includes demolishing houses and buildings, providing empty spaces for recreation, and widening the streets. In late 2020, the Deir Al Balah Municipality signed a draft agreement with UNRWA to start the project with funding from the German government. I provide more details about the ICIP in Chapter Seven.

3.3.3 *The spillover of urban refugee camps in the Gaza Strip*

Available figures show that around 48.1% of Palestinian refugees in the Gaza Strip live inside refugee camps (UNRWA, 2023). Refugees inside and outside the camps are part of the

isolated and contained 2.1 million people in the Gaza Strip, suffering from blockades, cycles of conflict, and a devastated economy. However, camps are characterised by higher rates of unemployment, a shortage of housing, a lack of living space and recreational places and higher levels of overcrowding (AFSC, 2014; Badawy *et al.*, 2016). The refugee camps have been the focus of humanitarian services, mainly through UNRWA. Yet these Palestinian camps have also been evolving as urban spaces since their establishment, to accommodate refugees' needs and assets (Rueff and Viaro, 2010; AFSC, 2014). As Rueff and Viaro (2010, p.340) suggest, these camps developed from being “shelters” to “habitats” by providing space for interaction between “a place of living” and “people living in a place.”

These habitats mirrored the social organisation of relatives and neighbours that existed prior to the exile and have been expanding beyond the camp space as refugees produced their “lived spaces”. Given that most refugee camps are located in proximity to their host cities, their expansion has led to them merging with these cities. Almost three decades ago, Marx (1992) argued that refugee camps in Gaza have become integral parts of the main cities with prominent links to their urban neighbourhoods and full integration into cities' economic activities. At that time, Marx (1992, p.282) described the integration of refugee camps into the economy by depicting these camps as “urban working-class neighbourhoods”. During that period, the population in Gaza's refugee camps enjoyed mobility, complex and efficient services provided by UNRWA, and “modest prosperity” of households in the camps (Marx, 1992, p.282). Despite these promising changes that were happening before the first uprising of 1987, Marx (1992) noticed two main features in the refugee camps' situation that continued and prevailed. In that, dwellers of the camps always considered themselves refugees, and all actors continued to consider these spaces as refugee camps, regardless of their evolution. Map 3.4 on the next page shows the refugee camps in Gaza and their spatial proximity to the built-up areas of different towns and cities.

Throughout their recent history, refugee camps have witnessed numerous attempts to reform their structure and introduce some form of urban planning and development. Most of these attempts that were carried out by Israeli authorities, especially in the Gaza Strip and

West Bank, were contested and seen by refugees as an attempt to remove symbols of Palestinian exile. Particularly since the occupation of the Gaza Strip after the 1967 war, the dense, overcrowded refugee camps gradually turned into a stronghold for the Palestinian resistance (Dahlan, 1990; Abreek-Zubiedat & Nitzan-Shiftan, 2018). As a result, the Israeli Army adopted a plan to demolish refugee houses in the large refugee camps, including Jabalia, in order to build security patrol roads, break the density of the refugee camps, divide them into more manageable neighbourhoods, and thin out the congested population through re-settling them in the adjacent areas (Dahlan, 1990; Abreek-Zubiedat & Nitzan-Shiftan, 2018).



Map 3.4 The Gaza Strip highlighting the built-up areas and refugee camps. Jabalia and Deir Al Balah are circled for illustration.

Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Gaza_Strip_map2.svg

Frequently, Israeli policies focused on finding ways to resettle refugees and end their cause permanently. Dahlan (1990) described the Israeli authorities' policies of camps' enhancement and refugees' resettlement as a policy of systematic destruction of refugees' houses. For the purpose of resettling refugees, the Israeli government also established eight housing projects in the Gaza Strip to house refugees from the camps (Dahlan, 1990). As these houses were also inadequate, refugees rebuilt and expanded them to accommodate their extended families (Dahlan, 1990). This can be understood as a practice of the spillover of refugee camps, where the refugee population were replicating and practising their refugeehood outside the camp boundaries. In 1972, the Israeli civil administration designed a plan for the future of the Gaza Strip that envisioned the relocation of the refugee camps' residents into new housing units in the adjacent cities, with the government providing subsidies, while at the same time, the plan prohibited any construction in the refugee camps (Abreek-Zubiedat & Nitzan-Shiftan, 2018).

As a result of this prevailing perception, refugees themselves in Gaza were reluctant to be part of the Israeli resettlement program at that time. In addition, UNRWA provided renovation and housing reconstruction programmes for refugee camps, which were also debated for a long time, raising questions about the political intentions behind them. However, there is a new emerging attitude, as I show in Chapter Seven, among refugees to accept plans for urban improvement of their camps without undermining their right to return (Misselwitz & Hanafi, 2010).

Some refugees were resettled in these housing projects, and new neighbourhoods near the camps emerged. Refugees who left the camps had to destroy their houses, and their vacant slots were used by their former neighbours to expand the housing units or build additional ones (Abreek-Zubiedat & Nitzan-Shiftan, 2018). The plans of "liquidating" the refugee camps did not succeed, and were challenged by refugees, the Arab countries, and the UNRWA, with only a few projects being implemented (Abreek-Zubiedat & Nitzan-Shiftan, 2018).

3.4 The War, the UNRWA, and the refugee camps

The attempts to empty the refugee camps and to end the Palestinian refugee cause have been ongoing since their establishment post-Nakba in 1948. Through frequent conflicts, Israel has enacted infrastructural violence against the relative normality the Palestinian refugees have built in their refugee spaces and the Gaza Strip in general. This has reproduced the oscillation between the “humanitarian situation” and the “humanitarian condition”, affecting the socio-spatial dynamics by assembling and re-assembling their structures, as I discuss throughout the empirical chapters of this thesis. This cycle of violence and destruction culminated in the October 2023 war, which is still ongoing while I am writing this thesis, and so far has caused radical, devastating socio-spatial impacts on the refugee camps and the overall situation in the Gaza Strip. Many refer to this current situation as an act of “urbicide”. As the war is still ongoing, there is still limited academic research and resources that analyse and discuss the urban impact of this war on the Gaza Strip, particularly the refugee camps. Such research is deemed very important to help understand the socio-spatial impacts of the war and inform potential future reconstruction, especially in the most devastated refugee camps like Jabalia.

The Jabalia refugee camp has particularly seen massive destruction and devastation. According to the analysis done by the Euro-Med Human Rights Monitor, which is a human rights organisation based in Geneva, the Israeli forces enacted a total annihilation of some Palestinian towns and refugee camps during the 2023-2025 war (EMHRM, 2024). For example, in the Jabalia refugee camp, the EMHRM (2024) reports massive destruction of public amenities like hospitals and schools, most of the homes, electricity networks, water and sewer networks, and all civilian economic facilities. Many pictures that show the scale of destruction have been published on social media and mainstream media outlets. Photo 3.1 shows the Jabalia refugee camp; it is estimated to have been taken in January 2025.



Photo 3.1 Palestinians walk through the remnants of the destroyed Jabalia refugee camp in the Gaza Strip in January 2025

Source: UNRWA Published Article⁹

Graham-Harrison (2025) in the Guardian article also revealed that the destruction had levelled whole neighbourhoods and left them in rubble, with nine in ten homes having been either destroyed or damaged in the Gaza Strip. The same report also states that all the tree cover has been razed, agricultural land has been heavily damaged, and contamination is reaching large portions of the soil and water, with longer-term impacts expected on the ecosystem and public health.

⁹ <https://www.unrwa.org/newsroom/features/returning-jabalia-%E2%80%93-testimony-hussein-unrwa-team-member>

In parallel to this destruction, the Israeli government has waged a war on UNRWA, claiming that the agency has become a “terrorist organisation”. In October 2024, the Israeli Knesset passed legislation banning the UNRWA from operating in Israel and the oPt. The international community has condemned this move, with many governments, including Western countries, reaffirming their support for UNRWA’s mission. Bashar (2025) published a blog at the London School of Economics (LSE), that assesses the legal consequences of the ban on UNRWA on the lives of the Palestinian refugees, arguing that implementing such a ban would violate International Law and particularly Article 55 of the Geneva Conventions, which necessitates the responsibility of the occupying power to guarantee food and medical supplies for the occupied population. Thus, banning the largest humanitarian aid provider for Palestinian refugees marks a stark violation of International Law and represents a risky precedent for future occupation powers to deny such an obligation in favour of political gains and interests (Bashar, 2025).

Furthermore, in a policy brief, Jensehaugen *et al.* (2025) affirm that the effects of such a ban are challenging to anticipate and will vary across UNRWA’s different fields of operation. However, for the Gaza Strip, the immediate impact will include the withdrawal of international staff, the inability to pursue deconfliction for humanitarian sites (marking them as neutral humanitarian locations), and the banning of all imports labelled for the agency. As the UNRWA is the backbone of the humanitarian apparatus in Gaza, banning the UNRWA means that the logistical support for most of the humanitarian operations will be lost (Jensehaugen *et al.*, 2025). It is believed that the Israeli strategy to dismantle the UNRWA could materialise. Despite the illegality attached to this action, other humanitarian agencies will be obliged to increase their tasks to fulfil their humanitarian obligation, especially if generous budgets are made available for such a purpose. Jensehaugen *et al.* (2025) affirm that there has been a lot of pressure on agencies such as the World Food Programme (WFP) and the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) from the United States to prepare themselves to take over part of the UNRWA’s operations. The longer-term impacts of ending UNRWA’s work have rarely been discussed. However, it is anticipated that the

consequences on the education and healthcare sectors will be massive. Without the UNRWA, it would take years, huge funding, and extraordinary efforts to restore the functionality of these devastated sectors (Jensehaugen *et al.*, 2025).

3.5 Conclusion

This chapter has provided the context for the study. The first section outlined the geopolitical history of the Gaza Strip and discussed how major political events have impacted the socio-spatial landscape in the Gaza refugee camps. The second section provided the structure and brief history of humanitarian aid in the oPt with a focus on the Gaza Strip. It provided an overview of the operational structures of UNRWA, highlighting the agency's profile. The section also briefly discussed the humanitarian-development link and how the UNRWA sought to achieve development outcomes through its operations, focusing on healthcare and education as developmental interventions, along with the humanitarian response. Finally, the section briefly presented criticism of humanitarian action in the Gaza Strip, where the socio-economic indicators have been deteriorating despite the humanitarian efforts. In this thesis, I further build on and discuss this critique, drawing out the socio-spatial impacts of the prolonged provision of humanitarian aid.

Denoting the urban character of the Gaza Strip area, the third section presented essential demographic and geographical information about the refugee camps in Gaza, with a focus on the two studied camps: Jabalia and Deir Al Balah. In doing so, the information on the two camps provides insight into how they share similar contexts and differ in geography and social structures, which informs the analysis in the empirical chapters. Finally, the section discussed the expansion of the refugee camp community to surrounding areas via various attempts to liquidate the camps and reduce their density for political purposes. These attempts were rejected and created a “taboo” regarding the urban development of the camps, as I discuss further in Chapter Six, showing how the political dynamics have an everlasting impact on the socio-spatial evolution of the camp.

The final section of this chapter briefly depicted the Israeli attempts to destroy the Palestinian refugee camps and the UNRWA, particularly in the last war of 2023 in order to

end the Palestinian refugee cause, highlighting the importance of further research that aims at understanding the socio-spatial impacts of the 2023-2025 war on Gaza and the consequences for refugee camp spaces that could result from banning the UNRWA.

The context provided in this chapter serves as the background for the discussions that follow in the empirical chapters. It highlighted the role and scale of humanitarian aid, particularly the UNRWA, in refugee camps, and it contextualised the interactions between aid agencies and the socio-spatial dynamics that I discuss later in this thesis. The next chapter will discuss the research methodology, drawing on the theoretical framework and research philosophy provided in Chapter Two. It will provide the rationale and details of the research methods used in this study.

4. CHAPTER FOUR: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

4.0 Introduction

This research aims to understand the evolution process of refugee camps in the Gaza Strip and the relationship between this process and the prolonged provision of humanitarian aid interventions, underscoring the reciprocal interactions between various socio-spatial dynamics and their impacts on the evolution process. It draws particular attention to the role of humanitarian aid, unpacking the formation of the socio-spatial structures and their causal mechanisms via employing a combination of assemblage thinking and critical realism ontologies.

This chapter presents the research design, methodology, and methods used in this thesis. It builds on the above research aim, questions, and the previous chapter's justification for selecting cases to rationalise the adoption of specific methods. The chapter is divided into four main sections. The first section builds on what I have discussed in Chapter Two. It is informed by the research philosophy and concepts discussed in Chapter Two, specifically critical realism research philosophy and assemblage thinking, to explain and underpin the methodological approach for this thesis. The section builds the ontological and epistemological stances for the research to present methodological implications for these combined philosophical underpinnings.

The second section revisits the research questions, initially outlined in Chapter One, providing details on the case study approach and the selection of the Gaza Strip as a case study and the two refugee camps as sub-cases. It builds on the contextualisation offered in Chapter Three to outline how and why I conducted this research in this particular context. The third section provides details of the research methods and explains how and why I used these particular qualitative methods to answer the questions and fulfil the aim. It then provides accounts of the different research and data collection methods I used, the data collection process and thematic analysis. The final section of this chapter offers insights and reflections on my positionality and experience as a researcher, discussing how my

insider/outsider positions were envisioned and negotiated, and reflecting on the challenges I encountered during this research journey.

4.1 Philosophical perspectives of the research methodology

As detailed in Chapter Two, this research employs the ontologies of assemblage thinking along the overarching critical realism (Rutzou & Elder-Vass, 2019) to capture the oscillations between formation and causation, fluidity and stability, under the changing phases of the “humanitarian situation” and the “humanitarian condition” (Feldman, 2018). On one hand, assemblage thinking ontology supports the construction of knowledge that includes both the arrangement of things and their agency (Kamalipour & Peimani, 2015). Assemblage thinking aims to understand the active role of the material in shaping daily experience and survival, where material functions as processes in work rather than as passive objects (McFarlane, 2011). Thus, based on the understanding of the assemblage ontological stance, I investigated the formation of the socio-spatial structures in the changing environment of the camps. This helps bring together subjects and objects, as well as temporariness and permanence (Abourahme, 2015). Through this understanding, I investigate historical accounts to unpack the temporalities and processes that produced practices and habits (McFarlane, 2011). Furthermore, assemblage thinking can be argued to complement critical theories to help grasp the complexity, multiplicity and contingency of processes (McFarlane, 2011).

On the other hand, adopting the critical realism paradigm allows me to unpack the causations and relations between structures, which is instrumental to achieving the aims of this research. Through critical realism, I recognise that our reality is structured and stratified. However, as critical realism is a philosophical stance, it does not reveal the actual structures that the world is composed of, which is a matter of substantive scientific investigation (Buch-Hansen & Nielsen, 2020). To unpack these structures, critical realism advocates for a pluralistic approach, highlighting the variety of structures and mechanisms that exist within the inner domains of reality (Buch-Hansen & Nielsen, 2020). This means that I need to answer questions of causation - what causes X to happen, why it is happening,

and how - while recognising that my knowledge of reality is conceptually mediated and theory-laden (Danemark *et al.*, 2002; Buch-Hansen & Nielsen, 2020). In other words, knowledge is not produced in a vacuum, as empirical studies and theories related to the studied phenomena should serve as the background for future research (Buch-Hansen & Nielsen, 2020).

This stance adopts retroductive reasoning, which is built on an inverted relationship between the conclusion and premises. In other words, “retroduction involves taking some manifest phenomenon or outcome of interest as a starting point (the conclusion) and then considering what mechanisms must in all likelihood exist for the phenomenon/outcome to be what it is (the premises)” (Buch-Hansen & Nielsen, 2020, p.69). Thus, I utilised discussions from the literature, along with my understanding of refugee camps, which I acquired through exposure to research theories and humanitarian work, to formulate an initial understanding of these spaces, as I summarise in the two propositions in Chapter Two. In this understanding, the camps are urban, “city-like”, paradoxical spaces where humanitarian management and socio-spatial dynamics have a mutual influence. Then, I tested and investigated these premises by designing the questions and instruments for conducting the research, aiming to contribute to the understanding of the reality of refugee camps.

This research innovatively combines critical realism philosophy and assemblage thinking to understand the complex heterogeneity of phenomena. It does not place particular emphasis only on specific aspects such as agents, structures, relations, and processes, and instead acknowledges the complexity of reality (Rutzou & Elder-Vass, 2019). Thus, achieving a balance in perceiving and understanding the world requires process- and object-focused ontologies (Rutzou & Elder-Vass, 2019). As Rutzou and Elder-Vass (2019) argue, explanatory work needs an ontological framework that helps understand the phenomena produced via interactions between the relatively stable objects and the more unstable, transient and in-the-making objects. This stable-fluid perception of reality is instrumental to empirically studying refugee camps in protracted displacement. It allows for the addition of

spatial dimensions via assemblage thinking that captures materiality and simultaneously offers an avenue to investigate the socio-spatial processes and objects of the protracted refugee camp space, which are characterised by periods of fluidity and times of relative stability. Employing these lenses, I aim to understand and unpack the oscillation of dynamics between formation and causation in the studied spaces.

Methodologically, I used tools that help understand the origins of structures formed during high instability, and how they relatively stabilise and enact their causal powers or, as Rutzou & Elder-Vass (2019, p. 420) frame it, “How do things come to be the way they are?” and “How can things have causal influence?” As refugee camps are relatively new phenomena in highly precarious contexts, there is a continuous oscillation between formation and causation, a movement back and forth between the two questions, that happens through times of acute emergencies and relative stabilities. Thus, studying the camps methodologically entails trying to unfold how specific socio-spatial structures came to be, their influence, and how the tension between these structures produces and reproduces new formations and causal mechanisms.

I used various qualitative methods to unpack the studied phenomena, comparing the two studied camp spaces. Including two camp spaces in the study aims to highlight the different mechanisms that contributed to each camp’s evolution. The selection of the two camp cases and the comparison of the results of the study of these camps in Gaza with the literature’s conceptualisation of camps represents a generative comparative methodology (Robinson, 2015). The generative comparison is not a strictly scientific comparison, but it relies on the purposive selection of the cases based on shared features to revise and stimulate concept invention (Robinson, 2015). Robinson (2015) proposes redefining urban comparison through a case-study approach, comparing with other cases, broader contexts, and existing theories to better interpret local outcomes and develop flexible, global urban concepts. In this generative comparison, the researcher uses the variations within common features to spark new theoretical insights and contribute to diverse global academic conversations. This approach to comparative methodology contributes to consolidating

understanding of intersectional ideas and to the applicability and expansion of these concepts (Robinson, 2015).

Thus, the comparison between the two camps in this study helps build connections between these cases and the earlier conceptualisation of the camps as “state of exception” and “city-like”, in which such outcomes emerged from interconnected, related processes in the studied context. Such an approach insists on “taking seriously the scholarly output of people working in different places” to inform one's own work and analysis and to suggest new theorisation based on the findings from the studied cases (Robinson, 2015, p. 21). This thesis utilises this methodological approach to generate a new theoretical insight. It explains and compares the socio-spatial dynamics in the two studied camps, unfolds similarities and differences, and builds on previous scholarly output produced by researchers who studied refugee camps in protracted displacement to introduce the theoretical concept of the “state of paradox”.

I employed diverse data collection methods to understand the formation of socio-spatial structures, considering both material and non-material aspects, acknowledging uncertainties and their impacts, and critically engaging with theories associated with the studied camps using retroductive reasoning to produce a less fallible understanding of the phenomena. For example, I employed documentary analysis to understand various aspects of the formation in Jabalia and Deir Al Balah studied camps, including how the camps came to be, how humanitarian aid, particularly that of the UNRWA, was introduced, and what historical geopolitical changes have shaped and reshaped the formation of these socio-spatial assemblages. Documentary analysis also helped identify the camps’ actors and their potential interactions.

Through documentary analysis, I formulated the initial outcomes and understanding of the refugee camp spaces. I reviewed reports and documents that discuss the built environment, how it was historically formed and constructed, by whom and under what conditions, what currently characterises it, and how it impacts the lives of refugees in the studied camps. The initial data collection and pre-existing theories from the literature helped me formulate

assumptions and propositions about the refugee camps, which I used to conduct further investigation and research, adopting critical realism's concept of retroduction.

In addition, I used field observation of the built environment to capture a snapshot of the current scenery, the functionality and aesthetics of the camp space, and the studied environment at the empirical level. Through field observation visits to the studied camps, I walked across their streets and alleys to observe the typology of the shelters, the UNRWA services centres, the economic activities and markets, physical infrastructure like roads, connectivity with adjacent non-camp areas, and daily interactions between refugees in the studied space. I observed the similarities and differences across different camp areas, between the two studied camps and between the camps and non-camp areas.

These methods were instrumental in informing interview questions. For instance, I noticed increased economic activities and trade around the UNRWA services centres, and I read about how UNRWA constructed these facilities and what services they provide, which led me to ask questions in the interviews about the impact of UNRWA facilities and services on the economy and the emergence of markets in a particular area of the camp.

Furthermore, by employing critical realism's conceptualisation of social structures, particularly Elder-Vass's (2010) work, I recognised that particular research participants act according to their normative social institutions and norm circles, as discussed in Chapter Two. Considering this structuration, I also acknowledge that collective social structures, like norm circles, normative social institutions, and organisations, have emergent properties/causal mechanisms that reciprocally interact with individual behaviours and thus influence the individual's understanding of the environment they live in (Elder-Vass, 2010). This helped me understand the intersectional identities formed by the socio-spatial dynamics of the studied refugee camps. Thus, research participants were identified and recruited according to their belonging to normative social institutions, without overlooking that they could be part of other norm circles. For example, when interviewing Refugees Popular Committee members, I recognised that they act on behalf of the committee and, at the same time, still hold the identity and character of a refugee. This is also similar to the

case of UNRWA staff, who represent the UNRWA as an organisation and act on behalf of that structure; however, they still recognise themselves as refugees, and both of these structures influence their perceptions and knowledge.

Being aware of these intersections, I employed multiple diverse sets of questions in the interviews, trying to probe knowledge and perceptions that represent different social structures. Based on that, I categorised the design of the semi-structured interview questions (Annexe A) into three main categories or levels of inquiry, reflecting my understanding of the social and organisational compositions. These are the community level, which involves refugees, grassroots organisations, and refugee committees; the national level, which involves national NGOs and municipalities; and the international level, which enquires about the work of INGOs and the UNRWA. On many occasions, the interviewees belonged to various structures, so I tended to ask questions from different levels of inquiry.

Through such a combined philosophical underpinning, I built an initial understanding of the causes and relations between the built environment, social structures, humanitarian management, and their impact on the evolution of camps. Driven by the main highlights from the documentary analysis and field observations, I designed semi-structured interviews and formulated questions that probed the causal and relational mechanisms. This multi-method case-study design helped me triangulate between stories of formation and the emergent properties of interactions that occur at different levels involving the main actors, including refugees, non-refugees, various committees, refugee institutions, the UNRWA, aid agencies, and municipalities. Additionally, this helped to unpack the formation of the space, as well as the non-material aspects, such as social refugee structures and the governance dynamics that emerged within the space that was formed. In the third section of this chapter, I provide more details about the multi-method design of this research. Before that and in the next section, I highlight and explain the research aim, discuss the main research questions and provide details on how the data was collected and analysed,

utilising qualitative research methods that are underpinned by the philosophies discussed in this section.

4.2 Research aim, questions, and case study

As explained in Chapter Two, refugee camps are interdisciplinary phenomena involving different thematic study areas, including politics, sociology, economy, geography, urban studies, and international development and humanitarianism. However, this study is primarily concerned with the evolution of refugee camps and the reciprocal interactions between socio-spatial dynamics, the evolution process, and humanitarian aid. Thus, this thesis aims to understand the evolution process of refugee camps in the Gaza Strip and the relationship between this process and the prolonged provision of humanitarian aid interventions. Existing literature and my experience and exposure to the camp context suggest that addressing this aim necessitates investigating and building typologies of the socio-spatial structures, understanding their mutual influence on refugees' living conditions and the camp governance, and unpacking the role of humanitarian aid represented mainly by the UNRWA. Therefore, this research has three main questions that fulfil this aim as follows:

- What socio-spatial dynamics have influenced the evolution of refugee camps in the Gaza Strip?
- How do socio-spatial dynamics, governance structures and the living conditions mutually shape each other in the refugee camp environment?
- How does the prolonged provision of humanitarian aid through the UNRWA affect and get affected by the socio-spatial dynamics of refugee camps in protracted displacement?

The context of this study is the Gaza Strip, which comprises eight refugee camps with varying levels of complexity and interaction, presented in Chapter Three. To provide in-depth answers to these research questions, I adopted a case study approach, selecting the Gaza Strip as a case study, and the two studied camps as sub-cases. This helps to generate

diverse perspectives and provide avenues for drawing comparisons. According to Muir (2008, p.107), the benefits of the case study in urban research “are the spatial focus, the importance of context, flexibility of research design, use of multiple research methods, the experience of multiple perspectives on the case; and the depth and richness of data that can be obtained”.

Selecting a research case can often be based on combined pragmatic and substantive criteria (Swanborn, 2018). Thus, I chose to conduct this research in the Gaza Strip based on pragmatic grounds and because of the unique substantive qualities of the case. Pragmatically, I am from the Gaza Strip, and I have lived there most of my life. I worked in the humanitarian sector there, which allowed me to gain access to refugee camps and potential research participants. As outlined in Chapter One, my interest in studying the refugee camps in Gaza developed while interacting with people in the camps and the camp spaces as part of my daily work and living routines.

Substantively, the Palestinian refugee camps are considered among the oldest and most evolved among the protracted displacement contexts in recent history (Agier, 2011; Sanyal, 2017; Saleh, 2020). Particularly in the Gaza Strip, the eight camps have evolved and transitioned differently throughout more than seventy years, representing a perfect example of studying the dynamics of refugee camps' evolution (Saleh, 2020) and how they became interwoven in their surroundings under the impacts of the prolonged provision of humanitarian aid. In short, the Palestinian refugee camps can be models that help us to understand the dynamics of protracted displacement in refugee camps elsewhere in the world, such as in Asia and Africa (Agier, 2011).

Studying Palestinian refugee camps in the Gaza Strip offers opportunities to develop theoretical and practical insights that extend far beyond merely addressing an empirical gap in the literature. Camps in Gaza represent an ultimate paradigm of protracted displacement, urbanisation of camps, and the humanitarian management of a refugee space. The case of the Gaza Strip offers a unique value that extends beyond the duration of

displacement, through the complex layers of sovereignty governing displacement in a “stateless” context. In this context, camps are controlled and managed by overlapping, complex authorities, both official and non-official. The context of refugees in the Gaza Strip also represents layers of exception and can be considered an extreme case of displacement.

In such an environment, camps evolved, blurring the spatial distinctions between camp and city, while remaining under the consequences of the “state of exception”. As refugees are under spatial exception, living their entire lives in camps, the entire Palestinian population are also placed under exception through denial of statehood, exceptional measures of military control and blockade. In such a context of juridico-political layered exceptions, the research examines the unparalleled frameworks that offer insight into how marginalised refugee populations re-established their social fabric, political agency, and mechanisms of survival when stripped of legal and political rights in the absence of state sovereignty. Studying refugee camps in Gaza provides the opportunity to unpack these dimensions and critically analyse the prolonged role of aid, the impacts of urbicide, biopolitical measures of control, and the act of refugees' agency to create normality, navigating these complexities and contradictions.

As the study is conducted in the Gaza Strip, I have chosen to focus on two refugee camps: the Jabalia and Deir Al Balah camps. Comparing the two camps in this research will help to understand how various characteristics within the context influence the success of a particular approach or policy (Goodrick, 2014). In this regard, the two camps share many historical and social similarities; however, they have also developed or evolved differently to some extent, which is significant to this study and helps highlight the different socio-spatial realities and their mutual impacts on humanitarian interventions. Building on their

contextualisation in Chapter Three, the general characteristics of the two camps at the time of conducting this research are summarised in Table 4.1.¹⁰

I also selected these particular refugee camp sub-cases based on substantive grounds. I have chosen the smallest camp and one of the largest refugee camps to research the differences in their evolution. Because I lived in the Gaza Strip and interacted with refugee camps, I noticed the socio-spatial differences between these two camps, which informed my decision on selecting the camps to study. The Jabalia refugee camp underwent rapid evolution, especially on its outskirts and main roads, where trade, commerce, and services became comparable to and even surpassed those in the adjacent urban centres. In addition, the community in the Jabalia refugee camp was more vibrant, with many civil society organisations operating and providing activities. However, the inner alleys and blocks of the Jabalia camp still represented a slum-like situation with overcrowding, poverty, and substandard, precarious houses.

¹⁰ The information in this table is based on UNRWA's website (<https://www.unrwa.org/>), the website of the Encyclopaedia of Palestinian Camps in the Arabic language (<https://mokhayyam.com/ar>), and my field observations.

Table 4.1 Main characteristics of the Jabalia and Deir Al Balah refugee camps

Characteristic Item	Jabalia Refugees Camp	Deir Al Balah Refugees Camp
Location	North area governorate, adjacent to Jabalia town that is mainly resided by non-refugees.	Middle area governorate, adjacent to Deir Al Balah town that is mainly resided by non-refugees.
Population Size	113,990	25,569
Essential UNRWA Facilities	16 School buildings accommodating 26 schools, 2 health centres in the camp and 1 in the surrounding areas, 2 social services office, 1 maintenance and sanitation office, and 1 food distribution centre.	8 School buildings accommodating 13 schools in total, 1 health centre. 1 social services office, 1 maintenance and sanitation office, and 1 food distribution centre shared with Al Maghazi refugee camp.
Other information	It is one of the largest camps in the Gaza Strip. Economic activity includes daily labour, farming in adjacent city's land, trading and employment. The camp has high number of multi-floor buildings and commercial areas.	It is the smallest camp in the Gaza Strip. Economic activity includes daily labour, farming in adjacent city's land and fishing. Most houses are one floor with asbestos/steel roofing.
Common Characteristics	Both camps were built on governmental land. They were randomly developed and the houses were built and upgraded by their owners. Between 40 – 50 % of population in both camps are under 16 years old.	

Compared to Jabalia, the Deir Al Balah refugee camp did not show stark differences between its neighbourhoods, with much less notable spatial evolution. Socially, the Deir Al Balah camp felt more homogeneous, and the refugees were more traditional in their ways of living, jobs, and thinking.

I employed my knowledge and previous experience to choose the particular camps, recognising that the researcher's background and knowledge can be used as an instrument for the research. As Maxwell (2012, p.45) argues, the researcher's background, identity, and influence are valuable research components, while “separating your research from other aspects of your life cuts you off from a major source of insights, hypotheses, and validity

checks”. I discuss the implications of my positionality and identity in more detail in section four of this chapter.

I use the two sub-cases to draw comparisons by employing a triangulation of methods. Triangulation in social science research is a broad principle and entails viewing the phenomenon from multiple perspectives (Denscombe, 2014). It is also argued that triangulation helps confirm and improve the validity and precision of the findings via combining methods, data sources, researchers or theories (Lewis *et al.*, 2014). In this vein, employing the triangulation of methods to research the two camps helps validate the findings and produce a deeper and less fallible understanding of their nature.

Although the empirical material is organised based on the research questions and the associated themes, I also discuss findings that distinctly respond to the particular camp sub-cases, highlighting how and why things are similar or different. This approach is also helpful in consolidating the evidence. If the same results are noticed or agreed upon, it will indicate that the findings are more accurate and authentic (Denscombe, 2014) and can be generalised to a large extent. I also achieve triangulation by recruiting different informants from various categories of participants and comparing the data obtained from them (Denscombe, 2014).

4.3 Research Methods & Participants

Utilising qualitative methods to collect and analyse data, I deployed a triangulation of research methods and various categories of participants in this research. My methods mainly involved direct field observations, documentary analysis, and semi-structured interviews.

The data collection and fieldwork lasted 14 months, from mid-January 2021 until mid-April 2022, and were roughly divided into two phases. The first phase (Phase I) included a documentary review and field observations, which helped formulate the interview questions and indicated the potential categories of participants I would recruit for the interviews. I used the first phase to identify the parameters for selecting informants based on a review

analysis of key documents. This review helped formulate an understanding of the main features of the context and develop the initial themes to provide some orientation for data collection. I also employed informal direct observation of the camps' environment and living conditions through frequent field visits to the studied camps. This allowed me to notice the socio-spatial structures, identify everyday social interactions and economic activities, and learn the typology of camp houses and infrastructure. The importance of such observation stems from the fact that the phenomena being studied are not purely historical and have available and relevant social and environmental conditions to be observed (Yin, 2018).

I started the first phase by analysing a few documents, highlighting some themes, and conducting field visits to observe the daily life in the selected camps. I started the first phase (Phase I) while waiting for the local authorities' approval to interview refugees from the camps. Utilising these methods of documentary review and non-participant field observation was also crucial as it was performed during and post-COVID-19 pandemic, where restrictions did not allow much face-to-face interaction, thus allowing me to utilise the time in data collection whenever possible. While doing the initial data collection, I reviewed and refined the interview questions. I started the documentary review around mid-January 2021 and the field observations around mid-February 2021 until I obtained the authorities' approval to conduct the interviews by mid-March 2021. I received the official approval letter to conduct interviews by the first week of April 2021.

I started the main phase (Phase II) of the data collection around mid-March 2021 by piloting and conducting interviews with a refugee and a refugee CBO member from the Jabalia refugee camp. This main phase continued until mid-April 2022. During this main data collection phase (Phase II), I focused on conducting semi-structured interviews, translation, transcription and analysis. In addition, I resumed documentary review and field observation in the last few months of the main phase, to compare and obtain explanations for particular themes and findings that emerged from the interviews. Diagram 4.1 illustrates the phases of data collection. In the remainder of this section, I provide more details of each method I used in this research.

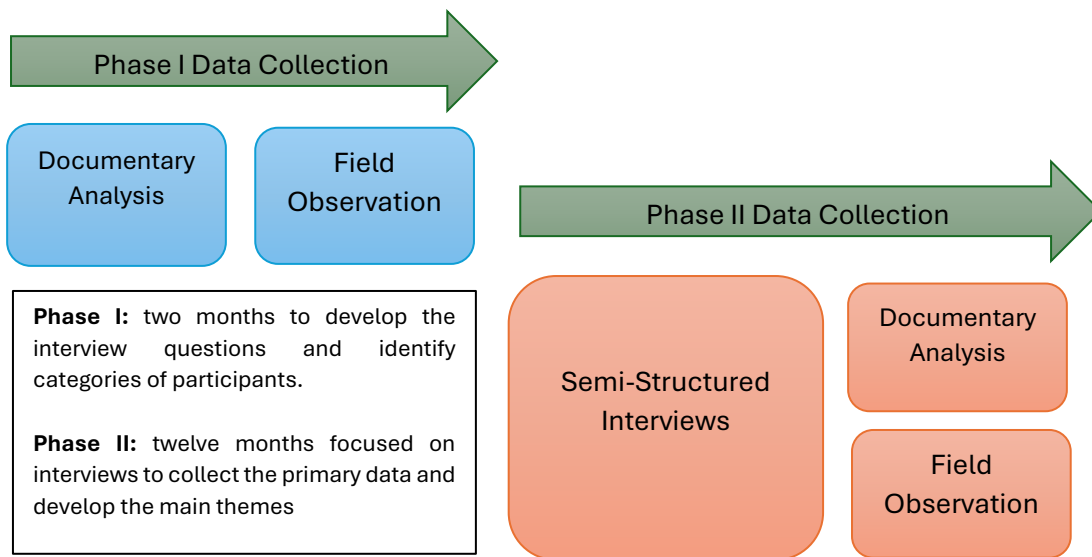


Figure 4.1 Phases of Data Collection

4.3.1 Observation

In this study, I conducted multiple field observation visits to the two studied refugee camps and their adjacent town areas. Most of my observation visits happened before the interviews and, to a lesser extent, during and after the interviews. The purpose of conducting observation before the primary data collection activity was descriptive, to gain orientation to the field, grasp the complexities, and further develop the more concrete research questions (Nicholls *et al.*, 2014). The follow-up observation field visits that happened towards the end of the data collection were used as selective observations to better understand the evolving evidence and examples that support the findings (Nicholls *et al.*, 2014).

Although I had been in these camps before, during my visits as a researcher, I paid more attention to the built environment, ongoing activities, and similarities and differences between the studied camps, within the camps, and between camps and the adjacent areas. In this research activity, I employed observation as a casual, less formal data collection method to build a general sense of the study environment and provide additional information that complemented the interviews, the main data collection method (Yin, 2018).

Field observation also helped me take visual evidence, videos and photographs from the study sites, which are instrumental in conveying the characteristics of the cases (refugee camps) to those outside the research environment (Yin, 2018).

Going to the camps and navigating their alleys was also part of my field observation. Whenever I organised an interview with a resident in the camp, I intended to walk my way through the roads in the camp to meet the participants and conduct the interview. Although most of the observation visits were non-participant observations, I sometimes met refugee acquaintances and friends and had a side chat with them. We talked about many things, including their lives in the camp, how they navigate throughout the day, the activities they do, the events that happen in the camp, and the services provided by the UNRWA and their needs. I also visited the markets in the camps, purchased some of my daily needs from those informal sellers, and chatted with them. After field observation visits, I wrote down notes that I used to develop the initial description of the studied environment, particularly before conducting the interviews, to inform the development of the interview questions.

For instance, I conducted two initial field visits to Jabalia and Deir Al Balah refugee camps in the Gaza Strip on the 15th and 20th of February 2021, respectively. After the field visit to Jabalia, I wrote: “To reach Jabalia refugee camp, I drove my car from Beit Hanoun town to Beit Lahia town, and then I intended to walk the street connecting Beit Lahia town with Jabalia refugee camp. Once in the camp, I roamed the main market streets to note the economic activities and the built environment. I have noticed that the camp, or at least parts of it, has evolved similarly or even more than the adjacent towns. Higher buildings erupted, economic activities evolved and diversified, and transport to and from the camps became easier. Roaming around the camp, one can notice the heavy presence of the UNRWA facilities, ranging from schools and clinics to the blue UN colour-themed garbage containers. Also, there was a greater sense of informality and random buildings, especially when I went deeper into the camp alleys; most of the roads became narrow, and the houses were substandard and crumpled. Buildings and houses closer to the wider roads and market areas are in better shape and condition than those deeper in the camp. The differences

between the adjacent neighbourhoods are stark...etc”. I shared some of these notes with my supervisors to facilitate the discussion and reflection, inform the analysis and the potential re-working of research questions.

I used observation as part of a multi-method design to build an interwoven interpretation. Observation helped identify and validate the initial themes that I investigated in the interviews, supported the building of a description of the physical context, and verified what was described in the interviews in the actual research environment (Nicholls *et al.*, 2014). However, observation is inherently subjective and usually influenced by the researcher's choices (Nicholls *et al.*, 2014). I utilised such initial field observations for familiarity and to gain additional information to complement findings from other methods, as they only offer descriptive accounts of the studied phenomena. Thus, other data collection methods are employed to gain a more in-depth, detailed analysis.

4.3.2 Documentary analysis

In addition, I analysed selected documents as part of the triangulation of data and in order to support the findings from the interviews, as the primary data collection method. I purposively selected the documents in Table 4.2 below to review them to formulate my initial understanding and then provide more in-depth accounts of particular themes. The documents I consulted and analysed involved reviews of the situation of the camps in terms of the built environment and socio-economic conditions. The list also included documents that provide historical accounts of the role of humanitarian aid and the formation of the camps. Furthermore, I reviewed policy documents and reports from UNRWA to better understand the agency's role and mandate, and to elaborate on the interactions between the UNRWA and the various socio-spatial dynamics in the camp.

Besides using the initial documentary review to build the primary themes and inform the design of interviews, the reviewed documents helped me access more explanatory information on particular key topics, as the data in these documents is already structured and ordered (Spencer *et al.*, 2014). Documentary analysis is an invaluable research method that offers detailed historical and contextual insights that can be triangulated with other

methods. Nonetheless, it also inherits authors' and organisational biases and lacks the precise details deemed necessary for this research. Thus, this research uses documentary analysis to provide factual and historical insights and complement the findings primarily obtained from analysing the data collected via interviews.

Table 4.2 List of documents reviewed for this research

Institution/Author	Date Published	Title	Purpose of review
American Friends Service Committee (AFSC)	1950	Quaker Work Among Arab Refugees Undertaken for the United Nations A brief description of the distribution of relief among Arab refugees in the Gaza Strip, undertaken by Friends on behalf of the 'United Nations Relief for Palestine Refugees'	To grasp historical accounts on aid provision and the formation of the refugee camps in the Gaza Strip
IUED – Graduate Institute of Development Studies, University of Geneva. In collaboration with JMCC – Jerusalem Media & Communication Centre	2001	International and Local Aid During the Second Intifada - An Analysis of Palestinian Public Opinion in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip	To obtain historical accounts on aid provision and the general perception of humanitarian aid in the West Bank and Gaza Strip
United Nations Relief and Work Agency (UNRWA)	2007	The United Nations and Palestinian Refugees	To depict the UNRWA's articulated mandate on dealing with Palestinian refugees
Badawi & Waltz (2014). Report based on the research outcome of groups working in the Ministry of Housing in Gaza within a program supported by CIM Germany	2014	Housing Conditions and Upgrading of Refugee Camps in Palestine (Findings, Aims and Strategies)	Capture details of discussions on the built environment of refugee camps.
American Friends Service Committee (AFSC)	2014	Needs Assessment of Overcrowding in Gaza Refugee Camps – Jabalia Refugee Camp	Depict the socio-spatial conditions and analyse the role of humanitarian actors in refugee camps

United Nations Relief and Work Agency (UNRWA)	2015	Medium Term Strategy 2015 – 2020	To understand UNRWA's services and planning for refugees
United Nations Relief and Work Agency (UNRWA)	2023	Strategic Plan 2023-28	To capture the UNRWA's profile of services and the size of their operations, and their strategies for the Palestinian refugees

4.3.3 Interviews

As the primary source of data, the findings analysed and presented in this research are obtained mainly from the semi-structured interviews. I conducted semi-structured interviews with participants utilising a categorised set of questions (Annexe A). Interview questions followed a semi-structured design utilising the sense of themes and features of the context developed at the first stage of data collection and informed by the overall research questions. As participants were categorised, each category of interviewees had a set of main questions and another set of probing questions I used to explore the matter in depth. Creating categorised sets and follow-up questions helped me harness the different perspectives and triangulate the findings.

During the interviews, I used the set of interview questions as guidance. I added or omitted questions during the actual interview based on the direction of the discussion and the purpose of recruiting a particular participant. For example, when interviewing UNRWA staff members, I took an in-depth focus, asking questions on UNRWA's role, services, and the agency's interactions with refugees. Each interviewee was given the opportunity to go in-depth in a particular direction and theme of discussion based on their experiences and views.

Through the semi-structured interviews, participants could express their opinions on the discussed issue and elaborate on their specific points of interest (Denscombe, 2014). Although interviews are resource-intensive and require a massive investment of time and energy from the researcher, the method provides participants with the opportunity to share their experiences, interpretations, and understandings of the discussed phenomena (Yeo *et al.*, 2014). Using open and non-leading questions allowed participants to provide additional

content on the topic and offer responses that revealed their actual feelings and perceptions (Yeo *et al.*, 2014). At the same time, sufficient flexibility was given during the interviews, allowing issues to be raised through interaction between the researcher and the research participants (Yeo *et al.*, 2014).

The sample of participants was purposively selected based on analysis conducted in the first stage of data collection. Purposive sampling allows selection criteria to be based on features that permit an in-depth investigation and understanding of the main themes and questions the study aims to address (Ritchie *et al.*, 2014). Purposive sampling enables the researcher to recruit participants from diverse communities, genders, and age groups, thereby presenting and understanding various perspectives. This allowed for the setup and amendment of participants' recruitment criteria, enabling the introduction of different participants to enrich the data from various aspects as the research progresses. For instance, the list of refugee participants was purposively diversified to include older people who witnessed the early stages of camps' setup and history, youth who can present the perceptions and needs of younger generations in refugee camps, and women refugees to capture women's living experiences and perceptions in refugee camps.

In total, I conducted 34 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with informants from three levels of inquiry: communities and refugees, government and national actors, and international humanitarian organisations. I provide a list of detailed interviews and the category of each participant in Annexe D. Participants are distributed across these categories, as illustrated in Table 4.3. All participants obtained a copy of the research participant information sheet and signed an associated consent form. Annexe B and Annexe C show the participant information sheet and provide a sample signed consent form, respectively.

Table 4.3 Categories and numbers of conducted interviews

General Category	Category of participant	Number of Interviews	Gender		Total Number of Interviews per Category
			Men	Women	
Community and CBOs Level	CBOs Staff members	3	3	0	17
	Current camp residents	10	5	5	
	Previous camp residents	4	4	0	
National and Municipal Level	National NGOs Staff members	2	1	1	9
	Municipality Staff Members	4	4	0	
	Refugees Popular Committee	2	2	0	
	Businessperson	1	1	0	
International Level	INGOs Staff Members	3	2	1	8
	UNRWA Staff Members	5	5	0	
		Total	27	7	34

Although I actively sought the recruitment and participation of women alongside men and other diverse age groups, the number of interviewed women is lower than the number of men. This is due to the patriarchal nature of the community and the limited number of women holding senior roles in organisations that are influential in the refugee camps. Due to the community's patriarchal culture and my role as a male researcher, I had to use a gatekeeper, typically a male family member of the woman, to recruit female refugee participants outside my network. Very often, those males suggested that they do the interview and provide the information. Nonetheless, I was fortunate to have refugee acquaintances who worked with CBOs and understood my need for the research to include women as part of my

participants. Thus, they helped me recruit some female refugees through their relatives and acquaintances to participate in this study.

Besides these cultural challenges that limited the participation of women, there were very few women who worked at the organisations involved in refugee camps, particularly the local municipalities and the Refugees' Popular Committee. Furthermore, interviews with the UNRWA staff were arranged by the UNRWA Human Resources (HR) department, which nominated staff members with relevant knowledge and enough expertise to engage with my research questions and discuss my research topic. All those nominated by the UNRWA's HR in Gaza to participate in my research were male participants. It is worth noting that the percentage of women staff who are in senior positions in the UNRWA area offices was 31 per cent (UNRWA, 2021).

I include the perspectives of the female participants I interviewed in this research as part of the thematic analysis and coding process. The thematic analysis I conducted revealed an alignment between the perspectives of male and female participants in this research, who discussed similar issues and identified similar themes. Particularly, I include quotes from the female participants that enriched the nuanced understanding and discussion in the empirical chapters. However, this research does not focus specifically on gender analytical dimensions to answer the research questions.

This thesis explores the interplay between the studied camps' socio-spatial dynamics, their evolution, and the role of humanitarian aid. Drawing gender related comparisons in the evolution process of the camps is beyond the scope of this thesis. Nevertheless, the findings I present in this thesis can be further explored utilising a more gendered approach to analyse the identified dynamics and the evolution of refugee camps from the various gender perspectives. This can be pursued in future research. Employing the triangulation of multiple data collection methods and resources via combining the interviews with field observations and documentary analysis fulfils the research aim, provides a more

comprehensive view, and validates the findings presented and discussed in the empirical chapters to answer the research questions.

It is worth mentioning that there has always been an overlap between the categories of participants. For instance, a CBO member can be a camp resident, and a camp resident can be a previous or current staff member of NGOs or the UNRWA. However, I assigned a category to each participant based on their primary purpose for recruiting them to participate in the research. All interviews were audio recorded after obtaining permission from participants, except one with a previous senior UNRWA staff member, who refused to audio record the interview. In this particular case, I wrote notes of the answers simultaneously. I focused on using the questions in the primary category for each participant and recording their answers. The duration of the audio-recorded interviews lasted between fifteen minutes and slightly more than one hour, depending on the participant's in-depth understanding and knowledge. The average time of recorded interviews was around thirty-five minutes.

Nonetheless, due to my insider positionality and familiarity with the research participants, some discussions and side chats related to the themes in my research happened before and after I started recording the interview. Additionally, during informal meetings and friendly gatherings, I had the opportunity to meet with many of the participants, and we discussed specific issues and themes related to my research and the situation of refugee camps in general. I always made notes of these unofficial discussions and highlighted interesting opinions.

Some of the interviews, eleven in total, were conducted online via Google Meet and recorded instantly after obtaining permission from the participants, especially those interviews with the UNRWA and INGOs staff members, due to COVID-19 restrictions in those organisations.

- ***Interviews translation, transcription, and analysis***

Analysing the research interviews was an iterative process. After conducting an interview, I re-listened to it, wrote notes, and identified if the interview had key content that I should

prioritise to build the themes. I used this prioritisation to facilitate and speed up the analysis so that I could identify themes as I went through the transcription and translation. Thus, I started the transcription of the key interviews, especially those that I noticed were rich with information, to start the analysis and not wait until the entire set of interviews is transcribed. After transcribing and analysing the key interviews, I returned to the interviews I had not prioritised at first to transcribe and analyse to produce the final themes and results.

Transcribing interviews started with translating the spoken Arabic into English. To translate the interviews from Arabic to English, I considered having support from an English Language graduate who worked as an interpreter so that she could provide a more accurate translation. To speed up the process and extract the early results, the interview records were translated and transcribed from Arabic into English in two stages. The first stage involved performing quick translation and transcription in English that included the answers to the interview questions for each interview. I asked for the support of the research assistant in this stage after I explained the context of my study and research objectives. My assistant, Maram¹¹, is a professional interpreter and supported the initial translation of interviews from spoken Arabic into English. I consider this step essential because some words in the spoken Arabic dialect could have different meanings or words that better describe them in English. In the second stage, I took the initial draft interview transcript and carried out the second transcribing stage by reviewing the initial text and making the transcription verbatim, producing the final interview transcript to be analysed. While doing this iterative process, and after finalising a few key interviews, I highlighted some prominent findings and themes and noted them down to start building the themes and drafting the results.

Because I am also fluent in both English and Arabic, I re-listened to the interviews, reviewed the initial translation and transcript, and added what was missing to make the transcription more verbatim. If the meaning of my translation and the assistant's translation of a

¹¹ This is a pseudonym

particular sentence or word did not match, we discussed it and agreed on the best English translation based on the meaning and our understanding of the Arabic word in our spoken dialect.

After translating and transcribing all the audio-recorded interviews into English, I conducted the full coding and analysis process to produce and write down the final results, primarily using manual paper coding. I employed critical realism's retroductive reasoning in coding the interview data. This involves building on my understanding of existing theories and testing and refining the explanations associated with them. In other words, to enhance what we know about the refugee camps, I utilised the empirical evidence and participants' accounts to refine the existing theories. I initially started with descriptive codes to describe the data the way it appeared, rather than to deploy a particular theoretical lens on it (Fryer, 2022). Nonetheless, this descriptive coding did not happen in a theoretical or epistemic void, as I recognise that a researcher cannot be freed from theoretical interests (Braun & Clarke, 2008). Initial descriptive codes included, for example, 'creation of social connections', 'overcrowding in camps', 'UNRWA's provision of health care and education', 'UNRWA's governance role', 'improvised evolution of the camp'...etc. Then I standardised the codes that meant the same thing and consolidated the analytically related codes under broader themes. For example, I consolidated the codes that described practices and issues of governance under the 'issues on governance' theme and the codes that described the initial setup and evolution of the camps under the 'formation and evolution of the built environment' theme.

I also drew the analysis to capture formation and causation and highlight the social-spatial dynamics at these interwoven phases. For example, under the main theme of 'formation and evolution of the built environment', I grouped the codes that describe the formation of the built environment, how the material of the camp was assembled, and the stages of formation that led to the current shape of the camp. Under the theme of 'refugees social dynamics', I included the codes that addressed the social formation and evolution of social

structures in the refugee camps, including the creation of social ties, connections, and intimacy, as well as the development of overcrowding issues.

To highlight particular causations, I identified themes that influence the socio-spatial conditions. For example, I used the theme ‘paradoxicality’ to capture the contradictory actions and perceptions in the socio-spatial environment, which captures the temporary-permanent perceptions, and improvisation in the camp space. I also identified themes related to ‘exceptional geopolitical conditions’ that highlight particular impacts of the inherited exceptions on refugees, their space and the humanitarian management. I also grouped codes into a theme on the ‘role of the UNRWA’, capturing its mutual relation with socio-spatial dynamics. Furthermore, I placed particular codes under different themes as they are intertwined and related. For example, the codes that describe ‘improvisation in the camps’ are placed under ‘formation and evolution of the built environment’, as well as the ‘refugee social dynamics’, because the practice of improvised construction of houses was linked to the increased population of refugees and the social tendency to house extended family members in the camp houses.

In general, I identified codes under various themes that capture the social and spatial interactions and conditions that affect events and structures in the studied camps. It was an iterative process as I worked between the empirical material and theoretical literature to build up new explanations and relations that contribute to explaining the conditions and causal powers. Thus, moving from the “concrete to the abstract and back”, and employing retroduction to “identify the necessary contextual conditions for a particular causal mechanism to take effect and to result in the empirical trends observed” (Fletcher, 2017, p. 189).

4.4 Positionality, reflexivity, and field access

My positionality was instrumental in how I approached research methods and data collection via this multi-method case-study research design. My interest in developing this research is linked to my positionality, as I discussed in Chapter One. My positionality and the conceptualisation I initially developed on refugee camps and their evolution are

influenced by my daily life experience, my role as a humanitarian aid worker, and my engagement in this research and the various theories from the literature. As researchers are instruments of the research, they utilise their own experience and identity to develop their hypotheses, frameworks, theories and validity checks (Maxwell, 2012). Thus, the undertaking of this research and developing its conceptual underpinnings, methods, and findings are influenced by my positionality and the theories presented and discussed.

The researcher's positionality as insider or outsider can be “understood to mean the degree to which a researcher is located either within or outside a group being researched” (Gair, 2012, p.137). As a Palestinian from the Gaza Strip who has lived most of my life in the Gaza Strip, I share with refugees and non-refugees the same Palestinian identity and socio-cultural background, which gave me an insider position with the research participants. Nevertheless, I am not a resident of refugee camps nor part of the extended families of refugees who lived in the camps, which gave me an outsider's position to the research participants, although I visited the camps almost daily for work, shopping, and social relations. From another perspective, I am a humanitarian aid worker who is known in the humanitarian sector in the Gaza Strip and was treated as an insider by humanitarian NGOs and practitioners. Nonetheless, I did not work for the UNRWA, and I am considered an outsider to the UN system.

Being an insider to the Palestinian community in Gaza and the humanitarian aid system helped me gain the trust of the research participants on both sides. I was received with openness, which translated into many fruitful discussions and chats about my research topic beyond the planned interview time. As a familiar face, I did not feel there was a barrier between me and most of the refugees I interviewed. Conversely, the challenging aspects of being an insider were participants’ assumptions about my identity and knowledge. In some interviews, participants assumed that I shared the same knowledge and understanding as they did. This suggests that an insider researcher can be provided with brief answers based on the assumption that ‘You know...’ (DeLyser, 2001, p.444), a situation I faced on multiple occasions. Therefore, I needed to add more follow-up questions and reminders of my

researcher identity during the interviews. Meanwhile, as an insider, some of the interviews were conversational, allowing me to use my knowledge to challenge and discuss the participants, probe for in-depth analysis, and contribute the researcher's knowledge to the interview discussion (DeLyser, 2001).

My insider positionality offered me insights into and enabled my research on refugee camps. Before conducting this research, I had almost day-to-day interactions with the camps' environment and the refugees dwelling there. Through these daily observations and informal conversations, I became familiar with the camp, observed social interactions, and understood the issues facing the refugees. My historical and contemporary engagement with the campsites, particularly Jabalia, informed my assumptions about how these spaces are both temporary and permanent. Through these interactions, I observed the camps' improvised evolution over the past two decades. I heard stories about how refugees reappropriated their spaces, creating homes for themselves and their future generations, gradually building room by room. I observed how businessmen came from outside the camp, bought the simple refugee shelter in commercial areas, and built their expensive shops and businesses. I heard stories and discussions among the refugee community about how refugees resolved conflicts over houses borders, lands they shared in the camps, agreed and reached consensus through customary community mediators. I utilised this accumulated rich experience to inform my discussion with the research participants and my analysis in this thesis.

In conducting this research, I was very cautious in explicitly articulating my role as a researcher, wearing a different hat, not as a humanitarian aid worker nor just a Palestinian from Gaza coming to have a casual chat about refugee camps, so that the participants understood that their participation is part of an academic study that they could contribute to and influence. Moreover, I was an outsider to living in the refugee camp because I did not dwell there. Thus, I did not initially have insights into the nuances and the values that living in the camp space brings to participants. Camp residents' commonly articulated sense of intimacy and shared struggle was another layer of their values and identity that I did not

initially consider. Furthermore, as an outsider to the UN system, I was not able to easily gain access to the UNRWA staff, and it took me some time to navigate my way through the system to obtain the required approvals.

Gaining the authorities' approval to access the field to conduct interviews was also challenging, although I am Palestinian from the Gaza Strip. Given the unstable geopolitical conditions and frequent escalations, the de facto authorities in Gaza strictly restricted any data collection activities without prior approval. I got my research facilitation letter from the University of Sheffield in December 2020. However, due to the Pandemic and lockdown in Gaza, I could not submit a request to the authorities to obtain a permit to conduct the research interviews with refugees until mid-February 2021, when the restrictions were slightly lifted. Because of my identity as a humanitarian aid worker, having worked with Western-influenced INGOs and my affiliation with a Western UK-based university, the de facto authorities in Gaza handled my request with caution and suspension. They interviewed me twice prior to giving me the permit needed to conduct the interviews with refugees in the camps. The set-up of the interviews they conducted with me was like an interrogation. They asked disturbing, unpleasant questions about my purpose and intentions for conducting this research and insisted on seeing the semi-structured interview questions I intended to ask my research participants. Finally, they gave me approval to conduct the interviews by mid-March 2021 and provided me with the official permit letter in the first week of April 2021. Although the process for approval from UNRWA was more friendly and understanding, it was also more bureaucratic and delayed. I submitted my request to interview UNRWA staff at the beginning of April 2021 and got the approval letter by September 2021, almost five months after the request.

After getting the needed approvals, my positionality has also helped me access field participants. Because I had worked before with camp residents and CBOs as a humanitarian worker, I had enough connections to recruit participants who did not hesitate when I contacted them to conduct the interviews. I had already built trust before conducting this research, and some of the CBO staff members helped recommend particular people with

knowledge and long experience of living and dealing with refugee camp issues. They also helped me recruit women participants to mitigate some of the gender and cultural challenges, as I explained above. Furthermore, I recruited participants from municipalities and the Refugees' Popular Committee via support from acquaintances from CBOs and NGOs.

This situation of holding insider-outsider positions allowed for my positionality to be shifting and fluid, particularly when comparing my interviews with INGOs and UNRWA staff. The interviews with the INGO staff members and the refugee camp residents had more of an insider feeling. However, when I interviewed the UNRWA staff, the feelings and attitudes were always those of an outsider to the organisation and its systems. This fluidity entailed being reflexive and self-conscious about the various identities, beliefs, and preconceptions that I brought with me from my professional career and life experiences (Holmes, 2020). By being reflexive, I was constantly aware that my position was shifting and was contingent upon the situation and specific context (Holmes, 2020). This entailed me as a researcher to understand and self-monitor my role and personal experience in contributing to the knowledge creation process in this research, trying to be open to different explanations and perspectives and “maintain the balance between the personal and the universal” (Berger, 2013, p.220). Through employing this reflexivity, I maintained an open dialogue with some of my research participants, my supervisor and fellow PhD colleagues to continuously assess and identify my positionality and identity in the context of the research.

However, when the October 2023 war happened in Gaza, and I was displaced, my reflexivity and identity around this research manifested in the experience. Although I was displaced before in previous conflicts, it was for shorter periods, and more importantly, did not include setting up a makeshift camp. Experiencing longer displacement and setting up makeshift shelters firsthand had a hefty impact on the way I approached the concepts of this research. I became what I am researching. This is how I found myself after the October 2023 war. I started to think about whether this displacement would be a situation similar to or even worse than the 1948 catastrophe (Nakba). As I understood through exposure to theories, the

colonial hegemonic powers' instrument of camps and reducing the undesired population to “bare life” could become more permanent. This fear of lifelong abandonment and liminality overwhelmed me during the experience of displacement since the start of the October 2023 war.

I was researching the living experiences of refugees in the camps and how they navigated their situation to build more liveable places, and here I was in the very beginning of setting up a spontaneous makeshift camp on sand dunes, in a remote area of Rafah governorate, after being displaced six times since 7 October 2023. When I was displaced from Khan Younis to Rafah on 2 December 2023, we arrived in an empty land full of dunes and small trees. I arrived at that place with my wife, children, and mother; every aspect of our lives was bare and bleak; we had lost everything and thought only about basic survival.

Everything in that place started to change rapidly. Makeshift nylon shelters were assembled in a day; people were arriving family after family, and tents were becoming cramped. Everything was precarious and rapidly changing; nothing was certain; how long were we going to stay? Who would support us? Food, water, and finding a place to go to the toilet were the utmost priority. I was preoccupied with my knowledge and identity as a researcher. Through this, I was thinking, are we building a refugee camp again, like those that were built in Gaza after 1948, and in Kenya, Jordan, Syria, and Bangladesh, because of the displacement catastrophes? Ok, I started asking myself, will this be a protracted displacement? Shall I tell everyone to leave enough spaces between tents so that they can expand their shelters in the future? I was wondering where the UN was. It has been days, and none of them has shown up. Do they not recognise this sprouting “camp”? I wondered if camps should be built up by the UN to be served?

Being a researcher living in the same disastrous situation that I have been researching and trying to understand was an utterly overwhelming experience. Because of my knowledge about the humanitarian aid system and refugee camps, I believe I had more questions than any other person who was with me in these tents. Nonetheless, through this experience, I recognised the actual meaning of “bare life” and how it is used to oppress unwanted and

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undesired humans. I also understood how chaotic and dynamic the camp formation process could be and how survival outweighs any aspect of planning and design. This experience made me rethink my analysis and recognise the importance of the conditions associated with camp formation and setup in specifying how the space would evolve. Thus, in order to provide a more holistic analysis of the situation of the camps I am studying, I realised that I need to put more emphasis on understanding how the camps came to be and how their spaces were historically formed. It was an experience that I will carry with me for the rest of my life.

4.5 Conclusion

This chapter has provided a detailed methodological framework used in this research and explained the research methods and data collection and analysis process used to achieve the aim and answer the research questions. The first section provided the philosophical perspectives that underpin the methodology and explained the use of retroductive reasoning, which is informed by the theoretical discussion I presented in Chapter Two. The second section revisited the research aim and questions, highlighting the case study approach in this thesis. The third section provided details of the methods used and the approach to thematic analysis. The fourth section discussed the researcher's positionality, providing reflexive accounts of my experience conducting this research.

The chapter ends the first part of the thesis, which provided the necessary theoretical and contextual underpinning for conducting the research. The second part of the thesis (Chapters Five to Eight) provides a discussion of the empirical findings and unpacks the answers to the research questions. The next chapter, Chapter Five, begins the empirical discussion surrounding the first research question, highlighting the socio-spatial dynamics at play during the initial formation of refugee camps and their subsequent evolution.

5. CHAPTER FIVE: SOCIO-SPATIAL DYNAMICS OF REFUGEE CAMPS IN THE GAZA STRIP

5.0 Introduction

This empirical chapter presents part of the findings that contribute to the research's aim to understand the evolution process of refugee camps in the Gaza Strip and the relationship between this process and the prolonged provision of humanitarian aid interventions. More specifically, the findings presented here answer the first research question, ***“What socio-spatial dynamics have influenced the evolution of refugee camps in the Gaza Strip?”***. Each of the empirical chapters covers one research question. However, the empirical chapters are interconnected as the dynamics identified and discussed in Chapter Five are also employed in the discussions in Chapter Six and Chapter Seven to draw a holistic picture that fulfils the research aim.

This chapter is divided into two main sections and a discussion and conclusion. The first section tells the story of the refugee camps' formation, where the findings are analysed, utilising assemblage thinking to identify the human and non-human, as well as the material and non-material, main components that created socio-spatial structures in the early years of the camps' life. The section provides a description and analysis of the camps at the time the research was conducted, providing details of their social evolution, and then addressing their spatial evolution.

The second section continues telling the story of the evolution of refugee camps. It highlights the creation of what I term the ***“state of paradox”*** that has resulted from everyday interactions under the inherited conditions of the “state of exception” and humanitarian management in the protracted displacement refugee camps context. In the first part of the second section, I analyse the visual and physical environment of the two studied camps, namely the Jabalia refugee camp, the largest in the Gaza Strip and located in the North governorate of Gaza, and the Deir Al Balah refugee camp, the smallest among the eight camps in Gaza which is located in the Middle area governorate. The analysis underlines the

differences and similarities between the camps, the camp and the non-camp areas, and within the specific camp space. Then, the section builds the picture of the temporary-permanent conditions that evolved over time and delves into analysing the state of paradox, and the causal mechanisms that contributed to creating such a state. It addresses spatial contradictions, social paradoxes, and contentious dilemmas linked to the “city-like” spectacle of the camp.

In the discussion and conclusion, I synthesise and highlight the entwined formation and causation as ontological analytical perspectives, summarising the social and spatial dynamics that contributed to the formation and evolution of refugee camps. I also highlight the main arguments and contributions to the city-camp literature, deepening the discussion on the “state of paradox”.

5.1 The genesis of the refugee camps in the Gaza Strip

This section discusses and analyses the mechanisms that influenced the formation of the Palestinian refugee camps in the Gaza Strip, based on an analysis with an empirical focus on the two studied camps, Jabalia and Deir Al Balah. This thesis argues that understanding the socio-spatial camps’ formation, or the camps’ genesis, helps explain the factors that influenced the studied spaces’ current morphological, social, and spatial characteristics. I analyse the formation through assemblage lenses as the camps’ socio-spatial structures emerged under fluid and fast-moving processes resulting from the shock of the Palestinian exodus in 1948. From that particular point in time, new socio-spatial dynamics emerged. These emerging socio-spatial dynamics and their structures continued to (re)form and stabilise, enacting causal powers under the influence of different periods of the “humanitarian situation” and the “humanitarian condition” throughout the lifetime of the camps. The analysis presented in this section is based on the empirical data collected for this PhD research and is underpinned by assemblage thinking theory, as discussed in Chapter Two.

I argue throughout this thesis that the inception of refugee camps is a consequence of the declaration of the “state of exception” (Agamben, 1998 & 2005). In the Palestinian case, it was during and after the 1948 war, that led to the end of the British mandate in Palestine and the establishment of the State of Israel, that these camp spaces were introduced as exceptional colonial measures which forced the “unwanted” and “undesired” (Agier, 2011) Palestinian Arabs to flee to the neighbouring countries and territories.

In the Palestinian case, the “state of exception” effectively began with the Arab Israeli war and the Nakba in 1948, where Palestinians were expelled from their homes and became refugees upon the establishment of the State of Israel. They lost their status as citizens with political rights and became "stateless." The sovereign power, the State of Israel, expelled the Palestinian Arabs, who had to settle in refugee spaces and became governed not by a state constitution, but by emergency regulations and humanitarian management. This exception has been largely maintained by the State of Israel and the international community, as the latter has given refugees an inadmissible right to return through the UNGA Resolution 194 (III) of 1948.

Even during the Egyptian military rule of the Gaza Strip from 1948 to 1967, exceptional measures of governance were maintained. Egypt decided to govern the population in Gaza through a dedicated administration, without annexing the Gaza Strip or providing its population with any form of citizenship (Roy, 1995). Although both refugees and non-refugees shared the condition of statelessness, a distinct separation of space and governance was established. The indigenous Gazans fell under Egyptian administration, while the refugees were placed under the humanitarian jurisdiction of the UN through the UNRWA, creating two parallel legal realities, each with its own specific spatial boundaries and mechanisms of exclusion (Abreek-Zubiedat & Nitzan-Shiftan, 2018).

Palestinians in Gaza were under a state of exception also through the direct military Israeli occupation from 1967 until the inception of the PNA in 1993. During the Israeli occupation, the juridical state of exception was cemented by putting the entire population under the

emergency military administration. During that period, Israel managed the population directly through military governors, curfews, and settlements. The camp was a specific site of high surveillance and resistance (Weizman, 2007) . Israel has maintained its control over the entire Palestinian Territories from air, land, and sea, even after the Oslo agreement and the establishment of the PNA.

While both refugees and non-refugees in the Gaza Strip were denied access to statehood, camps remained under another layer of exception as the PNA and the UNRWA preserved the exceptional temporary nature of the camp space (Hanafi, 2008). Although the PNA asserted its presence in public urban spaces through juridical order, it abandoned the camps, and similarly, the UNRWA overlooked the camps' urban development, relegating them to a state of exception governed by customary and emergency regulations (Hanafi, 2008). In this vacuum, planning and policy enforcement is exercised by residents where governance becomes exceptionally unstable and fluid, resulting unregulated transformation of these spaces (Hanafi, 2008; Saleh, 2020)

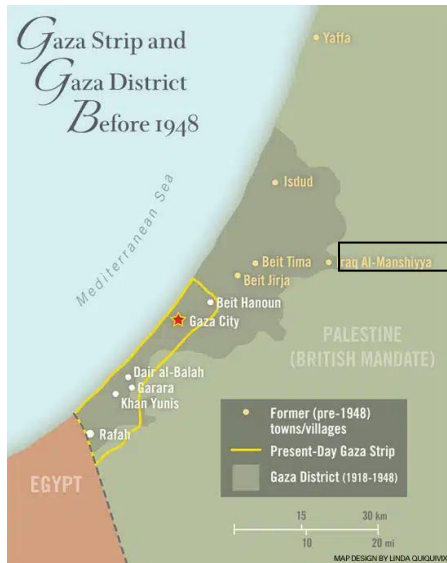
As a consequence of the 1948 Nakba, it is estimated that there were around 700,000 Arab Palestinians who were expelled and forced to settle in the neighbouring Arab countries, the West Bank, and the Gaza Strip regions (Marx, 1992). In the Gaza Strip, the estimate is that between 200,000 and 250,000 Palestinians arrived in the area between September 1948 and December 1949 (Cheal, 1988; Feldman, 2009). This influx of refugees tripled the population in Gaza, which stood at approximately 80,000 at that time (Ibid).

Nonetheless, scholars assert that these numbers are close estimates because obtaining the exact numbers at that time was a complex and challenging task for the entities involved, including the hosting countries and relief organisations (Cheal, 1988; Hazboun, 1994). The contentious estimation of the number of Palestinian refugees between 1948 and 1949 is caused by many statistical and contextual factors. These include the fact that the population of refugees became very geographically dispersed across different countries, the poor statistical systems in the host countries and territories, and the lack of competence

in the newly established aid organisations, especially the UNRWA, to carry out thorough registration at that time (Hazboun, 1994). On top of that, Palestinians who fled to Jordan were also given Jordanian citizenship, complicating the estimation of the number of refugees (Ibid).

Despite these numerical discrepancies regarding the refugee population size, the original towns and villages of those settled in the Gaza Strip were and still are well-known, as waves of arrivals have been linked to specific military actions where towns and villages fell with the Israeli army (Cheal, 1988). It is estimated that around 56 per cent of the total number of refugees who settled in the Gaza Strip came from the strip's surroundings, known as the Gaza District (Gaza and Beersheba), while around 42 per cent originated from what was known as the Lydda District, including Jaffa and Ramleh (Cheal, 1988). Maps (5.1 and 5.2) show the Gaza district before 1948 and the borders of the post-1948 Gaza Strip, and the districts of Mandatory Palestine in 1945, respectively. Most of the refugees were from peasant families and villages, with more than 65 per cent being agricultural workers or classified as unskilled workers (Cheal, 1988).

The Gaza Strip received this massive influx of refugees from its surrounding villages and districts while suffering from the strains of its already poor economy and services. At that time, the Gaza Strip's economy depended on trade and agricultural work with the surrounding areas, where refugees were coming from, which had been cut off by the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 and the expulsion of the original residents. The Gaza economy suffered more devastation as jobs became very scarce, especially for those newcomers, while the Gaza local community became unable to offer much support for the displaced. Despite this situation, the first line of response was from the original residents of the Gaza Strip, in other words, non-refugees. Food, clothes, and money were donated to refugees by the non-refugee residents. In addition, some of them hosted refugees in their homes, and public buildings were used as shelters for those who needed them (Cheal, 1988).



Map 5.1: Map of the Gaza district before 1948 and the borders of the post-1948 Gaza Strip

Source:

<https://thejerusalemfund.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/Gaza-Strip-and-District-Before-1948-1.jpg>

Map Design by Linda Quiquix



Map 5.2: Britain's mandatory Palestine districts and administrative divisions in 1942-1945

Source:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Districts_of_Mandatory_Palestine

The first international humanitarian response waves started to arrive in late 1948. The United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) passed Resolution 212 on 19 November 1948 to establish the United Nations Relief for the Palestinian Refugees (UNRPR) as a new relief organisation with a response budget of \$ 32,000,000. The new agency signed an agreement

with the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC), which is a religious society of Friends related to the Quakers¹² to provide relief in southern Palestine, including the Gaza Strip.

The current geographical boundaries of the Gaza Strip were defined based on the Israel-Egypt armistice agreement signed on 24 February 1949 (Alexander, 2007). The agreement was based on the position of both forces at the time of the ceasefire. The land that remained under the domination of the Egyptian Army became known as the Gaza Strip. The Quakers worked with the Egyptian army to facilitate and provide humanitarian support. The first Quaker humanitarian worker arrived in December 1948, followed by another nine workers coming in early January 1949 with the help of the Egyptian army to cross the Sinai desert in trains and trucks (AFSC, 1951). The following lines are extracts from the Quakers (AFSC) report that was written in 1951, explaining the misery of the refugees' situation, providing information on the refugees' origins and their diversity, and highlighting the initial encounter between refugees and the relief workers:

“In warm, human terms, the refugees' problems were apparent in and all around the little community of Gaza. In terms of cold statistics, persons estimated to number 200,000 to 250,000 were stranded in a resourceless strip of territory twenty-five miles long and five miles wide immediately behind the lines of a fighting army and superimposed on a local population of about 80,000. They came from 145 towns and villages ranging in size from Jaffa and Lydda - some with beautifully familiar Biblical names, Hebron, Jerusalem, Beersheba - to tiny places never shown on any map. Many of the villagers had never seen a Westerner; some of the relief workers were meeting their first Middle Easterners. Lively curiosity existed on both sides. Subsequent surveys showed that nearly 65 per cent of the wage earners among these refugees were unskilled agricultural workers; nearly half of

¹² For more information about the AFSC and the Quakers, please visit:
<https://www.quakersintheworld.org/quakers-in-action/217/American-Friends-Service-Committee-AFSC>

them were women or children; they were about 90 per cent illiterate, and the incidence of eye diseases and the infant mortality rate were sorrowfully high.” (AFSC, 1951, P.7)

Refugee settlements were established under precarious conditions, resulting from the devastating war that led to the Palestinian catastrophe. The conditions of refuge manifest the “state of exception” resulting from the emergency and war that initially created the refugee biopolitics. Under the state of exception, the humanitarian system was introduced to Gaza, firstly by the Quakers, to relieve the suffering of displaced Palestinians, depoliticising their cause and reducing their political issue to a humanitarian one (Feldman, 2018; Fassin, 2012).

From these conditions, the refugees' situation dramatically changed during the first few years of displacement. Refugee numbers gradually increased as they arrived in waves, new social and political structures and organisations were introduced to the context, and a new spatial formation evolved in the temporary-permanent refugee settlements. Thus, the formation of refugee camps had never been a planned process; it was undertaken in a rapidly changing context that did not allow for proper planning by the main organisational actors such as the UN and the Quakers.

Palestinians displaced in 1948 became refugees under the “state of exception”, with no political status. They were dispersed in the Gaza Strip, suffering from exceptional spatial arrangements, as they initially built makeshift shelters and tents in places that the UN later developed into recognised camp space. Refugees and the humanitarian organisations considered the camps as temporary measures, based on the assumption that their refugee status is temporary and that they would repatriate soon. As I discuss in the following empirical chapters, the temporary nature of these spaces persisted, contradicting everyday practices and the reality of living in the camps, where refugees created normality in their protracted temporary living spaces. Refugees continued to dwell in their places, while camps' governing authorities (like local municipalities and the UNRWA) did not recognise

these camps as “normal” places or neighbourhoods and continued to provide only ad-hoc planning interventions when needed, which has reproduced the sense of exceptionality and temporariness.

Nonetheless, aid and the rapid introduction of humanitarian response provided some relief for the destitute refugee population. Humanitarian aid personnel who arrived in the area between 1948 and 1949 showed solidarity and support. Even at early stages, international aid workers hired refugees to organise and facilitate the distribution of aid material, creating economic opportunities for the displaced. The AFSC report states that:

“Some 500 Palestinians were employed to aid in the distributions, and gradually, as responsible leaders emerged from the refugee population, Palestinians were put in charge of distribution centres, with several centres under the general supervision of one Friends' worker.” (AFSC, 1951, p.10)

Relief efforts supported the refugees' livelihoods, but the first response was mobilised by the original citizens of Gaza. “The local residents were swift and generous in responding to the refugees' needs, as they donated money, food, clothing, and other necessities. Not only did they open their homes and allow public buildings to be used for shelter, but women's clubs provided personnel for milk distribution centers and local doctors provided much-needed medical assistance” (Cheal, 1988, p.141).

Shared and similar cultures, identities, and political struggles contributed to enhancing the relationship between refugees and non-refugees. Besides the early hosting and support from non-refugees to refugees, they gradually established business relationships, social connections, and friendships. One of the youth refugees told me:

“I have a non-refugee friend who always visits me in the Jabalia refugee camp...we refuse all social discrimination between the refugees and non-refugees. We also refuse the stereotypical images that discriminate

between people based on their origins. Your geographical location doesn't define your identity or personality" (*Yamen, 2021, Interview 20*)

These social and economic conditions contributed to the human formation of the refugee figure. More specifically, the shared identity and culture contributed to integration between refugees and non-refugees in the long run. In addition, support from humanitarian organisations and relief workers helped refugees access livelihoods and enabled them to change their camp space and exercise their impact on the morphology and the spatial assemblage of the camp at a later stage. This spatial assemblage was initially introduced under the UN's rules, which planned and built the initial official shelters in the camp, resembling a quasi-military form of planning as a humanitarian tool.

I present the studied camps' formation throughout this chapter as an assemblage to answer the first research question and highlight the primary socio-spatial dynamics during the camps' genesis phase. The components of this assemblage interacted in a particular geopolitical context imposed by the "state of exception". This composition included refugee and non-refugee humans with normative social institutions and structures, humanitarian organisations, the Egyptian authorities, the camp space with its geography, and aid materials that included the shelter materials provided in the refugee camps. This formation evolved gradually, coming to resemble "city-like" functions after decades of protracted displacement, as I recently observed through the fieldwork. After providing the detailed context and conditions of refugee camps formation above, the following two subsections delve into the details of the social and spatial formation of the refugee camps.

Both the social and spatial formations are interwoven and mutually impact the camps' genesis. Urban spaces are socially produced (Lefebvre, 1991). In other words, the presence of a specific social dynamic led to a particular spatial implication and vice versa. I provide separate subsections for each of the social and the spatial, labelling particular dynamics that manifest in the themes and findings from the empirical data; however, this does not mean that the social and the spatial are necessarily separated. The first subsection below

presents the components of the social formation, analysing particular social components of the initial assemblages of the camp, highlighting the causal structures that were formed and integrated and had an enduring impact on the two refugee camps studied in this research.

5.1.1 The social formation

All eight refugee camps in the Gaza Strip were established between the years 1948 and 1954¹³. Some of them, like Deir Al Balah, were informally set up by the refugees themselves in 1948 before being officially established by the UN in the 1950s. Those displaced because of the 1948 war and the consequences of the “state of exception” that rendered them undesired and unwanted sought shelter with non-refugees, and in public spaces. Some of them, like in Deir Al Balah, built their makeshift shelters and set up tents near the seashores. In Jabalia, most refugees started taking shelter in the Jabalia refugee camp in the early 1950s. This is because the UNRWA only constructed the first block of the Jabalia refugee camp in 1953, which marked the beginning of the temporary-permanent status in the Jabalia refugee camp (Saleh, 2021).

Before officially establishing refugee camps, refugees were scattered in various shelter configurations. Some of them found housing by renting from or being hosted by non-refugees (people who were not displaced and had been originally living in Gaza). In contrast, others were sheltered in various public buildings, such as mosques, churches, and schools, in addition to empty British army barracks (Cheal, 1988). Specifically, in Jabalia, and before the UN shelters were introduced in the camp, many refugees lived and shared houses with their non-refugee friends and relatives. In the early stages of the exodus, the non-refugees provided swift and generous support to the newcomers, which contributed to the building of social ties and the sense of solidarity between the refugees and the non-refugees. Thus, the refugees became part of the existing non-refugee norm circles that allowed them to access

¹³ The historical information on the dates of camps’ establishment is based on information from the UNRWA’s website (www.UNRWA.org), and the Arabic language website, Encyclopaedia of Palestine Camps (<https://mokhayyam.com/ar>), in addition to the data collected and analysed via the semi-structured interviews.

the needed support, at least from a social perspective, which helped them to re-integrate and rebuild their lives.

More generally, the Palestinian refugees, although having faced challenging conditions of displacement, were already part of the “normative social institution” (Elder-Vass, 2010) of the Arab Palestinians. This allowed them to have common ground for integration with the non-refugees in the Gaza Strip as they both shared, to some extent, similar cultures and the same political struggles. In addition, some of them who settled with hosting non-refugee families for a few years, such as those who moved to the Jabalia refugee camp and were in Jabalia town and Gaza City, managed to become part of an internal social norm circle where they built social and economic ties before moving. One of the interviewees from the Jabalia refugee camp, Abu Raed, described to me the early years of the exodus that allowed his family to reside with the original citizens of Jabalia town. He said:

“My experience started when my family was expelled from their original village دمرة (Demra) during the Palestinian catastrophe النكبة (Nakba) in 1948. At the beginning of the Palestinian exodus, my family did not settle immediately in the Jabalia refugee camp because it was not established and was not designed for refugees. As I heard from my parents, they had settled in Jabalia city جباليا البلد (Jabalia Al-Balad), with the original residents for 5 to 6 years. At that time, the Jabalia refugee camp was not qualified for living in. In 1954, my family moved to live in the Jabalia refugee camp with assistance and aid from the UNRWA”. (Abu Raed, 2021, Interview 01)

In addition to the social ties established with the non-refugees post-displacement, some refugees have already established friendships with the original citizens of Gaza City. One of the refugees I interviewed, Abu Ayman, whose grandfather was originally from Al Majdal City المجدل, which is close to Gaza City, explained to me that:

“At the early beginning of the Palestinian catastrophe النكبة (Nakba), my grandfather headed to Al Zaytoon الزيتون area in Gaza City. Some other

refugees moved to places where the original Gazan citizens used to live, like the Al Tuffah التفاح neighbourhood besides the Al Zaytoon area. The Gaza citizens were living in gathered communities, and they welcomed the refugees. They (refugees and non-refugees) lived together and kept each other's company". (*Abu Ayman, 2021, Interview 02*)

It was evident that the Palestinian refugees in the Gaza Strip could access the same political and social rights as the original citizens (Al Hussaini & Bocco, 2009). Both refugees and non-refugees in the Gaza Strip shared the same political struggle. They were placed in the "state of exception" by being denied the right to self-determination and statehood. However, refugee conditions were more appalling because they had been forced to flee their homes and suffered from exceptional spatial arrangements. Drawing on critical realism's ontological perspectives, one can see that sharing the same identity and struggle made the Palestinian refugees part of the same political and, to a lesser extent, social normative institutions and norm circle as the indigenous Gazan citizens. Utilising this ontological perspective allows us to recognise the intersection between refugees and non-refugee social structures, and the associated causal mechanisms as provided in the discussion and conclusion sections.

Although they shared the same political struggle and overall exceptional conditions with non-refugees, refugees faced further exceptional circumstances resulting from the loss associated with displacement and temporary spatial arrangement for living in the camps, which were designed and managed by the UN to shelter the displaced temporarily. Thus, refugees have been dealing with the exceptions and limitations resulting from camp spatial arrangement, negotiating their everyday lives and practices to create a sort of "normal" living.

As shown above, the interviewees assert that the Jabalia camp was formed and established in 1954, almost six years after the exodus. When refugees settled at the camp, they maintained ties and connections with the non-refugees who had hosted them before the

camp's establishment. Thus, they had supportive norm circles (of non-refugee friends with whom refugees shared social connections) that helped them get social and economic support from people outside the camp. Abu Fadi, a non-refugee from Jabalia town who works at the Jabalia municipality, explained to me the support non-refugees provided for refugees in the early days of the displacement. He said:

“According to our grandparents, in the past, they (refugees and non-refugees) had a good relationship. At the beginning of the exodus, the non-refugees welcomed the refugees into their houses after they were expelled from their land. When the Jabalia refugee camp was established, the refugees moved to live in the refugee camp” (*Abu Fadi, 2021, Interview 04*)

Thus, the social assemblage that existed in the Gaza Strip at the early stages of the exodus before the official establishment of camps like Jabalia was in favour of the refugees' cause. Refugees were not abandoned in their early days of the ordeal, and this played a positive role afterwards in fostering their access to services and support and enabled them to be part of the social normative institutions of non-refugees. Abu Ahmed, from Jabalia camp, who lived through the exodus, told me how the refugees were supported and lived with non-refugees:

“The non-refugees who were living in the Jabalia village had hosted us and we lived with them for a few months. Then we moved to some of the non-refugee farms and we built houses and lived there for almost a year. After that, the UNRWA has established Blukkat بلوكات (Camp Blocks) A and B in the Al-Joron area in the camp, and it built houses for the refugees. We moved from the farms of the non-refugees to live in these houses, which were built by the UNRWA.” (*Abu Ahmed, 2021, Interview 11*)

However, the research revealed some differences between the eight camps in the Gaza Strip regarding the ability of refugees to forge social connections, gain support, and, later on, integrate. These differences arose from the initial spatial arrangements for displacement. Those refugees, like those in Jabalia camp, who stayed with non-refugee friends and

relatives for a few years, formed social intimacy and economic interactions with the non-refugee community. This continued during the later years of displacement. Conversely, in Deir Al Balah camp, refugees settled immediately in 1948 on the beach, using tents and makeshift shelters they had built. They did not immediately integrate with the hosting community, which has created boundaries between refugees and non-refugees.

This initial limited social integration in Deir Al Balah camp was also a result of a particular geographical assemblage related to the camp's location. The refugees settled in a remote area adjacent to the beach, apart from the town of Deir Al Balah, thus limiting interactions between refugees and non-refugees. While doing fieldwork in the Deir Al Balah refugee camp, I met with Abu Basil, whose parents were displaced in 1948 and settled in Deir Al Balah. He lived most of his life in the camp, and when I met him, he was just moving to a new house just a few hundred metres away from the camp. He told us about the refugee/non-refugee relationship in Deir Al Balah, as he said:

“The relationships and connections between the refugees and non-refugees in the Deir Al-Balah city have never been healthy or proper. The non-refugees look down on the refugees and consider them strangers. Even after 73 years, this look and attitude still exists. There are agricultural pieces of land that separate between the Deir Al Balah refugee camp and the Deir Al Balah city. They separate the refugees and the non-refugees. Refugees and non-refugees go to the same high schools; however, their connections are limited to schools. This phenomenon is not familiar in other refugee camps. In Khan Younis and Rafah, the refugees and non-refugees live in harmony. The refugee camps in other areas were established very close to the original towns and cities. The Deir Al Balah refugee camp was built in a remote area separated from the city by agricultural land. Social connections, such as marriage between the refugees and non-refugees, are limited in the Deir Al-Balah refugee camp.”
(*Abu Basil, 2021, Interview 13*).

Nonetheless, there is almost a consensus among participants that differences between refugees and non-refugees have gradually vanished throughout time. Refugees and non-refugees shared the same cultural and political identities, the same struggle, and some of them had pre-existing relations, which helped refugees to gradually integrate. One of the Palestinian INGO workers who has daily interactions in refugee camps told me:

“All circumstances that the people of the Gaza Strip have been through, such as the occupation, blockade, and Israeli attacks, have made the people of the Gaza Strip a homogeneous people. There are no differences between refugees and non-refugees. This is an important factor that may be related to all of your questions” (*Amani, 2021, Interview 08*)

This shared struggle and social homogeneity between the hosting and the displaced allowed for differences to fade and for refugees to establish social relations with non-refugees. Abu Samy, a refugee from Deir Al Balah refugee camp, told me how these differences vanished throughout time as he said:

“In the past, there was estrangement between refugees and non-refugees. Nowadays, all social distinctions between the refugees and non-refugees have disappeared. They have social connections and relationships for marriage...all social differences between the refugees and non-refugees have vanished. We are all Palestinians living in an occupied country.” (*Abu Samy, 2021, Interview 14*)

In general, the pre-displacement social and economic relationship between refugees and non-refugees created grounds for support and integration, which helped refugees access support and resources when they were displaced. Furthermore, post-displacement, refugees who stayed for longer periods with non-refugees also managed to foster their socio-economic relationship and become close to non-refugees' norm-circles. In addition to the pre-displacement relationship and the social connections that were formed after the displacement, the proximity of the geographical location of the camp to the non-camp areas

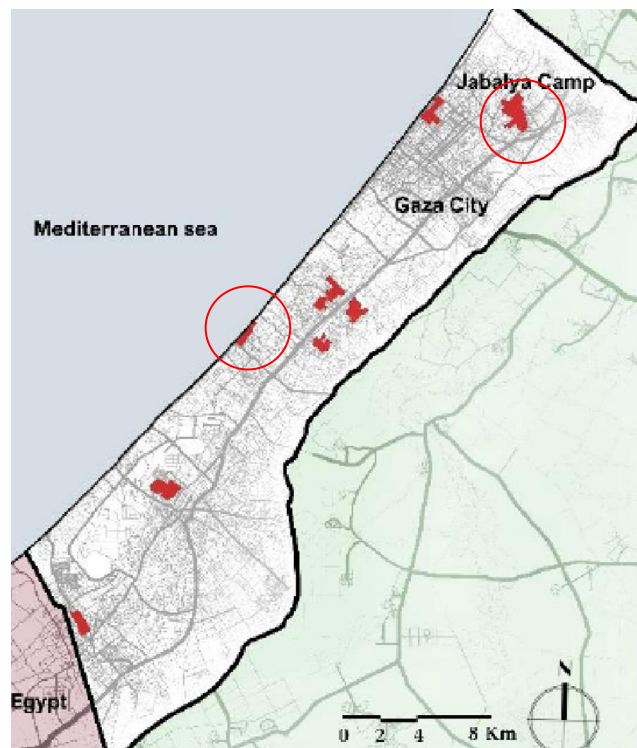
was a substantial factor that allowed or hindered the establishment of social ties between refugees and non-refugees.

Socio-spatial dynamics are linked and interwoven. The social formation of the studied camps involved the existence of shared norm circles and normative social institutions between refugees and non-refugees. The support from non-refugees and the early presence of humanitarian aid helped refugees recover their norms. As discussed above, the spatial assemblage in the studied camps has also influenced the social formation. This included the selection of a particular geographical location of the camp, the proximity to the non-refugee community, and the temporary hosting arrangements before the camp was officially set up, all of which have contributed to the level of social interactions between the displaced and the host. In the following subsection, I build on the above discussion with more focus on the spatial assemblage and its impacts during the formation of the refugee camps. I discuss how the spatial dynamics impacted the social structures in the camps, particularly the organisation of refugees' shelters. By looking at the geographical location of the two studied camps and the original layout and structure of the individual shelters distributed and built, this thesis suggests that the spatial genesis is an integral part of the formation story that inevitably impacted the way the camps have socially, spatially, and economically evolved.

5.1.2 The spatial formation

The geographical location of refugee camps is one of the essential and salient aspects of the spatial assemblage and the formation of the camp spaces. The geographical location played an important role in defining the camp's future and connections within its urban surroundings. The two studied camps in this thesis have different features in their geographical location. The Jabalia refugee camp has a central location close to the North governorate towns and Gaza City. The Deir Al Balah refugee camp is located on the seashore of the Middle area governorate, east of the city of Deir Al Balah. Map 5.3 below highlights these differences in the location (the two camps are marked inside red circles).

The findings from the interviews and documents analysed, as well as the prolonged field observations I conducted for this study, show that the development of the functionality of the camp space from being only a marginal shelter for refugees to introducing trade, services, and “city-like” aspects of life is influenced by the (dis)advantages of the camps geographical location. Findings from both studied camps clearly demonstrate this. On the one hand, the Jabalia refugee camp received advantages from its geographical location, which has contributed to the evolution of the camp space’s functionality via trade, economic interactions, and transport with the surrounding areas.



Map 5.3 Map of the Gaza Strip showing eight refugee camps (in red) highlighting the Jabalia and Deir Al Balah refugee camp location (red circle)

The Jabalia camp is in the middle of some urban centres in the North of the Gaza governorate and on a transport route between the Northern communities and the central city of Gaza. So, commuters between northern towns and Gaza City have to pass by or stop at the centre of the Jabalia refugee camp. This has created a need to establish roads that serve this functionality and allow people outside the camp to access it frequently as part of their usual routine. Such movement also allowed for economic interactions between refugees and non-refugees inside the camp. Abu Ayman from the Jabalia camp described this to me:

“Al-Trans Street is very crowded and considered one of the most vital streets in the northern area of the Gaza Strip. When people living in Beit Hanoun or Beit Lahia return home from Gaza City, they have to cross Al-Trans Street, which has centralised the Jabalia refugee camp. Also, farmers and merchants from the surrounding areas head to the main market of the Jabalia refugee camp to sell their crops and goods. Citizens who live in Jabalia downtown, “Jabalia Al-Balad”, Beit Lahia and Beit Hanoun come to buy their shopping and groceries from the market of the Jabalia camp” (*Abu Ayman, 2021, Interview 02*)

Photo 5.1 shows Al-Trans Street, considered one of the main transport routes in the north of the Gaza Strip.



Photo 5.1 The main road of the Jabalia Camp (Al Trans St.) spans from north to south, connecting Beit Lahia town with Jabalia Camp and then to Gaza City.

Photo taken at the northern part of the Jabalia camp on 15 October 2021

On the other hand, the Deir Al Balah refugee camp was remote and situated at the seashore in the western part of the Middle area governorate. This geographical location isolated the camp from its surroundings, as routes and access to roads in the camp were and still are mainly used by refugees who live in the camp. Such a situation was not helpful for economic development and did not promote interactions between refugees and the non-refugee community, especially at the early stages of the exodus. Abu Basil from the Deir Al Balah refugee camp told us during the interview:

“The Deir Al-Balah refugee camp was established on mounds of sand. These mounds were bush areas that have been rehabilitated to build the Deir Al-Balah refugee camp. The Deir Al-Balah refugee camp has become isolated and trapped in agricultural areas. This has created a gap between the refugees and non-refugees. There was only one road, not paved, that linked the camp with the city.” *Abu Basil, 2021.*

Thus, the selection of the camp's location at its initial setup stage contributed to the circumstances that evolved later and played a substantial role in shaping the future of the refugee camp in the prolonged displacement context.

Another critical dimension of the spatial formation of refugee camps in Gaza is the initial layout and the distribution of shelters at the early stages of the refugee camps' establishment. As space and as a social life, the camp did not exist to be a “normal” settlement. It was primarily introduced as an assemblage of tents or mud-brick units with a layout that was mainly intended to provide shelters as temporary measures of protection and containment under the “state of exception”. The UNRWA designed and laid out the shelters, and the construction was coordinated with the Egyptian authorities that governed the Gaza Strip between 1948 and 1967. For instance, in the Jabalia refugee camp, UNRWA started setting up the first shelter block in 1953 on common land previously used for storing seasonal crops (Saleh, 2020). The UNRWA, as a humanitarian organisation, introduced a quasi-military layout for the shelters. This layout comprises blocks of shelters, more expansive open spaces, common UN facilities, and shared toilets and kitchens for each block. Specifically, according to Saleh (2020), the camp was divided into zones with a zone for schools, another for the UNRWA compound, a marketplace, and a block of shelters.

This grouping of blocks of shelters was coupled with the UNRWA policy to allow homogeneous extended groups of refugees who belong to the same extended family, clan, or village to settle together in the same block or street in the refugee camp. This action has had spatial and social consequences. Spatially, the roads with those from a particular town

or village were named after that origin, marked with these groups' identities, and acted as a memorial for the exodus and the old towns. Abu Raed from the Jabalia refugee camp told us during the interview:

“Until now, some streets inside the Jabalia refugee camp were named after the place refugees were expelled from. For example, “Al Majadlah” المجادلة street is named after Al Majdal City. Furthermore, “Al Huaja” الهوجا street was named after “Howje” village and so on. The refugees lived in small rooms built by the UNRWA with roofs made of corrugated steel panels “Zinqo” زينقو”. (Abu Raed, 2011, Interview 01)

Despite the hardship and misery the refugees faced in the early years of the exodus, their homogeneous spatial grouping promoted a positive social impact through the recreation of feelings of belonging and intimacy among the camp’s residents and within their shared camp space. Refugees from a particular village preserved their original norms socially and spatially by settling in the same place. This has allowed for stronger solidarity among refugee communities and promoted their self-esteem and collective agency.

In addition, the elderly and community notables, like Mukhtars (مختار) contributed to bringing refugees together. Abu Jamal from the Jabalia camp explained that:

“At the beginning of the exodus (Al-Nakba), refugees from one origin used to live together. Although nowadays this does not exist anymore, and many people left the camps and lived in nearby housing projects and areas. In these new housing areas, you can find refugees from different villages. Previously, the notables and elderly Mukhtars of each area or family used to bring the refugees close together. The UNRWA and the Egyptian government were dealing with those Mukhtars who had influence and respect among refugees in those times.” (Abu Jamal, 2021, Interview 12)

Anthropologists and planners noted earlier the connection between social networks and spatial development, whereby the poor and refugees develop their space utilising kinship and social connections (Peattie, 1968; Fawaz, 2007). Peattie (1968, 1990) emphasised the importance of understanding these social structures, or ‘urban villages’, to recognise the hidden social structures that define a place. The findings of this thesis confirm the importance of social ties and kinship that shape the earlier microcosms for refugees and their later development. Refugees established their settlements according to clusters reflecting their origins and relations, “sustaining a thick network of social and economic relations and exchanges that rendered a refugee’s housing choice in the neighborhood a broader investment in networks of information and exchange about vital needs” (Fawaz, 2017, p. 104).

One of the interviewees for this research was a prominent community leader and women's activist from the Jabalia refugee camp. She left the camp and lived in Gaza City many years ago, but she told me that she always liked to be called “the daughter of the camp” بنت المخيم. She explained that the camp provides her with a sense of pride, belonging, and intimacy, as she said:

“The Jabalia camp is an important place for me, and it is a big thing in our lives that has affected every single detail of my life. I always call myself “Bent Al Mukhaia” بنت المخيم (the daughter of the camp). Many brilliant influencers in the Gaza Strip society were born and raised in the Jabalia refugee camp. The refugees of the Jabalia refugee camp have good social connections among them. Two days ago, I visited the Jabalia refugee camp; the neighbours were so welcoming in a way that made me feel the social intimacy of the camp. I love the good vibes of the Jabalia refugee camp. I always miss the nice atmosphere in the camp” (Fatima, 2021, Interview 03).

Such social intimacy was fostered spatially through the initial setup of shelters in the camp. Refugee-related families were grouped together, allowing them to recover pre-displacement social relations and norms.

UNRWA's ad hoc shelter interventions were formalised during the early establishment and evolution of the refugee camps across the region. In 1955, UNRWA shifted its shelter strategy from an ad hoc approach to a formalised shelter programme (Berg, 2014). The primary goal was to transition refugees from tents to more adequate and permanent structures, a process largely completed by 1959. The standardised model provided families with a small hut on a larger plot, which they could expand and add to as their circumstances permitted (Berg, 2014). Residents typically added essential amenities, such as kitchens, latrines, and boundary walls, as their resources allowed.

UNRWA's shelter program also emphasised self-help initiatives, providing grants and materials to encourage residents to construct, though implementation varied by region. While UNRWA contractors handled most construction in the West Bank, East Bank, and Gaza, refugees in Lebanon and Syria largely built their own homes using agency-provided roofing materials and cash grants (Berg, 2020). According to Berg (2020), UNRWA's establishment of camps focused on utilising planning principles to ensure low population density and improved hygiene, with specific zones for housing, infrastructure, and public services, connected by a structured road network.

In the 1950s, the shelter programme at UNRWA was developed in response to the need to replace tenets that emphasised the temporary nature of the refugee problem, which had led to inadequate longer-term planning and the use of low construction standards (Berg, 2014). In the decades following the 1950s, UNRWA shelter assistance and construction remained under the temporary relief programme due to the temporary nature of UNRWA's mandate, the limited funding, and most importantly, the political demand from the Arab nations and the PLO to keep camps temporary to safeguard the right to return (Berg, 2014). The UNRWA depended on host countries regulations and enforcements to regulate camps' evolution

(Berg, 2020). These authorities have been fragmented, as I discuss in the next chapter, in relation to the context of the Gaza Strip. Such a situation entailed exercising ad hoc infrastructure interventions as the UNRWA and the hosting authorities maintained the temporary space through their improvised actions in the camps (Oesch, 2020).

The setup and the material used to build the spatial assemblage of the camp space did not cater to refugees' needs. The type of shelter material and the size of the provided houses did not consider the social and cultural demands of the refugee population. These houses were considered substandard by the refugees who mostly lived in their own towns and villages before the 1948 war, enjoying their private, spacious homes and land.

By contrast, the UNRWA gave each refugee family a plot of land in areas ranging between 80 m² and 100 m² to build one core unit, composed of a room of 12 m², with a sanitary unit attached to it (Rueff & Viaro, 2010). Small-sized families received one core unit, while larger ones with family sizes exceeding six members received two core units. These units were built of cement and bricks with roofings made from asbestos or corrugated tin (Marx, 1992; Rueff & Viaro, 2010). Additional floors were not initially permitted to mark the temporary nature of houses in refugee camps. These units were small and did not cater for the social and everyday living needs, as I discuss in the next section. The issue with the initial shelters has been the same in all the Palestinian refugee camps in the Gaza Strip. Thus, the refugees started to provisionally recreate and redesign their shelters whenever possible. The refugees carried out their improvised expansion and improvements while living in the paradoxical dilemma of the “temporary-permanent” situation.

In general, this section presented and discussed the socio-spatial formation of the studied camps, showing the interwoven impacts between the social and spatial structures. The section showed that the initial setup and formation of the camp space play a significant role in shaping the socio-spatial evolution and future development. In the next section, I present and discuss this improvised evolution of the studied camps, highlighting the mutual influences of various causal factors of the identified socio-social components.

5.2 Evolution of camps and the State of Paradox

5.2.1 The shape of refugee camps

I begin this section with some reflections on the process of learning about the changing nature and evolution of the refugee camps under study through my initial field visits and observations. During my life in Gaza, I frequently visited refugee camps. These visits were for my work in the humanitarian sector, shopping, meeting with friends, and accessing the UNRWA and public services. In 2021, and during my fieldwork for this research, I conducted multiple visits¹⁴ to the Jabalia and Deir Al Balah refugee camps. This time, my visits were different, with the eye of the researcher, trying to understand and analyse the campscape (the apparent shape of its buildings and streets) and spot similarities and differences within the camp itself, between the camps, and between the camp and the non-camp areas.

I conducted one of the visits before to collect data in the Jabalia refugee camp on 15th February 2021. On that visit, I walked the street connecting Beit Lahia town in the North of Gaza with the Jabalia refugee camp. Once in the camp, I roamed the main market streets to observe the buildings, roads, and economic activities. I also visited the Deir Al Balah Refugee Camp on 20th February 2021. This visit was via a drive on Gaza's main coastal road adjacent to the camp, where I observed the front road on the seashore. Then, I headed east to meet a friend at the eastern entrance of the camp, who would show me around. We went for a walk in the main market area, around the UNRWA facilities, and across different roads and narrow alleys connecting the camp's neighbourhoods (house blocks).

Through observations from these visits and subsequent ones, one can argue that these camps, or at least parts of them, have evolved as “city-like” and become, to some extent, similar to the rest of the cities in the Gaza Strip. Higher buildings and diverse economic

¹⁴ These field visits to Jabalia and Deir Al Balah refugee camps in the Gaza Strip took place between February and October 2021. Thus, the campscape and morphology described here are based on my observations during these visits. This picture of the camps presented here has changed because of the massive destruction and displacement that started in the October 2023 war. In the conclusion chapter, Chapter Eight, I briefly describe and analyse these changes, probe the possible future of the camp, and highlight the lessons that should be learned from this study to be considered in future planning for the refugee camps.

activities, such as trade and services, were established. In Jabalia, transport routes to and from the camps were more accessible, with numerous taxis operating. The heavy presence of UN facilities was familiar in the camps, ranging from schools and clinics to the blue UN colour garbage containers. Also, many incomplete buildings and houses stood around the refugee camps' different areas, marking the improvisational development practices. What was unique about the scenery of the camp, as compared to surrounding non-camp areas, was that the differences between the adjacent buildings in the camps were stark, as one can spot poor asbestos roofing houses next to a multi-story building. Everything seemed improvised.

The evolution of buildings and infrastructure in the camps' spaces continued gradually via negotiations between the refugee needs to create the “lived space” and the temporary nature and restrictions imposed on the camp as a “conceived space”. As refugees recovered their socioeconomic structures, they started to re-appropriate their space and create normality in their camps. They expanded and developed their individual shelters, and also expanded to areas adjacent to the original camp space, in a practice of continued spatial evolution. Abu Hasan, a previous resident of the Jabalia refugee camp, explained to me the main stages of the spatial evolution of the camp space, as he said:

“The houses in Jabalia camp were developed from bricks to zinc panels and then asbestos, based on the income level of each individual. In addition, the construction of houses from concrete appeared with the beginning of the first Intifadah, not only in the camp but also in its surroundings. That is, the construction in the camps was in two locations. The first is internal development. It was very simple, such as building with zinc and asbestos or building only one small room from concrete until the first Intifadah. Second, development in the camp's surroundings. Some lands were purchased by refugees in the areas surrounding the camp, such as the Tal Al Zaatar area and other areas that contained lands for sale, and houses were built on them from concrete. This development appeared among the

merchant class or among young people who went to work abroad. The urban development occurred outside the camp in its surroundings and not inside it, for the reasons I mentioned. In addition to that, the Israeli occupation prevented the construction of houses from concrete and urban development in the camp to secure its army camps.

This situation continued in the camp until the Palestinian National Authority came to the Gaza Strip in 1994-1995, after which people began to develop themselves, that is, the owners of the houses inside the camp tried to expand them and increase the number of their floors. After that, what created a stark change and major shift in construction was the investors and traders from outside the camps who came to the camp. Because of the vibrant market and commercial value of the camp, businesspeople came from outside the camp. They chose camp houses in vital places and public streets overlooking the commercial markets, then they bought them from their owners at exorbitant prices and built their buildings and businesses. However, this did not positively impact life in the camp from the inside. The outskirts and main streets became lined with high buildings, but the inner roads remained as they were, narrow, and the houses were simple and small” (*Abu Hasan, 2021, Interview 09*).

The built environment in the refugee camps has been influenced by the initial formation of the space and its subsequent evolution. As the initial shelters provided by the UN did not adequately address the social and living needs, refugees provisionally expanded their houses, using temporary building materials and practices. Those with higher incomes expanded vertically by constructing additional floors made of concrete. However, the practice of shelter expansion was limited due to the restrictions imposed by the Israeli authorities, which forced people with better income from remittances and trade to expand beyond the camp's boundaries, buying land and building more permanent houses. Refugees inside the camp expanded their shelters vertically after they had consumed the spaces

available for horizontal expansion. The process was gradual as they built room by room based on their financial capacity.

In the Jabalia refugee camp, the economic viability of the camp space became an incentive for investors who benefited from the camp's high density and unique geographical location. This has been fostered by the enhanced income of the refugee population who worked in Israel, those who were employed by the PNA, and those who were educated and worked in the Gulf countries. Thus, the rapid transformation of the built environment and infrastructure resulted from the social needs of refugees, their financial capacity, and the economic viability created in the refugee space. However, the organisation and expansion of the buildings was not managed or controlled by the UNRWA or the local authorities, leaving the spatial evolution of the space to the desire of refugees and the customary rules enacted by refugee committees. The following photos are from the Jabalia refugee camp, where there were lots of unfinished buildings (Photo 5.2) and conjoined buildings with various heights and finishes (Photo 5.3). I present and discuss the issue of camp space governance in more detail in the following empirical chapter, Chapter Six.



Photo 5.2 East-West market road in Jabalia refugee camp with unfinished buildings.

Photo taken by the researcher on 15 February 2021



Photo 5.3 North-South market road in Jabalia refugee camp with conjoined buildings of different heights and finishes.

Photo taken by the researcher on 15 February 2021

Deir Al Balah camp has had fewer commercial activities due to its relatively disconnected location and the smaller population size. The camp has fewer multi-story buildings, as it generally did not evolve much compared to Jabalia and other camps in the Gaza Strip. Photo 5.4 shows the entrance of the main market street in Deir Al Balah Camp.



Photo 5.4 The main market street in Deir Al Balah Refugee Camp.

Photo taken by the researcher on 20 February 2021

In Deir Al Balah camp, refugees can only buy their necessary food and clothes from the shops in the camp. However, there are very few restaurants and clothes shops, and no places for leisure, as well as no electronics stores, etc. They can get such things from the Deir Al Balah city shops if needed. There are minimal commercial activities and services in the Deir Al Balah refugee camp. Conversely, Jabalia camp has all these diverse amenities and is a central economic place and transport link for the north governorate of the Gaza Strip. When I visited the Deir Al Balah camp in February 2021 for this research, I walked with a friend towards the housing blocks. The roads got narrower as we moved away from the market and the services area. Photos 5.5 and 5.6 below show narrower roads and poorer refugee houses in the Deir Al Balah refugee camp.



Photo 5.5 Road between houses' blocks in Deir Al Balah refugee camp.

Photo taken by the researcher on 20 February 2021



Photo 5.6 The Road gets narrower between houses in the Deir Al Balah refugee camp

Photo taken by the researcher on 20 February 2021

The divergent aesthetic of the refugee camps reflected a contradictory reality, partially evolved and partially stuck in time and space. Everything has genuinely been created, while at the same time being a consequence of exceptional conditions resulting from the “state of exception”. Camps were spaces designed to be a temporary settlement and became a permanent reality for refugees. Such a contradictory reality was more manifest in Jabalia as poor camp internal alleys with devastated infrastructure are interwoven with a booming number of higher buildings and fancy commercial shops. Parts of the refugee camps have

evolved, resembling the “city-like” features of their adjacent towns and cities (Agier, 2011; Sanyal, 2012; Ramadan, 2013; Saleh, 2020), despite being a temporary spatial arrangement managed by the UN. Under the prolonged displacement, the spectacle and functionality of permanence emerged with the development of houses and roads. However, they still looked different from other areas in the Gaza Strip. The camps are more crowded, their streets are narrower, and there is a stark difference between the poor refugees’ substandard shelters that exist next to high-rise and well-finished buildings in the same neighbourhood.

One field visit I conducted was to observe the internal alleys of the Jabalia refugee camp and spot differences between the camp and the non-camp urban areas. It was on 13 March 2021 when I drove from my home in Beit Hanoun through the main road connecting Beit Hanoun (the northern part of the Gaza Strip) with Beit Lahia and then towards the Jabalia Camp. As I got closer to the camp, passing by the housing projects built to expand it, the roads became narrower. Parts of the roads closer to the camp were composed of one roadway for cars driving in both directions. More shops were on both sides of the road, and more people passed by using these roads. Buildings became closer to each other, smaller in area but higher, with more floors. One can notice the increased economic activities when approaching the camp via this main road. The camp's central areas had more shops on both sides of the road, more pedestrians, and more vehicles. Buildings became packed and higher compared with the non-camp adjacent regions. The functionality of the space diversified, including not only houses and flats for refugees. There were many signs for businesses, offices, training centres, beauty shops, private clinics, lawyers’ firms, currency exchanges, restaurants, etc. The Jabalia refugee camp resembled many features of the city centres of the main cities in the Gaza Strip.

It was apparent to me that the outskirts and wider roads around the shelter blocks of the Jabalia camp have some similarities with the non-camp urban areas. Nonetheless, the outskirts of the camp are denser and contain more buildings and people, with more vibrant economic and social activities compared with the non-camp areas. In addition, camp roads, even the wide ones, are narrower than their counterparts in non-camp regions such as the

adjacent towns and city centres like Beit Lahiya and Beit Hanoun in the north and Deir Al Balah city in the Middle area. There is a heavy presence of UNRWA's service facilities, such as clinics, schools, food distribution centres, and social services centres, that serve refugees in and outside the camp. This meant that refugees outside the camp frequently commute to the camp to access these services. This contributed to the emergence of an active marketplace in the Jabalia camp area and gradually made the camp a transport hub for the surrounding areas.

The spatial impact of the presence of the UN services centres in the camp is similar to the impact of having governmental facilities in any city, creating active movement from and to these centres to access their services. Thus, the Jabalia camp became the service centre for the north, providing social, educational, and health services for the refugees from non-camp areas in the north governorate. This is one of the many impacts of the presence of humanitarian actors in the camp, discussed further in Chapter Six. Photo 5.7 shows a panoramic view of the camp centre from the western side. The blue buildings are the UNRWA's facilities.



Photo 5.7 Jabalia camp western side centre

Photo taken by the researcher on 13 March 2021

However, from the inside, the camp's internal streets between refugee house blocks, located not far from the wider developed roads just behind the blue buildings and the multi-story buildings, still represent a spatialisation of poverty and misery. A form constructed by

very narrow alleys, packed with houses with asbestos and corrugated roofs, covered by nylon sheets to prevent water leaks, with irregular, non-systematic shapes. I took the following photos (5.8 & 5.9) in March 2021, when I walked between the different house blocks to observe the built environment of the Jabalia refugee camp.



Photo 5.8 Narrow alleys between houses in Jabalia refugee camp.

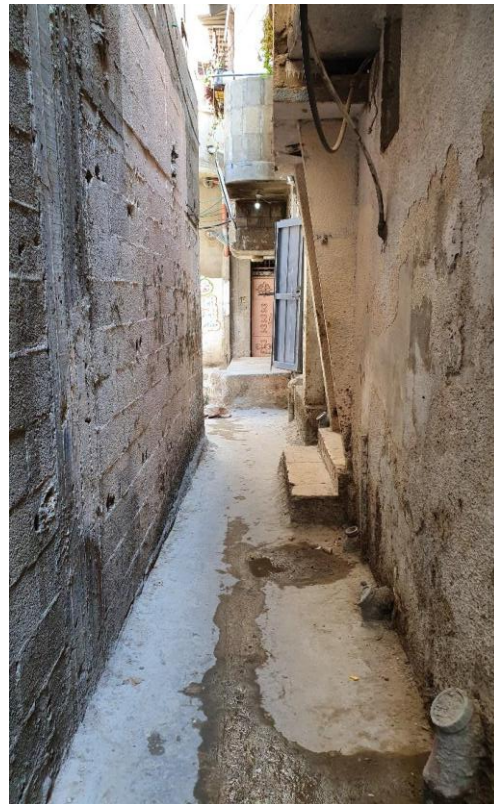


Photo 5.9 Narrow alleys between houses in Jabalia refugee camp.

Photos taken by the researcher on 13 March 2021

These conditions concur with Badawy *et. al.*'s (2016) findings, which suggested that around half of the refugee houses inside the refugee camps of the Gaza Strip are in miserable conditions. They stated that

“In Gaza, an average of 49 per cent of camp shelters are in substandard conditions. Walls of refugee shelters are mostly structurally unsafe, poorly insulated and not waterproof. Roofs are frequently irreparable and

consequently in need of replacement. Ventilation is inadequate, and shelters are damp and musty, cold in winter and hot in summer. Many families are crowded into too few rooms, and most of the roads are narrow, inaccessible and unlit” Badawy *et. al.* (2016, p.682).

There is a socio-spatial paradox within the camp itself, especially the Jabalia camp. Despite the spatial differences between the camp and non-camp areas, parts of the refugee camps became “city-like”, resembling and extending the functionality of their various adjacent cities. This functionality was more evident in Jabalia than in Deir Al Balah, due to its smaller size and remote location, as well as its population characteristics, which meant that residents did not fully integrate with non-refugees from the adjacent Deir Al Balah city, as highlighted in the previous section.

Nevertheless, in addition to the social and economic differences that evolved among the refugees, there was a paradox in the shape of the buildings and streets that showed stark differences between the camp’s main roads and its internal alleys. In the following subsection, I analyse research findings (interviews and observations) to identify the emergent properties/causal powers of certain normative social institutions and organisations that influenced the creation and evolution of this “state of paradox” and the temporary-permanent reality.

5.2.2 The State of Paradox

In Chapter Two, I presented and discussed the conceptualisation of “humanitarian situation” and “humanitarian condition” (Feldman, 2018) and how camps in protracted displacement oscillate between these periods. This oscillation influenced the ongoing formation and causation (Rutzou & Elder-Vass, 2019) of the camps’ socio-spatial structures throughout periods of fragility and fluidity, as well as periods of relative stability and emergence of causal powers. Such a situation is initially triggered by the introduction of the juridico-political “state of exception” (Agamben, 1998, 2005) and the creation of refugee camps and their associated spaces. Refugees’ practices to create their “lived space”, gradually changing their “perceived space” and challenging the “conceived space”,

dictated by the various authorities and the humanitarian system, have largely influenced the conditions in the camps and contributed to the alternation between conflicting statuses. This alternation between the temporary and permanent, fluid and stable, formation and causation created the current paradoxical morphology of refugee camp spaces. I argue throughout this thesis that the morphology and the lived experiences of the refugee camps under prolonged displacement represent a “**state of paradox**”. Under this state of paradox, the initial exceptional conditions continue either via political, legal, or spatial arrangements and at the same time, refugees, aid organisations, and community structures re-create sorts of normality.

The state of paradox is not a temporary situation that can be seen as abnormal in the lives of the camps. Instead, lives and conditions in the camps under protracted displacement are formed and understood via our realisation of this state. It is a manifestation of accumulated socio-spatial contradictions that mutually reproduce one another and contribute to uncertainty and precarious living.

The state of paradox is spatially observed and socially lived. In the studied camps, particularly Jabalia, *spatial* paradox is manifested by the existence of higher, well-finished buildings and commercial areas next to the poor, unfinished refugee houses and camp blocks. There are also well-established and planned buildings and interventions, such as those implemented by the UNRWA or businesspeople, as I discuss in detail in the following chapters. At the same time, many other developments have also been unplanned, provisional, and improvised, implemented by refugees over the decades of the camps' existence. In addition, the *social* paradox manifests through the ability of refugees to reproduce their normal social conditions while being attached to their place of origin and return, reproducing the refugees' identity while living in a transient-permanent reality. These conditions, resulting from the socio-spatial paradoxical determinants, affected the interactions of various normative social institutions and organisations in the camps' context, which contributed to shaping the lived space and its social life.

Spatially and empirically, one can notice the contrasting reality between the refugee camp's main roads, where businesses and higher buildings exist, and the camp's internal alleys (see Photos 5.10 and 5.11). When compared with the non-camp adjacent areas, the paradox in the camp is clearer and starker. The internal alleys of the camp have miserable housing conditions, while the houses on the external roads feature luxury buildings and flats, just a few meters away from the misery. Refugee camp spaces and their overall organisation were initiated under the circumstances of the “state of exception” to respond to the emergency of displacement, but they have evolved differently and gradually under the “state of paradox”.

The UNRWA provided refugees with shelters while being influenced by working under the juridico-political exceptions imposed on refugee camps. These camps were introduced to the Palestinian context as devices created by Western governments and a measure of “temporary” response to the “humanitarian situation” to support the needs, manage and control the displaced population under the exceptional conditions resulting from the consequences of the 1948 war. As displacement became prolonged, donors pressured and supported UNRWA to provide more permanent shelter for refugees living in tents.

At the same time, there has been an influential internal factor from the pressure exerted by refugee representative organisations, the Palestinian political organisations, as well as from the Arab nations, not to accept permanent settlements, fearing the complete integration of refugees and the abandonment of the “right to return”. To address these caveats and provide better shelters for refugees, the UNRWA collaborated with the Egyptian Authorities, who ruled the Gaza Strip until 1967, to build and provide mud-brick shelters designed in a quasi-military manner, and at the same time, prevented refugees from vertically expanding these houses to more permanent structures after they received their shelter. This has been considered by many as the start of the temporary-permanent situation of the camp (Saleh, 2021), thus introducing the “state of paradox” by starting to settle more permanently in what was deemed to be a temporary situation.



Photo 5.10 Flats and commercial shops at an outer road of the Jabalia refugee camp

Photo taken by the researcher on 15 February 2021



Photo 5.11 Houses in the internal alleys of the Jabalia refugee camp.

Photo taken by the researcher on 13 March 2021

One of the main determinants of paradoxical spatial evolution has been the practice of refugees to provisionally expand houses, occupying empty lands and spaces in the refugee camp. Refugees conducted these practices post the displacement emergency and during periods of relative stability or “humanitarian condition”, to create a sort of normal living. While the UNRWA led the initial provision of houses, these houses were evaluated by the refugees as inadequate and unsuitable for the refugees' culture and family sizes, despite being vastly better than tents. These houses were covered by thin cement tiles, packed

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together, composed of one storey, and spanned intersecting streets (Dahlan, 1987). The houses were without toilets or kitchen facilities and without a water supply. Communal toilets, kitchens, and water supplies were provided in public spaces for each group of shelters (Dahlan, 1987). Abu Basil, from the Deir Al Balah refugee camp, told me about his family's house at that time, as he said:

“These Byout al Toub بيوت الطوب (mud-brick houses) have not satisfied the needs of refugees. They were small, consisting of two rooms. There were no baths, toilets, or kitchens. One room was used as a kitchen and a shower, and the other one for sleeping. There were not even places to host your guests. You know that refugees who left their original villages used to have special rooms for their guests to sleep in their houses. I remember these houses; I lived in the era when the streets of the Deir Al Balah refugee camp were large and wide; our house consisted of two rooms, and there were public toilets. At that time, we could not host any guests in our house. These houses did not provide the minimum needs of the refugees, nor did they provide adequate privacy. That is why the refugees have rebuilt their houses when they were able to do so. They started to rebuild their houses after the 1970s.” (*Abu Basil, 2021, Interview 13*)

The initial provision of the houses for refugees by the UNRWA was driven by the reality that the organisation was mandated to provide temporary relief under the “humanitarian situation” and the “conceived space” of the camp was originally planned to be temporary. This initial provision of shelters was carried out under exceptional political and spatial arrangements for refugees in the refugee camps. At the same time, due to the protracted nature of the Palestinian displacement, and under the “humanitarian condition” where everyday human needs arise outside the emergency, the agency was required to provide more developmental services and solutions that should not jeopardise the temporary nature of the camp nor the right of return of the Palestinian refugees. Palestinian refugees and their representatives did not accept permanent settlement in the camps and other

displacement locations, fearing losing their political rights, particularly the right to return. Thus, the UNRWA has been providing relief and development services under these complex, paradoxical arrangements, which I discuss in more detail in Chapter Seven. These conditions have primarily influenced the provision of humanitarian aid and the future evolution of the camp space.

In addition, the UNRWA did not fully understand the needs and culture of the people being assisted. This, in turn, created a pressing need for refugees to improvise and enhance their shelters, re-appropriating them to create their “lived space”. Because vertical expansions were prohibited by authorities, as well as the building of more permanent structures, the refugees devised a new practice, expanding their units by fencing the spaces between their house, their neighbour’s house and the adjacent streets. They have termed this practice as “Yohawit” يحوط or “Tahwit” تحويط.

According to the modern Arabic dictionary, the Arabic word “Yohawit” يحوط means to build a fence around a space, and to preserve something, protect it, and bring whatever benefits to it at a later stage. The practice explained by interviewees was in keeping with this meaning of the word. It starts with provisional, improvised fencing of an empty piece of land, adjacent to the household’s shelter. Then, enhancing the use of this land by later expanding the housing unit to be part of a temporary-permanent setup in the camp, bringing the benefit of what has been fenced through more permanent measures. Abu Raed from the Jabalia refugee camp told me about this practice as he said:

“They (the UNRWA) did not interfere with the building expansions. Even when someone wanted to get married, while living with his parents, he used to leave his parents house and extend to another land. This practice named by the elderlies by “Yohawit” يحوط, meaning fitting fence around a piece of land” (*Abu Raed, 2021, Interview 01*)

These improvised expansions were among the main reasons behind the arbitrary evolution of the camps’ streets and buildings, which developed the spatial paradoxical reality. This

provisional expansion was also influenced by the presence of the causal powers of the different organisations and the normative social institutions that were at the interplay. For instance, after 1967, when the Israeli government took control of the Gaza Strip, the building policies in the camps were somehow relaxed, allowing refugees to expand and build more permanent concrete structures. This relaxation of policies was also coupled with the Israeli government's plans to empty the Gaza refugee camps and build more permanent housing projects. It is believed that the Israeli measures aimed at that time to end the Palestinians' "right of return" by allowing refugees to reconstruct their homes during displacement and thus be anchored to their new spaces (Abreek-Zubiedat, 2022).

When refugees wanted to expand or rebuild a more permanent house structure, they needed to identify the boundaries and lines separating their unit from the neighbouring units and the refugee camp streets. This process of identifying the lines between the streets and houses was, by itself, improvised and determined by the individuals on the ground who belonged to specific organisations and held particular interests. Abu Basil, from the Deir Al Balah refugee camp, told me how they defined the lines for expanding and building their family house in the camp:

“In 1973 or 1974, I remember that a manager from the UNRWA was at our house when my father asked him to increase the area of our house. My father was a carpenter, and the manager came because he needed him for a job. The manager allowed my father to take 3 meters from the street, and thus, he determined the new area of our house. The street in front of our house was spacious; it is not any more.” (*Abu Basil, 2021, Interview 13*)

Such improvised, arbitrary expansion has also resulted from overlapping fluid authorities and powers, as I discuss in more detail in Chapter Six. The UNRWA manager, who was part of the UNRWA's organisation and authority, acted according to their power and interest. Their interest intersected with the norm circles of refugees in the camp, allowing them to expand their houses and occupy the camp streets. Part of the making of the “lived space”

was affected by the dynamics of power structures, as those who held more authority and influential networks managed to alter the space and expand, benefiting from the lack of centralised organisation authority in the camp, and the relaxation of construction policies in the 1970s.

The buildings' shape and construction materials started to change from the 1970s onwards. In the 1970s, the relaxation of building policies was accompanied by an improvement in the financial situation of the camps' residents. Refugees generated better income by working in Israel alongside the remittances their relatives used to send from working in the Arab Gulf countries (Marx, 1992). Opportunities in the Arab countries became available at that time for the sons and daughters of the first generation of refugees because some of them were educated at the university, thanks to the UNRWA's provision of a free primary education that helped the refugee community to become literate and educated. This is one of the positive roles of the UNRWA, and it will be discussed in detail in Chapter Seven.

Furthermore, because of its vibrant location, population density, and demands for goods and services, many non-refugee businesspeople invested in Jabalia camp. They came with capital, bought the poor, substandard refugee houses, demolished them and built multi-story buildings with offices, flats, and shops. Those non-refugees already had connections with the camp residents, which facilitated reaching deals with refugees in the camps. The contributions of non-refugees have augmented the spatial "state of paradox," which represents itself in the stark differences in the neighbourhoods of refugee camps, especially Jabalia, where "city-like" commercial and housing blocks exist side by side with poor, substandard refugee shelters.

Socially, the "state of paradox" manifests in the mixed, contradictory feelings that refugees expressed about their belonging and attachment to the camp. This also has impacted their ability to plan for the future, where most refugees' decisions to expand a house under its current condition, build a more permanent structure, or even leave the camp and live somewhere else were based on pressing needs at specific points in time. They had to take

improvised and provisional actions. Refugees feel intimacy and attachment to the camp, but at the same time, some of them wish to leave it to find better opportunities. One of the interviewees in Jabalia told me about her father living under corrugated steel and refusing to leave the camp as she said:

“I lived with them under زينكو “Zinqo” (corrugated steel). I am proud of my old family house that was built with a roof of corrugated steel panels, and it has not changed in 40 years. My father had many choices and offers to leave the camp, but he had a different point of view.” (*Fatima, 2021, Interview 03*)

During the prolonged displacement in the camp, refugees built more permanent relationships. The camp became their home and sanctuary as they rebuilt their lives and revived their identity. If refugees leave the camp, they feel exiled again. Abu Basil from Deir Al Balah told me about this:

"One day, I met a refugee from the Deir Al Balah refugee camp who moved to live in the Sheikh Radwan area 30 years ago. We have not met for a long time. However, I could remember him and remember his family because his brother was a friend of my brother, and his sister was also a friend of my sister. These relations cannot be found somewhere else. At that time, all the refugees were like one family. The man told me that when he is outside the camp, he feels Ghorba " غربة " (expatriation/exile)." (*Abu Basil, 2021, Interview 13*)

At the same time, many of the refugees who were able to leave the camp left it to seek a better future despite their emotional attachment. I met with one of the refugees from Deir Al Balah who had left the camp to build a better future. He told me about the disagreement inside his family, as they still have these mixed, paradoxical feelings. He said:

“Let me talk about my personal experience. Maybe I represent this status. I have moved to live in the Abu Oraif area, which is 1.5 to 2 km away from the

Deir Al Balah refugee camp. All my life and social connections are attached to the Deir Al Balah refugee camp. I was born in a refugee camp. All the memories of my life are attached to the Deir Al Balah refugee camp. Wherever I go, I will always have nostalgia for my home in the refugee camp. It is a small version of our attachment to home ... My brothers were really upset when we decided to move to separate houses outside the refugee camp. People who buy pieces of land outside the refugee camp have a vision for their future. They want to secure their future life and to own something that they can invest in and develop.” (*Abu Samy, 2021, Interview 14*)

As displacement prolonged, refugees’ norm circles in the camps strengthened, social relations became an asset for refugees to maintain, particularly with their families and friends in the camp. Attachment to the new home increased and the temporary emergency humanitarian measures became permanent, where houses and infrastructures were built to respond to a need or fix an issue without considering plans for the future of the space. However, as these enhancements go on, there is an internal realisation that the camp is temporary; also, there is the political tension that creates “punctuations” in the protracted conditions when emergencies occur, and the needs return to the basics. This has influenced refugee camps in the Gaza Strip after their establishment, resulting from multiple emergencies and the escalation of conflicts, like the 1967 war, the first uprising in 1987, the many escalations of conflicts between the Palestinian factions and Israel, and lastly, the devastating war of 2023.

The “state of paradox” is a precarious situation, full of socio-spatial contradictions, and dilemmas for the humanitarian organisations that were established and dictated by donors to respond to emergencies and required by refugees to provide for their protracted human needs. The camp space under this state is featured by political and spatial exceptional measures reproduced and conceived by the emergency mandate of the UNRWA, the agendas of the national movements, and the local authorities, but at the same time, it is the

only home refugees have had for decades, and it is their lived space and sometimes their permanent home.

Especially in the Palestinian case, camps became stuck in an indefinite temporary situation or a permanent paradox as refugees wait and bear the sensation of “interminable insomnia of exile”(Agier, 2011, p. 72). One of the refugees who was among those who were forced to flee in 1948 and was among the first generation of refugees told me:

“I have a house and a piece of land here (the refugee camp), but if we were able to return to our homeland, I would go immediately. We all believe that a refugee camp is a temporary place, and soon, we are all returning to our homelands.” (*Abu Ahmed, 2021, Interview 11*)

Having to live life in the indefinite waiting for their return, refugees administer their lives in emergencies and exceptions, creating normality and attachment to their new camp homes. They must deal with the implications of the “state of exception” that reproduces itself via the geopolitical order that governs their lives. They gradually build their normal lives, old selves, and communities by utilising their agency and the enabling social structures. Navigating life in the camp under such conditions creates a “state of paradox”. It is a state where everything and its opposite exist within the same temporality. Exceptions and everyday life exist together in the camp space.

Refugees yearn for their grand return to their original villages and, at the same time, create permanent life and attachment to the camp. This is a core paradox of the Palestinian refugee experience as they pursue lives under a relief system and prolonged temporariness. For more than seven decades, Palestinian refugees created homes and normality in camps while refusing to accept the camp as the end of their story. Refugees are attached to the camp and their community there. They are not strangers in their camp space; they recreated their cultural and social norms and built their permanent homes.

However, they still yearn to return. Their right of return (grounded in the UN resolution 194) is not only nostalgia for their original villages and towns, but it's part of their shared collective political identity. Most of the refugees I met, even the younger generations, continued to identify themselves by their original villages and towns, saying, for example, "I am from 'Al Majdal' (المجدل) or 'Al Sawafir' (السوافير), and I live in the camp." As noted above, refugees revived their customs and cultures; they named their camp streets following their towns and villages' names, they cooked their original dishes, sang their village songs, and many kept their keys from their houses before 1948 and passed those through generations, signalling their enduring hope of return.

Despite their ideology of return, the decades of stretched plight created the necessity for a permanent reality. As I described above, camps evolved from tents to neighbourhoods in cities, concrete apartment blocks erupted, and the refugees practised their citizenship rights, similar to non-refugees in Gaza. The camp became a beloved home, and refugees accumulated memories of childhood and school, attachments to neighbours and friends, and pride in belonging to the camp and its community.

5.3 Discussion and Conclusion

As explained in Chapter One, the "Discussion and Conclusion" sections of the empirical chapters first reflect on how critical realism and the combined critical realism and assemblage ontological analytical frameworks are employed to analyse and understand the socio-spatial dynamics and the empirical material. The sections then present the main analysis and discussion of the findings, which speak back to the theoretical framework of city-camp concepts, humanitarianism, and space production.

This chapter answers the first research question by identifying and analysing the socio-spatial dynamics that have influenced the evolution of the refugee camps in the Gaza Strip. It has presented and analysed the formation and evolution of refugee camps in the Gaza Strip, suggesting the "state of paradox" as the main contribution to city-camp literature. It highlighted the initial formation of the camp space and the dynamics associated with the

camp setup phase, which have significantly contributed to shaping the camps' socio-spatial evolution and their future development. It also discussed and analysed the evolution of the studied camps, Jabalia and Deir Al Balah, outlining the features of socio-spatial dynamics that led to the production of the "state of paradox", where exceptional legal, political, and spatial circumstances and normal everyday lives exist in the same temporality of the camp space.

- ***Implications for ontological debates***

The thesis employed combined assemblage's and critical realism's ontological perspectives, as discussed in Chapter Two, to unpack and analyse the various socio-spatial structures in the camp space. The initial establishment of the refugee camps in the Gaza Strip was triggered by the 1948 war and subsequent displacement, placing Palestinians under the state of exception (Agamben, 1998, 2005). The creation of this new reality produced an assemblage of new socio-spatial structures that were formed and stabilised throughout time. Refugees as a political, humanitarian, and social category were created, sharing the same political identity and struggle with the host community in Gaza. Humanitarian aid materials were brought in by the international community, relieving the immediate suffering, and a new spatial arrangement was introduced through the establishment of refugee camps. This initial formation was fluid, precarious, marked with high levels of uncertainty and exception.

During the initial assembling of the camps, refugees settled in homogeneous groups according to their original pre-displacement villages and towns. This way, refugees utilised their pre-displacement networks and structures to re-establish their space. Building on existing social networks and kinship ties to dwell in the space is a common practice among refugees and residents of informal settlements (Peattie, 1968; Fawaz, 2007). In the camps studied, for instance, in Jabalia, refugees named the camp streets and housing blocks after their original villages. You could find the "Huaja" street for refugees from "Huj" village and "Al Majadlah" street for refugees from "Al Majdal" city, and so on. They recreated their culture and recovered their collective memory.

Furthermore, the homogeneity between refugees and non-refugees and the proximity between camps and non-camp areas contributed to stability and integration of the newly established refugees' socio-spatial structures. With basic needs provided by the aid system, refugees recovered their agency and started to adapt their environment in the camp space. When these socio-spatial structures stabilised, they produced dynamic processes that created, maintained, and transformed these structures over time. Through these processes, the camp space was reproduced via interactions between the refugee society and space, shaping the environment and refugees' social lives.

In this chapter, I utilise critical realism's ontological perspectives and Elder-Vass's (2010) analysis of the norm circles and normative social institutions to discuss the intersections of social structures and analyse the associated causal mechanisms. I suggest that shared identity and struggle made the Palestinian refugees part of the same political and, to a lesser extent, social normative institutions and norm circles as the indigenous Gazan citizens. Belonging to those norm circles, refugees and non-refugees intersect in the wider society and space, pursuing a similar higher aim of liberation and political recognition.

Utilising this ontological perspective allows us to recognise the intersection between refugees and non-refugee social structures and the associated causal mechanisms. At the same time, employing norm circles and organisations from Elder-Vass's (2010) for this analysis allows us to recognise that refugees were also part of smaller norm circles, including the organisations they worked for, like the UNRWA or political parties, their clans, original villages, and particular spatial configurations within the camps. Such an intersection can lead to conflicting mechanisms affecting an individual living in the camp. For instance, refugees lived under the influence of a humanitarian, nonpolitical aid system while simultaneously seeking political representation through the normative institutions of their political parties and committees, thereby exercising causal powers within the apolitical system itself. As Feldman (2018) clarifies, Palestinian refugees managed to pursue their politics through the apolitical humanitarian system. Thus, through this intersection, a

refugee can influence and be influenced by multiple causal mechanisms and organisations, as discussed in this chapter and throughout the thesis.

From critical realism's ontological lenses, one can argue that the spatial grouping of refugees from the same towns and extended families in the same camp block allowed their original normative social institutions (Elder-Vass, 2010) to persist and preserve their emergent causal powers and reproduce their norm circles. As Elder-Vass (2010) explains, the norm circles are composed of people, refugees in our case, who act towards their commitment to their particular norm. Spatial grouping of homogeneous refugees facilitated social interactions so that original social commitments persisted under the norm circles of belonging to the extended family with its social customs and solidarity, as well as the norm circle of belonging to a particular village/town, also with its unique heritage, culture, and traditions. The causal, emergent properties of these normative social institutions persisted to some extent during displacement in the camp's social life, promoting feelings of intimacy and solidarity among refugees. Some refugees, especially those in the Jabalia camp, already had established connections with the non-refugees and overlapped with their norm circles via previous friendships, marriages, and trade. At the same time, refugees also benefited from being hosted by non-refugees for months or years before establishing the camp, allowing them to forge or enhance their relationship with the non-refugee community.

- *Implications on theoretical debates*

I further build on Feldman's (2018) definitions of the "humanitarian situation" and the "humanitarian conditions" to conceptualise the protracted displacement, and analyse the oscillation between fluidity and stability in the camp space. Refugee camp spaces exist under emergency and chronic situations, causing the oscillation between the formation and causation of the socio-spatial structures. The findings show that initial refugee camps were established, and humanitarian aid was introduced under the temporary features of the "humanitarian situation" (Feldman, 2018), contributing to the formation of refugees' norm circles and their living space. In the post-war period and a few years later, the refugees recovered from the immediate impacts of displacement by accessing basic needs, including

shelter, food, and livelihoods, and later stabilising their normative social institutions. Refugees benefited from aid support and the shared cultural and political identity with the non-refugees, which enabled them to act with causal powers to enhance their living conditions. When the situation relatively stabilised under the chronic “humanitarian condition”(Feldman, 2018), refugees re-established their pre-displacement norm circles, including their identity and exercised their agency.

As displacement prolonged, refugees expanded their inadequate UNRWA-provided shelters to accommodate their specific dwelling. From critical realism’s ontological and philosophical perspective, the fact that the initial shelters’ spaces and designs were inadequate for refugees’ living needs and culture, coupled with a lack of future planning and vision by the managing authorities, constituted causal mechanisms that enabled refugees to improvise and expand their homes later. Improvised evolution of the shelters and the camp space continued throughout the decades, and involved multiple parties, based on their interests and capacities to occupy and alter the camp space. Those included refugees, the UN, governing authorities, and businesspeople, who contributed to creating overcrowded, paradoxical spaces in the camp. This has created a contrasting scenery within each of the studied camps, between the camps and non-camp areas, and also between the two studied camps, as I detailed in this chapter. The most notable differences in the shapes of the buildings and streets are evident in the Jabalia refugee camp, where the least developed and most developed areas coexist within the same camp block.

Camps evolved as refugees challenged the conceived special arrangements, where shelters were provided as a temporary humanitarian tool, by improvising, upgrading and expanding their houses. In such practice, refugees convert their shelters into homes (Malkki, 1995). In this chapter, I also draw on the theoretical framework developed from city-camp literature discussed in Chapter Two, analysing the tension between the camps’ “conceived space”, “perceived space” and “lived space” (Lefebvre, 1991), showing how Palestinian camps remained under exceptional conditions, while simultaneously evolving into city-like spaces. In the formation stage, Palestinian refugee camps began as abstract, quasi-military (Saleh,

2020) spaces designed to temporarily host refugees until they returned to their original villages and towns. As a “conceived space” (Lefebvre, 1991), camps planned by the UNRWA, and introduced to function under the conditions of the “state of exception” (Agamben, 1998, 2005), to cater for the initial purpose of hosting refugees as conceived biopolitical figures. This initial conception and function of the camp space gradually changed in the protracted displacement contexts, through the actions and agency of refugees who created their “lived space” (Lefebvre, 1991). This has been the case in multiple protracted displacement contexts where refugee camps develop urban “city-like” features (Agier, 2011; Sanyal, 2012; Dalal, 2015; Jansen, 2020). However, in the Palestinian case, the Israeli occupation continued its functions through institutionalised exceptional measures (Weizman, 2007), which create emergencies that “punctuate” (Feldman, 2018) the humanitarian system. Palestinians and camps remained under constant measures of military control, and a sense of temporariness resulted from the “state of exception” while refugees created their permanent normal lives and their “lived space”.

I expand on the city-camp literature discussed in Chapter Two, which introduced the juridico-political and urban analysis of the camps, to argue that in the Palestinian case, the “state of exception” (Agamben, 1998, 2005) and its impacts have remained in various conditions and forms while refugees created their “city-like” camps. This has created a tension between the temporary and the permanent, the conceived and the lived space, and an oscillation between the humanitarian situation and the humanitarian condition, resulting in a “state of paradox”. In this thesis, I introduce the concept of the “state of paradox,” which represents the contradictions in the socio-spatial structures of Palestinian refugee camps.

Under the “state of paradox”, tension continued between the camp's “conceived” and “lived” space. Refugees physically altered the “perceived” space, challenging the “conceived” layout to fit their everyday needs. The formal grid of a camp, designed in a quasi-military manner (Saleh, 2020), profoundly ignored refugees’ cultural needs for privacy and their family expansion. As described above, refugees had to share toilets and kitchens, and they had only one room for sleep, while they originally lived in their spacious houses on their

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lands. Thus, refugees re-appropriated their shelters and socially reproduced their “lived space” (Lefebvre, 1991). They started that by practising “Tahwit” (تحويط) as explained in this chapter above - to fence parts of the open spaces and streets near their shelter and use them later to build rooms and expand houses.

In addition, Palestinian refugees also managed to accumulate economic capital, utilising education provided by UNRWA to access jobs in the Gulf countries and other employment opportunities. They invested their financial capacity to build and expand their houses. Under “humanitarian urbanism” (Jansen, 2016), it is a common practice for refugees to rezone and repurpose their residential units to create better access for livelihoods in pursuit of economic activity and financial capital. This was also the case for the Palestinian refugees who rezoned and repurposed their shelters and transformed them to commercial use, particularly in the Jabalia camp. The economic viability of the Jabalia camp, due to its location, density, and the central presence of aid within the camp, promoted economic growth and opportunities along the main roads and outskirts of its markets. This attracted investors from outside the camp, as I explained in the data above, who created fancy buildings and commercial projects. However, internal streets and blocks of Jabalia camp remained in their miserable, improvised shape, re-emphasising the spatial paradoxes.

Thus, parts of the camp became similar, and sometimes better than the adjacent urban centres and cities, particularly the commercial areas where the built environment and socioeconomic life developed. But at the same time, other parts of the camp still tell the plight of refugees and misery in a clear manifestation of the temporary nature of the space. Socially, there are conflicting feelings and attachments to the camp. Refugees have recovered their original social life and shared their intimacy and values in this space. At the same time, they want to leave it for a better life, considering the camp temporary while they wait for their right to return.

Nonetheless, I showed in this chapter that this happened, to a lesser extent, in the Deir Al Balah refugee camp because the newcomers did not have the opportunity to integrate with

the original citizens, like other camps. They immediately settled in makeshift shelters on the shores of the Mediterranean and were geographically isolated from the central city of Deir Al Balah by land, bushes and trees.

Under these conditions and tensions discussed above, camps develop to become “city-like”. Those socio-spatial contradicting dynamics and the associated tensions have had reciprocal impacts on governance structures and the living conditions in the studied camps. I explain and discuss the issues surrounding governance, the living conditions, and the interactions with the socio-spatial dynamics in the following empirical chapter. The findings in the next chapter analyse these aspects and show how they have been mutually influencing each other in the studied camp spaces. Particularly, the next chapter discusses the role of UNRWA, local municipalities, and the Refugees Popular Committee as the prominent governance actors in the studied refugee camps, providing critical accounts on how the living conditions have been shaped and developed.

6. CHAPTER SIX: GOVERNANCE STRUCTURES, LIVING CONDITIONS AND SOCIO-SPATIAL DYNAMICS IN THE REFUGEE CAMPS.

6.0 Introduction

It is “painstaking” وجع قلب Waja’ Qalb. This is how one of the refugee participants of this research described the process of receiving aid or other services for poor families living in the overcrowded Jabalia refugee camp. Lack of clarity, precarious services, deteriorated infrastructure, and miserable living conditions have characterised large parts of the refugee camps. As established in the previous Chapter, refugees and their camp space are in a “state of paradox” under prolonged juridico-political exception and indefinite spatial temporariness combined with normality and permanency created by refugees under humanitarian management. These conditions have reproduced and exacerbated uncertainty and conflicting roles and responsibilities among the camps’ various organisations and social structures. Responsibilities for service provision were unclear and sometimes not claimed, rendering many refugees in limbo. Authority in the camp has continuously shifted, and many thematic areas of managing the space that affect the living conditions have been overlooked.

The reciprocal interactions between the different actors and the socio-spatial dynamics I discussed in Chapter Five have shaped and reshaped governance and living conditions in the camp. In this chapter, I will address the second research question: ***“How do socio-spatial dynamics, governance structures and the living conditions mutually shape each other in the refugee camp environment?”*** This empirical chapter is divided into two main sections and a conclusion. The first section explores the governance issues of the refugee camp space, examining the roles of leading organisations and normative social institutions. Mainly, I analytically present the roles of political/military authorities that governed the camp at particular times, the role of the UNRWA, the municipalities, and the Refugees Popular Committee, as the authority of these structures has been geopolitically influenced by the genesis of the state of exception, the development of the state of paradox, and the

socio-spatial conditions created under these states. The section highlights how the roles of these organisations and structures have been negotiated and shifted, representing a fragmented governance model.

Continued interactions between these identified organisations and the various socio-spatial structures reshaped the living conditions, which in turn impacted the structures' interactions. The second section of this chapter analytically explores and critically discusses these mutual interactions between socio-spatial factors which have emerged under this governance and the evolution of living conditions in refugee camps in order to further elaborate on the reciprocal relationship between them. In this section, I analyse how refugee and non-refugee relations have developed, affecting the transition of the economic situation in the "city-like" camp. I also draw more focus on the issue of overcrowding in refugee camps by unpacking how socio-spatial features have caused this issue, highlighting the multiple impacts on living conditions and social life in the camp.

Finally, the conclusion summarises the main findings discussed in this chapter and briefly introduces the role of humanitarian organisations, especially UNRWA, in addressing the socio-spatial issues in the studied camps. This links to the final empirical chapter, Chapter Seven, which tackles the interplay between the provision of humanitarian aid and the camps' socio-spatial dynamics.

6.1 Governance in the refugee camps

In this section, I critically discuss and present the interactions between the socio-spatial conditions highlighted in the previous chapter and governance structures in the studied refugee camps. Given the continuity of the juridico-political "state of exception" in the Palestinian situation, and more specifically, the "state of paradox" in the refugee camp spaces, governance in refugee camps has been complex and problematic. As camps exist in a state of indefinite temporariness, improvised governance practices have evolved among the refugee population and various actors. Various organisations and structures, both

political and humanitarian, have exerted control and held power over the refugee camp space, which has contributed to shaping the socio-spatial landscape in the refugee camps.

For this analysis and to define governance in the refugee camps context, I draw on the “city-like” representation of the refugee camp and the analogy between these camps and cities. Governance in this context is concerned with understanding what structures and processes exist to manage and regulate public affairs in the camps. As Hanafi (2010), who specifically studied and analysed governance in Palestinian refugee camps in the Middle East, points out, governance in the camps is complex, sometimes technocratically administered and other times popular, informal and inconsistent, involving partial multilayered sovereignty and actors. Governance here relates to identifying those various actors and the related decision-making processes in which organisations and normative social institutions run the camp’s everyday life. Governance concerns power being rearranged and redistributed rather than imposed from above (Hanafi, 2010). Refugee camps lack centralised or official conventional governance structures, allowing different forms of authority to arise to regulate behaviours and the daily functions of the displacement space (Hanafi & Long, 2010). The discussion here follows the same understanding of governance and builds on it.

The exceptional juridico-political conditions in Palestine, particularly in the camps, continue to influence governance structures and everyday life. It is true that Palestinian refugees have recovered their political agency and are creating normality in their camp space, but this is still happening under exceptional political and spatial arrangements. This has produced the “state of paradox”, I presented in the previous chapter. In addition, the temporary nature of the humanitarian management has also contributed to the temporary perception of the camps and the creation of different modes of governance. The prolonged presence of the UN, coupled with the rooted social and political concern of accepting the camp space to be permanent, created the problem and exacerbated the complexity of refugee camp governance. I maintain here that the analytical paradigm linked to the “state of exception” can still be used as an anchor point to explain the exceptional features of the camps. These features, along with other analytical paradigms, are used to test and probe

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the socio-spatial dynamics from “city-like” perspectives as the interplay between various structures and organisations is highlighted to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the governance of the complex refugee spaces. Despite their ‘cityness’, camps are not complete cities, and the Palestinian territories are not a sovereign state, which creates unique shifting modes in governance. In other words, governance in the studied camps has been influenced by the exceptional juridico-political conditions as well as the development of the “city-like” camp spaces.

In this sense, when discussing governance, one cannot overlook the fact that Palestinians are deprived of political sovereignty and the fact that Israel controls the Palestinian territories from the air, land and sea, where the exceptional military rules are used to control the Palestinian civilian population (Weizman, 2007). Long-term curfews, closures, enforcement of siege, and the massive destruction were used under the broader strategy to de-develop the Gaza Strip, systematically stripping the population of its economic and social autonomy (Roy, 2016). This has reproduced exceptional conditions in the Palestinian context since 1948 because the Western sovereign powers, and more specifically, the State of Israel, have been denying the right of statehood and sovereignty to Palestinians and depriving them of protection by the rule of law. Refugee camps have been placed under another layer of exception, created by the temporary nature of the space and its continuity under humanitarian management. As the camps are stuck between the temporary and permanent, refugees create permanent lives and everyday practices that are provisional and precarious, exercised under a shifting and sometimes conflicting authority.

Most scholars contend that governance in the Palestinian refugee camps, especially in Gaza, has been characterised by fluidity and complexity (Saleh, 2020), with power continuously shifting among leading authorities and entities (Hanafi, 2010). According to Saleh (2020), fluid governance in Gaza camps is also linked to the traditional nature of the refugee society, which creates multiple loyalties and connections. Thus, an official or staff member of a particular organisation, although acting on behalf of that organisation, could have multiple loyalties, entailing them to act accordingly. Building on and extending Saleh’s

argument, I suggest that governance in the camp is **fragmented**. This is because of the nature of the space that is characterised by indefinite temporariness and continuous change of authority, which does not allow for any particular organisational structure to have a clear, bounded role of control and power.

These entities acquired power and acted at different times by bringing their thoughts and expertise to the daily practices in refugee camps. In the studied camps, governance structures comprised various entities, including the ruling military power, the PNA, national and Islamic factions such as the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO) and Hamas, local municipalities, community leaders, and the Refugees Popular Committee (Hanafi, 2010; Saleh, 2020). The unstable political conditions and the ascent and descent of different ruling powers in the Gaza Strip have continuously shifted the magnitude of control and authority. This has meant that there have always been dynamic power structures and responsibilities, sometimes contradicting, among actors throughout the camp's lifetime. Based on the findings from the fieldwork, these actors can be categorised into three main categories: humanitarian, political, and popular (see Figure 6.1).

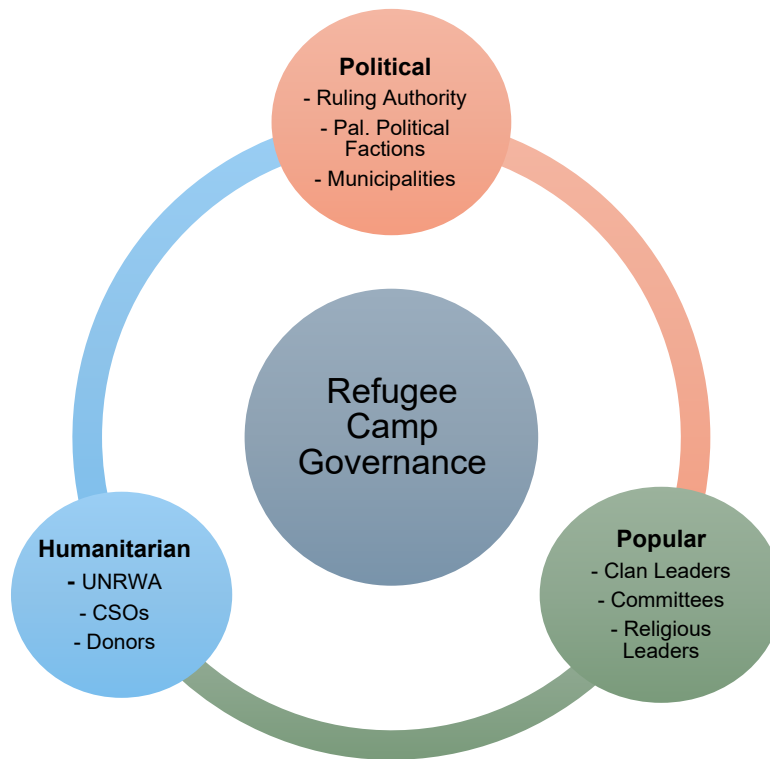


Figure 6.1: Categories of governance actors in the Gaza Strip

These actors did not exercise governance like classical states or authorities with full sovereignty and legitimacy. Instead, they practised alternative modes of governance that emerged in the exceptional juridico-political vacuum and negotiated to regulate camp space and population behaviour concerning legalities, local municipalities, the host country, refugee groups, and conflict resolution mechanisms in the camp (Hanafi, 2010). Since the establishment of the camps, there have been historical changes in the exercise of power and governance among actors, as highlighted in Table 6.1.

Table 6.1 Governing entities in the Gaza Strip in specific historical periods

(Source: Hanafi, 2010)

Historical Period	Governing entities of the camp
From 1948 till 1967	UNRWA, Egyptian Military, and Community Leaders
1967 - 1994	UNRWA, Israel Defence Forces, and Community Leaders
1994 - 2007	UNRWA, PNA, Municipalities and Neighbourhood Committees, PLO Refugees Popular Committee, National and Islamic Parties, Community Leaders.
2007 - until 2023	UNRWA, Hamas Government, Refugees Popular Committee, Municipalities and Neighbourhood Committees, National and Islamic Parties, and Community Leaders.

Each of these organisations acted within the space of its actual expertise and gained power via its technical tasks, knowledge and the exercise of its processes in the camp. However, boundaries between these fragmented governance spaces are blurring as the field of expertise or technical knowledge shifts between the different acting organisations. Figure 6.2 below shows the fragmented and shifting governance space of the main actors in the refugee camp.

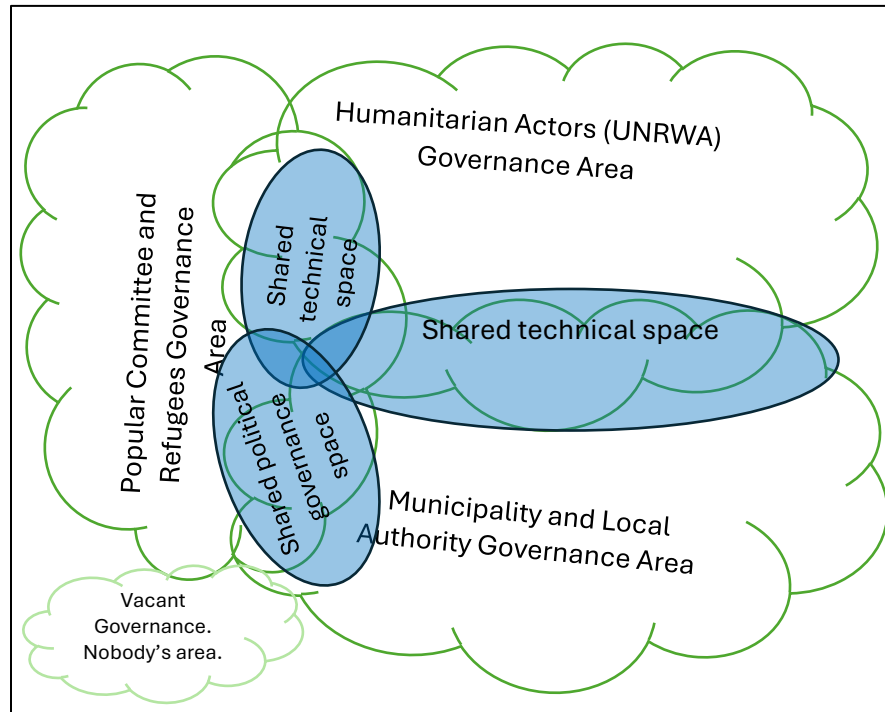


Figure 6.2 Spaces of governance in the Gaza Strip refugee camps

This figure shows that governance spaces or actions in a specific technical area can sometimes be shared or negotiated between the actors. Also, political agendas of the ruling authorities, local municipalities and the Refugees Popular Committee sometimes intersect in the camp governance. The findings confirm that there is always a vacant governance area, particularly in relation to governing and regulating the built environment, where no one steps in to regulate or process, which causes improvisation at specific points in time. Such a vacancy is well observed and reported in the actions that create more permanence in the camp space, such as building houses. One of the research participants who was a resident in Deir Al Balah refugee camp noted:

“In all refugee camps, until today, there is no authority that is responsible for the urban planning and issuing authorisation of structures and houses in the refugee camps. The refugees have the right to build wherever they

want and whenever they want as long as there are no complaints from the neighbours.” (*Abu Basil, 2021, Interview 13*)

One of the municipality staff in Deir Al Balah also mentioned during the interview that:

“The municipality is responsible for designing the streets, organising the construction process, and providing construction permits in Deir Al Balah city. However, the municipality cannot do so in the refugee camps, where refugees have constructed houses randomly. The municipality tries amicably to prevent the refugees from building their houses beyond the main streets. However, the refugees were building houses randomly in the internal streets of the refugee camp. There is no law that obliges the refugee to be bound by the rules of the municipality. The municipality does not have any legal authority in the Deir Al Balah refugee camp.” (*Abu Hamdi, 2021, Interview 31*)

As discussed in the previous chapter with regard to humanitarian actors’ lack of planning, it is evident from the empirical findings of this thesis that the camp space was not planned or regulated after the initial genesis and the provision of refugee shelters. At the higher organisational governance structures, camps are considered temporary places. Thus, none of the organisations acting in the camp intervened to regulate or control the design of buildings and houses. The UNRWA, Local Municipalities, and the Refugees Popular Committee distanced themselves from this role. The UNRWA was not mandated or funded to carry out urban planning in the camps until very recently and in a responsive manner, as I discuss in Chapter Seven. Additionally, attempts to officially plan and alter the built environment in the camp were seen as a politically sensitive action that could harm the refugees’ right to return, as I show in the next sub-section. Thus, regulating buildings and the overall planning of the camp space remained a vacant governance area that needed to be filled appropriately, despite the problematic, paradoxical nature of the refugee camps.

In the remainder of this section, I discuss in more detail the fragmented governance roles technically practised by the UNRWA, Local Municipalities, and the Refugees Popular Committee. Those are the leading actors highlighted by the participants as the most influential in the physical and social development of the camp. In addition, they are highlighted as playing a functional role in the daily routine management of the camp's living space. Throughout the discussion, I also briefly present the role of different political and military entities that have significantly contributed to changing the camp's morphology and social structures.

6.1.1 The UNRWA and the 'taboo'

Among the leading actors who hold governance roles in the refugee camps is the UNRWA. The organisation is the leading service provider for Palestinian refugees in the Gaza Strip and the Middle East region. The organisation is responsible for the provision of essential services such as education, health care, food distribution, and the creation of emergency job opportunities for refugees. The UNRWA has also provided some shelter assistance to destitute families in the refugee camps. This assistance, dedicated to hardship cases, has been implemented over the past decades to support refugees with substandard housing. The AFSC report of 2014 provided some details about the UNRWA's shelter and infrastructure interventions in the Jabalia refugee camp. It stated that the:

“UNRWA had developed several programs for hardship cases to help them in renovating their homes. UNRWA started with a shelter program aiming at rebuilding small houses less than 100 square metres of poor families. The Shelter Rehabilitation Program lowers the cost of rehabilitation by providing cash, material, and employment assistance to the family, or by using local contractors to help complete the work. Shelters are brought up to international standards for disaster relief, making them safe and healthy places to live with dignity. UNRWA is also providing services related to infrastructure i.e. roads, sewer, water and solid waste collection inside the

camp and in specific cases outside the camp where refugees are living.”
(AFSC, 2014, p.12).

Through this role, the UNRWA gained a tacit non-coercive power over the camps’ population (Saleh, 2020). As the UNRWA staff are mainly refugees and are also part of other normative social institutions in the camp, they managed to transfer and sometimes enforce regulations, or the technical knowledge required for the UNRWA operations in the camp. A refugee residing in the Jabalia refugee camp told me during the interview:

“At the beginning of the establishment of the UNRWA, it had an authority inside the refugee camp...my grandfather told me that the dustmen, employed by the UNRWA to clean the streets, had the authority to cut off food supplies from refugees who threw trash in front of their house.” (*Abu Ayman, 2021, Interview 02*)

The UNRWA has given authority to its staff in order to exercise power and implement its policies on the ground. Thus, the UNRWA was able to act on the ground via its staff, who were refugees and residents of the camp at the same time. Employing critical realism’s ontological lens discussed in Chapter Two, the UNRWA can be seen as an organisation composed of its people, primarily refugees on the ground, and based on their roles, they regulate their relationship and act accordingly on behalf of the organisation (Elder-Vass, 2010). Thus, the governance power of the UNRWA is exercised via its incumbents’ roles, where the organisation’s policies and regulations co-determine how refugee staff act individually and interact with the external stakeholders, including other refugees in the camps. Those staff are also part of refugees’ normative social institutions where they interact with other refugees and transfer the governance power, which they acquired through their position in the UNRWA organisation, to their social structures.

By being seen as close to their plight and holding the power to alleviate suffering and provide services, the UNRWA and its refugee staff members have been considered responsible by the camp dwellers for providing for their needs and solving their problems and issues.

Nonetheless, the UNRWA has consistently avoided the assumed governance role, especially after complications arose from the rapid development of the camps into a “city-like” urban environment. Governance issues have been problematic for the UNRWA as the organisation failed to deal with the rapid urbanisation that transformed the camp tents into complex interwoven neighbourhoods (Hanafi, 2010). This has created what Hanafi (2010, p.6) termed as “phantom sovereignty” because the UNRWA’s mandate is strictly humanitarian, acting to provide temporary relief to the victimised refugee subjects, and at the same time, it is misunderstood by the camp dwellers who see the organisation to be responsible for managing their camp living space.

Even when catering mainly for relief efforts, the UNRWA has struggled to implement and control the provision of essential services in the refugee camps, as it suffered from diminishing funding and political challenges to its role. In the past three decades, especially after the establishment of the PNA, the UNRWA has been trying to transfer some of its responsibilities and services to local entities and municipalities. One of the interviewees in the Jabalia refugee camp told me a story of how the responsibility of managing the main rainwater collection pond in the camp has been transferred from the UNRWA to the Jabalia municipality, as he said:

“For example, there was a pool used to collect rainwater in the middle of the Jabalia refugee camp; it is called Abu Rashed pond. It was geographically formed because it was a low area. The UNRWA was responsible for this pond. The UNRWA created a water pump to pump water to other areas, paid for the fuel for this pump, and hired a guard to work there. Then they wanted to hand over this pool to the municipality. Initially, the municipality refused, fearing it would be accused of betrayal (by refugees). Then, the UNRWA made a deal with the municipality to be responsible for managing this pool. The deal was that the UNRWA would pay for the operational costs, such as the guard’s salary and the fuel for the water pump, while the municipality manages the pool, controls pumping

water to other areas, and can charge fees for these services. The municipality accepted that deal because it was in its own interests and was a chance to collect taxes or get donations from international donors. When the guard retired, the UNRWA didn't employ another. The European Union stopped providing the pool with fuel. Nowadays, the pool is full of water, which causes bad smells and mosquitoes in summer. I know this because I live near the pool and know the ex-guard and many details. When people ask the municipality to find a solution, it claims there is no fuel to run the water pump." (*Abu Ayman, 2021, Interview 02*).

There has been a shifting of responsibility and, thus, governance practices between the leading actors in the refugee camp. However, organisations acting in the camp always feared introducing proper planning or management of the space because of the political 'taboo' of normalising displacement and abandoning the right of return (Saleh, 2020). This 'taboo' is of a national political nature; it is associated with camp governance and development and has exacerbated the issues surrounding the organisation of camp spaces and the overall evolution of the urban environment in the refugee camps for all actors. One of the senior municipality staff of the Deir Al Balah refugee camp told me:

"The municipality does not have any roles inside the refugee camps because of former president Yasser Arafat's decision concerning the preservation of refugee camps as long as the refugee issue exists." (*Abu Ali, 2021, Interview 16*)

The refugee camp dwellers and the Palestinian political factions have always maintained the need for keeping the political identity of the refugee camp space, an identity that represents the misery of the displacement and is a manifestation of the Palestinian plight. Thus, any radical transformation to the buildings or structures in the refugee camps has been denounced mainly by the Palestinian political factions and refugees' representatives, which has left the camp susceptible to improvised evolution and fragmented governance.

One of the previous members of the PLO's Refugees Popular Committee explained to me

that while it is true that multi-storey buildings have erupted in the Jabalia refugee camp, these developments were not supposed to be seen in the camp because they are “politically dangerous evolutions” (*Abu Jamal, 2021, Interview 12*). It is also the stance of the Palestinian national political parties, who consider the development of refugee camps as a representation of the refugees' integration, which they refuse and consider as a risk that threatens the right to return.

Planning and development in the refugee camps have always been challenging for all actors. Because of the political ‘taboo’, the grand size of such development tasks, and the uncertainty in roles and responsibilities among the various actors in the camp, no official organisation has claimed support or endorsement for such responsibility. The UNRWA did not consider taking responsibility for this work, nor did the municipalities or the Refugees Popular Committee. One of the managers in the Jabalia municipality told me:

“Over the years, the UNRWA succeeded in managing the refugee camps and the affairs of refugees and providing relief aids, health and education services, and social services for refugees. This is in terms of humanitarian aid. However, the UNRWA did not contribute to the planning, expansion or development of the Jabalia refugee camp. I think that it is not the responsibility of the UNRWA to develop the refugee camp; it is the government’s or even higher international authorities duty to do so ... Any suggested plans to develop the refugee camp should insert the participation of the international community because all plans need huge financial funds to be implemented on the ground which cannot be afforded by the municipality or the government who are already in debts” *Abu Fadi, 2021*.

Refugee camps' development is costly and requires a longer-term funding commitment from donors, which contradicts the temporary nature of humanitarian funding. Besides the political caveats, municipalities did not have the financial resources to intervene in the

urban planning of refugee camps. I highlight the detailed role of local municipalities in the next subsection.

6.1.2 Local municipalities

Via functional responsibilities, political affiliation, and technical roles, municipalities and the Refugees Popular Committee acquired areas of action and governance in the refugee camps. Municipalities' role in the camps was introduced in the 1970s under the Israeli government's policies to integrate the camps into the cities and permanently resettle refugees in their camp spaces.

More specifically, in 1971, the Israeli Army started a military operation against the refugee camps in the Gaza Strip that included the main camps like Jabalia, Al Shati', and Al Nuseirat. The operation was implemented in the Jabalia Camp under the orders of Ariel Sharon, the head of the Israeli Army's southern command, who ordered the demolition of refugee houses and the opening of paved patrol roads to control freedom fighters in the camp (Abreek-Zubiedat & Nitzan-Shiftan, 2018). Part of this military plan was to build housing projects for refugees to facilitate their integration and control the congested refugee camps that had become breeding grounds for Palestinian resistance (Abreek-Zubiedat & Nitzan-Shiftan, 2018). Although the stated objective of the destruction and resettlement scheme was to reduce overcrowding and provide better urban planning, most of the refugees opposed the idea of leaving the camp. Abu Hasan from the Jabalia camp talked about this and said:

“They were settlement projects, meaning that you demolish your house in the camp and leave it, giving up your place as a refugee, and you are resettled in one of these areas and own the houses or lands through the Israeli Civil Administration. These projects were rejected by the residents because they support the Israeli occupation...There were never any difficult conditions (to obtain these houses) because people rejected the idea of leaving the camp on the grounds that it was a betrayal of the homeland and the refugee cause.” (Abu Hasan, 2021, Interview 09).

At these times in the late 1970s, municipal services were introduced to the camps as part of this plan. Municipalities, which operated outside camp areas, took over some of the services from the UNRWA, which included some water and sanitation services and the provision of electricity (Marx, 1992).

Since 1996, after the establishment of the PNA, refugees from the camp became more involved in municipalities' organisations via their representation in the neighbourhood committees. Neighbourhood committees were established by a decree from the PNA's Ministry of Local Government as subsidiaries of the municipalities in Palestinian cities and camps. These neighbourhood committees are supported by municipalities with the aim of representing neighbourhoods and forming social and service delivery functions that improve people's living conditions (Hanafi, 2010).

Until the date of conducting this research and before the October 2023 war, municipalities played a limited role in the camps by managing certain services, committees, and structures that represented the refugee population. For instance, in the Jabalia refugee camp, the municipality continued providing:

“Management of the rainwater drainages, sanitation services, lighting the streets of the camp and managing the main markets (Al-Awdah market, and Al Faluja market), which includes cleaning the streets of markets” (*Abu Fadi, 2021, Interview 04*)

Although municipalities provided technical services, municipal councils were politically affiliated. From the establishment of the PNA until 2006, municipal councils were affiliated with the PLO/Fateh. After 2006, the municipal councils became affiliated with Hamas. Nonetheless, the majority of the technical on-the-ground staff members remained the same, doing their functional organisational roles, and municipalities continued to operate under the umbrella of the PNA's Ministry of Local Governments.

Nonetheless, most of the refugees in the camp, especially the Jabalia camp, were discontented with the role of the municipality, arguing that it served mainly non-refugees

and had abandoned the camp. They argued that the municipality only wanted to collect fees and taxes from the camp and its markets without providing adequate services. Municipalities' role in the camps is also limited due to the sensitive political nature of these spaces. As suggested above, for the Palestinian political system and its associated authorities, preserving the camps as “temporary” is one of the means to declare and negotiate the need for a just solution for refugees. Misery in the camps represents the continued plight and injustice that refugees face, as their cause should be part of a political solution that the international community should pursue.

Although municipalities have limited roles because of their inability and unwillingness to get further involved in the camps, refugees established connections with the hosting municipalities. They utilised the national and Islamic political factions such as Fateh, Hamas and others to gain representation in neighbourhood committees and municipal councils. In addition, contrary to the situation in the West Bank, refugees in the Gaza Strip could participate in municipal elections (Hanafi, 2010), which provided them with some leverage to be part of the municipal organisation.

Under the Palestinian law, refugees enjoy the same legal status as non-refugees, despite that their camps are not recognised as neighbourhoods and thus are not regulated. All Palestinians also suffer from exceptions associated with the absence of full sovereign state protection. Nonetheless, they are entitled to participate in both national and municipal elections for the PNA. As noted by Jarrar (1998), eligibility for participating in elections is governed by the 1995 and 1996 electoral laws, which restrict voting rights to residents of Palestinian descent. Specifically, Article 10 of the 1995 law defines a 'Palestinian' as an individual who, or whose ancestors, was born in Palestine, provided they do not hold Israeli citizenship. Furthermore, Article 9 of the 1996 law stipulates that a voter must be a resident within the jurisdiction of the local authority where they are registered.

This scope and the fact that refugees can participate in elections under the PNA encompasses refugees residing in urban and cities settings as well as refugee camps. As I mentioned in the context chapter, about two-thirds of the Gaza Strip's population are

refugees residing across the various cities and camps. Thus, refugees' participation in the elections is considered important for the Palestinian political parties. This approach is seen to parallel Israel's practical strategy, initiated in the mid-1970s, of incorporating refugee camps into municipal boundaries to effectively assimilate them (Dahlan, 1990; Abreek-Zubiedat & Nitzan-Shiftan, 2018). This process has entailed extending some municipal services to the camps and realigning international aid to support this integration. However, this approach has been controversial and criticised by refugees and their representatives arguing it is functioning as a *de facto* policy of permanent settlement; through integrating refugees into host communities and threatening to undermine their specific rights and effectively negating the Right of Return (Jarrar, 1998). Nonetheless, refugees representatives and committees in the West Bank refugee camps took a decision not to participate in elections to safeguard their right to return. Thus, the Palestinian Central Elections Commission, the entity that organises and holds elections in the West Bank and Gaza, does not hold municipal elections in the West Bank refugee camps.

As refugees are part of the municipal organisation in the Gaza Strip in a certain way, although with a limited role, the UNRWA cooperated with and supported some municipalities to contribute to enhancing the infrastructure and living conditions of refugees in the camps. Although this coordination was mainly technical and did not involve large-scale transformation processes in the camps, political criticism arose around these efforts. Some political activists among the refugee community used to accuse these attempts of aiming at normalising displacement as a pathway for resettlement (Al-Tawteen), التوطين, and the abandonment of the right of return. In the interview with the Jabalia municipality staff member, he mentioned:

“There is no prospect of solving these complicated problems, and any suggested solution will be at the expense of the right to return. When anybody or authority wanted to build an apartment building in the camp, social media influencers said that these apartment buildings (multi-floor buildings) make the refugee camp into a city and the refugees may lose the

right of return and look as if they are settled in this area (the camp)” (*Abu Fadi, 2021, Interview 04*)

Ideally, refugees want their camps to remain under the administration of UNRWA. The participation of camps in municipal elections and large-scale construction projects and development of infrastructure have always been controversial and seen as a risk that could allow for the UNRWA to hand over its responsibility at a later stage and decrease its budget for the camps without a permanent solution for the refugees’ issue. In particular, some opposition and suspicions arose around the construction that makes the camp similar to a normal city in Gaza. Even in the past couple of decades, particular criticism was given to these building projects, which brought in fancy finishing and commercial aspects. However, this was not always the case with all camp enhancement attempts. As I discuss in Chapter Seven, refugees have recently recognised the need for infrastructure enhancement and improvement in their camps, provided reassurance is given about the intentions and purposes of these projects.

6.1.3 Refugees Popular Committee

The governance practice has also expanded to include a significant entity in the camp, the Refugees Popular Committee. There has been much debate and criticism of this organisation's role and mandate in the refugee camps, especially after the political division between Fateh and Hamas in the Gaza Strip when Hamas took over the authority in 2007. Scholars argue that the Refugees Popular Committee is the most influential and powerful actor in terms of governance in the Palestinian refugee camps, especially in Lebanon and Palestine (Hanafi, 2010).

The PLO had been attempting to establish governance structures in the refugee camps to deliver services, facilitate UNRWA operations, resolve conflicts that arise, and represent the camp dwellers to external actors. Through its Department of Refugee Affairs (DORA), the PLO facilitated the establishment of the Refugees Popular Committee in refugee camps after demands and discontent from refugees against the PNA in the mid-1990s (Hanafi, 2010). The Popular Committee, sometimes called Popular Service Committee, stemmed

from their predecessors, the Union of Youth Activities Centres (YAC), established earlier by the UNRWA to promote popular participation and youth engagement as social relief centres, in the Palestinian refugee camps (Hanafi, 2010; Alazzeah, 2023).

The PNA was established to govern the West Bank and the Gaza Strip after the Oslo Accords, signed between the PLO and Israel in 1993. There had been suggestions in the political discussions that the PNA should either annexe refugee camps to existing municipalities or create separate governing bodies that operated under the authority and sponsorship of the PNA's Ministry of Local Governments (Alazzeah, 2023). These suggestions were strictly refused by refugee activists and their political movements, who saw the PNA as another "host country", and mobilised themselves through the YAC either to reject both the normalisation of refugee camps and the relinquishing of their right to return (Alazzeah, 2023).

According to Alazzeah (2023), this refugee political movement sought to mobilise a grassroots challenge to the leadership of the newly established PNA. These committees defined their primary objective as unifying Palestinians behind the "right to return" as an inherent political right, while explicitly opposing any initiatives favouring resettlement, integration into host countries, including the camps in Palestinian territories under the PNA. These refugee committees insisted that the PLO is their sole legitimate representative and advocated for better living standards in camps and the protection of UNRWA, asserting the agency's role as a symbol of international obligation to the refugees (Alazzeah, 2023).

The Palestinian refugees exercised pressure using the leverage of their roles within the social structures and organisations of the Palestinian community, which included their participation in the PLO and political factions. They mobilised in their YAC, Women's Centres, and Services Centres, which were established by the UNRWA for functional and technical purposes, to exercise political pressure and pushed the PLO to create the Refugees Popular Committee in refugee camps, thus preserving the exceptional nature and temporary status of the camp space until achieving a just solution for their cause. Abu Jamal, from the Refugees Popular Committee in Jabalia, told me during the interview that:

“The Popular Committee was established in 1996 to avoid the side effects of the Oslo Accords on the refugees. The Popular Committee does not provide services for the refugees. They have political aims to keep the refugees’ cause and to refuse any resettlement project. In July 1995, the heads of services and sports clubs (YAC) in the refugee camp set up a conference to elect a Popular Committee in each refugee camp.” (*Abu Jamal, 2021, Interview 12*)

Traditionally, before establishing the Refugees Popular Committee, other refugee committees in the camps were composed of elite social figures and notables. Those notables had cultural and social capital, and they were usually approached by the UNRWA and political authorities controlling the camps to facilitate refugee cooperation and resolve conflicts. The role of those notables, like elder leaders of clans (Mukhtar) مختار, was one of the most important and influential in the refugee camps. As discussed in Chapter Five, social and cultural capital for the Palestinian refugees was preserved via the spatial arrangement that allowed them to recover and recreate their original villages' social connections and customs. Based on the findings of this research, I suggest that the spatial dimension of grouping refugees in specific spaces largely contributed to reproducing their identity and norms, which preserved the role of the community's elderly and leaders, among the refugee community.

The refugees respected their community leaders, particularly in the early decades of displacement, as they played an influential role in their communities. Thus, they substantially preserved discipline and stability in the refugees’ community. During my fieldwork, I met with Abu Mohsen, a refugee from Jabalia camp who had an early experience with refugee community leaders and, at the same time, was a senior UNRWA staff member. He told me that:

“In the past, refugee committees included educated and elderly people... Imams and elderly people ruled the refugee committees. Those people led the society and demanded that the Israeli government meet the

refugees' needs. They also demanded that the UNRWA provide some services, such as hygiene services. Most of their requirements were fulfilled in the past, unlike the current committee (Popular Committee), which cannot fulfil the refugees' demands." (*Abu Mohsen, 2021, Interview 15*)

The Refugees Popular Committee, established after the PNA, came under broad criticism after the political division in Gaza in 2007, where the de facto government (affiliated with Hamas) established a parallel refugees popular committee to impose control on the camps. The new parallel popular committee served as an intermediary between the municipalities and refugees. However, it failed to establish relationships with the UNRWA or international donors due to concerns about legitimacy and political affiliation. The new parallel Hamas-affiliated popular committee did not oppose the camps' integration into the city's neighbourhoods, claiming that this did not undermine the right to return and was not against international resolutions (Hanafi, 2010).

Since the creation of this parallel Refugees Popular Committee, governance structures have become more fragmented, and the work and mandate of the different Refugees Popular Committees have caused ambiguity in understanding the lines that separate different authorities. The committees attempted to fill the gaps by undertaking work that neither UNRWA nor the municipality was doing, without apparent technical reference or guidance. In an interview, a PLO Popular Committee member expressed concerns about the new Popular Committee collecting fees to "license" the expansion of buildings in the camp (Interview 12), while other interviewees accused the committees of being fully aligned with their political party and thus trying to impose particular political visions in the camp (Interview 01, Interview 04).

In general, the governance of refugee camps in the Gaza Strip has been problematic and can be described as fragmented. As presented above, the fragmented governance actions in the refugee camps have been negotiated between technicality and politics. Various actors in the refugee camps practised some governance that goes beyond traditional notions of sovereignty, which is absent in the Palestinian case. Thus, authority and power have been

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distributed via daily processes and interactions rather than imposed from above. Power shifted between the UNRWA, political representations, and community representations, where each of them preserved its unique niche for action and, at the same time, did not step further into areas with vacant authority and management. Primarily in terms of spatial improvement, this fragmented governance has necessitated that refugees must improvise better solutions to accommodate themselves. This has contributed to creating and exacerbating social and economic effects of refugees' actions, which in turn have reshaped the spatial arrangements in the camps.

There has been a reciprocal relationship between the causal factors associated with fragmented governance and the shaping of the socio-spatial structures of the refugee camps, under the paradoxical camp environment. Political and social structures have influenced governance and exacerbated fragmentation. These conditions have affected the living conditions and daily lives of refugees living in the camps. Many experts assert that the unplanned and ungoverned developments have caused struggles for refugees and deteriorated housing conditions and the overall camp space. In their report on the housing conditions and the upgrading of refugee camps in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, Badawi and Waltz (2014) described the refugee camps in Gaza as:

“Deserts of stone and sand, no green, no court, no garden and no tree even. Each centimetre is built up for shelter. Ventilation, safety, and emergency needs were not respected” (Badawi & Waltz, 2014, p.60)

They note that the inability and unwillingness of camp actors to regulate and govern building practices have created large disparities within the camps, as households with higher incomes gained a better ability to ‘plan’ and build more adequate shelters, enjoying better living conditions. As I discussed above, the political conditions and the exceptional spatial measures in camps have complicated their governance. This precarious fluid situation has shaped living conditions and reproduced socio-spatial structures, which I will present and discuss in the next section.

6.2 Living conditions and the interwoven socio-spatial effects

The continuous interactions between the various structures in the refugee camps have reshaped the camps' spaces and living conditions. This thesis argues that there has been a two-way cause-and-effect relationship between interwoven socio-spatial dynamics and their impacts.¹⁵

I highlighted in the previous chapter, Chapter Five, that the camps originated with an emergency “humanitarian situation” characterised by a juridico-political “state of exception” imposed on the Palestinian population, and especially refugees in the camps. Conditions from the state of exception continued for a prolonged period, creating a situation of indefinite temporariness that reshaped social relations and living conditions. This has evolved into a protracted long-term humanitarian management or a “humanitarian condition,” which, in turn, has resulted in conflicting and contradictory modes of living. These circumstances have significantly impacted the development of living spaces and social interactions, producing what I term a “state of paradox.”

Despite these contradictions, the fragmentation of governance, and the continued geopolitical tension that rendered Palestinians in Gaza subject to recurrent escalation of conflicts, refugees recovered and built their own normality in their camp living space. In this section, I present and discuss how living conditions, in terms of the refugee/non-refugee relationship, economic development, and the population density and overcrowding, were influenced by the socio-spatial dynamics and this governance configuration, as part of the reciprocal relationship.

6.2.1 Refugee/non-refugee relations

In the early years of displacement, the economy was ravaged across the Gaza Strip, where both refugees and non-refugees suffered from poverty and lack of access to jobs or income. This is because the 1948 war cut off the Gaza Strip from its markets of trade and its agricultural supplies, which were largely reliant on the many villages in the Gaza District that

¹⁵ I provide a summary diagram for this relationship in the conclusion chapter, Chapter Eight.

became part of the State of Israel in 1948 (Cheal, 1988). At these times, there have been no significant economic differences between refugees and non-refugees or different social classes in the community of the Gaza Strip. A large percentage of the population needed humanitarian assistance. At the same time, refugees and non-refugees shared the same political and economic struggle and, thus, the same normative social institutions as part of the deprived community in Gaza.

As discussed in Chapter Five, shared social norms between refugees and non-refugees, along with the support provided by non-refugees and humanitarian aid, enabled refugees to recover their social structures and practices. However, this supportive social structure started to break down a few years later. The establishment of the UNRWA and its continued support to refugees by the provision of aid material and services created competition over humanitarian aid and debate about entitlement to it. The poor non-refugees in the Gaza Strip saw themselves as eligible for humanitarian assistance (Cheal, 1988) even though the UNRWA was clear that it focuses its services and relief efforts on the refugees. Thus, the majority of aid and humanitarian support was provided based on the status of displacement. This has been manifested in the UNRWA services as the agency provided what was termed by refugees to be “luxurious” services while overlooking the needs of the poor non-refugees, whose livelihoods were severely affected by the war.

The competition for aid created a certain level of sensitivity between refugees and non-refugees. Abu Ayman, from the Jabalia camp, highlighted the situation at that time as he said:

“I mentioned before that the UNRWA used to provide luxurious services such as tobacco, cigarettes, and kerosene lamps to refugees. This has made the poor non-refugees try to reach out to the UNRWA’s registration centres, claiming that they are refugees to get access to these luxury services...At that period of time, this has created some sensitivity between refugees and non-refugees.” *(Abu Ayman, 2021, Interview 02)*

This tension has also transferred to various organisations and normative social institutions that compose the social dynamics in the refugee camp environment. Both refugees and non-refugees competed over governance and roles in municipalities and the Palestinian political parties. Such tension, which was built on classification and displacement status, was somewhat contained by the broader normative social institutions, including political parties and the shared Palestinian community's customs and norms, that call for patriotic notions of the Palestinian collective identity, shared struggle, and social solidarity.

However, some manifestations of that tension were emphasised in daily practices and interactions. For instance, marriage relationships between refugees and non-refugees were not common during the first few decades of the exodus. In addition, tension arose regarding the governance of specific spaces and organisations, such as the questions raised about who should be the mayor of a certain municipality and how roles between refugees and non-refugees should be distributed. Such considerations, based on displacement status, have always been taken into account in the discussions and decisions of various governing authorities. In recent decades, such considerations have faded as collective awareness of the shared struggle and social integration has been fostered. Abu Fadi, from the Jabalia municipality, talked about this:

“This is a very sensitive and critical issue. I think that the citizens (non-refugees) are envious of the refugees for having authority, jobs, international aid, and donations. While the refugees envy the citizens for owning their pieces of land and so on. I think that the main reason for this issue is the lack of awareness and knowledge that creates a gap between the refugees and non-refugees. I believe that we are all one people living together in one place.” (*Abu Fadi, 2021, Interview 04*)

Distinctions between refugees and non-refugees gradually faded throughout time. Both have shared the same political struggles and aspired for self-determination and statehood. The existence of a higher common goal and the homogeneity of customs and religion helped refugees better integrate with non-refugees. Relationships were particularly enhanced due

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to kinship ties resulting from marriage and the daily economic interactions between the two groups. The enhanced economic status promoted trade between refugees and non-refugees. In large camps like Jabalia, the high density and central location have promoted economic investment from non-refugees within the camp, as I explain in the next subsection.

6.2.2 Economic developments in the camps

The economic conditions of refugees and the Gaza population in general started to improve in the early 1970s. After the 1967 war, Israel took control of the Gaza Strip. The Israeli Government's policy at that time aimed to integrate refugees into their surrounding community in Gaza, where the creation of economic opportunities was an integral part of that policy. As a result, the Gaza Strip's economic output was enhanced between the 1970s and 1980s, when many of the Gaza labour force were allowed to work in Israeli cities (Roy, 1987; Marx, 1992). In other words, the economy of Gaza at that period could be described as an auxiliary to that of Israel (Roy, 1987). Refugees utilised the good income from their work in Israel and the remittances from their relatives who started working in the Gulf countries in the 1970s to expand and build their permanent houses.

The period from the 1970s to the first uprising (Intifadah) in 1987 witnessed a significant boost in the refugee economy in Gaza, marked by major changes to the morphology of the refugee camps. Roy (1987) highlighted that residential construction absorbed most of the capital investment of the Gaza population and accounted for 85 per cent of the total capital in the Gaza Strip in that period. Abu Basil from Deir Al Balah mentioned:

“Since the 1970s, the refugee camps started to change. This was mainly because of economic reasons. At that time, the refugees started to work in Israel, which improved the financial income of the refugees, which caused the change.”. (*Abu Basil, 2021, Interview 13*)

The fact that refugees enjoyed the same legal rights as non-refugees in terms of the ability to purchase and own properties outside the camp has been a main causal factor that

enabled refugees to expand beyond the camp space, particularly for those who had the financial capacity and desire to leave the camp.

Nonetheless, land and property exchange within the camp is a complex issue and was also a major determinant of how these camps evolved economically and spatially. As explained in Chapter Three, recognised refugee camps are situated on land that is either public or leased from private landowners. Consequently, refugees do not hold legal title to the plots beneath their shelters; instead, they retain only the right of usage (referred to as the right of benefit) for residential purposes (UNRWA, 2025b). While this right is legally defined as temporary and non-transferable (NRC, 2015), the permanence of the refugee issue has established a *de facto* system of inheritance. In practice, usage rights have become inheritable assets passed down to the descendants of original refugees (NRC, 2015). Over time, this has evolved into an informal real estate market driven by overcrowding, density and economic potential, as explained below. Residents frequently monetise their shelter assets by selling these 'rights to benefit' to others, including those from outside the camps, treating the usage right as a tradable commodity despite the absence of formal land ownership.

The UNRWA possessed no formal sovereign or administrative authority over camp land. However, initially, the agency maintained strict oversight of plot allocation and residency; but, this capacity eroded over time as the agency lost the ability to track the increasingly complex web of informal transactions and relocations (NRC, 2015). Consequently, a disconnect emerged between the temporary use of the land and reality, in which refugees treated plots as private, alienable property. This has blurred the distinction between the right to benefit and complete ownership, inevitably leading to property disputes that are addressed through a complex legal framework involving both the formal Palestinian judiciary and customary dispute-resolution mechanisms (NRC, 2015).

The Israeli Government's plan for the camps included military action to reduce congestion and the population in the refugee camps, which became a stronghold of Palestinian

resistance after the 1967 war. As discussed above, the plan included carving wide roads to be used by the Israeli military for security and patrol reasons, and the suppression of the Palestinian resistance. This resulted in the widening of the main roads in the camps, while the backstreets and inner areas have continued to get narrower, as described earlier. The plan was implemented in the large camps of Jabalia, Al-Shati, Khan Younis, and Rafah, through the demolition of approximately 3,941 refugee houses (Dahlan, 1990). This carving of roads was intended to cut the urban fabric of the camps, fragment resistance and impose spatial control and restrictions on refugees dwelling in these camps (Saleh, 2020). The shape of these long, wide spaces, carved for military purposes, did not match with organically evolved camp spaces. However, they created an opportunity for opening communal ways and proper functional streets.

More specifically, in the Jabalia refugee camp, these streets played a significant role afterwards in making the camp a commercial centre for the northern area. The Jabalia camp benefited from its central location between the main Gaza City and the northern towns and villages. Commuters between the towns of Beit Lahia and Beit Hanoun and the village of Umm al-Nasr heading to Gaza City or vice versa usually pass through the Jabalia camp. The wider roads, opened by the Israeli military, became used for transportation. Their fronts gradually transformed to accommodate a wide range of shops and services. The high density and agglomeration of a large population in the camp, coupled with the concentration of UNRWA services and the functional infrastructure of roads and markets, attracted investments to the refugee camps to cater for the population's needs in the area.

Conversely, these conditions are not present in the Deir Al Balah camp, which is relatively limited in its prospects and evolution. This is because, as discussed previously, the Deir Al Balah camp is located in a relatively remote area, and the UNRWA services are not concentrated in the camp, as the road infrastructure is not adequate. One of the interviewees from Deir Al Balah told me that developing the Deir Al Balah camp starts with developing the main street at the seafront (see Photo 6.1 below), as this street would provide

the needed infrastructure to tradespeople and investors to launch economic activities and businesses that would benefit the camp (Abu Samer, 2021, Interview 32).



Photo 6.1 Showing the Deir Al Balah camp main street to the left, with a UN fencing wall for a school to the right.

Photo taken by the researcher on 20 February 2021

Economic growth and development were interrupted by the 1987 uprising. The years of this uprising were marked by limited economic activities due to Palestinian labour strikes, protests and demonstrations, conflicts, and curfews, as a form of economic warfare waged by Israel (Gabriel, 1988). However, a relative stability was brought about by the Oslo Accords and the inception of the PNA in 1994, which boosted commercial and economic activities in the Gaza Strip. The high demand, functional infrastructure, and the virtue of location fostered construction and trade in Jabalia camp. Businesspeople and traders came to the camp, bought refugee houses at the forefront of the wider roads, demolished them, and built multi-storey buildings with shops, flats, and offices.

During my fieldwork, I met with Abu Adam, one of the leading real estate developers and businessmen in Jabalia camp. I asked him about the developments happening on the main roads of the camp, and he mentioned that:

“There are upmarket areas where houses are worth millions of dollars...The population density in the Jabalia refugee camp is very high. Unlike the other refugee camps in the Gaza Strip, the Jabalia refugee camp is considered the centre of the northern area, including Beit Hanoun, Beit Lahia, and Umm al-Nasr village. In the centre of the Jabalia refugee camp, you can find markets, health clinics, schools, and government institutions. People from all areas around the Jabalia refugee camp go there to get different services. I consider the Jabalia refugee camp to be an economically independent country. People from all areas in the Gaza Strip launched commercial businesses in the Jabalia refugee camp. Also, the Jabalia refugee camp has the largest area and the highest population density of the refugee camps in the Gaza Strip.” *(Abu Adam, 2021, Interview 27)*

Abu Adam’s quote represents a “city-like” description of the camp, portraying a transient displacement place that nevertheless can offer what any other city in Gaza can do. It is a city that is becoming in the camp through the organisation of space, social and economic life, and the interplay of power dynamics, all of which have been established in the transient context (Agier, 2002). The social interactions in the camp, the buildings and infrastructure, the services and the economy resembled those of other cities, or at least in some parts of it.

The main cities in the Gaza Strip are administrative centres belonging to governorates and municipalities, such as Gaza City and Khan Younis City. These cities are characterised by high-density residential buildings, active commercial and transport centres, and municipal governance. It has a large number of high-rise residential buildings rather than horizontal sprawl, with a concentration of services like hospitals, schools and private businesses. Camps became similar to those cities of the Gaza Strip, although they remained administratively distinct and were managed through fragmented authority among UNRWA, municipalities, and refugee committees. City-similar clan-related social structures developed in the camps; homogeneous cultures existed; economies and trade replicated those in other cities; and the same building materials were used for the camps' construction

and infrastructure. However, camps remained informal, politically unrecognised as neighbourhoods, and a temporary “conceived space” for the UNRWA and municipalities, with an everlasting emergency purpose.

I used to live in Beit Hanoun, near the Jabalia camp. My daily routine required frequent movement from and to the camp, either to reach Gaza City for work or study or to visit friends and go shopping in the camp. I always felt and witnessed the sense of the city in the camp, as even more crowded, vibrant, and intimate than other cities in Gaza. The camp dwellers and visitors capture this sense, but it was not translated at levels of authority and governance, as discussed in the previous section and throughout this thesis. The UNRWA, local authorities, political parties, and Refugee Committees considered the camp a temporary spatial arrangement despite the longevity of its existence. This has limited planned development and preserved the misery in large parts of the space, representing its continued exception and inherited features from the “humanitarian situation”. Infrastructure interventions were mainly ad hoc and did not cater to the growing population's needs. Throughout time, the camp transcended some of its exceptions and moved towards a “humanitarian condition” in many aspects, but it did not become a completely ‘normal’ living space like other cities or neighbourhoods. Contradictions arose from the interactions between the various socio-spatial structures that created and evolved the living space in the camp, bringing normality amidst the precariousness of humanitarian management and the continued fluctuation of geopolitical conditions, thereby reproducing the socio-spatial state of paradox.

Under such temporary-permanent circumstances, and the periods of “humanitarian situation” and the “humanitarian condition”, refugees have invested in their living spaces, and the camps have evolved accordingly. The photo below, Photo 6.2, which I took in 2017 before engaging in this research, shows vibrant commercial activities in one of the main streets of the Jabalia refugee camp.



Photo 6.2 Vibrant activities in one of the main streets of the Jabalia camp in 2017

Picture taken by the researcher in 2017

6.2.3 Overcrowding and social problems

The vibrant commercial activity in Jabalia's main roads and outskirt areas, and the aesthetic it conveys, is primarily associated with the infrastructure and materiality of buildings, trade opportunities, and services, which are not present in the internal alleys of the camp. As argued in Chapter Five, camps are in a "state of paradox", which results in contradictions in the morphology of space and living conditions. Just behind the Jabalia camp's main roads are the internal alleys with miserable shelter conditions and decayed infrastructure. This is the ordinary scenery of refugee camps in the Gaza Strip. These conditions also persisted in the Jabalia refugee camp's internal alleys, resembling the refugees' exceptional spatial conditions. As camps evolved on the surface, they continue to suffer from exceptions associated with improvisation, resulting in increasingly overcrowded, poor conditions. To a lesser extent, relatively similar situations can be spotted outside the camp area. However, the differences and paradoxes in the camp are more stark and more apparent, and the deterioration of the poorer blocks in the camps is much worse than that of poor

neighbourhoods in out-of-camp areas. Abu Adam, the real estate developer in the camp, explained:

“The refugees are facing severe living conditions. Another constructor and I have tried to decorate (renovate) the outskirts of the Jabalia refugee camp. The internal area of the Jabalia refugee camp faces severe conditions during the winter; it faces rainwater floods. The infrastructure there is weak, and all the refugees suffer from hard living conditions because of poverty and unemployment. This limits urban developments.” (*Abu Adam, 2021, Interview 27*)

One of the impacts of these exceptional spatial conditions, imposed on refugees since the introduction of the “state of exception” after the 1948 war that rendered them outcasts, confined, and restricted, is the issue of overcrowding. Overcrowding has been a major problem in refugee camps, which has produced social and economic impacts. Identifying the issue of overcrowding is relatively subjective to the context. It can be measured by the number of persons occupying one room. For instance, families with three or more individuals in one room are considered to be living in overcrowded housing (Dahlan, 1987). Alternatively, according to the Sphere Humanitarian Standards (2018), in emergency shelters, each person should have at least an occupancy area of 3.5 square metres, excluding the cooking space, bathing area, and sanitary facilities.

Between 1992 and 1993, the Norwegian Institute for Applied Social Science (FAFO), with funds from the Norwegian Foreign Ministry, conducted a survey of the living conditions of the Palestinians in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip as part of Norway's entry efforts into the peace process in the Middle East. The survey indicated that family structures were seeing transformation, with more nuclear families staying in the same house with their extended families, resulting in overcrowded conditions reaching 40 per cent in Gaza's refugee camps and towns (Zureik, 1993).

Overcrowded conditions have deteriorated over the past decades. The manifestation of overcrowding can be twofold, at the household level and the community/area level (Marshy 1999, AFSC, 2014). On the one hand, as suggested above, it is an issue at the household level, represented by an increased number of persons living in smaller substandard housing units. The unplanned, improvised expansion of refugees' houses in the camps has created large, concrete, substandard neighbourhoods crowded with refugee families that expanded horizontally and vertically. In their report on the housing conditions and upgrading of the refugee camps in Palestine, Badawi and Waltz (2014) described the situation of overcrowding and density in the refugee camps in the Gaza Strip in 2010, as follows:

“What a situation! The Camps are horribly overcrowded, about 255,000 people more. The families are suffering. Nearly all of them were forced to build up more two floors, even if the construction was not very safe. Most of them were built up from asbestos, with zinc roofs and look very provisional. Some of the families spent all their money, sold all the gold, only to have a roof over all heads of their growing families. Everywhere children, no space to sit and to relax. Many houses are yet not finished. People live surrounded by concrete walls and with minimally furnished kitchen and bathrooms. Who could buy the expensive tiles for floors and walls? No plaster, no tiles, sometimes no window glass. Six persons per room have become more and more normal. All these building activities took place without planning or official permissions. Still the UNRWA rules the Camps. Provision with food has again become a big item in the Camps. The PNA could not find an agreement with UNRWA — they remain responsible for the miserable. The so-called peace process has been stopped completely. Gaza Region lives in a kind of status quo — no political changes, neither into worse nor into better” (Badawi & Waltz, 2014, p.60)

Municipalities in the Gaza Strip are responsible for regulating planning and buildings in the non-camp areas. In the camps, as I discussed in the previous section, no entity took such

responsibility, and this has been left to refugees themselves to organise. This has exacerbated the poor conditions of refugee houses and shelters.

On the other hand, overcrowding at the community level is manifested by the lack of access to public spaces, crowded school classrooms and health clinics. The statistics from the UNRWA (2023) education baseline report show that overcrowding in schools is a serious problem, for example. The report indicates that around 65 per cent of school classes have more than 40 students, and around 80 per cent of schools run on double or three shifts to accommodate the increasing number of refugee pupils. Another example of overcrowding at the community level in the refugee camps can be seen in the health clinics. Despite being renovated in 2012 with more capacity added, the UNRWA health clinic in the Jabalia refugee camp is run by 16 doctors and 25 nurses, and it serves an average of 2000 persons per day, with each doctor seeing more than 100 patients (AFSC, 2014).

Overcrowding also has subjective interpretations and can be articulated via how people sense it and express their perceptions when reporting a lack of privacy and not having enough space in homes, schools, clinics, and community spaces (AFSC, 2014). It is also subjective because its measurement varies between regions and countries according to cultural and social differences (Marshy, 1999). Nonetheless, scholars, research institutions, and independent studies confirm that it is a significant issue in the refugee camps in the Gaza Strip, as there are several determinants that contribute to the issue, which can be analysed from social, spatial, economic, and political perspectives.

Socially, overcrowding is caused by increased refugee numbers and the natural growth of the population, which is combined with a strong tendency of refugees not to leave the camps. Thus, the refugees' extended families expanded their houses and presence in the camp, utilising the camp's limited space. Refugees do not move outside the camp because they are attached to it. For them, the camp resembles the home that they lost. It is a new home, and they use its space to recover their identity and reproduce their norm circles. The camp space has been used by the first generation of refugees, and later on, their extended

families to reproduce social, cultural, and political norms. The norms represent their original village before displacement and their collective identity as Palestinian refugees.

Nevertheless, many refugees in this research expressed paradoxical feelings toward the camp space. It is true that they are attached to the space, to their social norms, and identity in the camp, but at the same time, some refugees aspire to leave the camp to create a better future and prospects. Moreover, those who left the camp are also still connected to that space, keen to visit whenever they can, feeling the intimacy and belonging. For refugees, the camp is a representation of their just cause, it is part of their identity, and they proudly call themselves the daughters and sons of the camp, "ابن/ بنت المخيم". I met with one of the refugees from Deir Al Balah who moved to live outside the camp, and he told me that:

“The Deir Al Balah refugee camp is like a paradise for me. I used to have a small house of 60 square meters. This house consisted of two floors. I built the second floor because I was refusing to leave the Deir Al Balah refugee camp because of the social harmony and companionship there. Nowadays, I live outside the Deir Al Balah refugee camp, but I go there every day to hang out with friends in the camp. I do not have any social connections in the area where I live. All my social connections are in the Deir Al Balah refugee camp.” (*Abu Omar, 2021, Interview 22*)

The refugee camp space is limited, and the initial spatial arrangements in the camp did not account for natural growth or the cultural aspects of the refugees. Thus, whenever there was an opportunity and capacity, refugees would improvisationally construct their houses, expanding beyond the original plot of land allocated to them by the UNRWA. They occupied public spaces and any open, non-built areas without planning or supervision. The refugees expanded their original shelters, provided by the UNRWA, horizontally and then vertically until the camp ran out of space. This practice has created multiple interwoven layers of concrete buildings that have the main functionality of accommodating the increased number of refugee generations and their extended families living in paradoxical conditions

of intimacy and misery. Monzer, from the Shelter Cluster¹⁶ in Palestine, explained to me how such spatial camp arrangements continued to affect living conditions and contributed to the overcrowding in refugee camps:

“The refugees are limited to living in the geographical area that was assigned since establishing the refugee camps. For example, in refugee camps, families that consist of 10-12 members live in small houses that do not exceed 60 square meters. However, we do not see this in other areas in the Gaza Strip. The refugee camps are set by the UNRWA. It is responsible for managing them and providing services such as hygiene services. The infrastructure of the refugee camps is weak, the houses are built in limited areas, and there are no open spaces.” (*Monzer, 2021, Interview 26*)

From an economic perspective, financial capacity played an essential role in expanding refugee houses and the ability to build upwards. As I explained earlier, refugees had the opportunity to work in Israel and the Gulf countries in the 1970s and 1980s, where they used most of their income to build houses for their extended family in the camp. In addition, it was more feasible for refugees to expand on the same plot of the camp land provided to them by the UNRWA. A large proportion of the refugees, despite having good incomes at certain periods of time, could not afford to buy pieces of land or flats outside the refugee camp. Thus, they stayed in the camp and invested in housing there for economic reasons, which contributed to increased density in the camp. One of the UNRWA staff who is a refugee and

¹⁶ Shelter Cluster in Palestine operates under the Global Shelter Cluster as part of the coordination mechanisms for humanitarian aid. According to the Global Shelter Cluster (GSC) website, the GSC “is an Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) coordination mechanism that supports people affected by disasters and internally displaced people affected by conflict with the means to live in safe, dignified and appropriate shelter. The GSC enables better coordination among shelter actors, including local and national governments, so that people who need shelter assistance get help faster and receive the right kind of support.” Source: <https://sheltercluster.org/resource/about-us>

used to live in a refugee camp, told me about being able to move outside the camp when he gained enough income. He said:

“The refugees believe that they were destined to become refugees, and the refugee camps are their current homelands. The refugees have no trust in politicians. The refugees are forced to deal with their destiny and the fact of being refugees, and they start to move to live outside the refugee camps. I used to live in a refugee camp, when my living conditions (financial capacity) became better, I moved to live outside the refugee camp. I sold my camp house to another refugee from a different refugee camp.” (*Abu Mohammad, 2021, Interview 29*)

From a different perspective, it is evident that overcrowding and the increase in population density have created economic opportunity and demand for services. In the case of the Jabalia refugee camp, these opportunities are fostered by the camp's unique geographical location, the centralisation of service provision from the UN and other service providers, and the functional transport links in the camp. Such high density attracted investors from outside the camp, as explained earlier in this chapter.

Overcrowding has contributed to an increase in many health, social and psychological problems for refugees in the camp. Conditions associated with the overcrowded living environment, such as inadequate ventilation, lack of access to sunlight, humid walls and roofs, limited privacy, and lack of access to recreational spaces, are linked to increased domestic violence (Haysom & elSarraj, 2012; AFSC, 2014) and deteriorated health conditions, especially those related to respiratory illness (Marshy, 1999). Educational attainment has been negatively impacted by overcrowding in both schools and homes. Increased numbers of students in the classroom and the lack of privacy and adequate space at home have undermined children's ability to concentrate, which has contributed to rising numbers of school drop-out and increased incidents of family and peer violence at school (Marshy, 1999; Haysom & elSarraj, 2012).

In the past two decades, overcrowding and deteriorated economic conditions have put strains on social relations in refugee households and the refugee camp community. Many participants in this research highlighted the issue of high population density and overcrowding, and their impact on living conditions in the refugee camps. They reported a weakening of social connections because of increased incidents of disputes resulting from overcrowding, which is affecting all the camps in the Gaza Strip. One of the youths I interviewed in Jabalia mentioned:

“My grandparents used to tell me about the past life in the Jabalia refugee camp, and all the refugees were living in harmony. There were no social defects, no sexual harassment, or house robbery. One day in the past, all refugees stayed up late hanging out together to watch TV or listen to the radio. All the refugees supported each other in social ceremonies. Life in the Jabalia refugee camp was great. I think all of that has changed. The Jabalia refugee camp is extremely crowded now, and the economic situation has deteriorated, and some of its residents have lost manners and respect. There are crimes and robberies now. The Jabalia refugee camp has been sabotaged.” (*Yamen, 2021, Interview 20*)

In Deir Al Balah, Abu Samy, a previous resident of the Deir Al Balah camp and civil society activist, mentioned:

“The Deir Al-Balah refugee camp is about to have a ‘population explosion’ (due to overcrowding conditions). It is about to face many social problems and poverty. All the refugee camps are about to explode. The unemployment rate is very high. Many of the refugees have graduated and have no jobs. The unmarried rate (for men and women) is very high. I can see no vision for the Deir Al-Balah refugee camp.” (*Abu Samy, 2021, Interview 14*)

Also, Abu Nader from Jabalia camp, who manages an NGO that provides services to refugee community in the camp, affirms that:

“Overcrowding in the Jabalia refugee camp has caused problems that we can’t find anywhere else. There is severe poverty among refugees in the Jabalia refugee camp, the bad living conditions that they live in, and not having public spaces and parks have made them lack hope and aspirations. They are depressed and living in despair.” (*Abu Nader, 2021, Interview 10*)

The provisional nature of the camp space entailed that refugees built and expanded based on need rather than having individual plans for the future of the housing unit or an officially organised plan for the entire camp space. This has contributed to determining the current spectacle and exacerbated overcrowding issues. These expansions of houses have rendered the camps with no or minimal open space. Saleh (2021) has classified these few open spaces in the refugee camps in Gaza into four types: streets used for transportation and socio-economic activities; pedestrian alleyways around the houses; some few open spaces resulted from Israeli destruction or those areas unbuilt on because of low topography; and scattered pockets of space that are only pedestrian accessible.

The issues associated with overcrowding in both refugees’ open community spaces and houses, and the increased number of refugees, put the UNRWA and its services under pressure. The agency did not have enough capacity to deal with the needs of the increased refugee population. As reported by refugee participants and the UNRWA staff I interviewed, funding to UNRWA was limited. It did not grow proportionally with the required ratio to accommodate the increasing needs of refugees. Geopolitical constraints have been put on the agency to limit its services. In many instances, Western governments' humanitarian funds provided to the agency have been utilised as tools for political pressure in the Palestinian geopolitical context. Abu Samer, from the Refugees Popular Committee in Deir Al Balah, talked about the issue of overcrowding and how it affected the work of the UNRWA, as he mentioned:

“Nowadays, the number of refugees in the Deir Al-Balah refugee camp is more than 30,000, and the areas around it, like the Al-Basah area and the Al-Qastal area (small areas), are also home to refugees. The number of refugees has increased, which requires an increase in the provided services. Nowadays, there is an overcrowding crisis at UNRWA’s schools. The popular committee are trying to cooperate with the UNRWA to solve this crisis by finding a piece of land for the UNRWA to build another school. However, we cannot find one despite the UNRWA’s offer to compensate the donor of this piece of land. There is a decrease in UNRWA’s services because of the increase in the refugees’ needs.” (*Abu Samer, 2021, Interview 32*)

The UNRWA has always been seen as the entity responsible for managing and running the Palestinian refugee camps in the region. During times of relative political stability, the UNRWA had limited attempts to address some of the issues associated with living conditions and overcrowding in the camps. The UNRWA did not intervene in the planning and expansion of refugee houses. However, whenever possible, the agency carried out ad-hoc enhancements to the open spaces in the camp, aiming to reduce congestion and overcrowding. One example of such efforts is the transformation of a space in the centre of the Jabalia refugee camp to a taxi station to serve the functionality of active transportation in the camp, see Photo 6.3 below.



Photo 6.3 Open space and transport waiting zone in the centre of the Jabalia refugee camp

Photo taken by the researcher on 13 March 2021

Throughout the prolonged displacement, Palestinian camp spaces have been reshaped and redefined, mimicking their surrounding cities. While these city-like camps evolved, their development was hindered by the exceptionality of the camp space and its specific socio-spatial dynamics. Notably, the inherited temporary nature of the camps remains a decisive factor in how governance actors, including hosting authorities, refugee representatives, political parties, and humanitarian agencies, conceive the camp space. Consequently, this conception has inadvertently given rise to technically fragmented governance, characterised by a constant shifting of roles and responsibilities influenced by political changes and varying levels of expertise.

At the same time, refugees challenged this temporary conception of the space, creating a perception of permanency amidst prolonged, unstable political conditions and fragmented

governance. By gradually creating their “lived space”, refugees exercised their interventions to alter the camps’ physical “perceived space”. Refugees’ impacts on the camp space were supported by their recovered social structures, their shared political identity, the enhanced economic statuses during some periods, and the persistent provision of humanitarian aid. However, the organisation of the camp space has been customary and subject to the refugees’ judgment and capacity. The spatial exceptions of the camp, its temporary-permanent paradox, the recovery of refugee structures and their economic empowerment, and the humanitarian services and management all have continuously (re)shaped the living conditions in the camp, resembling some city-like features while also manifesting the inherited victimhood of the displaced refugee subject, and exceptions in the camp space.

6.3 Discussions and Conclusion

This chapter critically examined the issues surrounding governance and living conditions in refugee camps, which have been shaped and reshaped by various socio-spatial dynamics within these camps. I suggest that camps evolved under the “state of paradox,” which represents the contrast in socio-spatial dynamics, characterised by being both temporary and permanent, exceptional and normal, as they oscillate between the fluidity and stability of social-spatial structures. The causal mechanisms of these structures influenced the camps evolution within the movement between the circumstances of the “humanitarian situation” and the “humanitarian condition”. Under the “state of paradox”, governance in the refugee camps in the Gaza Strip is characterised by being fragmented. Palestinians in general, and refugees in particular, are still impacted by exceptional conditions characterised by a lack of access to statehood and continued displacement. As these conditions result in the indefinite temporariness of the camp living space, governance practices have shifted, overlapped, and sometimes been overlooked in specific thematic areas.

- *Implications for ontological debates*

Employing Elder-Vass’s (2010) critical realism ontological perspectives, this chapter analysed the governance of refugee camps, highlighting the overlapping roles of various

organisations and normative social institutions, and recognising refugees as not just a unified group of victims. For example, the UNRWA as an organisation is composed of its people, who are predominantly refugees themselves. Based on their roles, those staff regulate their relationships by acting on behalf of the organisation (Elder-Vass, 2010), while remaining deeply embedded within the camp's existing social fabric. This dual position enabled them to effectively transfer technical knowledge and enforce regulations essential to UNRWA operations. Consequently, the agency exercised governance through these individuals; while organisational policies shape the staff's professional conduct, their integration into the community allowed them to extend this institutional authority directly into local social structures.

As mentioned by one of the participants and presented in this chapter, at some point, a dustman employed by UNRWA had the power to request that aid be cut to a refugee family if they broke UNRWA's rules. This shows how a Palestinian refugee, being part of refugees' norm circles and their spatial camp arrangements, would act on behalf of the organisation they are affiliated with, implementing its interests to fulfil their duties. Thus, an organisation like the UNRWA relied heavily on refugees to implement its actions and policies. This allows us to see the Palestinian refugees' community not as a homogeneous group of individuals. Rather, although they were socially homogeneous, they held multiple powers and agencies through their norm circles and organisations and exercised various overlapping loyalties and interests. These interests were also sometimes conflicting in viewing the camp space as temporary or permanent, creating issues in the camp space governance, as discussed and explained. These tensions can be understood through the ontological combination of critical realism and assemblage (Rutzou & Elder-Vass, 2019). This thesis suggests using this ontological combination to envision and analyse the tension between the temporary-permanent perceptions of the camps and their associated socio-spatial dynamics characterised by continued oscillation between fluidity and stability.

- ***Implications for theoretical debates***

The Palestinian camps remained under the tension between fluidity-stability, temporary-permanent, and exceptional-normal. These camps are “exceptional” under the Israeli mechanism of control and colonialism, and the continued lack of regulation and conception of a temporary space by the UNRWA and the PNA. However, the Palestinian camp spaces, in their very existence, evolved into a material and political challenge to colonialism (Abourahme, 2025). They became spaces of cultural, social and political agency, with refugees practising forms of the citizenship they are deprived of. Palestinian refugees utilised the humanitarian space and system to create their political identity and representation (Feldman, 2018). For example, as presented in this chapter, the Refugees Popular Committee was established based on the women centres, youth clubs, and sports clubs originally established by the UNRWA for a functional role associated with social and programmatic activities. Given the diverse loyalties and the intersections of the norm circles and normative social institutions in the refugee community, members of the UNRWA’s established clubs were also involved in other forms of representation and participation. Thus, some members of committees were linked to the PLO, sharing the same political struggle and aspirations for statehood and the responsibility to safeguard the right to return. Their ultimate objective superseded their functional roles within UNRWA’s committees, and they mobilised by utilising this humanitarian space to establish the Refugees Popular Committee to represent refugees, thereby creating political representation within humanitarian governance (Feldman, 2018). However, as camps urbanised, they oscillated between the temporary and the permanent, between the conception and perception of space, between the fluid and the stable, and between the humanitarian and the political.

These socio-spatial paradoxes derived from and contributed to the fragmented governance in the camps. The political and social structure that reproduced the temporary-permanent features of the camp space created a vacancy in camp governance, leaving critical areas of intervention, such as planning and regulating the camp space, unclaimed. However, under the “state of paradox” and throughout prolonged displacement, refugees, some

businesspeople, and some organisations have enacted developments and constructions that created a sense of permanence. They mobilised to create the “lived space” of the camps, where refugees regained agency and utilised aid mechanisms to create financial opportunities. The findings presented in this chapter suggest that parts of the camp became spaces of economic opportunity, while many households in other parts remained in poverty and dependency, thereby characterising the camps as a “state of paradox”. Spatially, this has resulted in poor camp shelters coexisting alongside well-established buildings that offered diverse services, trade, and shops.

Many scholars from city-camp literature have also suggested that camp space and aid mechanisms create economic opportunities. For instance, in their study of the Kakuma refugee camp and the Kalobeyei settlement in Kenya, Brankamp *et al.* (2023) suggest that camps are not sites of dependency but rather a “capitalist frontier” ripe for investment. Capital, investment and innovation in the refugee camps are fostered by relative stability or status quo created and maintained by humanitarian governance (Jansen, 2025). Such investment triggers spatial reconfiguration to remake the physical environment and refugee subject, transforming the camp from a site of care and maintenance to a market opportunity (Brankamp *et al.*, 2023). Thus, under Feldman’s (2018) “humanitarian condition”, camp space reappropriation involves the investment and the creation of markets under the humanitarian governance where aid is no longer just about emergency relief but functions as a mechanism for long-term regional development (Jansen, 2025). In the protracted displacement conditions, camps evolve into a unique form of “humanitarian urbanisms” that are spatially and economically integrated into the host region as the infrastructure of aid is repurposed for economic innovation (Jansen, 2025).

In the context of the camps studied in this thesis, the findings indicate that UNRWA’s humanitarian interventions, through the allocation of resources, infrastructure, and services, actively shaped camp geographies. Camps traditionally described as spatial technologies of control (Agamben, 2005; Agier, 2011; Carter-White & Minca, 2025) transform through aid forces that lead to the emergence of new spatial practices and forms

of agency and resistance (Maqusi, 2021; Brankamp *et al.*, 2023; Al-Homoud & Samarah, 2025). As I explain in this chapter and the next, UNRWA's services, initially meant to be a temporary safety net for refugees, contributed to fostering the political agency of refugees, enhancing their economies, and most importantly, laying the foundation, through roads, water, and shelter, for their more permanent city-like settlement.

The presence of aid through the UNRWA and the introduction of humanitarian services have been mechanisms of social-spatial changes in the refugee camps. Socially, it promoted the recovery of social norms through the spatial grouping of homogeneous refugees. This grouping supported social relations and networks, which are instrumental for the development of spaces (Peattie, 1968). This research affirms that the social dimension contributed to the development of the camp space as refugees capitalised on their social ties, kinship network, and historical relationships to create opportunities and develop their camp space.

Furthermore, the UNRWA contributed to maintaining social distinctions and demarking of Palestinians as refugees and non-refugees through its system, creating competition over what was seen as "luxurious" humanitarian services in the early years of aid provision. As shown above, aid continuity through the decades, coupled with the centralisation of UNRWA services in Jabalia camp, created economic opportunities for investment and trade. This has enhanced refugees' economy, as various distinctions between refugees and non-refugees have faded over time. Besides sharing political identity and culture, economic opportunities in the refugee camps brought in investments and trade between refugees and non-refugees in the camp space, which capitalised on their already established social relationship. As the findings showed, these investments boosted the land and house market in the Jabalia camp, particularly in the upmarket areas where refugee houses became worth millions of dollars (Interview 27).

Through the creation of the camp's property and land market, refugees challenged the temporary notion of the "conceived" camp space by reappropriating transactions and exchanges of land and property, gradually changing the physical "perceived" space in the

camp to socially and economically construct their “lived space” (Lefebvre, 1991). As they do not hold formal ownership (title deed), “Tabu” (طابو), as commonly known, they sold and bought the shelters and the “right to benefit” from the location. This is usually an informal contract, often witnessed by a local notable, “Mukhtar” (مختار), or a lawyer.

Spatially, this process of property and land exchange in the camps has contributed to the rapid urbanisation of these spaces. Refugees saw the camp houses as capital that they could sell for higher prices, depending on location, population density, and commercial potential, particularly in the centres of large camps such as Jabalia. Through this practice, refugees created their own property economy, in which traders and businessmen, as explained above, purchased camp houses and constructed commercial buildings and projects on the land of these houses. Thus, despite the lack of formal recognition of the space and its exceptional status, refugees reclaimed a kind of normality in property exchange similar to that in the neighbourhoods of the city, reclaiming their right to the city. As Agier (2011) argues, it is a process of city-making, as camps develop their own economy, class, and property market.

Throughout the decades of camp evolution and the city-making in the camps, the camp's "lived space" has become the site where political identities are formed, social hierarchies are negotiated, and "new forms of citizenship" emerge (Carter-White & Minca, 2025, p. 36). It is where dwellers stop being just refugees and become residents, neighbours, and citizens of their own unique city-camp, pursuing cultural, economic, and social activities.

This chapter has also shown that no authority accepted the responsibility for organising the camp space, as the creation of permanence was a political ‘taboo’. This has exacerbated the fragmentation of governance and opened the door for refugees to improvise in constructing houses and expanding their living space. However, these improvised expansions are seen by scholars as a political act, as what is conceived as spatial violations of the original setup of camps was essential for refugees' survival. Thus, the evolution of camps involved shifting power and authority that were negotiated between refugees, the

host state, and the humanitarian regime (Maqusi, 2021). Improvised building practices have significantly impacted the social, spatial, and economic characteristics of the refugee camps as discussed in this Chapter. One of these significant impacts is the issue of overcrowding, which has contributed to deteriorated living conditions in the refugee camps.

The issue of overcrowding in the past two decades, in general, has contributed to increasing social problems like domestic violence, undermined the educational attainment of refugee children, and caused health and mental health-related problems in the refugee community. This overcrowding and deteriorated living conditions have preserved the sense of exceptionality of the camp, making refugees express their willingness to find better living conditions outside the camp. Despite evidence and reports indicating a worsening of living conditions in the refugee camps, the UNRWA and international donors have, in general, continued to address the camps and refugees from a purely humanitarian perspective, neglecting the protracted nature of the issue (Feldman, 2009). However, there has been a shift in UNRWA's approach in dealing with the refugee camps and the issues of protracted displacement of Palestinians. Particular socio-spatial dynamics have impacted the nature of the agency's interventions. The mandate of the agency, its interactions with refugees and their committees, the temporary nature associated with political symbolism of the camps, the creation of permanency by refugees, the dramatic evolution of the camps versus their deteriorated infrastructure and housing, all required the agency to be pragmatic, negotiating its niche for service provision while taking a cautious approach to what would be acceptable to the refugees and the donor community. In the next chapter, I will discuss the interactions between the UNRWA and the socio-spatial dynamics in refugee camps, introducing the agency's initiatives to enhance the built environment.

7. CHAPTER SEVEN: THE UNRWA AND HUMANITARIAN AID IN THE REFUGEE CAMPS

7.0 Introduction

“The UNRWA used to provide clothes for them, which were donated by European countries. My parents used to talk about these clothes and describe them to us. Also, they used to tell me a lot about الطعمة “Al-To’mah”, which is a centre for the UNRWA that provides food supplies and meals and Omega3 pills for refugee families and the UNRWA school students. My parents and grandparents used to tell me about the events that they lived through in the 1950s and the 1960s.” (*Fatima, 2021, Interview 03*)

It is generous, something they have never seen before, and it comes from Europe, clearly indicating the political attachment to humanitarian aid. This is how Fatima, from the Jabalia refugee camp, described to me the aid services that the UNRWA provided for the first generation of refugees in the Palestinian camps. It is a kind of assistance carved in the memories of those who experienced first-hand displacement and exile. The humanitarian assistance the UNRWA provided effectively fulfilled emergency needs, particularly regarding the needs associated with food, clothes, and medicine. The continued provision of education and health care services has also been instrumental in preserving the human development of refugees. One can argue that the UNRWA has succeeded in this endeavour.

However, when analysing the spatial aspects of the UNRWA’s interventions, it is evident that the story has gone in a different direction. The UNRWA failed to provide adequate shelter for refugees in the early stages. The agency also did not introduce systematic urban planning and organisation in the camps, which underwent uncontrolled fast urbanisation, creating spatial pockets of extreme overcrowding, poverty, and social problems (Budeiri, 2014). The UNRWA and other aid agencies preserved the temporary nature of their spatial interventions, fulfilling their emergency relief mandate under the humanitarian situation

(Feldman, 2018). The lack of planning and regulations also resulted from the political sensitivity associated with the official introduction of permanent actions in the camp space, which always raised questions and scepticism around their intention, as discussed in the previous chapter, Chapter Six.

In this chapter, I critically analyse the humanitarian aid system, particularly the UNRWA in Gaza, and its central role in forming the socio-spatial environment in the Palestinian refugee camps. As discussed in the previous chapters, aid systems have emergent properties as salient organisations in the refugee camps. These organisations have been influenced by the socio-spatial dynamics and their associated causal effects during the camps' lifetime. In this chapter, I discuss and analyse this multi-dimensional relationship by answering the third research question: ***“How does the prolonged provision of humanitarian aid through the UNRWA affect and get affected by the socio-spatial dynamics of refugee camps in protracted displacement?”***

The analysis in this chapter is built on the theoretical framework presented in Chapter Two, defining and discussing humanitarian aid in the context of refugee camps in the Gaza Strip, highlighting the UNRWA's aid interventions in the “city-like” camps. Combining the assemblage thinking and critical realism ontologies, I present how the UNRWA and socio-spatial structures in the camp interact under a pendulum swing between formation and causation, or fluidity and stability (Rutzoe & Elder-Vass, 2019). I analyse the role of the UNRWA as the leading humanitarian actor in the Palestinian refugee context, and how the agency negotiated its role between the temporary and the permanent, and enacted its influential causal powers through its apolitical instrumental functions of aid provision. I discuss how the agency reformed its mandate and operations to introduce camp improvement interventions, responding to the living conditions in the camps created by interactions between refugee camps' socio-spatial structures, governance dynamics, and the donors' agendas.

This chapter has two main sections. The first focuses on the introduction and the formation of the UNRWA for the Palestinian refugees, critically discussing the agency's role as a pure humanitarian, non-protection refugee organisation, revealing contradictions in the agency's existence, mandate, and relationship with the refugee community, arguing that this contentious mandate has contributed to the “state of paradox”. Throughout this discussion, I highlight the UNRWA's role in forming the camps and shaping the causation mechanisms that influenced the socio-spatial structures. The section also critically discusses UNRWA's evolution and the impact of its work on the material and non-material, particularly the social refugee structures and the role of health and education services in building refugee subjects.

The second section continues to analyse the role of UNRWA, investigates how humanitarian management has affected the camp space, and draws on findings that highlight the impact of aid on the economy and the agglomeration of services within the camp space. In this section, I re-employ Feldman's (2018) notions of the “humanitarian situation” and “humanitarian condition” to critically analyse the work of the UNRWA in the humanitarian context in the Gaza Strip and the impact of this oscillation between the emergency and the chronic in the spatial environment. The final part of the second section focuses on the impact of living conditions in refugee camps on UNRWA's work. It discusses the Infrastructure and Camp Improvement Program (ICIP), which the UNRWA has initiated over the past two decades in response to deteriorating living standards. It highlights how the UNRWA creates pockets of enhancement in the refugee camp space. The final Discussion and Conclusion section firstly presents the findings from critical realism perspectives. Then it critically engages with the debates on humanitarianism and builds on lessons from UNRWA's humanitarian work in the context of urban camps.

7.1 UNRWA formation and paradoxes

7.1.1 UNRWA's mandate and the human development of refugees

The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) has been an integral part of the formation and evolution of the refugee camps in

the Gaza Strip, providing material assistance, establishing camp shelters, and contributing to the restoration of social norms and the social structures of refugees. In addition, the organisation as an influential structure has interacted with the various socio-spatial dynamics of the camps, influencing the space and the lived experience there while adapting and manoeuvring the effects of the evolving camp environment.

To cater for the humanitarian needs of the Palestinian refugees, the UNRWA was created in 1949 to provide humanitarian assistance to more than 700,000 persons who fled their homes as a result of the Arab-Israeli war (UNRWA, 2007; Bocco, 2010; CJPME, 2010). The agency was established via the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) Resolution 302 (IV) on 8 December 1949 (UNRWA, 2007; Bocco, 2010; CJPME, 2010; Al Hussein, 2025), replacing an ad-hoc humanitarian intervention program that had been carried out mainly by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) (Bocco, 2010).

The agency initially operated under a dual mandate intended to be temporary. Its initial objective was a short-term relief measure, until the end of 1950, designed to alleviate starvation and distress through the provision of food, housing, healthcare, and education. Its core objective, however, was the economic integration of refugees (Al Hussein, 2025). By employing able-bodied men in irrigation and construction projects until June 1951, the agency aimed to address the socioeconomic roots of the crisis. It was believed that this approach would eventually render UNRWA unnecessary, provided that host governments were prepared to assume responsibility once international aid was withdrawn (Al Hussein, 2025). By employing refugees in “works” projects, the agency aimed to modernise the refugees, transition them away from traditional lifestyles, and implicitly encourage them to accept permanent resettlement and new citizenship, effectively erasing their past (Peteet, 2010). Geopolitically, the initiation and continued operations of the UNRWA were seen by the United States and Western Powers as a stabilising factor and a tool to hinder the spread of communism in the region (Peteet, 2010; Al Hussein, 2025). Many saw that promoting economic approaches to solve refugees’ political problems was part of the Cold War’s

foreign policies to utilise economic integration in the host countries to prevent refugees from reverting to communism (Peteet, 2010)

Nonetheless, the UNRWA “works” approach to the refugee issue has been criticised and met with suspicion. As Peteet (2010) affirms, refugees viewed this rehabilitation as a political trap designed to negate their right of return, and they resisted these projects while simultaneously utilising the aid. Bocco (2009) highlights that these early “works” projects were driven by a reintegration fund aimed at dissolving the refugee problem through economic development rather than political repatriation.

UNRWA’s international donors viewed the link between economic prosperity and political stability as essential for a successful peace process (Bocco, 2009). However, according to Al Hussein (2025), UNRWA’s initial works programme was largely unsuccessful due to the steadfast resistance of refugees to such interventions. Refugees viewed UNRWA relief not as charity, but as an inalienable entitlement symbolising the international community’s obligation to uphold their right of return. Consequently, they interpreted any attempt at economic integration, whether through large-scale irrigation projects (1952–1955), transfers to Gulf states (1959–1960), or even infrastructure upgrades within the camps, as a political threat designed to erode their refugee status and permanentise their displacement (Al Hussein, 2025)

The UNRWA’s mandate evolved throughout time to provide human development services besides relief assistance in the agency’s areas of operations, including the West Bank, the Gaza Strip, Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria (UNRWA, 2007). As Al Hussein (2025, p.371) notes, UNRWA’s policy eventually shifted to match the “lowest common denominator” of agreement among all parties. By the 1960s, the focus moved from collective resettlement schemes to individual empowerment through education. This shift satisfied all stakeholders: refugees gained skills without forfeiting their political rights; host countries gained an educated workforce and continued international aid; donors accepted the cost to prevent political radicalisation (such as communism or Islamism); and Israeli authorities,

despite their criticism of UNRWA, cooperated with the agency to maintain stability and reduce the economic burden of their occupation (Al Hussein, 2025).

For other refugees worldwide, the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) was created under the 1951 Geneva Convention relating to the status of refugees and its 1967 additional protocol to provide protection, assistance, and durable solutions (Bocco, 2010 and CJPME, 2010). Durable solutions for refugees can be one of three options. Voluntary repatriation, where refugees return to their country of origin if it is safe and based on their informed decision; local integration in the country where they are currently living; resettlement by moving to a third country they agree and accept to move to. However, the UNRWA is not mandated to pursue durable solutions or protection for the Palestinian refugees. With its apolitical mandate and the prevailing political status quo, the agency focused on the human development of Palestinian refugees as a gateway for protecting refugees' rights and preserving their dignity (de Jong & Aced, 2014).

As discussed in Chapter 3, the “anomalous institutional” feature resulted from Article 1D in the Geneva Convention, and the temporary mandate of the UNRWA hindered the agency's ability to offer protection to the Palestinian refugees. Thus, Palestinian refugees were denied access to protection and durable solutions by the international system, which did not provide the UNRWA with the mandate to conduct such a pursuit. Palestinians were given a non-implementable right to return; a right that lacked the political will or tools to be implemented, which rendered the refugees in limbo. The UNRWA, as an organisation under these anomalous circumstances, was part of the constellation of components of the assemblage that formed the Palestinian refugee figure and the Palestinian refugee camps. As a new emerging organisation, the UNRWA was (and still is) influenced by the international powers, mainly formed by Western Sovereign states, as well as the geopolitical context in which the agency operates.

Furthermore, the UNRWA funding depends on voluntary donations from donors, mostly Western countries and their allies. According to the UNRWA's website¹⁷, the UN member states, including regional governments and the European Union, contributed 92.6 per cent of the UNRWA budget, which stood at USD 1.46 billion in 2023. The main contributors to this budget are the US, the EU, Germany, the UK, France and other Western governments. This dependency has historically imposed limits on UNRWA's ability to participate in political solutions or create autonomy from the political interests of donor countries (Bocco, 2010).

As Al Hussein (2025) noted, geopolitical considerations have influenced UNRWA's mandate and operations since its establishment. The United States, for example, initially saw the UNRWA as a tool for stability in the region (Irfan, 2024; Al Hussein, 2025). In addition, funding to the UNRWA has been used as a tool to exercise political pressures on Palestinian refugees, reflecting the geopolitical regional interests of donors, which sometimes jeopardised the UNRWA's ability to provide services to refugees in need. Funding to the agency has shifted based on donors' interests and the changing international political alliances and priorities, imposing financial challenges that led to a decline in the UNRWA's services (Berg & Jensehaugen, 2021). UNRWA's operations have been largely affected by donors' objectives, particularly the objective to settle refugees in their displacement locations (Bocco 2010, Irfan, 2024). In other words, it is argued that donors, especially the United States, used funding to UNRWA as a tool to contain, manage, or even punish Palestinian refugees and achieve political objectives, as withholding or providing funds was often embedded in the political agendas of the UN member states (Irfan, 2024)

Nonetheless, throughout the decades of displacement and humanitarian services, the UNRWA, a non-political organisation operating in a highly politicised context, became a pragmatic and solution-oriented (Bocco, 2010). The agency developed the capacity to deal with its ambiguous mandate as a refugee organisation that does not pursue durable solutions, and by being the only UN agency that deals with a particular group of refugees in

¹⁷ <https://www.unrwa.org/how-you-can-help/how-we-are-funded>

a specific geographical area (Bocco, 2010). In the UNRWA's report titled "The United Nations and the Palestinian Refugees", the agency highlights its apolitical role and acknowledges its indirect contribution to protection, stating that:

"Through its core programmes of assistance and human development and its range of interventions with governmental authorities, UNRWA provides a measure of protection to Palestine refugees in its areas of operations. The task of finding a comprehensive solution for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the Palestine refugee problem, however, is not part of UNRWA's mandate but is rather the responsibility of the parties to the conflict and other political actors. UNRWA's role is to address the humanitarian and human development needs of Palestine refugees in the interim." (UNRWA, 2007, p.5)

The notion of "interim" is repeated and manifested in the narrative about Palestinian refugees and their cause. It has inflicted paradoxicality on refugee camp space and its social dynamics. In addition, it has affected the way the humanitarian aid apparatus works for the Palestinian refugees by fostering temporary actions, starting with designing and assembling the refugee camp space and then providing interim shelters and interim assistance under an interim mandate that lasted for more than seven decades. Under these conditions, successive generations of refugees have embraced and reproduced these temporal concepts. While waiting for the grand return, refugees' social and spatial practices promoted recovery and built their identity around shared origins and struggles, creating a sense of provisional life. This has contributed to the accumulation of contradictions, resulting in a "state of paradox", as developed and discussed in this thesis. This state manifests multidimensional contradictions between the temporary and permanent, the fluid and the static, and in the perception of the camp space by different actors. While these camps were meant to be temporary, they existed for decades; while refugees were meant to find durable solutions, they remained in displacement, and while these spaces stabilised, they were shocked again by emergencies and conflicts.

Due to the indefinite-temporary situation, the UNRWA and its top management had to “improvise” by implementing rehabilitation and integration programs via humanitarian modes of operations. As Bocco (2010) argues, although this was challenging to the UNRWA, the ambiguity in the agency’s mandate and the lack of guidance “control” from the UNGA provided the UNRWA with the space needed to manoeuvre and expand its mandate throughout prolonged temporary conditions. Thus, in the absence of a political solution, the UNRWA has operationally expanded the coverage of its mandate to include the descendants of 1948 refugees in its services, by registering them and providing them with humanitarian assistance, which expanded the definition of Palestinian refugees (CJPME, 2010). The broad mandate allowed the agency to introduce human development activities under essential services, including primary health care, relief and social services, and primary education. These services have contributed to better protection of the Palestinian refugees and their cause without compromising their right to return (Bocco, 2010).

Despite their attachment to the right of return, the refugees needed material assistance and camp development interventions. Especially in the early years of the exodus, as discussed in the previous Chapter Five, the material assistance provided by the UNRWA contributed to the recovery of refugees’ norm circles and social structures by alleviating poverty, opening spaces for social interactions, and offering the refugees the opportunity to rebuild their community and look at their futures. Abu Mohsen, who is a refugee from the Jabalia camp and a retired UNRWA staff member, mentioned:

“Through its services, the UNRWA has a great role in creating social, political, and cultural structures in the refugee camps. For example, the UNRWA’s sports clubs were sports, educational and cultural centres that provided many services. However, these services have been reduced.”

(Abu Mohsen, 2021, Interview 15)

The UNRWA has created and provided functional semi-governmental services to refugees in the refugee camps. Many refugees and communities in Gaza refer to the UNRWA with the

term “the blue government”. According to the agency’s website, the UNRWA currently serves 5.9 million refugees in its area of operation. The UNRWA employs more than 30,000 staff members; the majority of them are Palestinian refugees, and around 10,000 of them are in Gaza.

In the Levant regions, the UNRWA runs 706 schools, 140 primary health care clinics, and 113 women and community centres, and it provides almost half a million refugee families with loans and microfinance. In the Gaza Strip, the agency runs 183 schools, 22 primary health clinics, and 7 women's centres, where it has cumulatively provided more than 128,000 microfinance loans to refugee families. This scale of material and non-material support has been provided at the early stages of displacement and continued throughout the decades, despite diminishing in the past two decades, due to a reduction in donors’ funding and increased conflicts, which have shifted the available funds towards emergency response in Gaza and the wider region.

Nonetheless, the interventions of the UNRWA have promoted the development of community structures and contributed to the recovery of the political and social agency of refugees. Photo 7.1, which I took during the fieldwork in the Jabalia refugee camp, shows the UNRWA services centres at the centre of the Jabalia camp.



Photo 7.1 UNRWA centres in the middle of the Jabalia refugee camp

Photo taken by researcher on 13 March 2021

By creating and supporting youth centres, sports clubs, and women's centres, the UNRWA allowed the community of refugees to assemble thematic normative social institutions that defended the rights of particular refugee groups, especially women and youth, in addition to the overall community of refugees.

This has manifested in the creation of refugee representation structures such as the Refugees Popular Committee that stemmed from YACs, established earlier by the UNRWA, as discussed in Chapter Six. Thus, the UNRWA facilitated refugee communities to organise and participate. The agency gave refugees the power to shape their socio-spatial dynamics and influence their living conditions. Abu Samy from Deir Al Balah refugee camp, talked about the services the UNRWA introduced during the first few decades of displacement. He stated:

"In the past, the UNRWA's services were effective because the life necessities were basic and simple. The UNRWA used to have centres called (To'mah) "الطعمة" where refugees could have food to eat. They used

to provide milk and free cooked food as well. The food-distribution centres provided food supplies for the refugees every month. These supplies included rice, sugar, flour, cooking oil, dried fruit, clothing bundles (Surrah) “الصرة” and shoes. The health centres were open 24 hours. Each health clinic in all refugee camps had a maternity ward. There was also an ambulance in each health clinic". (*Abu Samy, 2021, Interview 14*)

Humanitarian aid services have also influenced the language and terms used by Palestinian refugees . Even in the daily conversations between refugees, they devised terms associated with the aid system's services which were not used outside that system. For example, as shown in the previous quote by Abu Sammy and many others during my conversation with refugees, the word “To'mah” (طعمة) was introduced to define the space or the service centre that provides ready-to-eat and cooked food. They also used the word “Surrah” (صرة) to describe the bundle of clothes and shoes that were wrapped together and provided for each family as part of the material assistance. These terms became common and were used across the refugee community in the Gaza Strip.

The UNRWA has been the catalyst for the human development of Palestinian refugees through its services and well-being programs, which have been widely recognised since its establishment. Since 1950, all Palestinian refugee children living in the UNRWA's operations area have received free primary education for nine years (de Jong & Aced, 2014). The education services and the primary health care provided by the UNRWA are universal to all refugees regardless of their poverty status or ration classifications, which resembles an urban model of services and welfare. The agency introduced an inclusive education policy that was adapted to the refugee children's disability, health, gender, and social status in an attempt to provide equal opportunities to access primary education. Furthermore, the traditional provision of primary health care by the UNRWA achieved the intended universal outcomes regarding immunisation, treatment and control of communicable diseases, and maternal health care (de Jong & Aced, 2014). Abu Samer, from the Refugees' Popular

Committee, specifically addressed the importance of the UNRWA's healthcare and education programs, as he mentioned in an interview:

“The UNRWA has provided free education services for the refugees, which has increased the literacy rate in the refugee camps. All our older generations who worked abroad and in the Gulf countries received their education at the UNRWA's school. I have noticed that most refugees prefer to send their kids to the UNRWA's schools rather than sending them to private schools. Nowadays, health and education services are the most useful services that the UNRWA provides for refugees. More than 400-500 refugees visit the UNRWA's health clinic daily. This health clinic used to be small but has been developed and expanded recently.” (*Abu Samer, 2021, Interview 32*)

As initial physical infrastructure and “works” projects failed, the UNRWA mandate evolved into the development of refugee human capital, primarily through education. Takkenberg (2009) notes that by the mid-1950s, education rapidly replaced physical work programmes as the primary vehicle for refugee self-sufficiency, effectively transforming the “works” mandate from engineering projects to social service provision. This shift to education is widely acclaimed for creating one of the most highly educated populations in the Middle East. Takkenberg (2009, p.256) argues that this “pioneering human development strategy” allowed refugees to compete in regional labour markets, particularly in the Gulf states, thereby achieving a degree of economic self-sufficiency that physical public works failed to provide.

The UNRWA and international aid agencies’ investment in human capital enhanced refugees' education and their knowledge and awareness. During my fieldwork, I interviewed Amani, a manager at an international NGO that implements projects and collaborates with CSOs and the refugee community in the Jabalia camp. She noticed the increased openness, awareness and education among refugees in Jabalia camp compared to other camps and

places, arguing that this is also associated with services provided by humanitarian organisations. She mentioned:

“I have noticed that the refugees in the Jabalia refugee camp are more open-minded, have more acceptance of others, and they are highly educated, which makes it easier for the organisations to provide services for the refugees of the Jabalia camp. Many NGOs, CBOs, and civil institutions in the Jabalia refugee camp have started locally and from deep inside the camp... International organisations and institutions have contributed to developing the Jabalia refugee camp. This development also happened because the refugees of the Jabalia refugee camp are eager to develop their lives. I think that developing societies require desire and power. At the first Intifada, the refugees of the Jabalia refugee camp were open-minded and eager to educate and develop themselves, which has contributed to developing the Jabalia refugee camp through the efforts of international aid organisations. The impact of these organisations and institutions is clear and obvious. When the international institutions fund economic empowerment projects for poor women to launch their small projects, they help in developing the economic situation of the refugee camp. When these international institutions organise awareness and learning workshops, the educated refugees of the refugee camp attend these workshops, and they have the willingness and desire to learn and develop.” (*Amani, 2021, Interview 08*)

Nevertheless, the UNRWA’s interim mandate and its reliance on voluntary donations, coupled with the increased refugee population, have largely affected the agency's ability to continue its universal, high-quality service provision. Most refugee camp residents I interviewed for this research expressed concerns about the decline in UNRWA’s services over the past years, especially as health and education are becoming of lower quality,

creating more burdens and hindering refugees' development. Abu Basil, from the Deir Al Balah refugee camp, stated:

“For a certain period of time, the UNRWA’s services have met the needs and requirements of the refugees. Because of the increase in population, the services of the UNRWA have become unable to meet the needs of the refugees. The UNRWA doesn’t provide the health and education services that are needed. Also, it does not provide effective relief aids and services. The UNRWA’s services barely meet half the amount of the refugees’ needs. I think these are political policies to end the UNRWA’s services.” (*Abu Basil, 2021, Interview 13*)

Besides being the main service provider for the Palestinian refugees, the UNRWA has become part of their identity, a representation of their struggle, and an integral part of their norm circles and social structure through its local staff and services. Palestinian refugees consider cutting off funds to the UNRWA, even before the 2023 war, as an implementation of a political agenda that aims at ending the refugee issue and hindering their development. Abu Samer from the Refugees Popular Committee in Deir Al Balah expressed it thus:

“The UNRWA is suffering much pressure to limit its power in the refugee camps as an essential step to end the Palestinian refugees’ issues. The Palestinian refugees are the major elements of the Palestinian cause. They are the crucial witnesses of the Palestinian displacement cause.” *Abu Samer, 2021, Interview 32*)

Such a situation and the tendency to limit UNRWA’s services are considered part of some donors’ political agenda. As a result, for the past decade, the UNRWA has suffered from a precarious funding situation that has been impeding the agency’s ability to fulfil the objectives of its strategic plan. Lack of funding relative to the population the UNRWA is supposed to serve is a central challenge for the agency, as expressed by the UNRWA staff I interviewed. It is constraining and jeopardising the ability of the UNRWA to deliver human

development services, rendering the efforts piecemeal. As it is totally dependent on external contributions, the UNRWA's funding is highly politicised and largely affected by geopolitical structures and circumstances.

7.1.2 From lack of protection to camp improvement

These vast efforts and the agency's scale of operations, the association of the UNRWA's funding with the Western governments, the contentious targeting and assessment systems, and the ambiguity in the UNRWA's mandate (not being able to offer protection or articulate a political stance) have all created, at some points in the past decades, scepticism among refugees concerning the intentions of UNRWA's works. Some Palestinian refugees have suspected that these efforts and the generous donations were attempts to make refugees forget their right to return, claiming that it was an indirect way to make them settle permanently in their refugee camps. Refugees articulated concern that the agency's objective is to normalise their displacement. This objective was never officially adopted by the UNRWA, but some researchers suggest that this was the agency's initial intention, via establishing the Public Works Program, at the early decades of displacement, that facilitates refugees' access to jobs and aims at achieving economic integration with the host community (Al Hussein & Bocco, 2010; Gabiam, 2012). To a more considerable extent and ironically, some refugees reported to me that their grandparents who lived during the early years of UNRWA's works, through jokes among each other, embraced and wished for the continuity of the "benefits of the exodus", apparently because of the high quality of service provided by the UNRWA during the early years of displacement.

Nevertheless, the UNRWA's attention to human development and effective social and relief services lacked proper attention to planning and organisation of the built environment, as shown above. These socio-spatial dynamics allowed refugees to gain the economic and social power to build their houses utilising whatever space was available. The UNRWA's enhanced human development of refugees fuelled the growth and construction in the camps, particularly during periods when authorities allowed such expansions, as discussed in the previous empirical chapters.

By having their biopolitical needs “guaranteed” by the UNRWA, refugees were able to recover their political structures and question the political agendas associated with their camp space. Refugees formed their identity around their right to return and the camp spaces, which represented their struggle and victimhood. This made refugees question attempts to develop the physical infrastructure in the refugee camps (Al Hussein & Bocco, 2010). The development attempts, sponsored by the UNRWA and aimed to alleviate the material suffering in the camp space, contrasted with the idea symbolisation of the camps as a manifestation of refugees' suffering and victimhood (Gibiam, 2012). Thus, through social structures like the Mukhtars مختار (leaders of original village groups) and the Refugees Popular Committee, as discussed in Chapter Six, refugees preserved their identity as political subjects to safeguard their right to return while managing their relationship with the international agency.

In turn, UNRWA had to gradually build up its development portfolio, continuously testing the waters for refugee acceptance and avoiding any massive transformations in the camp space. The UNRWA focused its development initiatives on human development by running significant education and healthcare programmes in addition to microfinance, which was provided to refugee families to build their economic resilience. Dealing with a “city-like” situation of camps, the UNRWA provided refugees with quasi-governmental services, representing a “unique international investment in the promotion of the social and economic rights of one particular category of refugees: the Palestine refugees” (Al Hussien, 2025, p. 325). Investments in refugees' education were among UNRWA's top priorities, consuming the largest proportion of its budget. Education has been a strategic orientation to achieve protection, preserve the identity of Palestinian refugees, and enable their social mobility (Bocco, 2010; UNRWA, 2023). Abu Basil, from Deir Al Balah refugee camp, mentioned:

“I think that the most effective services that the UNRWA has provided for the refugees are the education services. The UNRWA has raised the status

and the importance of the education services in the refugee camps.” (*Abu Basil, 2021, Interview 13*).

Furthermore, the UNRWA has invested in local communities of refugees through supporting the development of their structures and capacities. One of the UNRWA staff members I interviewed mentioned that:

“In collaboration with the CBOs, the UNRWA provides capacity building, training activities, and initiatives that contribute to developing the youth. However, there isn’t an independent program called the development program. The UNRWA works on relieving the refugees and enhancing their ability to access potential and future opportunities” (*Abu Mohammed, 2021, Interview 29*).

Apart from the initial provision of shelters, the UNRWA has not systematically intervened in the physical evolution or the future planning of the camps for decades. However, the agency recently established the Infrastructure and Camp Improvement Program (ICIP), discussed in detail in the next section, as a responsive measure to the deteriorated camp infrastructure and living conditions.

Despite the wide recognition of UNRWA’s limitations in devising durable solutions for refugees, the agency has adopted advocacy policies and collective empowerment to build refugees’ capacities and self-reliance, which contributes to their longer-term protection (Bocco, 2010; Gabiam, 2012; Al Hussein, 2012). Being unable to provide permanent protection through achieving durable solutions for refugees, which are inherently political, the agency tried to operationalise innovatively by mainstreaming protection in its aid delivery. Operationalising protection is a pragmatically good step, but refugees still lack the privileges obtained by protection from a “state-like” entity afforded to normal citizens. Nonetheless, the UNRWA kept developing its protection programs and in its latest strategic plan for the period from 2023 to 2028, the UNRWA adopts the pursuit of protection through

complementary services rather than the realisation of durable and sustainable solutions. The following text is extracted from the UNRWA's strategic plan for 2023-2028:

“First, the agency will ensure that Palestine refugees are protected through the realization of their rights under International Law. This will be achieved through a number of complementary approaches, namely: providing services in a safe and dignified manner; meeting the protection needs of vulnerable and at-risk Palestine refugees through preventative and remedial action; and engaging duty bearers to respect, protect and fulfil the rights of Palestine refugees. In addition, UNRWA will make its programmes more gender sensitive so that the services it provides are equitable, ensuring that all Palestine refugees – women, men, girls and boys - can fulfil their needs and enjoy their rights.” *UNRWA (2023, p.5)*

It is unclear how the UNRWA will pursue or “engage” with duty bearers, particularly governing political authorities and states, to promote the protection of Palestinian refugees while at the same time being a neutral, apolitical organisation and without being mandated to do so by the international community. Throughout the past decades and under the implementation of a similar objective in its previous strategic plans, the agency only exerted advocacy efforts to promote the rights of Palestinian refugees under International Law, highlighting “protection and compliance with International Law through targeted interventions with duty bearers and other external stakeholders” *UNRWA (2023, p. 24)*.

Despite being unable to offer a durable protective solution for Palestinian refugees, the UNRWA, through its services, offered them the opportunity to grow and recover their political identity as Palestinians aspiring for the right to self-determination and a just solution for their cause. Part of these services is the UNRWA's interventions in the camps' built environment. I discuss this role in detail in the next section.

7.2 UNRWA's interventions in the context of urban refugee camps

UNRWA's interim mandate, lacking protection and durable solutions, and the rising need to enhance the living conditions for Palestinian refugees in protracted displacement camps, pushed forward the agenda around adopting and clearly articulating medium-term plans for the human development of the Palestinian refugees (Misselwitz & Hanafi, 2010; de Jong & Aced, 2014). These efforts culminated in the 2004 Geneva conference, co-hosted by the Swiss government and the UNRWA. The conference recommended a reform promoting an ambitious agenda for human development and suggested developing a strategic planning framework acknowledging the political status quo regarding the Palestinian question. The conference recommendations were also inspired by the newly adopted UNHCR's (2003) "framework for durable solutions for refugees and persons of concern", suggesting a dissociation between refugees' right to enjoy decent living conditions and their political right to return (Misselwitz & Hanafi, 2010).

As a result of the recommendations of this framework, and to respond to the challenges created by the arbitrarily built camps' space, the UNRWA introduced its new Infrastructure and Camp Improvement Program (ICIP), aiming to better understand and organise the camps' spatial environment and intervene to improve it (Misselwitz & Hanafi, 2010; Budeiri, 2014; Tayeh, 2022). Through these new programmatic lenses, the agency started to tackle the largely deteriorated infrastructure and housing conditions in many refugee camps, responding to pressure from the international community to introduce an agenda for reform that aims to bring about adequate "city-like" living for refugees, and admitting to the reality that a permanent solution for the Palestinian refugees is not foreseeable.

In this section, I critically discuss UNRWA's interventions in the context of "city-like" camps, and their contentious impacts on the camp and refugees, providing details from the ICIP in Gaza that represents the culmination of the agency's causal impact on the spatial evolution of refugee camps. The section critically presents this discussion in the context of the continued oscillation between crisis response and chronic responses, drawing on lessons learnt from UNRWA's urban planning experience under the ICIP.

7.2.1 *The evolution of “city-like” refugee camps and the contentious role of the UNRWA*

The “humanitarian situation” that resulted from the state of exception post-1948 war has entailed creating the category of Palestinian refugees. Obtaining this category determined how people labelled as refugees would live their lives afterwards and was the primary determinant defining entitlement to humanitarian assistance (Feldman, 2018). As a new category, being a refugee strips the individual of political and legal rights. Still, for Palestinians, the category of refugee became part of their political identity, with reference to which they have pursued the right to return and access international assistance.

The introduction of the aid system under the “humanitarian situation”, particularly through the UNRWA, has been significant for the Palestinian refugees and their camps. It has helped them preserve their original social structures and recover their agency, as I discussed in Chapter Five. It has also contributed, directly and indirectly, to the human development of refugees and their living space.

This humanitarian apparatus and its longer-term services have become an integral part of the background consciousness of Palestinian refugees, shaping their lives and living conditions through a distinct pattern of service provision (Feldman, 2018). However, in the Palestinian situation, there has always been what Feldman (2018) called “humanitarian punctuation,” a shift between chronic need and emergencies triggered by geopolitical events. For instance, shifts of moving from longer-term marginalisation, poverty, and the chronic juridico-political exception to more life-threatening acute crises happened in the June 1967 war, which produced a new wave of displacement. The Palestinian uprisings, the frequent military escalations in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip and lastly, the devastating October 2023 war on Gaza have all been examples of dramatic shifts between the humanitarian situation and condition.

The UNRWA has been relatively successful in responding to acute emergencies, successfully delivering the lifesaving aid needed for refugees to recover. However, as

circumstances shifted back to the chronic, the UNRWA resumed focusing on human development. The agency faced challenges tackling chronic issues aside from its work in Education and Healthcare interventions. This was mainly linked to its interim mandate, its short-term funding cycles, its inability to pursue durable solutions, and, most importantly, only slowly responding to urban challenges and the changing socio-spatial conditions.

The UNRWA had to deal with continuous international political shifts in addition to the dynamically changing needs and conditions of its refugee participants. Recognising these facts, the UNRWA admits that the definition of the category of a Palestinian refugee is instrumental, a working definition. This has translated to a focus on registration of refugees who show that they are in need of humanitarian assistance, utilising the category of “refugee” to govern aid provision (Feldman, 2018). It was evident that the registration and counting of Palestinian refugees post-1948 war, in the phase of the “humanitarian situation” when the category of a Palestinian refugee was being created, was challenging and problematic (Cheal, 1988; Feldman, 2018). Thus, the UNRWA introduced subcategories for operational purposes and to better manage its limited resources. Refugees were classified based on their needs, identified by UNRWA’s assessments, such as a “Palestinian refugee” and a “Palestinian refugee eligible for assistance” (Feldman, 2018, p.42). This categorisation has created tension and has been contentious among refugees who view access to humanitarian assistance to be their right and entitlement from the international community, whom they blame for their plight and inability to introduce a just solution for their cause. One of the UNRWA staff members mentioned in the interview that:

“The Relief and Social Services Program (RSSP) set priorities based on emergency bases related to vulnerable Palestinian refugees, such as some vulnerable refugee families who do not have houses to live in. These families may include persons with disabilities, women, and children, and they might live in a refugee tent. These families are a high priority to provide them with the help they need. Prioritisation is based on specific needs under the umbrella of the UNRWA’s programs and domains. Each program

sets priorities based on its framework.” (*Abu Mohammad, 2021, Interview 29*).

Adopting systematic categorisation and ongoing assessment of eligibility for humanitarian assistance has meant that the UNRWA is acting responsively rather than proactively. In other words, the agency was unable to plan for all refugees or for its future endeavours until it had assessed eligibility. This has reproduced the sense of instability for refugees in the UNRWA’s work because the agency is continually assessing and re-assessing their eligibility for assistance, particularly for food rations, microfinance support, shelter rehabilitation, and temporary job creation (education and healthcare were universal for all refugees). This systematic categorisation has been carried out under the umbrella of the refugee category.

However, as noted by many scholars in literature, the systematic categorisation and subsequent reduction in services by the UNRWA created tension and controversies in the relations between the refugees and the agency across the many decades of the existence of refugee camps (Feldman, 2018). Furthermore, Palestinian refugees maintain a complex and often paradoxical relationship with UNRWA, characterised by a simultaneous sense of distrust and deep attachment (Gabiam, 2012). While they do not necessarily expect the agency to provide a political solution, they view its continued existence as vital. To them, UNRWA validates their visibility as refugees and stands as a testament to the international community’s failure to resolve their plight. Consequently, as Gabiam (2012) argues, despite longstanding tensions regarding the agency’s avoidance of the political roots of the conflict, research indicates large support among refugees for UNRWA’s preservation

These tensions have fuelled the sense of instability and temporariness over decades that nourished the “state of paradox.” In particular, these aid systems of monitoring and control of the eligibility to receive aid assistance enacted by the UNRWA have affected the relationship between the agency and refugees at the camp level. The question of eligibility, which is who is eligible for a particular type of assistance, has created imbalanced power structures in the “city-like” camps. The UNRWA’s and other aid organisations’ staff held the

right to investigate and control entitlements to aid. Thus, under this humanitarian condition, a system of “policing eligibility” has been established (Feldman, 2018, p.49).

There is a strong commitment from the UNRWA to hire Palestinian refugees, acting in roles similar to local government workers in particular thematic areas of service provision, to promote refugees employment (Al Hussein, 2010), and provide the needed manpower to implement the system of categorisation and aid control on the ground (Issa, 2009; Feldman, 2018). Employment at the UNRWA is considered a privilege for refugees. Besides providing refugees with the opportunity to enhance their skills and employability, the UNRWA has contributed to improving the economic situation of displaced families by paying comparatively good salaries to its staff members. One of the NGOs’ workers I interviewed for this research highlighted this fact by comparing the pay of the UNRWA teachers with that of the government teachers. Abu Abdallah said:

“The UNRWA teacher who teaches the 5th and 6th grade and earns a USD 1,000 salary in a month is not similar to a teacher who teaches the same grades in a government school and earns ILS 1,200 Israeli Shekels (USD 400) salary every 40 days”. (*Abu Abdallah, 2021, Interview 05*)

Through its response to the “humanitarian condition” of prolonged displacement and poverty, the UNRWA has contributed to the economy of refugee camps. Besides refugee staff salaries, the aid distributed to refugees in the camps is traded, and the distribution centres and UNRWA services compounds have acted as catalysts for markets and transport. Refugees traded aid and sold commodities for those visiting the UNRWA centres. In my frequent visits to the Jabalia refugee camp, I visited the area where the UNRWA centres are located. It was consistently busy, with peddlers and street stalls next to fancier shops and service offices, all in the streets that led to the UNRWA centres. This emergent economic activity in the camp is not an intended intervention by the UNRWA, but has organically erupted and grown. Photo 7.2 below shows a pop-up seller just at the front of the

UNRWA's food parcels distribution centre at the Jabalia refugee camp selling flour, rice, lentils, and cooking oil, which are commodities distributed by the UNRWA.

In this emergent economy of aid, Feldman (2018) suggests that Palestinian refugees use aid provided regularly by the UNRWA as a source of income. This is fundamentally true as aid, in this case, is provided in the “city-like” or urban context, which is money-driven, where the refugee community is open to selling aid commodities in the camp and the surrounding areas. Refugees have sold aid commodities to obtain cash that they needed to use to fulfil their diverse needs, similar to any other city dweller.



Photo 7.2 Refugees selling the contents of the food parcel distributed by the UNRWA.

Photo taken by the researcher on 13 March 2021

The case of the Jabalia refugee camp central market and the pop-up stalls around the health clinics in the Deir Al Balah refugee camp are perfect examples of aid contribution to informal

economies in protracted “city-like” or urban displacement scenarios, which contributed to shaping the socio-spatial spectacle under the “humanitarian condition”. The main market in the Jabalia camp, the Al Awda market, was established around the UNRWA centres. The opening of aid distribution centres and the concentration of the UNRWA services, coupled with high density and good transport routes, have made the market successful and a desired place for traders and businesses. The majority of interviewees in this research suggest that the presence of UNRWA’s services in a particular location of the camp definitely created an economic boost. Abu Fadi from Jabalia municipality mentioned the immediate impact on land prices, saying:

"The foundation of the UNRWA’s centres and services in any place is related to a great economic role. Nowadays, when the UNRWA constructs a building in a specific location, the prices of pieces of land around this location rise immediately." (*Abu Fadi, 2021, Interview 04*)

Besides that, there are pop-up sellers and booths around the UNRWA health clinics (see Photo 7.3 below). These booths specialise in selling particular goods that could be needed by those coming to visit the clinic, like mother and child clothes, detergents, hygiene items, accessories, etc.



Photo 7.3 Informal economic activity near the Deir Al Balah refugee camp clinic.

Photo taken by the researcher on 20 February 2021.

When present in a particular area, aid services create mobility of people who come to these areas to receive services, and thus creating activities and opportunities, even informal, for trade and economy. Even refugees living on streets that lead to or are adjacent to UNRWA facilities used the spaces in front of their doorsteps to sell goods and generate income. This is an indirect impact of aid that has led to an alteration in the functionality of the space. Refugees adjacent to aid facilities benefited from the mobility around their location of residence to generate income (Photo 7.4 below). Abu Abdullah, an NGO worker who lived in the Deir Al Balah refugee camp, also noticed the change in the functionality of the space. He said during the interview that:

“When the health centres or clinics of the UNRWA are open, you can notice many booths and carriages that sell goods next to the UNRWA’s centres; they are called the UNRWA’s clinic market. These booths and carriages sell clothes and houseware items, but not groceries and food supplies. However, the market of the Deir Al Balah refugee camp is different from this market, and its shops and booths sell groceries and food supplies. The

distance between these two markets is 20 meters; however, they are different and feel separate.” (Abu Abdullah, 2021, Interview 05).



Photo 7.4 Refugees living near the Deir Al Balah refugee camp clinic, selling clothes at their doorstep.

Photo taken by the researcher during fieldwork on 20 February 2021

It is evident from the findings that the presence of the humanitarian aid apparatus, especially the UNRWA, has contributed to the formation and evolution of the camp space, as I discuss in Chapter Five and here. The economic impact of the UNRWA has influenced the reshaping of the “lived space” of the refugee camp. Refugee UNRWA staff utilised their good pay to enhance their shelters, thus contributing to creating a sense of permanency in the camp. In addition, the UNRWA agglomerated its services in central areas of specific camps where refugees from the camp and the surrounding areas should come to receive their food parcels, follow-up registrations and social services, and access the health clinic.

Around these centres, informal and pop-up markets erupted, creating the mobility needed for the local camp economy. Besides the dynamics discussed in the previous chapters, these economic activities and the concentration of services contributed to the rapid evolution of the “city-like” camps, where refugees changed the built environment to accommodate the economic activity. The evolution of “city-like” camps and the associated issue of overcrowding required that the UNRWA include shifts in its programs via the introduction of the ICIP, as presented and discussed in the next subsection.

7.2.2 UNRWA’s Infrastructure and Camp Improvement Program (ICIP)

In the early years of the exodus (Nakba), the UNRWA organised the refugee camps and provided refugees with initial shelters, marking the beginning of its spatial interventions (Berg, 2014). After that, the UNRWA’s building and infrastructure construction were primarily related to the provision of the agency’s services, such as establishing schools, healthcare clinics, food distribution centres, and social services offices. In the camp, there have been some ad-hoc infrastructure enhancement interventions in response to acute emerging situations, such as street flooding, sometimes in collaboration with local authorities (Oesch, 2020).

However, the UNRWA’s planning and the organisation of refugee camp spaces were barely present under the “humanitarian condition”. The agency’s failure in this regard began with its early inception, when UNRWA constructed culturally and materially inadequate refugee shelters in the 1950s. During data collection, I interviewed Abu Ahmed, an elderly refugee who witnessed the 1948 exodus (Nakba) first-hand and lived through the spatial development of the Jabalia refugee camp. He explained the first decade of suffering from the spatial interventions provided by the UNRWA at that time. He said:

“In the beginning, these houses were just tents. I remember that at the beginning of the 1950s, the refugees had to face heavy rains and floods. It was a complete mess. The refugees were moved to live in schools, and some of them died in the floods. The situation was tragic. After that, the

UNRWA built small houses with palm-frond roofs that were painted with mud and pitch. In summer, the pitch of these roofs melted and collapsed because of the high temperature, and it caused a huge mess. Each four to five refugees were living in the same room; that was never enough. I remember at the age of 15 or 16, we had to build two rooms made of mud to live in them because the UNRWA's houses were very small. Don't be surprised, but in 1956, I got married in one of these rooms made of mud. Life was extremely hard." (*Abu Ahmed, 2021, Interview 11*)

Nonetheless, the increase in the number of refugees, the economic growth and the changes in geopolitical contexts throughout the decades of displacement have led to drastic changes and uncontrolled horizontal and vertical expansion of refugee camps, shifting towards more permanent building structures, as discussed earlier. The UNRWA failed to take proactive measures to govern the building practices and expansion of the camp, and its interventions were only implemented in response to individual refugee families' needs in a piecemeal way (Budeiri, 2014).

Nonetheless, this humanitarian aid paradigm, which lacks planning and pays limited attention to the socio-spatial urban dynamics in the refugee camps, has begun to shift towards a more proactive approach since the inception of the Infrastructure and Camp Improvement Program (ICIP) within the UNRWA in 2007. The program was established based on the recommendations of the 2004 Geneva Conference to enhance the living conditions and standards in the refugee camps while preserving the camps' political identity and promoting refugees' right to return. The UNRWA's website states:

"Launched in 2007 to address the deteriorating environments of the camps, the Infrastructure and Camp Improvement Programme (ICIP) operates on the premise that the spatial and environmental conditions in which Palestine refugees live cannot be divorced from their livelihood or well-being. Consequently, ICIP adopts an integrated, comprehensive,

participatory and community-driven improvement of the built environment of Palestine refugee camps, utilising urban planning tools.” UNRWA (2025)¹⁸

It is an attempt by the UNRWA to capitalise on its development agenda as a promoter and catalyst for human development, recognising that spatial conditions are inseparable from refugees' livelihoods and well-being. However, this recognition came late, more than 50 years after the establishment of the camps. This delay could be attributed to the nature of the temporary mandate, a lack of understanding of the “humanitarian condition,” and the associated socio-spatial nature of refugee camps, as well as the political circumstances that questioned planning and infrastructure provision in the camps. As a result, camps have evolved organically via refugees' action, with ad-hoc infrastructure provision, improvised building of houses, and markets.

Muna Budeiri, who served as the first head of the ICIP since its establishment, wrote a chapter on the dynamics of the space, temporariness, development and rights in the Palestinian refugee camps in the book edited by Hanafi *et al.* (2014), titled “UNRWA and Palestinian Refugees: From Relief and Works to Human Development”. In her chapter, she acknowledges that even early planning attempts for refugee shelters by the UNRWA in the 1950s failed because the refugees had already established their shelter clusters based on their family networks and origins, and there was no sustainable framework to follow up on the evolution of these plans (Budeiri, 2014). The findings I presented in the previous chapters confirm that the UNRWA kept such spatial formation of shelters that grouped refugees from the same original village in a particular cluster, contributing to the recovery of social norm circles (discussed in Chapter Five). However, beyond that period, the geopolitical events that shaped the refugees' lives have impacted the camps' spatial evolution. As the camps stayed in indefinite temporariness, proactive and official traditional planning practices were

¹⁸ <https://www.unrwa.org/what-we-do/infrastructure-camp-improvement>

hindered, encapsulated within the juridico-political ambiguities, and tabooed to preserve the symbolism of refugee camps (Budeiri, 2014).

Prior to the inception of the ICIP, infrastructure and spatial interventions were responsive to a particular need or crisis, a piecemeal approach that lacked vision and a sustainable plan (Budeiri, 2014). The UNRWA's spatial interventions were limited to basic shelter provision, rehabilitation/repair of substandard individual shelter for some vulnerable cases, piecemeal camp infrastructure upgrades, and re-housing after a particular emergency or crisis (Budeiri, 2014). Remarkably, the agency has implemented limited housing interventions. At the household level, the UNRWA only implemented shelter interventions to enhance the living standards of individual households in the refugee camps. It is clear that these interventions were not systematic and only included those refugee families who were affected by certain emergencies or were destitute and unable to rehabilitate or extend their housing unit. Although such material support is important in terms of providing welfare for the poor refugees, these shelter enhancements were only based on refugee family needs and their level of vulnerability at certain points in time. They did not consider any overall plan for the urban enhancement of the camp space. One of the UNRWA staff I interviewed for this research explained to me that:

“The housing program provided shelters based on three categories; first, the houses that have been damaged because of wars, we consider them as an emergency; second, the houses that have been damaged because of water floods, we consider them as an emergency. We provide these two categories with essential needs such as blankets and mattresses. The third category is related to recommended houses (after assessments). We examine the condition of these houses by arranging field visits to them. We have a specific scoring system based on the technical assessment of these houses.” (*Abu Kamal, 2021, Interview 30*)

Although late, the UNRWA has introduced the ICIP to fill this gap in infrastructure provision and camp improvement planning. Since its inauguration, the ICIP has adopted a “city-like” or camp-city vision of refugee camps, aiming at enhancing the urban environment and infrastructure in the refugee camps via community-driven strategic planning (Misselwitz & Hanafi, 2010; Budeiri, 2014; Tayeh, 2022). In its latest strategic plan, the UNRWA adopts an orientation towards community-led camp improvement planning. According to the agency, since 2007, the ICIP has completed camp improvement plans in ten camps across the Levant (including the Deir Al Balah refugee camp in Gaza), resulting in the construction of public spaces, upgrading of infrastructure, improving road networks and economic urban spaces, and introducing some recreational and green initiatives (UNRWA, 2023b). According to Budeiri (2014, pp.197-198), the ICIP adopts the following conceptual pillars:

- “Importance of Built Environment”: acknowledging the direct connection between the quality of the micro/wider-scale built environment and the quality of everyday life.
- “Urban Planning”: utilising urban planning principles and best practices, including community-driven planning and design, that allow the UNRWA to operate holistically at the urban scale and address complexities in the Palestinian refugee camps.
- “Integrated Interventions”: recognising that camps are interconnected sites that require an integrated approach that links UNRWA’s various interventions and the interventions of the local authorities and the civil society.
- “Innovative and flexible interventions”: providing flexible and tailored proposals that recognise the variations in complexity and different social, political, and economic environments in the different refugee camps.
- “Civic/community participation: harnessing the local knowledge of the camp environment by involving camp residents in studying the planning of the spatial character of the camp and capitalising on refugees’ experiences and local pool of skills and assets.
- “Transition from relief to development”: transforming communities from passive aid recipients to active participants via systematic participation in fundraising, planning,

and further human development. Also, the UNRWA structures should be transitioned towards more developmental and community-based processes.

- “Sustainability of change”: building more capable refugees who can improve and sustain their living environment so that improvements are not isolated from socio-economic development.

Through different donor funding, the UNRWA has been piloting the implementation of this ICIP vision in different camps such as Nahr el-Bared in Lebanon, Neirab in Syria, Talbieh in Jordan, Dheisheh in the West Bank, and Deir Al Balah in Gaza (Tayeh, 2022). The main donor for this project in Deir Al Balah is the German Government through the KfW Development Bank. At the time I conducted this research, the project was being implemented, and an agreement on implementation had been reached between the community of refugees and UNRWA in Deir Al Balah. Abu Samy, a refugee from the Deir Al Balah camp and activist in the camp, talked about the ICIP’s intervention to enhance the main market street. He mentioned:

“The market street of the Deir Al-Balah refugee camp is extended from the parking lot to the UNRWA schools to the north of the Deir Al Balah refugee camp. This street is very narrow and can fit only one car. Nowadays, the UNRWA has made a deal with the refugees who live on the west side of the street to destroy their houses to expand the street. In return, the UNRWA offered to give them houses near the Al-Qastal area in the east of the Deir Al-Balah city” (*Abu Samy, 2021, Interview 14*)

Abu Rami, who is a project manager in the UNRWA’s ICIP in Gaza, talked about the intended plan and the progress of the intervention:

“Recently, we have been working on development projects to develop the refugee camps in the Khan Younis and the Deir Al-Balah areas. These projects aim to enhance the living circumstances of the refugees in the refugee camp. The refugee camps are overcrowded places that have

narrow streets. The development projects work on extending the roads and creating open areas, which require the destruction of some houses in the refugee camps. So, these projects also work on constructing multi-storey buildings for the refugees whose houses were destroyed. We have built 121 apartments in the Deir Al Balah area and 34 apartments in the Khan Younis area. First, we work on housing the refugees in multi-storey buildings and apartments. Then we work on the development process that includes destroying houses and redesigning the streets of the refugee camps.” (*Abu Rami, 2022, Interview 34*)

The UNRWA adopted participatory planning and a phased approach for the implementation. Delays and changes were inevitable due to total dependence on external funding, donors' preferences, and geopolitical events. Phase I of the program, implemented between 2018 and 2019, included shelter rehabilitation for some refugee houses in the camp, but this has been delayed and diverted to repair damages from the frequent conflicts (Tayeh, 2022). The UNRWA only secured the funding for Phase II in 2021 to build apartment blocks and rehouse 121 refugee families in order to demolish their camp houses and prepare for the implementation of street widening and establishing open squares in the neighbourhoods. As the camp streets became very narrow due to uncontrolled house expansions, Phase III entails the implementation of street widening and rehabilitation (Tayeh, 2022).

The programme faced many implementation challenges besides the precarious funding landscape and geopolitical tensions. These included initial rejections from the camps' residents due to uncertainty about the project's scope and impact. Lengthy discussions and negotiations happened between the refugee families, refugee committees, and the UNRWA. As Tayeh (2022) reported, the residential scheme consisting of apartment blocks was initially rejected because refugees wanted a standalone housing unit that they could extend in the future, mimicking the improvised expansion practice they adopted in the past decades. In addition, discussions have been held on the areas of the apartments, the location of potential apartment blocks, UNRWA services, and the support needed for

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refugees' livelihoods after they move out of the camp, aiming to reach a consensus (Tayeh, 2022). The Refugees Popular Committee took a substantial part in these discussions. Abu Samer, from the Deir Al Balah Refugees Popular Committee, mentioned:

“We have been working on a German-funded project that has been executed by the UNRWA for 3 years. This project aims to reconstruct the main street of the Deir Al Balah refugee camp. The street is tiny and not suitable. The Popular Committee communicated with the refugees and convinced them to destroy their houses to rebuild the main street in exchange for giving them an apartment in the Al-Qastal area. The Popular Committee face a difficult choice by removing part of the refugees outside the Deir Al Balah refugee camp. But, I always say that the refugees, who are the symbols of the Palestinian issue, are not supposed to live in terrible conditions.” (*Abu Samer, 2021, Interview 32*)

In general, refugees showed a positive reception to this project after discussion and negotiations with the UNRWA. They welcomed the intervention that helped enhance their housing conditions and the camp environment, which relieved them from many daily problems (Tayeh, 2022).

Nonetheless, Tayeh (2022) suggests that the developmental shift with holistic initiatives such as the ICIP is crippled by recurrent crises and conflicts, or “punctuations” as per Feldman’s (2018) concept. Tayeh (2022) argues that despite using urban planning tools, the ICIP has turned into an “extender relief operation” because the UNRWA inherits a lack of protection mandate (Tayeh, 2022, p.16). In addition, the Israeli government has been weaponising the destruction of infrastructure to de-develop the Gaza Strip (Tayeh, 2022), particularly in the refugee camps, to sustain the marginalisation of refugees and render them merely passive recipients of humanitarian aid, or “biopolitical” subjects (Agamben, 1998), as discussed in Chapter Two. The ongoing regimes of control, destruction, and collective punishment expose the limitations of humanitarian aid agencies, which are

unable to protect the civilian population and cannot tackle the underlying root causes of displacement (Tayeh, 2022).

From another perspective, Misselwitz and Hanafi (2010) indicate that planning bureaucracy in refugee camps will always collide with everyday life and the established structure of informal forces. They suggest that in the case of the UNRWA, grassroots powers challenged the planning initiatives to end their external dependence and top-down decision-making, and to offer better representation of the community interest. As discussed in Chapter Five, refugees were initially grouped according to their extended families, and they reproduced and renamed their residence blocks to resemble their original villages. This has continued as related families mostly lived in adjacent houses. Thus, the changes in the built environment require conversation with refugees to build their consensus and understand their preferences, similar to what has happened under the ICIP in Deir Al Balah.

In order to provide a sustainable impact on refugee camp improvement, observers suggest that humanitarian actors should acknowledge the established socio-spatial spillover, by having improvements integrating both the new and old built environment, blurring the official boundaries of the camp, and finding radical solutions outside the camp boundaries to reduce the population and the built densities (Misselwitz & Hanafi, 2010). Furthermore, democratic and sustainable camp governance structures should be supported, learning from local municipalities, pursuing wider refugee community involvement and participation, and working closely as a legitimate partner with the hosting authorities (Misselwitz & Hanafi, 2010). As discussed regarding the establishment and role of the Refugees Popular Committee, refugees have proven their ability to recover their representative and political structures. The findings of this research assert that the existence of representatives from the refugee community contributed to filling particular governance gaps as discussed in Chapter Six.

Given the precarious context of the Gaza Strip, the political and operational challenges for camp improvement presented by Tayeh (2022) and Misselwitz and Hanafi (2010) remain

valid. The socio-spatial structures in the camps are interwoven with each other. Social norms were preserved via spatial arrangements in the camps. Moreover, the spatial arrangements offered some camp spaces opportunities for economy and trade, which fostered social relations between refugees and non-refugees.

Nevertheless, the Gaza Strip can be seen as an extreme case in terms of the radicality of the conflict and “punctuations” of humanitarian aid. Despite this, the UNRWA slowly achieved and accumulated positive outcomes in its ICIP pilot and regarding its human development approach in general. In a relatively more stable context, even with minor crises, initiatives like the ICIP could offer pragmatic solutions in the refugee camps in protracted displacement scenarios. It is not anticipated that such an initiative would rebuild the refugee camps as fully integrated neighbourhoods in the hosting city or as a sustainable modern human settlement because refugee camps inherit the juridico-political exception, impacting both social and spatial structures. Nevertheless, such initiatives could definitely help improve the living conditions, offer more dignified living standards and foster the human development of refugees.

7.3 Discussion and Conclusion

This chapter has critically discussed the role of the UNRWA and the reciprocal relationship between the agency and the socio-spatial dynamics in the studied refugee camps. The chapter focuses on the role of the UNRWA because it is the dominant aid agency created for Palestinian refugees. This Discussion and Conclusion section provides further analysis highlighting the main findings and discussing them from the thesis's ontological perspective. Then it links the discussion presented in this chapter back to theoretical debates related to humanitarianism and humanitarian urbanism.

- ***Implications for ontological debates***

In the Palestinian case, humanitarian aid organisations, particularly the UNRWA, have been part of the formation and causation stories of the Gaza Strip refugee camps. They were part of the early assemblage that was affected by the “state of exception” and later paradoxes, and they were among the stabilised structures that remained while the refugee camps evolved into “city-like” socio-spatial composition. In such a "city-like" context of camps, humanitarian action has taken a functional role, arguably a semi-governmental role, with a particular focus that is defined by a mandate dictated by the international community.

UNRWA’s humanitarian work is indeed characterised by top-down management approaches where international expatriates fill senior management positions to preserve the international identity of the organisation and maintain accountability to the General Assembly and the UN system in general (Al Hussein, 2010). However, as camps have become more “city-like,” they feature some specific characteristics in terms of governance on the ground, living conditions, social structures, and particular spatial arrangements. In the city-like camp, different modes of humanitarian management are required to accommodate the ongoing evolution of the space. To cater for the “city-like” needs in the refugee camps, public servants, such as teachers, medical doctors, nurses, and social workers, who are refugees themselves, are employed by the UNRWA.

As discussed in Chapter Six and here in Chapter Seven, this thesis analyses the UNRWA as an ***organisation***, highlighting its roles as practised mainly through refugees who continuously negotiated their overlapping norm circles. According to Elder-Vass (2010) critical realism’s ontological perspective, organisations are structured entities of social groups who have emergent causal powers with commitment to the entity and specialised roles and authority relations. As noted in Chapter Three, the UNRWA, as an organisation, employs more than 11,800 staff members in Gaza, with the majority of those staff members from the refugee community. Thus, the majority of the organisation’s staff are also members of the community it serves. This has created a deep intersection between the UNRWA and refugees' norm circles.

UNRWA's staff are Palestinian refugees who identify with the same normative social institutions as their extended refugee families and neighbours. Those staff living and working in the refugee camps represent the UNRWA and their behaviour is co-determined by the causal effects of the organisation they represent (Elder-Vass, 2010). The UNRWA refugee staff helped explain the agency's humanitarian mandate to refugees, made it more acceptable to refugee communities, and, at the same time, exercised this mandate as part of refugees' daily narratives and interactions (Gabiam, 2012). This position of the UNRWA's refugee staff also imposed challenges on them, as they were subject to criticism when they were unable to influence the agency's mode of work or when they were expected to convey to the UNRWA's HQ the refugee population's scepticism and demands (Al Hussein, 2010).

In addition, through this intersection, refugees exercised their agency utilising causal mechanisms of their shared norm circles, forcing the UNRWA to shift its policies so that they intersect with their shared commitment. For example, refugees conveyed their refusal to UNRWA's initial "works" programming and pushed towards recognising their shared commitment to demand the international community to uphold the recognition for a just solution for their cause. Through these negotiations and tensions, the UNRWA's mandate evolved, making the agency the main contributor to camp evolution through the provision of education, health, and infrastructure in the camps. This has created a quasi-state function for the UNRWA that constituted a public service provider for refugees at their hosting locations (Al Hussein, 2025; Bocco, 2010). Through these intersections with the norm circles of the refugee community and their interests, UNRWA's authority was not only legal through the UN mandate, but also socially embedded within the local refugee community hierarchy, providing an avenue for refugees to exercise a citizen-like dwelling and create their "lived space".

Furthermore, as many refugees became part of the UNRWA organisation through employment, they accessed better financial resources. This has provided refugees with financial capital, contributing to the financial resources needed for the development of city-like refugee camps. Those refugee UNRWA staff invested their income from the UNRWA in

their camps, expanded their homes and established economic activities. Furthermore, the presence of the UNRWA as an organisation presented an economic leverage for refugees in general. UNRWA's aid material and the mobility created around its centres intersected with refugee camp space, creating opportunities for financial gains and trade as discussed in this chapter above. Despite some of the shortfalls in UNRWA's work due to lack of funding, limited urban planning, and the temporary-permanent reality, refugees see their existence as attached to the existence of the UNRWA and consider any attempts to reduce the agency's work to be an attempt to harm the Palestinian refugees' cause. Even the Palestinian political parties are against reducing or ending the UNRWA's mandate for Palestinian refugees. As Abu Jamal from the Refugees Popular Committee in Jabalia said: "As long as the UNRWA exists, the refugees' issue is alive." (*Abu Jamal, 2021, Interview 12*).

- ***Implications for theoretical debates***

Establishing refugee camps as humanitarian spaces and providing material support and shelters were the first socio-spatial interactions between the UNRWA and the refugees. In this first encounter, the UNRWA succeeded in providing urgent needs and support for relief and recovery despite concerns articulated about inadequate shelters provided at the inception. Nonetheless, the agency overlooked the camp's socio-spatial evolution and focused its efforts on the human development of refugees. Utilising the ambiguity in its mandate, the UNRWA has successfully turned its operations into a catalyst for the refugees' human development. However, being unable to provide protection and durable solutions, alongside overlooking urban development for decades, has contributed to the improvised evolution of camp spaces and exacerbated the state of paradox.

The UNRWA has indirectly influenced the spatial environment via its economic and human development roles. As I have shown in the findings, the mobility created around its centres and the economic support provided for refugees via aid and employment have widely affected and reshaped the camp spaces, creating commercial spaces and increasing the viability of the areas surrounding its service locations. From another direction, the UNRWA has supported refugees and their development, enabling them to recover and generate

income. Refugees received education at the UNRWA schools, which fostered their ability to get higher education and then employment. They were employed by the UNRWA itself, the governmental and private sectors, and abroad, sending remittances to their relatives in the camp. Refugees' enhanced income, mostly invested in the construction of their houses, contributed to the organic, refugee-led, uncontrolled evolution of refugee camps, which has created severe overcrowding. Poor refugees and those with limited incomes remained in destitution and expanded their shelters gradually, room by room, using whatever substandard, sometimes unsafe building material available to them. All these expansions were not controlled or regulated, which created the paradoxical overcrowded conditions in the camps.

This thesis draws on the discussion of Feldman's (2018) notions of the continuous movement between the "humanitarian situation" and the "humanitarian condition". It is a movement between fluid formation and stable causation. Crisis and emergency conditions exert pressure on the socio-spatial structures, which could cause them to collapse, reform, or trigger the formation of new structures when responding to urgent situations. The destruction of houses, for example, is a spatial devastation that requires the formation of collective efforts at different social and organisational levels to assess the damage, mobilise funding and provide temporary and then permanent solutions. At the same time, social institutions of families and wider communities provide support, advocate, and exercise pressure, where existing structures are challenged on the basis of their effectiveness and efficiency to respond to the dire situation. When the context stabilises, the "humanitarian condition" is manifested, chronic issues arise, structures that survived the "humanitarian situation" are strengthened or weakened, and newly formed ones interact, exercising their emergent properties to cause changes that occur, albeit at a slower pace than the "humanitarian situation." Similar to aid recipients, humanitarian organisations, like the UNRWA, oscillated between the temporary and the permanent, stuck until there is a sustainable, durable solution. Such oscillation of interventions has always

had a socio-spatial impact and contributed to the other dynamics I have discussed in this thesis.

As discussed in Chapter Two, many scholars criticised humanitarian aid. As Agier (2011) and Fassin (2012) argued, humanitarian aid interventions are seen as tools to provide logistical solutions to political problems. In other words, by framing inequality, persecution, and injustice as suffering, the humanitarian apparatus reduces complex political issues to technical, medical, or logistical problems (Fassin, 2012). This has been true during the “humanitarian situation” and the initial introduction of the UNRWA to support Palestinian refugees. However, throughout the decades of displacement under the “humanitarian condition”, refugees agency and their consistent influence on UNRWA’s operations transformed the notions of victimhood into a manifestation of their struggle and political rights. This transformation is rather incomplete as the situation of the camps and refugees oscillated between the fluid acute emergencies and stable chronic conditions as discussed in this chapter. Feldman (2018, p.234) explains that “the pursuit of politics within humanitarianism has been necessary for Palestinian refugees, but it has also been necessarily limited. The mixing of temporalities, geographies, and goals that is the hallmark of refugee politics is a source of persistent tension”.

Under the “humanitarian condition”, the UNRWA provided interventions of long-term nature and at the same time was affected by donors’ policies and priorities, who sometimes used funding to UNRWA to exercise political pressure on Palestinians. To tackle this, the agency became pragmatic and solution-oriented. A direction manifested in the ICIP and the introduction of urban planning initiatives.

Before the ICIP, the UNRWA provided piecemeal and ad-hoc infrastructure and refugee housing upgrade interventions (Budieri, 2014; Tayeh, 2022) which were a clear manifestation of the nature of humanitarian aid provision. In Feldman’s (2018) terms, it is a response to a “humanitarian situation”, rather than recognising the complexity and spatial dimensions of the “humanitarian condition”. The humanitarian aid apparatus has been

established to be responsive to short-term crises and focus on basic needs. However, protracted refugee crises worldwide are challenging this paradigm, with growing evidence that entails a “city-like” shift in thinking to introduce humanitarian urbanism and urban perspectives and practices (Fabos & Kibreab, 2007; Agier, 2002 & 2011; Sanyal, 2012 & 2014; Jansen, 2016; Jansen & de Bruijne, 2020).

The UNRWA acknowledged the need to enhance the built environment in the camps, responding to the donor community's desire to improve the camps' infrastructure to preserve the geo-political stability. At the same time, the deteriorated shelter conditions and the “city-like” realities created by the camps' improvised evolutions entailed the shifting of UNRWA's strategies to offer systematic urban planning initiatives.

Thus, there has been a shift in the UNRWA's mode of operation and attention to the spatial aspect in the introduction of the ICIP. Although late, this shift has been accepted by the community of refugees, as shown in the Deir Al Balah refugee camp case, after they have seen its benefits through the pilot phase, and via intensive dialogue between the UNRWA and the refugee community. These types of interventions can be implemented by humanitarian actors through collaboration with local authorities and the displaced communities, which is much needed in protracted displacement conditions. International actors should be proactive in addressing the “city-like” camp issues and not only responsive to spatial crises, as the UNRWA was. The conditions of overcrowding, deteriorated infrastructure, and associated substandard living conditions were created by overlooking the need to plan and regulate refugee camps, ignoring considerations for more stable governance structures and the lack of systematic engagement of refugees.

The UNRWA is unique in the context of Palestinian refugees as it has actually introduced some sort of planning to establish the camps, as discussed in Chapter Five. It was humanitarian planning under its temporary mandate. Planning here is concerned with establishing a refugee settlement that offers an adequate standard of living and possibilities for future expansion. Some argued that UNRWA did so during the early establishment of

refugee camps, considering the location of the camps, the morphology of the terrains, access to transport routes and infrastructures, and the desire to avoid overcrowding (Berg, 2014). The agency viewed proper site selection, specifically proximity to employment and urban amenities, as essential for preventing slum conditions and ensuring refugee acceptance. However, this economic logic often clashed with the security concerns of host states, who resisted centrally located camps (Berg, 2014).

While Palestinian camps are often viewed as chaotic, Berg (2014) argued that those built from scratch were initially highly disciplined spaces. Ultimately, the UNRWA did not explicitly aim to build permanent settlements, but their practical design choices, such as expandability of shelters and locations near urban towns, enabled the camps to endure and expand Berg (2014). This aligns with the findings of this research which confirms that the camps' initial location and initial planning by UNRWA have contributed to the way they evolved later. This is manifested in the discussion provided in the thesis on the differences between the socio-spatial dynamics of the two studied camps, Jabalia and Deir Al Balah.

However, the UNRWA failed to adequately introduce houses that cater for community needs and their future as the data shows, and overlooked the regulation of these camps for many decades. They organically evolved while poverty and overcrowding conditions increased. Recently, the UNRWA brought back a bold model for camp planning through the ICIP as overcrowding issues became a headache for the UNRWA and its donors, and was seen as a destabilising factor in the region. The Geneva Conference of 2004 strongly adopted the recommendation to improve housing and infrastructure in refugee camps highlighting that this would not compromise the Palestinian refugees' right of return. UNRWA responded by introducing "a new, holistic, integrated, developmental and participatory approach based on urban planning to improve the built environment in Palestinian refugee camps" (Hanafi *et al.*, 2014, p. 10). The ICIP approach brought the consensus of various stakeholders including the Arab League and host states to urgently tackle the worsening conditions of Palestinian refugee camps (Budieri, 2014).

Humanitarian efforts, such as the UNRWA's ICIP, have created pockets of enhancements, or models that could be consolidated and expanded in other camps and contexts. Nonetheless, acting reactively could create enhancement, but it could also perpetuate the "state of exception", as it would be hard or impossible to overcome structural isolation and misery created over decades without radical transformation. Furthermore, all solutions will remain in the interim, impacted by frequent crises or conflicts that cause setbacks in the desired plans and cannot be avoided without achieving a durable solution.

8. CHAPTER EIGHT: CONCLUSION

8.0 Introduction

The primary aim of this thesis is to understand the evolution process of refugee camps in the Gaza Strip and the relationship between this process and the prolonged provision of humanitarian aid interventions. The main contribution of the thesis is the introduction and analysis of the overarching term, the **“state of paradox,”** which describes the conditions that shaped the evolution of the studied refugee camps.

The “state of paradox” reality can be ontologically understood through combining assemblage and critical realism ontologies (Rutzou & Elder-Vass, 2019). Utilising this ontological conception, the thesis demonstrates the processes of formation and causal mechanisms of the socio-spatial structures in the studied camp cases, Jabalia and Deir Al Balah. The analysis presented in this thesis views the studied protracted refugee camps as sites of ongoing formation and causation that are influenced by periods of acute emergencies, the “humanitarian situation”, and periods of relatively settled circumstances or stability, the “humanitarian condition” (Feldman, 2018).

This thesis contributes to the broader debates in the city-camp literature highlighting that camps in protracted displacement evolve under the “state of paradox”. As refugee camps in protracted displacement are depicted as urban environments with features resembling cities and towns (Agier, 2011; Sanyal, 2012; Dalal, 2015; Jansen, 2020), they remain impacted by the state of exception (Agamben, 1998 & 2005), particularly in the Palestinian case. This reproduces the “state of paradox” that is characterised by the contradiction in everyday life between the temporary and the permanent, the continued oscillation between fluidity and stability, and the continued tension between the “conceived space” and “lived space” (Lefebvre, 1991). The “state of paradox” expands the debates from city-camp literature by reconciling notions of exception and normality that co-exist in the same temporality and space.

Practically and empirically, the analysis of the “state of paradox” unpacks the dynamics that contributed to the shape and conditions of the studied camps. It highlights the tensions between the short-term mandate of humanitarian actors and the reality of service provision for longer-term chronic needs. In addition, through the “state of paradox”, one can understand the contradictions in the built environment of the studied camps. Such a campscape of protracted displacement is largely shaped by the temporary-permanent conundrum, in which official organisations provide ad hoc infrastructure while refugees create permanence.

The research contributes to filling the research gap in studying the “city-like” context of refugee camps in the Gaza Strip. Refugee camps in the Gaza Strip have a unique context that this research explored and analysed, offering perspectives on how socio-spatial dynamics played out under multiple and layered sovereignties. The research provides insight into how refugees navigated their lives amid the complexities of the absence of traditional state structures and the fluid, fragmented governance. By looking particularly at the role of the UNRWA, the thesis offers critical insights into the quasi-governmental humanitarian management of refugee camps that can be discussed and analysed in other contexts. These discussions inform the debates on humanitarian urbanism (Jansen, 2018) by analysing the roles of various actors that shaped the urbanity of the studied camp spaces.

Furthermore, as refugees in Gaza share the same political and legal rights as non-refugees, the research analyses the particular socio-spatial dynamics that enabled refugees to maintain their distinct refugee identity, manifested in their attachment to the camp space and the preservation of their social cohesion. An identity that was also preserved through humanitarian management and the entitlement to UNRWA services, under which refugees managed to recover their agency, utilise financial resources, and exercise their politics (Feldman, 2018).

In this thesis, I analyse the socio-spatial structures and causal mechanisms utilising retroductive reasoning, constantly moving back and forth between literature and empirical findings, and theories and my fieldwork data analysis. This approach helped me develop and build on the conceptualisation of refugee camps in the literature to identify and produce the thematic findings for this thesis.

I utilise qualitative research methods, including semi-structured interviews, documentary analysis, and field observations, to triangulate the data and inform the in-depth analysis. Semi-structured interviews are the primary data collection method, allowing for detailed conversations and reflections from participants. At the same time, field observations help notice and describe the built environment using the researcher's lenses. I use documentary analysis to generate initial understanding and then to complement the more in-depth findings. Comparing the two camps in the case of the Gaza Strip throughout the analysis helps expand on the discussion of the differences between the two places, which have evolved in a similar context. By highlighting these differences, I discuss particular underlying structures of causal mechanisms and processes that produced distinct powers and thus influenced the socio-spatial components differently in the studied spaces.

The three empirical chapters preceding this conclusion have provided an in-depth analysis and discussion of the main themes under the research questions. The first empirical chapter, Chapter Five, discusses the socio-spatial formation of refugee camp structures since the beginning of exile in 1948 and the ongoing interactions between these structures. In that chapter, I introduced the ***“state of paradox”*** as main contribution to the city-camp literature. It is a new concept I propose and use to encapsulate the understanding of the camp space when accumulation and culmination occur between conflicting conditions and statuses. The second empirical chapter, Chapter Six, analyses the reciprocal influence between governance, living conditions, and socio-spatial features, discussing their interactions and impacts. The chapter engages with the socio-spatial dynamic of the fragmented governance and discusses the living conditions in the “city-like” studied camps. In the third empirical chapter, Chapter Seven, I highlight the role of the UNRWA and its

evolution alongside the oscillation between acute emergencies “humanitarian situation” and chronic prolonged displacement “humanitarian condition”, in the context of the Gaza Strip.

I present my overarching findings and recommendations in this conclusion, believing that they would be beneficial for other contexts as well as the planning and management of future refugee camp spaces. The following section of this concluding chapter provides summary answers to the research questions presented in the methodology chapter, Chapter Four. After answering the questions, in the second section of this conclusion, I provide a diagram that summarises the findings, highlights the state of paradox and the associated discussion points, and connects the main arguments of the thesis. In the third section, I suggest the empirical, theoretical, and policy contributions of this thesis, highlighting the main themes that I used to contribute to theoretical and other debates from the findings. This section puts forward some recommendations alongside the discussion. Finally, I provide a brief analysis and discussion of the consequences of the October 2023 war, proposing ideas for further research.

8.1 Answering the research questions

Question One: *What socio-spatial dynamics have influenced the evolution of refugee camps in the Gaza Strip?”*

I suggest in this thesis that two major processes influence the way the studied camps have evolved. The first process is related to the genesis of the camp space and the emergency situation under which camps were established and assembled. The second process is related to the chronic conditions that evolved over time via continuous interactions between the various socio-spatial structures in the camps. Although these two processes can be seen as having occurred in a sequenced chronological order, “punctuations,” as Feldman (2018) elaborates, occur through repeated crisis situations that disrupt the existing structures and create a backwards movement to the “humanitarian situation”, (re)establishing new structures and stabilising in the “humanitarian condition”.

As I present and discuss in this thesis, particularly in Chapters Two and Five, answering the first research question requires unpacking the processes of forming socio-spatial structures and the causal mechanisms that emerge from the time the refugee subject and the camp space are introduced due to war and displacement. I argue that such processes of formation and the enactment of causal powers through various socio-spatial dynamics and their structures continue to operate under the oscillation between the emergency and the chronic conditions. In other words, there were periods of acute emergencies resulting from conflicts and wars, and periods of chronic and relatively static circumstances that caused distinct dynamics in the studied spaces. This oscillation happens under temporary-permanent conditions as the camps are placed under juridico-political exception while refugees enact their daily living and contribute to the evolution of their built environment. I summarise below the socio-spatial dynamics identified through this research, which I explicitly discuss in Chapter Five, to answer the first research question.

- ***Initial formation of refugee camps and setup***

The initial formation of refugee camps in the Gaza Strip happened under the “state of exception” (Agamben, 1998, 2005), triggered by the displacement of the Palestinian population and the 1948 war. Refugees were placed under exceptional legal and spatial arrangements as aid recipients in their refugee camps. The consequences of the state of exception continued to influence the camp space amid protracted displacement. Under the state of exception, refugees were forced to flee, leading to the establishment of camps to shelter them, to be managed exceptionally by the UN. Analysing the initial formation of the refugee camps entails understanding the first assembling of the socio-spatial dynamics and their associated structures. As discussed in Chapter Two, employing the ontologies of assemblage thinking to unpack the formation of socio-spatial structures entails unpacking the material and non-material, and the human and non-human components of the studied spaces (Anderson & McFarlane, 2011). This helps understanding the fluid structures in the forming and seeing the historical processes of powers and actors that stabilise to produce habits and practices (McFarlane, 2011).

Throughout this thesis, I frame the assembling of the studied refugee camp spaces to have socio-spatial dynamics. Socially, in the Gaza Strip, the formation of refugee community structures has occurred within a host community that shares similar homogeneous characteristics. The non-refugee hosting community facilitated the quicker recovery and integration of refugees, as both groups shared values and norms and were previously connected to some extent.

This social support has been fostered or hindered by particular spatial arrangements at the time of establishing the camps. Those refugees, such as those in the Jabalia refugee camp, who stayed with non-refugees for periods before moving to the camp became closer to the non-refugees' social norm circles. They maintained and fostered this relationship after moving to the camp, located near Jabalia town and Gaza city, where the refugees had established connections with the host community. Once the Jabalia camp was established, refugees from particular villages and families were grouped together, which helped them recover their pre-displacement communities and social norms.

Spatially, the camp's initial geographical location and connectivity helped or hindered interactions between refugees and non-refugees. As observed in the Deir Al Balah camp, one factor that hindered the immediate development of relationships between refugees and non-refugees was the camp's remote and relatively isolated location at the time of its establishment. In contrast, the camp location in Jabalia was central, enabling economic activities and connectivity with the surrounding towns and cities. Furthermore, because the UNRWA shelters provided to refugees at the formation stage did not match their social and living needs, refugees enacted improvised spatial enhancement when their situation became relatively more stable. They practised what they called "تحويط" (Tahweet) in order to expand their dedicated land plots, occupying empty spaces between refugee shelters and in the streets. This practice reformed the shape of the camp space and totally altered the quasi-military initial shelter setup provided by the UNRWA (Saleh, 2020).

Furthermore, the early introduction of humanitarian aid and the generosity of the services provided contributed to recovery and the relative stability of refugees' conditions. The solidarity and support from aid organisations provided the necessary means for refugees to recover their social structures and enact their everyday dwelling in the camp space. The humanitarian actors fulfilled refugees' basic needs, as essentials such as food, water, and health were catered for. This promoted refugees' ability to prioritise the development of themselves and their living space, as the humanitarian apparatus granted the essential needs. As I argue throughout the thesis, the initial and continued provision of aid and the humanitarian management of the camp space are among the main determinants of how camps evolved throughout time.

- ***Evolution of camp spaces and refugee structures***

Protracted camp spaces are temporary and permanent at the same time (Agier, 2011). They inherited their temporary nature from the political and legal exceptions enacted on the camp space and its dwellers as being outside the normal sovereign state protection and management. They are designed and intended to host refugees temporarily, until a durable solution is achieved. These dynamics are particularly notable in the Palestinian case as there is no apparent durable solution or pursuit of one by the UNRWA. Under these conditions of exception, Palestinian refugee camps in protracted displacement developed “city-like” or camp-city features through refugees’ everyday tactics and practices of normal living (Agier, 2011; Ramadan, 2013; Sanyal, 2014a; Abourahmeh, 2015; Saleh, 2020).

The evolution of city-like camps has also been impacted by oscillation between the humanitarian situation of emergencies and the chronic conditions for development (Feldman, 2018). Throughout the decades, the camps were impacted by acute emergencies that happened in the Gaza Strip and particularly affected the camp space. For instance, the camp space was affected by the 1967 Arab-Israeli war, which reduced the number of refugees in the camp due to further displacement. The 1971 Israeli military operation to destroy houses in the camps to build paved patrol roads and impose control over the

freedom fighters (Dahlan, 1990) has also changed the conditions in the refugee camps. Also, the 1987 uprising and its associated conflict recreated the dire humanitarian need among refugees, and again changed the living conditions in the camps. The further escalation of conflicts in 2008, 2014, and 2021 recreated a humanitarian situation that necessitates the provision of relief assistance, perpetuating the sense of exception and temporariness. Once the acute crisis ends, the circumstances transform into conditions of poverty, restrictions, and precarity in the chronic humanitarian condition of Palestinians (Feldman, 2018).

Under such prolonged conditions and the oscillation between the exceptional and the normal, refugees re-appropriated their camp space to create their “lived space”, changing the “perceived space” and challenging the imposed “conceived space” (Lefebvre, 1991). These ongoing tensions between the temporary and the permanent, conceived and lived spaces, create a paradox or contrast in everyday living, which I call the “**state of paradox**”. The state of paradox represents the contradictory features in the protracted refugee camps, the oscillation between the temporary and the permanent, the normal and exceptional, and the “humanitarian situation” and the “humanitarian condition.” Under the state of paradox, refugee camps inherit legal and political exceptions, yet develop city-like features. Spatially, the state of paradox is manifested by contradiction in the built environment, between the permanent, well-constructed building blocks and the temporary, improvised, miserable shelters. Socially, the state of paradox reproduced mixed and contradictory feelings and attachments among refugees. Refugees expressed their sense of belonging to the camp and their desire to make this space their permanent home, while simultaneously presenting their wish to leave the camp to establish a better future. Those who left the camp are still attached to it and its social norms, and many of those who remained in the camp want to leave it.

The evolution of camps has been influenced primarily by the socio-spatial dynamics and the causal mechanisms enacted under the state of paradox. The state of paradox helps to explain and capture how the studied camps, particularly Jabalia, manifest contradiction in the built environment, exacerbated by improvised and unplanned building practices. In

relative stability, refugees provisionally expanded their houses to accommodate their natural growth and everyday needs, without the supervision and management of the UNRWA or local authorities. Customary laws and agreements between refugees in particular neighbourhoods were the only means that regulated such expansions. Although UNRWA manages camp spaces, the agency does not have governance authority (Hanafi, 2010; Saleh, 2020) and only provides ad-hoc responsive infrastructure and building interventions (Oesch, 2020; Tayeh, 2022). Refugees established the Refugees Popular Committee to fill the governance vacuum after the PNA came to power in 1994, aiming to preserve the political identity of the camps and refugees. The fragmented governance of the camp space, as I discuss in Chapter Six (and further below), opened the doors for the uncontrolled development of the built environment.

High population density and the central location fostered trade and economic activities, especially in the Jabalia refugee camp. Businesspeople came and introduced a commercial built environment. In Deir Al Balah, commercial activities were limited due to socio-spatial factors that did not create a supportive environment. This is because of the remote geographical location, relatively smaller population size, lack of or limited interactions with non-refugees, and the absence of central UNRWA services and facilities in the camp.

Those refugees with better economic opportunities, obtained from remittances, trade, or employment with the UNRWA, expanded their houses vertically or bought land plots near the camp, thereby expanding the space. Refugees established a sense of normality under the “humanitarian condition.” This normality was fostered by the causal powers of UNRWA and its services. The UNRWA has provided effective education and healthcare services, which have primarily contributed to the development of the refugee community. Refugees became educated and healthy, and they established their own social structures and economic activities. They gained political representation and enacted spatial enhancement for their houses and the built environment in their camps.

The spatial evolution of the camps has been influenced by UNRWA's actions as well. The UNRWA introduced a centralised service infrastructure to specific refugee camps. Particularly in the Jabalia refugee camp, the health clinics, social service centres, and UNRWA's services created centrality and fostered mobility and trade. However, the inner alleys and the internal blocks away from services and commercial areas in the Jabalia camp remained in substandard conditions. The less fortunate and poor refugees occupied them. The spectacle became paradoxical within the camp areas in Jabalia. This occurred to a lesser extent in Deir Al Balah, due to its smaller size, limited commercial activities and fewer UN services. At the same time, UNRWA's temporary mandate and the emergency services provided by the agency, such as periodic food distributions, emergency shelter repairs, and ad-hoc water and sanitation infrastructure projects, manifest the temporary nature of the refugee camp spaces. The UNRWA was established to cover the service gaps and cater for refugee needs in exceptional spatial and juridico-political arrangements. These services were always of a temporary nature, provided during the camps' permanent existence, which has continuously reproduced the state of paradox.

In general, the evolution of refugee camps in the Gaza Strip has been co-determined by the conditions under which they were initially established, as well as the subsequent processes of continued reformation and causal mechanisms that evolved through ongoing dynamism between the different socio-spatial structures. This evolution has been affected by the oscillation between the "humanitarian situation" and the "humanitarian condition", creating city-like features while inheriting the exceptional political and legal conditions. Such a situation has created fragmented governance and deteriorated living conditions, and presented a dilemma for humanitarian management, entailing continuous shifting of operations to provide relief aid and development actions. The answer to the second research question summarises findings that unpack the mutual impacts between the socio-spatial dynamics, governance, and living conditions.

Question Two: *How do socio-spatial dynamics, governance structures and the living conditions mutually shape each other in the refugee camp environment?*

Camp governance, living conditions, and various socio-spatial structures have been influenced by inherited exceptions in the camp space, as well as the reproduction of normality under a state of paradox. Authority and power have continuously shifted between military, political, humanitarian, and community actors at different times. As a result of the temporary-permanent conditions, improvised and shifting governance structures emerged and dissolved, contributing to (re)shaping the camp space. During the evolution of refugee camps, there has been conflict between exceptional measures and the production of everyday life, which created a complex and fluid governance that continuously shifted between various authorities and service providers (Hanafi, 2010; Saleh, 2020).

I argue in this thesis that governance in the camps is fragmented due to the unstable political conditions and the presence of various service providers and community structures with blurred boundaries. The fluctuation in the political situation that caused periods of conflict and other periods of relative stability exacerbated the temporary-permanent paradox in the camps. In such a situation, no clear boundaries were drawn between the various service providers who provided interventions in the camp space. Actors like the UNRWA, local municipalities, and the Refugees Popular Committee operated to provide services in a decades-long camp space that should preserve its temporary nature until a just political solution for the refugee issue is materialised.

Furthermore, the Israeli military rule and control of the Gaza Strip throughout different periods of time have reproduced experiences linked to the state of exception. Refugee camps, particularly, were placed under another layer of exception due to the temporary nature and the humanitarian management of the space. The fragmented authorities of governance were mainly technical, with overlapping or absent powers in particular socio-spatial aspects of the camps. The vacancy of regulatory powers was particularly apparent regarding the planning and building practices of the camp space, as no authority provided proper regulation, which opened the door for customary, improvised organisation.

To enact its technical governance, the UNRWA, as the lead humanitarian actor in the camp, benefited from the refugees' normative circles. The agency employed refugees on the ground to act on behalf of the organisation and pass the technical knowledge needed to manage the camps. However, the findings of this research reveal that the UNRWA was unable to properly manage the city-like features of the camps due to its limited temporary humanitarian mandate. The agency has also negotiated transferring services, such as those related to water, sanitation, and roads, to municipalities that were hesitant to accept such responsibilities due to the political perception of the temporariness of the camps. This has created ambiguity regarding the roles of the UNRWA and local authorities concerning governing the built environment of the refugee space.

Furthermore, the social, cultural, and political capital of refugees, which were preserved and fostered in the early years after displacement, allowed them to gain representation in the hosting municipalities and create their own organisation, the Refugees Popular Committee, when the PNA came to power. Despite the critique associated with the humanitarian governance and the limited ability of the UNRWA to provide sustainable, durable solutions, refugees utilised the existence of international aid and their refugee status to turn their suffering into political concerns and thus exercise their politics (Feldman, 2018).

Although UNRWA and various political authorities like the PNA maintained formal disciplinary control, Palestinian refugees asserted their own agency to redefine the camps' physical and symbolic landscapes. By replicating the social structures of their original villages within specific camp blocks, refugees fostered a sense of nationality and continuity. Consequently, the camps evolved from mere markers of displacement into vital centres for the cultivation of national identity (Berg, 2020). In particular, spatial arrangement and grouping of refugees helped them recover their social structures and exercise causal powers in the broader community and political decision-making process, influencing the management of the camp space. Through this influence, refugees managed to preserve their identity around their displacement and attachment to a just solution and the right to

return. The political identity of the camps, to remain temporary places of displacement and manifestation of victimhood until there is a political solution for the Palestinian refugee cause, was central to the management of the space among Palestinian parties and Refugee Committees, who have always seen the refugee camps as the responsibility of the international community.

Governance and power have been continuously (re)distributed through the daily enactment of service provision by different organisations and entities. This situation has been influenced by the existing exceptional arrangements and contributed to producing the socio-spatial paradoxes in the camps. Fragmented governance exacerbated the improvisation and the provision of ad-hoc fragmented services that were also hindered by acute emergencies and the (re)introduction of the “humanitarian situation”, during the frequent escalations of conflicts and humanitarian crises. This entire scenario of fragmented governance, fluctuating authorities, the lack of long-term organisation and planning, and the blurring of lines between roles and responsibilities of different organisations and structures has contributed to a deteriorated built environment and infrastructure in large parts of the refugee camps, creating miserable living conditions.

Social heterogeneity, the spatial proximity and early hosting arrangements by non-refugees helped refugees integrate with the surrounding non-refugee community, as mentioned above. Additionally, the fact that both groups shared the same political struggle and pursuit of statehood created a common goal, facilitating integration. Refugees have access to the same opportunities for employment and economic activity as non-refugees, which has promoted enhanced economies at particular periods, such as the 1970s, due to Israeli policies that promoted refugees' work and integration, and the 1990s, during the early rule of the PNA. Also, commercial activities in the camps flourished, fostering trade relationships between refugees and non-refugees. Enhanced refugee income in those periods affected the built environment as refugees utilised their income to expand their houses and buy land at the outskirts of the camps to build new houses. Furthermore, the

patrol roads opened by the Israeli authorities to control the big refugee camps and reduce their density became main routes for transport and trade at later stages.

All these socio-spatial factors affected the living conditions in the camps. Density and overcrowding became a chronic issue due to the uncontrolled construction and expansion of buildings. Many buildings remained unfinished as the refugees did not have the financial capacity to complete them after the deterioration of the economic conditions during the second uprising and political division between Hamas and Fateh. Some refugees lived in these substandard buildings, and older refugee camp houses degraded over time. Socially, many refugees were deeply attached to the camp and remained there due to their social customs, considering the camp an integral part of their identity and status. Their place in the camp was attached to their right to return.

However, living in overcrowded, substandard conditions had an impact on the socio-spatial structures in the camps. As discussed in Chapter Six, domestic violence increased due to the harsh living circumstances and lack of privacy. Many reported that the last years witnessed deteriorated social conditions as a result of overcrowding and families living together in the miserable, substandard shelters. The issue of overcrowding pushed refugees to squat on every open space in the camp, leaving the camp with minimal public open space.

These findings unfold a reciprocal relationship between the socio-spatial dynamics in the studied camps, governance, and living conditions. Refugee camps inherited characteristics from their genesis in a state of exception, and the camp became stuck between the temporary and permanent, reproduced by humanitarian management, national politics, and refugees' actions, which created problematic governance. This governance has shifted between various entities and left vacant thematic areas, particularly concerning the regulation of the built environment. This situation allowed for improvisation and exacerbated the deterioration of infrastructure and overcrowding. As presented in Chapter Six, these living conditions in the camps affected the socio-spatial structures, causing a

reduction of social solidarity, increased social problems, and encroachment on the camp space. Such a situation has, in turn, led to a shift in the governance of the built environment and prompted the Refugees Popular Committee to step in and offer some regulations for building without proper expertise. In addition, as discussed in Chapter Seven, this led the UNRWA to introduce the Infrastructure and Camp Improvement Program (ICIP) to enhance the built environment and living conditions in refugee camps, under its humanitarian mandate. The reciprocal interactions between the socio-spatial dynamics and the humanitarian management, particularly by the UNRWA, are summarised in the answer to research question three below.

Question Three: *How does the prolonged provision of humanitarian aid through the UNRWA affect and get affected by the socio-spatial dynamics of refugee camps in protracted displacement?*

Humanitarian aid, particularly the UNRWA, has been a substantial actor that influenced the formation of the socio-spatial structures of the refugee camps. At the same time, these socio-spatial structures have had a continued reciprocal impact on the evolution of the Palestinian camps and the agency's operations throughout the decades of displacement. The UNRWA, along with all humanitarian actors in the Palestinian context, was brought in to respond to the catastrophes caused by the displacement of Palestinians and their subsequent placement under a state of exception following the 1948 war. Early responses from organisations such as the ICRC, AFSC, and UNRWA helped the recovery of Palestinian refugees and the restoration of their social and political identities. Spatially, the UNRWA was the instrumental actor in building the camps and providing shelter in the early stages. However, as outlined above, the agency left the camps in the Gaza Strip without proper urban planning or management of the built environment for a prolonged period.

The UNRWA's work was significantly influenced by the changing political agendas associated with the introduction and failure of the peace process, the recurrent conflicts, as well as the interests of donors. Nonetheless, the agency adapted to the context-related

uncertainty and became solution-oriented, focusing on the human development and self-sufficiency of refugees. The UNRWA provided good pay to its local refugee staff, which helped them enhance their houses and initiate business activities. The concentration of UNRWA services in large camps, such as Jabalia, created mobility and enhanced economic activities around the service provision areas. Specifically in the case of the Jabalia refugee camp, the provision of centralised humanitarian services in the camp, along with the camp's central location and the wider roads opened by the military, promoted trade and commerce, creating more development at the camp's main roads and outskirts. This has resulted in the spatial contrast highlighted above, between the poor, improvised internal alleys and the also improvised richer and more developed commercial areas.

The UNRWA's provision of free, effective primary education and healthcare services contributed to the development of refugees' skills and abilities to access employment and jobs within Gaza and abroad in the Arab Gulf countries. In return, this enhanced the income of refugees who invested in building and expanding their houses within the camps to make them more permanent. However, the absence of proper regulations for such expansions has contributed to increased overcrowding in the camps' space, as outlined above.

The interactions of the socio-spatial dynamics under the state of paradox, as discussed throughout the thesis and summarised above, have created city-like features in the camp spaces. While the UNRWA and other aid agencies responded to acute emergencies and crises, they struggled to tackle the chronic conditions and the associated improvised built environment. To respond to the situation, the UNRWA adopted a shift towards human development through the provision of healthcare and education systems, and later, the ICIP, despite the temporary mandate of the agency (Bocco, 2010; de Jong & Aced, 2014). As presented in Chapter Three and discussed in Chapter Seven, to address the socio-spatial dynamics associated with chronic conditions, the UNRWA adopted strategic priorities and operational response objectives that focus on human development. The Agency had to link traditional humanitarian response actions with the human development agenda, pursuing shifts in aid delivery modalities and funding structures (UNRWA, 2023b). This required

flexibility between the UNRWA's core human development programmes' budget and its emergency services that target the same refugees using the same systems and assets within the agency (UNRWA, 2023b).

One of the most salient aspects in UNRWA's operations that responded to the "city-like" features of the camps was the introduction of the ICIP. Although it was late and mainly occurred after 50 years of prolonged displacement, the UNRWA eventually adapted to the evolving socio-spatial environment, taking bold steps to introduce proper planning of the camp space through the ICIP. Before the ICIP, the formal infrastructure and housing upgrades by the agency were piecemeal and only responsive to critical needs and emergencies. The UNRWA's ICIP, in response to the deteriorated built environment in the Deir Al Balah camp, represents a shift in humanitarian thinking to address the various aspects of the "humanitarian condition", entailing collaboration with local authorities and the refugee community to address the spatial needs of a protracted refugee camp situation.

8.2 Connecting the main arguments

In this thesis, I identify and analyse the socio-spatial dynamics and the shifting circumstances in the protracted refugee camps I have studied in the Gaza Strip. I present the camps as spaces in continuous evolution and oscillation between crisis situations and chronic conditions, under which the socio-spatial structures form, stabilise, enact causal powers, and then are stressed by shocks, reforming again. This movement contributes to the "state of paradox" for refugees and organisations acting in the camp, which inherits features from the temporary "state of exception" and collides with the permanent, chronic reality. To synthesise these main arguments, I have developed Diagram 8.1 below.

The State of Paradox in Refugee Camps

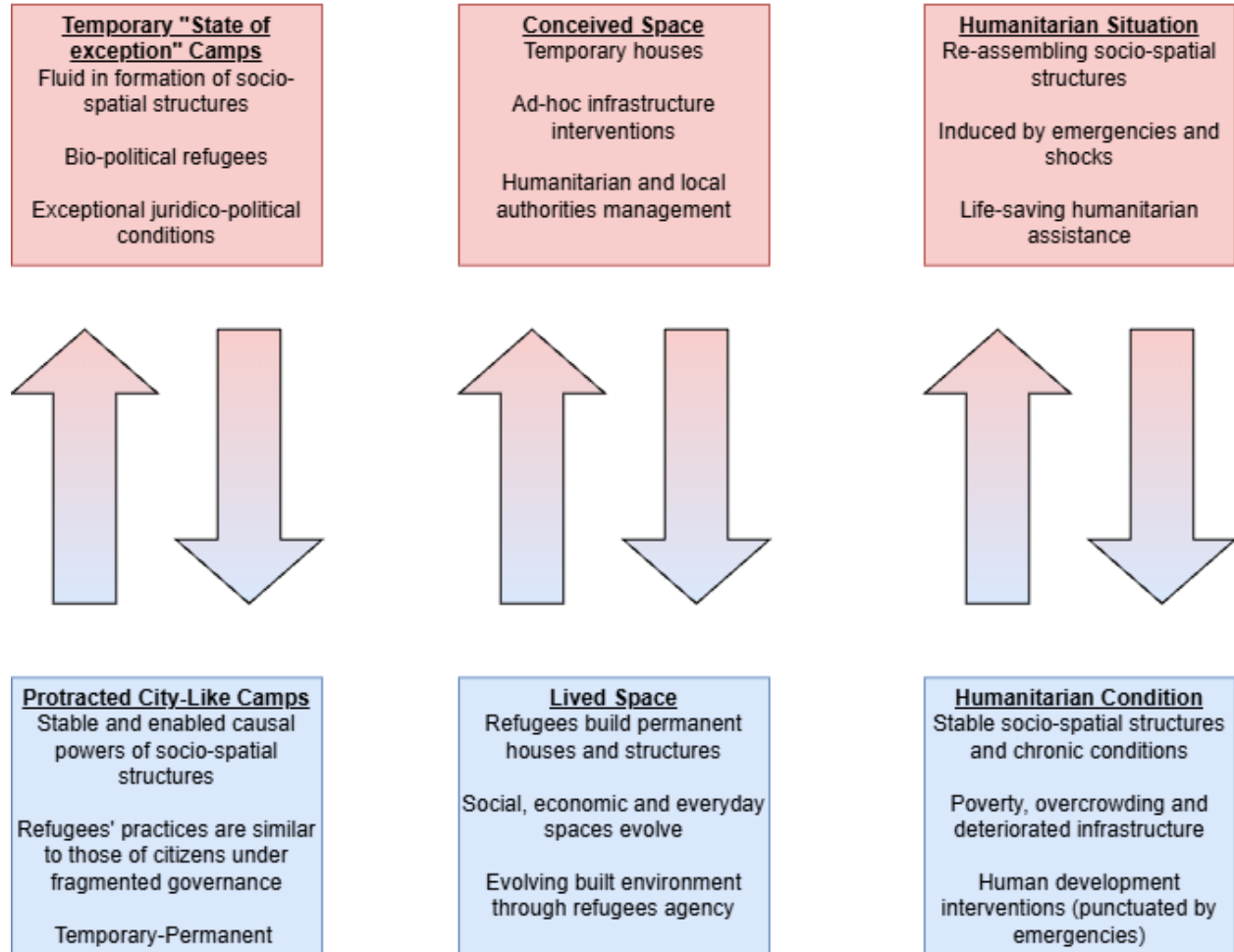


Figure 8.1 The state of paradox in protracted refugee camps in the Gaza Strip

The diagram depicts the different components, states, and tensions presented by concepts discussed in this thesis to unpack the state of paradox in the studied reality. I developed this diagram based on the findings of this research, and it represents the situation in the studied camps in the Gaza Strip. It mainly reflects the findings from the Jabalia and the Deir Al Balah refugee camps, where the socio-spatial structures evolved, creating particular contrasts and paradoxes.

The story of the studied camps started with the declaration of the “state of exception”, triggered by the 1948 war. This led to the creation of Palestinian refugees and the formation of camp spaces. The formation phase, discussed in Chapter Five, contributed to determining the future dynamics and structures that were formed and stabilised at later stages. During this formation, the UNRWA and humanitarian actors focused on the provision of life-saving assistance under the “humanitarian situation”. Gradually, the established socio-spatial structures stabilise and enact their causal powers, and the socio-spatial scene evolves into the “humanitarian condition”. As formed structures and the general situation stabilise, refugees seek normal living, and humanitarian agencies are required to introduce longer-term interventions to cater to the well-being of refugees. During this more stable phase, tension increases between the temporary humanitarian camp “conceived space” and the more permanent desired refugee “lived space”. Refugees negotiate living and challenge the juridico-political exception inherited from the state of exception. This includes the exceptional spatial conditions for the Palestinian refugees associated with their prolonged displacement and the geopolitical factors that hinder durable solutions.

The prolonged periods of the “humanitarian condition” contribute to the formation of “city-like” camps. In the “city-like” camp, the space becomes dense, vibrant, and quasi-governmental services such as education, healthcare, social services, financial support, culture and sports are provided by the UN and non-governmental actors. Daily interactions and activities are similar to those of citizens in adjacent cities, albeit with a denser population and overcrowded houses. In such circumstances, the camps become stuck between temporary-permanent features, which contributes to the “state of paradox” under

the uncertainty about durable solutions and the humanitarian management of the space. Humanitarian services are provided to serve a longer-term existence under measures designed for temporary assistance and mandate. This happens in a prolonged and almost permanent situation, where other emergencies and crises occur, reverting the situation back to basic needs and survival under a new “humanitarian situation” and reproducing paradoxes in the city-like camps. This continuous movement redefines the main conditions of the city-like camps, the state of paradox, and the humanitarian management.

Throughout the various contradicting aspects of this scene featuring the city-like camps, the reproduction of the “state of paradox”, the oscillation between “humanitarian situation” and the “humanitarian conditions”, and the tension between the “conceived space” and “lived space”, governance becomes fragmented and sometimes vacant, as analysed in Chapter Six. Due to the uncertainty associated with the juridico-political exceptions of the camp spaces and the status of refugees, governance has mainly become technical and focused on service provision. The vacant and fragmented governance permits spatial improvisation, which is justified by the existence of inadequate shelters that require spatial expansion.

This situation is coupled with enhanced education and health of refugees due to the UNRWA’s services. Enhanced education and healthcare contribute to improved refugee conditions and the creation of some economic opportunities. Refugees’ normative social institutions benefit from their access to good healthcare and education, as human development helps refugees recover their agency and contribute to their broader normative circles. Particularly, refugees benefit from their education to access jobs. As the UNRWA services are taken for granted, refugees focus on generating income and accessing representation at the Palestinian political structures. However, the geopolitical complexities and the blockade on Gaza have reduced access to economic opportunities in the past two decades, creating more impoverished refugees in the camps.

The practice of improvised construction and vacant governance contributes to problems of overcrowding and deteriorated infrastructure. Overcrowding, in turn, affects the priorities of humanitarian services. These services are developed to introduce longer-term programs and urban initiatives, such as the ICIP. However, the overall situation remains “punctuated” by the occurrence of shocks resulting from conflicts, which destabilise structures and trigger socio-spatial reformation. All these dynamics between socio-spatial features, governance, living conditions, and movement between emergency and chronic situations have shaped and reshaped the city-like camps, reproducing a state of paradox under humanitarian management.

8.3 Research contributions & recommendations

This thesis makes various genuine and original contributions to different theoretical, policy-related and empirical debates. I categorise these contributions as empirical, theoretical, and policy-related as per the following subsections.

8.3.1 Empirical contribution

Empirically, this thesis sheds light on refugee camps in one of the longest and largest protracted refugee situations worldwide (Sanyal, 2014c). In general, studying Palestinian refugee camps brings useful discussions and insights to understand how geopolitics, development issues, and humanitarianism co-interact with refugee actions, with the spatial development of the Palestinian camps offering an avenue to analyse the spatial outcomes in protracted refugee situations (Sanyal, 2014c). In particular, this thesis offers empirical contributions via the study of the Palestinian refugee camps in the Gaza Strip, one of the longest-displacement crises and an understudied refugee context (Saleh, 2020; Tayeh, 2022).

The strict security restrictions and the inaccessibility of the Gaza Strip make the territory out of reach for the majority of researchers. This research is unique as it offers genuine academic insights from the understudied refugee camps in the Gaza Strip, particularly from the two camps: Jabalia and Deir Al Balah. The two camps evolved distinctly under relatively

similar and homogenous geopolitical conditions and humanitarian aid structures. Drawing a comparison between the two studied spaces at various points discussed in this thesis shows that socio-spatial dynamics have influenced the two spaces differently. It has shown how social structures and norms affected the spatial development and how relationships between refugees and non-refugees are instrumental in this regard. The empirical findings also helped unpack the distinct impact of humanitarian actions on the built environment and how centralised service provision and density created economic opportunities in particular camps like Jabalia. Geographical location, connectivity and proximity to nearby hosting cities of refugee camps contributed to how the camp-economy and spaces developed. As shown in the discussion, these characteristics in the Jabalia camp contributed to a distinct, and more rapid, vibrant and urbanised evolution compared with Deir Al Balah.

The data from the semi-structured interviews recorded for this research, along with the images taken throughout the fieldwork, represent a valuable resource that documents the evolution of the studied camp over the decades. As the socio-spatial structures have radically changed due to the ongoing war started in October 2023, this research presents an original source of knowledge as well as a spatial memory of refugee places that no longer exist in the same way they did before the war, due to acts of urbicide on large refugee camps, specifically the Jabalia refugee camp. I briefly highlight the impacts of urbicide in the last section of this Conclusion Chapter.

8.3.2 Theoretical contribution

Theoretically, this thesis mainly contributes to the city-camp literature by introducing the concept of the “**state of paradox**”, drawing upon Agamben’s foundational theorisation of the camp as a “space of exception,” as well as the “city-like” depictions of camps explored by scholars such as Agier, Sanyal, Minca, and Jansen. In particular, I suggest that the theorisation of the camp spaces should not completely depart from Agamben’s “state of exception”. Despite that contemporary scholars who studied the Palestinian refugee camps assert that Agamben’s paradigm of “bare life” and “state of exception” falls short in

theorising and explaining the camp space (Sanyal, 2012 & 2014; Ramadan, 2013; Saleh, 2020), I call for the need to explore the ongoing impact of this state, along with other evolving aspects of the refugee camps, which are referred to as “city-like” places. The creation of refugee camps and the labelling of displaced people as refugees are products of juridico-political exceptions enforced by sovereign states on those groups of people who are displaced due to conflicts and wars.

It is true that in prolonged displacement, refugee spaces evolve and become incomplete towns (Agier, 2011), developing their own form of urbanism or “humanitarian urbanism” (Jansen, 2018). However, in relation to the Palestinian case and beyond, I suggest that the total abandonment of Agamben's work creates a gap in understanding the genesis of the phenomenon of camps. The “state of exception” has legal and political consequences. So, the complete abandonment of the “state of exception” means that legal and political actions have already been taken to end this state and its consequences. The actions that should end the state of exception should be juridico-political and are associated with achieving durable solutions for refugees. In other words, in the Palestinian case, to abandon the “state of exception” means ending the current legal label of “refugees” and providing them with citizenship either as citizens of a Palestinian sovereign state or citizens of a third country that provides complete protection similar to that of their citizens. Furthermore, if we suppose a durable solution is to happen by integrating and assimilating refugees while they are in their camp spaces, the camp spaces should be fully integrated in the urban development plans of the host countries and treated similarly to other neighbourhoods in their hosting cities, not as distinct, exceptional spaces. None of this has happened, and the Palestinian refugees and their camp spaces are still facing exceptional measures linked to their legal and political exceptional statuses.

Thus, instead of totally abandoning the exceptional and biopolitical notions in refugee camps because they cannot work alone to explain the camp space, I argue that studying refugee camps should still consider the prolonged effects of the “state of exception” and combine the analysis with “city-like” depiction and its complexities to unpack the complete

picture. In other words, camp research should explore the politics, urbanity, and the production of the camp space (Ramadan, 2013; Sanyal, 2014b), and at the same time consider the inherited impacts from the origins associated with the “state of exception”.

It is important to note that an exception is not necessarily reproduced by the sovereign hosting state, which is sometimes weak and influenced by other sovereign powers and donor agendas. However, exceptional conditions are still a product of the refugee label and spatial arrangement. As Ramadan (2013, pp. 69-70) contends, “while Agamben’s notion of the camp as a ‘space of exception’ is useful, understanding how, why and by whom the law is suspended requires a nuanced and empirically informed approach, sensitive to the particular characteristics of real camps, the politics, people, relations and practices that constitute camps on an everyday basis.”

The concept of the state of paradox underpins this theoretical framing. The state of paradox is a culmination of contradictory features in protracted refugee camps, characterised by oscillation between the temporary and permanent, the normal and exceptional, and the continued oscillation between what Feldman (2018) describes as “the humanitarian situation” and the “humanitarian condition.” The state of paradox explains the ongoing tensions between the “conceived space” and “lived space”, helping to understand the city to become, to be formed, in a protracted refugee camp, where structures and processes are stuck between being temporary and permanent at the same time.

The analysis of the socio-spatial dynamics under the state of paradox also captures the oscillation between the “humanitarian situation” and the “humanitarian condition” (Feldman, 2019). This represents an ongoing tension between the stable-fluid perception of reality and the contradiction between inherited exceptionalities and the creation of normality. As I present in the empirical chapters, this state helps explain the conflicting spatial campscape where the misery and poverty in the camp space continue to exist next to relative prosperity and development. The miserable living conditions and built environment stem from exceptional arrangements, including a lack of governance in the

space and inadequate shelters that underwent uncontrolled and unfinished expansions. At the same time, the well-established built structures result from actions associated with creating permanence in the camp, which promoted economy and trade, bringing relative stability for external investment and development.

Socially, the state of paradox is manifested in the conflicting feelings and perceptions about the camp space among the refugee dwellers. Refugees have recreated their original social connections, established social life, friendships, and families, and at the same time, still yearn for their right to return, considering their legal-political status as temporary. They want to leave the camp for a better life, greater prosperity, and a better future for their families. However, simultaneously, they are attached to their camp, as their home, their inherited heritage, and norms, because the camp is a manifestation and representation of their identity and struggle.

The state of paradox also represents a dilemma for the humanitarian actors. As the conditions oscillate between the crisis and the chronic, the temporary and the permanent, humanitarian management of the camp should become more flexible and able to cater for needs under such continuous movement. The humanitarian actors should provide relief assistance at times of crises while considering protracted needs associated with chronic displacement. However, with a temporary mandate and short funding cycles that are affected by the political atmosphere, humanitarian interventions are themselves precarious and are limited in their longer-term impacts.

Throughout the discussion in this thesis, therefore, I suggest that protracted displacement refugee camps represent a state of paradox. Camps are in continued negotiations between the temporary and the permanent, oscillating between the “humanitarian situation” and the “humanitarian condition”, under processes of formation of structures and their causal powers. To synthesise this argument, I propose the following statement to be a summary of this discussion:

*The Palestinian refugee camps evolved into the ‘**state of paradox**’ through being ‘**temporary-permanent**’: places of emergency and fluidity, and at the same time, places of stability and normality, influenced by continued formation and causal powers of the socio-spatial structures. Refugees' living conditions, governance structures, and their interactions with the socio-spatial dynamics are reproduced under the impacts of the ‘**state of exception**’ while evolving into ‘**city-like**’ camps and mutually influencing the ‘**humanitarian management**’ of these spaces.*

This statement builds on the propositions I provided in Chapter Two and the unpacked reality through the empirical study. I initially developed those propositions through analysis of literature and my particular knowledge and observations. The propositions contend that the camps are contradictory spaces (Proposition One) and that humanitarian management has a mutually impacting effect on socio-spatial dynamics, characterised by a continued oscillation between crisis and chronic conditions (Proposition Two). Using retroductive reasoning, the concluding statement I provide above expands on these concepts and propositions utilising the findings unfolded by this research.

To recap, the statement suggests that the Palestinian camps evolve into a “state of paradox” resulting from the inherited impacts of the “state of exception” and the development of “city-like” features under precarious temporary-permanent conditions and humanitarian management, while circumstances continuously move between the “humanitarian situation” and the “humanitarian condition”.

In addition, this research seeks to build on and apply in the real world the complementarity between assemblage and critical realism ontologies discussed by Rutzou and Elder-Vass (2019). This thesis is a unique contribution to this approach as it utilises the combined ontological understanding of reality to unpack and explain the studied refugee camp spaces. Under this approach, I have combined the ontologies of the process-oriented assemblage and structure-oriented critical realism (Rutzou & Elder-Vass, 2019) to explain

the formation and causal mechanism of the socio-spatial structures in the studied refugee camps.

I unpack how particular structures came to be, becoming and being formed by analysing the genesis of refugee camp spaces, considering both the material and non-material, as well as human and non-human components. At the same time, I bring in the discussion of causal powers and the more stable socio-spatial structures, particularly refugees' norm circles, normative social institutions, and organisations (Elder-Vass, 2010), and the established camp spaces. This is to explain how structures affect each other and create mutually affected capacities to influence the world (Rutzou & Elder-Vass, 2019).

I find this ontological underpinning helpful in supporting the exploration and study of protracted refugee camp spaces. This is because these spaces are oscillating between the fluid and stable, the temporary and permanent, the normal and exceptional. I recommend considering this analytical framing in the study of protracted refugee camp spaces to test its validity and contribute to the unpacking of the formation and evolution of these spaces.

8.3.3 Policy contribution

On the policy side, the thesis aligns with various arguments that humanitarianism is originally mandated to provide temporary protection to the victims of the new world order, serving as the left hand of the empire, the hand that heals (Agier, 2011). This does not imply that this thesis casts doubts on the intentions and motives of the humanitarian workers and their organisations. However, as I presented in detail in Chapter Seven, this thesis suggests that humanitarian organisations and the overall humanitarian apparatus are confined and crippled by the implications of the exceptional conditions and mandates imposed in specific contexts and times. It is the international donor community that defines and provides humanitarian actors with their niche for action, and these aid organisations must navigate complicated politics and manoeuvre in a temporary reality to leverage donor state interests, preserve their operations, and fulfil their mandate.

However, when a refugee situation unfolds to be protracted, sticking to the traditional modes of humanitarian action will yield limited results. In the particular situation of the Palestinian refugee case, the UNRWA is dealing with protracted displacement under a temporary mandate and is not provided with the capacity to pursue durable solutions. At the same time, the agency is required to respond to crises and chronic needs of the Palestinian refugees under the same mandate. Thus, the UNRWA has been operating under a “state of paradox” environment, under which the agency undertook operational and policy shifts to provide short-term and longer-term interventions, as I discussed in the case of the UNRWA in Chapter Seven. It is argued that other refugee organisations, such as the UNHCR, can capitalise on the UNRWA’s approaches in addressing protracted refugee crises (Sanyal, 2014c). This thesis critically discusses and highlights the UNRWA’s policies and interventions in the Palestinian refugee camps in Gaza, implemented throughout more than seven decades of displacement. The findings and discussions provided here open more avenues for policy debates and discussions among humanitarian actors. As Sanyal (2014c, p.135) suggested, the “UNRWA is becoming the norm, not the exception, to refugee studies and can offer valuable insights into the politics of protracted refugee situations of today.”

Furthermore, based on the empirical findings associated with the studied camp spaces, this thesis advocates for responding to the city-like dynamics of protracted camps, particularly in terms of spatial planning, governance structures, economic activities, and self-reliance. Leaving the camp space to evolve without proper planning creates paradoxes and bottlenecks for both the hosting country and humanitarians. Thus, a more integrated approach between humanitarian organisations and the hosting governments should be sought from the early inception of the camps if the aim is to allow the future integration of these spaces with the hosting cities. Such an approach should start with a proper selection of the geographical location of the camp, studying possible connectivity and circulation of population and goods between the camp and the adjacent urban centres, and adopting a clear, pragmatic agenda for socio-economic integration and sustainable planning.

Evidence from other contexts also aligns with such a suggestion. Looking at the Za'atari Syrian refugee camp context, Dalal (2015) concludes that current self-reliance processes neglect local dynamics and emerging urban qualities, with the increased focus on the socio-economic dimension showing limited success. Parekh (2020) highlighted examples of the dire conditions and persecution that refugees face in various protracted refugee camps worldwide. Parekh (2020) described the suffering that the refugees from Myanmar face in Cox's Bazar refugee camps in Bangladesh, the poverty and insecurity that the refugees from Somalia face in Dadaab camp in Kenya, and the isolation and coercive control that Syrian refugees face in Azraq camp in Jordan. In the majority of displacement contexts, protracted refugee camps remain most precarious with the prevalence of makeshift and temporary shelters, informal and abusive labour, and ongoing restrictions on movement (Parekh, 2020).

In such circumstances, how could aid organisations and UN agencies offer and implement proper and sustainable refugee camp planning under high uncertainty and unpredictable conditions without durable solutions? It is a valid critical question that has no easy answer. Although the Gaza Strip case can be seen as extreme on the continuum of protractedness and punctuation of the humanitarian actions, the prolonged Palestinian refugee experience offers important lessons to be learned. This thesis suggests potential approaches to tackle such a conundrum. The starting point is to identify and plan a camp space that has the potential for spatial integration in the long run through collaboration between the humanitarian agency and the host authority; a camp that could be designed in line with the local authority's planning framework, a connected place that can be inherited by the local community and handed over once a durable solution is realised. Socio-spatial dynamics should be considered in the management of the camp space to offer dignified living for refugees while considering the political 'taboo' not to normalise a permanent camp life. A programmatic, careful shift for the work of the humanitarians is inevitable in this case, where the humanitarian management should navigate a niche with the host authority to introduce spatial planning integrated with the host authorities' plans, adopting upgradable

response plans that can swiftly shift between acute emergency response and programming for prolonged development needs. This requires further policy considerations that are based on rigorous research to adapt refugee settlements to offer refugees with dignified living without compromising their rights for a just, durable solution.

8.4 Back to ground zero and further research

I acknowledge that going through this research journey, from beginning to writing up this thesis, was one of the most challenging and emotionally demanding activities I have undertaken in my life. Besides the personal, overwhelming journey of displacement during the October 2023 war, I feel a tremendous burden simply writing about the people I met, about their thoughts that contributed to this thesis, and their desire to convey a message about living in their simple, yet complex camp space. I do not know who among them has survived this insane war, who is still carrying the memory of the camp, attachment to it, and the sense of home that has been devastated by “urbicide”.

Relistening to the recorded interviews while doing the analysis and seeing the photos of the places I visited in the refugee camps in Gaza opens deep wounds and brings to the forefront the suffering I and the people of Gaza have experienced. Writing the description of these spaces and elaborating on the findings in these pages brought with them nostalgia for the friends, the places and alleys in the refugee camps, for the voices and conversations, for the remnants of the homeland that once existed. I wrote these pages to provide explanations and document experiences that spanned more than seventy years, from displacement to hope, suffering to pride, tears to laughter, and from the camp to the city.

Socio-spatial circumstances in the Gaza Strip have utterly changed since I began this research project. I never expected to write about displacement while I was displaced. I never imagined I would be describing the catastrophe (Nakba) that happened more than seventy years ago and experiencing it happening now. I designed this research to explain the conditions in the camps before the devastating war in October 2023. However, I could not present my findings and work in isolation from the events taking place. Thus, I have tried to

briefly explain and extend the discussion of the unfolding events happening on the ground in various parts of this thesis. Nonetheless, the situation is highly fluid and uncertain, and the future of the destroyed refugee camps is vague.

Since the beginning of the October 2023 war, the catastrophes have brought back devastating humanitarian circumstances that entailed shifting all humanitarian operations to pure response to emergencies and life-saving activities. Socio-spatial structures are stressed and are being reassembled again to produce new realities. Socially, refugee families, particularly in Jabalia, are displaced and dispersed across the Gaza Strip in dire conditions, breaking the social refugee fabric. Extended families suffered many losses, and the utmost priority for people now is the survival of their nuclear families and close relatives. War caused extreme safety threats and hunger making survival the utmost priority for refugees and the overall community in Gaza. Such mechanisms of war weakens previously established social norms and structures as actions become driven by the biological factors and needs of the human body (Elder-Vass, 2010). Thus, the war, its acute emergency, and the prolonged chaotic situation opened the way for criminal gangs, looting, and thefts that emerged, threatening the social cohesion and creating big cracks in the overall society of the Gaza Strip.

Those stressors of war destroyed the economy in the camps and the overall Gaza Strip territory. The non-refugees are not in a better shape and have become displaced themselves, competing with refugees for the scarce resources. This situation has utterly transformed the social norms and structures in the overall community, and it is difficult to anticipate what social structures could remain and how new structures would evolve, as the spatial arrangements for such a situation are still not known.

Spatially, the Jabalia refugee camp, as it was studied here, no longer exists. More than seven decades of gradual evolution and enhancements were lost. The buildings, infrastructure of refugees and the UNRWA were severely damaged and destroyed. Scholars and media commentators assert that these aspects of urban life have been deliberately targeted by the

Israeli military in the Gaza Strip, in an act of urbicide (Khalilia, 2024). The spatial scenery is being drawn again, bringing back the situation to ground zero, with a very acute emergency and devastated infrastructure. The space is being redefined under new conditions of the “humanitarian situation.” It is not clear if camps will remain in their previous locations or if refugees will move somewhere else. Refugees are taking shelter in any space available, even if not dignified or adequate, establishing pop-up tent camps with no infrastructure or services (Khalili, 2024; Shields-West, 2024)

This devastating war has reshaped the awareness and consciousness of refugee space, which has historically challenged the imposed temporary measures. The war destroyed the permanency created via more than seven decades of displacement and reproduced extreme exceptional circumstances and socio-spatial instability. I witnessed the war and displacement first-hand in the first six months, as I briefly discussed in Chapter Four. When I was displaced to makeshift shelters, every socio-spatial aspect was highly uncertain and temporary. The nylon shelters, the grouping of people, and the creation of a new refugee space without planning or knowing how long and when the displacement will end, reproduced utter temporariness. However, there was always a desire to return to the old temporary-permanent situation. Even when people were displaced, they established their temporary shelters based on their old social ties and connections, hoping to preserve their original community, collective support and memory (Khalili, 2024).

In the Gaza Strip, how the war situation will unfold its impacts on the socio-spatial structures is a critically significant research topic that should be explored once the war ends. As the war is causing radical changes in the socio-spatial structures in the Gaza Strip, the narrative around space and shelter has drifted towards the provisional and the improvised, under the current acute emergency. It is therefore highly critical to study and understand the influence of “urbicide” on the socio-spatial dynamics there. Such a research can employ the analysis of the formation and causation presented in this thesis to understand the socio-spatial dynamics being pressured and destroyed through “urbicide”,

reformed and transformed by the agency of different structures, and the enacted causal powers in the studied environment.

In addition, post-war planning and the dynamics associated with rebuilding refugee camps or temporary shelters, like tents, caravans, and pre-fab units, that are expected to remain a reality for many years, are also another important area to research once the war stops. It would be a pursuit that could benefit from the experience that followed the 1948 Nakba and the establishment of camps. In this research, I highlighted insights and lessons that cover that period and would be beneficial and relevant to build upon. Based on the findings I present here, I call for considering that lessons can be drawn from the protracted displacement experience before this war, particularly in light of future planning for refugee camps and settlements. It is essential to consider the initial setup and formation as part of a process that can be prolonged, where refugee spaces may last for extended periods and develop “city-like” features. Additionally, considering how to introduce new innovative operational and funding landscapes that could enable humanitarian organisations to shift between the acute and the chronic phases if reconstruction begins is another area that could be explored.

Finally, in the Middle East region and beyond, the approaches and findings from this research can be used to understand and analyse the evolution of refugee camps. Other refugee camp contexts can be studied following the same theoretical conceptualisation to expand and further develop the findings presented in this thesis. Particularly, the Palestinian refugee camps in the UNRWA’s areas of operations share many similarities with those that existed in Gaza before the war. I suggest that further research should explore the various socio-spatial dynamics in those camps to enhance service provision and provide better living conditions, building on the findings of this thesis. This entails analysing the structures and dynamics associated with the origin and evolution of camps to help humanitarian organisations, local authorities, and service providers develop a better understanding of these spaces and thus better plans for longer-term services.

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Annexe A: Semi-structured interview questions

Inquiry Level	Questions to seek answering at each level through field work	Semi-structured Interviews probing Questions
البحث مستوى	خلال من عليها الاجابة أو بطرحها الباحث يرغب التي الأسئلة الميداني البحث	
Community, refugees, and grassroots organisations الأجنيين ،المجتمع والمؤسسات القاعدية الاجتماعية	<u>Descriptive/Explanatory وصفي:</u> - What are the main factors that motivated refugees to live or settle in certain camp or area inside / outside the camp? - ماهي العوامل التي دفعت اللاجئين لاختيار منطقة سكن معينة داخل المخيم /خارج المخيم؟ - What are the common humanitarian interventions in refugee camps? - ماهي الخدمات / التدخلات الانسانية الشائعة داخل مخيمات اللاجئين؟ - Which humanitarian interventions are seen effective by refugees and communities in the camp and which are not? - أي من التدخلات /الخدمات الانسانية تعتبر فعالة (ناجحة) (من قبل اللاجئين والمجتمع في المخيمات، و ما هي الخدمات التي لاتعتبر ناجحة؟ - How do refugees and non-refugees from the camp' surrounding areas interact in the shared urban space of refugee camp? - كيف يتفاعل اللاجئين والغير لأجنيين في داخل وخارج المخيم وفي المساحة الحضرية المشتركة بينهم؟ <u>Analytical تحليلي:</u> - Why refugees consider certain interventions effective or non-effective in enhancing their living conditions?	- Bio-data: Name, Age, Gender, Place of residency, Refugee or non-refugee, Occupation? - المعلومات الأساسية: الاسم، العمر، النوع الاجتماعي، مكان السكن، لاجئ أم مواطن، المهنة؟ - Please tell me about your experience living/working/interacting in refugee camp? - من فضلك أخبرني عن تجربتك في العيش/العمل /التفاعل في مخيم اللاجئين؟ - Do you know the history of the camp? How was it established? Where and when? How did it evolve (spatially, economically, socially)? - هل تعرف تاريخ المخيم؟ كيف تم تأسيسه؟ أين ومتى؟ كيف تطور المخيم) مكانيًا ، اقتصاديًا ، اجتماعيًا(؟ - What does the camp represent to you? How is it similar or different from the surrounding areas? What are the reasons of similarity or difference? - ماذا يمثل المخيم بالنسبة لك؟ كيف يتشابه أو يختلف عن المناطق المحيطة؟ ماهي أسباب التشابه أو الاختلاف؟ - If living in the camp/ used to live in the camp, do you consider the camp your home? Why? - إذا كنت تعيش في المخيم / اعتدت العيش في المخيم ، فهل تعتبر المخيم منزل لك/موطنك ؟ لماذا؟ - If not living in the camp (ex. Living nearby or in surrounding

	● لماذا يعتبر الأجثين بعض الخدمات الانسانية ناجحة وبعضها الآخر غير ناجح في تحسين الظروف المعيشية ؟ ● How do refugees, especially the poor ones, develop resilience practices while suffering from prolonged displacement and living in the refugee camp? ● كيف طور الأجثون، خصوصا الفقراء منهم، مجموعة من الممارسات التي ساهمت في التأقلم والمرونة على الرغم من المعاناة من النزوح المطول في مخيمات اللجوء؟ ● How humanitarian actions support or hamper resilience practices? ● كيف ساهمت أنشطة المؤسسات الانسانية في دعم أو عاقبة تطوير ممارسات التأقلم والمرونة؟ ● How interactions among refugees and between refugees and non-refugees are affected by humanitarian interventions in the shared space of refugee camp? ● كيف ساهمت التفاعلات بين الأجثين أنفسهم وبين الأجثين والغير لاجثين في كفاءة العمليات الانسانية داخل البيئة المشتركة في مخيمات الأجثين؟	area), how do you feel living next to the camp? What the camp represents to you? Why? ● اذا كنت لا تسكن في المخيم) مثلا تسكن قريبا منه أو في المنطقة المحيطة له ،(كيف تشعر بالسكن قرب المخيم؟ ماذا يمثل المخيم بالنسبة لك؟ لماذا؟ ● Can you describe social interactions in the camp? How people support each-other? Do communities have negative or positive perceptions for living in the camp? ● هل يمكنك وصف التفاعلات الاجتماعية في المخيم؟ كيف يدعم الناس بعضهم البعض؟ هل لدى المجتمعات تصورات سلبية أو إيجابية عن العيش في المخيم؟ ● Do you see the camp as refugees' space only? How people in the camp interact with non-refugees? ● هل ترى في المخيم كمساحة للاجثين فقط؟ كيف يتفاعل الناس في المخيم مع غير الاجثين؟ ● How do people plan for their life in the camp? Why they invest economically in the camp despite it is temporary place? ● كيف يخطط الناس لحياتهم في المخيم؟ لماذا يستثمرون اقتصاديا في المخيم رغم كونه مكانا مؤقتا؟ ● Who provides services in the camp? How do you evaluate these services? ● من الذي يقدم الخدمات في المخيم؟ كيف تقيم هذه الخدمات؟ ● What kind of services see as effective and needed? What are not? Why? ● ما نوع الخدمات التي تعتبر فعالة وحسب الحاجة؟ ما هي الخدمات التي ليست كذلك؟ لماذا؟ ● Do you know who are the most important international humanitarian organizations in

		the camp? What do you think they are doing and provide? ● هل تعرف من هي المؤسسات الدولية الإنسانية الفاعلة في المخيم؟ برأيك ماذا يفعلون أو يقدمون؟ ● How do you see the role of humanitarian organizations? In what areas are they effective and in what areas they are nor? Why? ● كيف ترى دور المنظمات الإنسانية؟ ما هي المجالات تعتبر هذه المنظمات فعالة وفي أي المجالات هي ليست كذلك؟ لماذا؟ ● Do you see the camp has evolved? Why people are building and opening businesses in the camp? What factors impact this decision? Is it because of camps' location? Camp's density? Camps' dwellers? ● هل ترى أن المخيم قد تطور؟ لماذا يقوم الناس ببناء وفتح أعمال تجارية في المخيم؟ ما هي العوامل التي تؤثر على هذا القرار؟ هل هو بسبب موقع المخيم؟ الكثافة السكانية؟ الأشخاص المقيمين؟ ● Specifically, how the houses, roads, and infrastructure developed? Who played a role in that? Humanitarian actors, local authorities, or people of the camp? ● على وجه التحديد ، كيف تطورت المنازل والطرق والبنية التحتية؟ من لعب دوراً في ذلك؟ الجهات الفاعلة الإنسانية أم السلطات المحلية أم سكان المخيم؟ ● How certain places started and evolved? Such as the market, the main roads, transport locations, clinics...etc? How is this related with the humanitarian services? ● كيف بدأت أماكن معينة وتطورت؟ مثل السوق والطرق الرئيسية ومواقع النقل والعيادات... الخ؟ كيف يرتبط هذا بالخدمات الإنسانية؟ ● How do you see the role of international humanitarian

		actors in this development? UNRWA and others? How do evaluate the role of these international humanitarian actors? • كيف ترى دور الفاعلين الإنسانيين الدوليين في هذا التطور؟ الأونروا وغيرها؟ كيف تقيم دور هذه المؤسسات الدولية الإنسانية؟ • What is the role of municipalities and local authorities? How they interact with international actors? How do you evaluate their role in comparison with the international organizations in the camp? • ما هو دور البلديات والسلطات المحلية؟ كيف يتفاعلون مع الجهات الدولية؟ كيف تقيم دورهم بالمقارنة مع المؤسسات الدولية في المخيم؟ • How economic and social practices in the city were changed due to the prolonged existence of refugee camp and the associated humanitarian interventions? • كيف تغيرت أو ارتبطت الممارسات الاقتصادية والاجتماعية في المدينة بالوجود المطول لمخيمات اللاجئين والتدخلات الإنسانية المرتبطة بها؟
Local authorities, national organisations, and municipalities	<u>Descriptive/Explanatory</u> • What is the relationship between international humanitarian actors and national authorities, municipalities and non-governmental national organisations look like? • ما هو شكل العلاقة القائمة بين المؤسسات الإنسانية الدولية من جهة والسلطات المحلية والبلديات والمؤسسات الغير حكومية الوطنية من جهة أخرى؟	• Please tell me about your experience and your organisations' experience regarding working and providing services in the camp? • أخبرنا عن خبرتك وخبرة مؤسستك المتعلقة بالعمل وتزويد الخدمات في المخيم؟

المحلية، السلطات الوطنية والمؤسسات والبلديات	• How national authorities, municipalities and non-governmental national organisations supported refugees while settling in their premises? • كيف قامت السلطات المحلية، البلديات، والمؤسسات الغير حكومية الوطنية بدعم اللاجئين أثناء فترة استقرارهم في المخيمات؟ <u>Analytical تحليلي:</u> • How the relationship between international humanitarian actors and national service providers do impacted humanitarian interventions in refugee camps? • كيف أثرت العلاقة القائمة بين المؤسسات الانسانية الدولية و مزودي الخدمات المحليين على طبيعة الخدمات الانسانية في مخيمات اللاجئين؟ • Is there a mismatch between international humanitarian interventions and national organisations developmental objectives and plans? • هل هناك هدم تطابق بين خدمات المؤسسات الانسانية وخطط وأهداف المؤسسات الوطنية والمحلية؟ • How do the physical environment in the camp's surrounding area of the city has changed and were shaped by international humanitarian actions? • كيف تأثرت أو تشكلت البيئة المعيشة في المخيمات والمناطق المحيطة من خلال التدخلات الانسانية الدولية؟ • How economic and social practices in the city were changed due to the prolonged existence of refugee camp and the associated humanitarian interventions? • كيف ترتبط الممارسات الاقتصادية والاجتماعية في المدينة والمخيمات بالوجود المطول لمخيمات اللاجئين والتدخلات الانسانية المرتبطة بها؟	• How did you support refugees? What services you provide in the camp? • كيف تدعمون اللاجئين؟ ما هي الخدمات التي تقدمونها في المخيم؟ • What are the main challenges your organization face regarding working and providing services in the refugee camp? • ماهي التحديات التي تواجهها مؤسستك في العمل وتزويد الخدمات في مخيم اللاجئين؟ • How do you see the camp developed? What is your organizations' role in this? • كيف ترى المخيم قد تطور؟ ما هو دور منظمكم في هذا؟ • Please describe the nature of your relationship with other actors in the refugee camp? Who do you work with there? • الرجاء اوصف لنا طبيعة علاقتك مع الفاعلين الآخرين في المخيم؟ مع من تعملون هناك؟ • Can you describe the nature of your relationship with UNRWA? What are the challenges facing this relationship? • هل يمكن أن تصف لنا طبيعة علاقتك مع الأونروا؟ ماهي التحديات التي تواجه هذه العلاقة؟ • Is there a mismatch between international humanitarian interventions and national

		organisations developmental objectives and plans? - هل هناك هدم تطابق بين خدمات المؤسسات الانسانية وخطط واهداف المؤسسات الوطنية والمحلية؟ - How do the physical environment in the camp's surrounding area of the city has changed and were shaped by international humanitarian actions? - كيف تأثرت أو تشكلت البيئة المعيشة في المخيمات والمناطق المحيطة من خلال التدخلات الانسانية الدولية؟ - How economic and social practices in the city were changed due to the prolonged existence of refugee camp and the associated humanitarian interventions? - كيف ترتبط الممارسات الاقتصادية والاجتماعية في المدينة والمخيمات بالوجود المطول لمخيمات اللاجئين والتدخلات الإنسانية المرتبطة بها؟
International and UN agencies الدولية المؤسسات	<u>وصفي Descriptive/Explanatory</u>: - What are the humanitarian interventions provided for refugees? - ماهي الخدمات الانسانية المقدمة للاجئين؟	Can you please describe your experience as a humanitarian worker in service provision in the refugee camps? What examples of work you were involved doing in the camp?

	● How do international aid agencies engage with refugees and their institutions? ● كيف تتعامل المؤسسات الانسانية الدولية مع اللاجئين و مؤسساتهم؟ ● How do international aid agencies collaborate with national authorities, municipalities and non-governmental national organisations? ● كيف تتعاون المؤسسات الانسانية الدولية مع السلطات المحلية، البلديات، والمؤسسات الوطنية الغير حكومية (الجمعيات المحلية)؟ <u>تحليلي Analytical :</u> ● What are the socio-spatial factors that underpin or undermine aid provision in urban refugee camps? ● ماهي العوامل الاجتماعية – المكانية التي تدهم أو تقوض تقديم المساعدات في بيئة مخيمات للاجئين الحضرية؟ ● How do international humanitarian aid agencies consider these factors? ● كيف تقوم المؤسسات الدولية بأخذ هذه العوامل بعين الاعتبار ؟ ● How do international humanitarian actors engage refugees and camp communities in designing and implementing their actions? ● كيف تقوم المؤسسات الدولية باشر اك اللاجئين في المخيمات في تصميم وتنفيذ أنشطتهم ؟ ● Who decides priority interventions for the humanitarian aid agencies? ● من يقرر أولوية التدخلات الانسانية للمؤسسات؟	● هل يمكنك الحديث عن خبرتك كعامل انساني في تزويد الخدمات في مخيمات اللاجئين؟ ما هي أمثلة على الأعمال التي كنتم تقومون بها في المخيم؟ ● How do international humanitarian aid agencies provide services in camps? What are the working modalities? How do you coordinate your work? Is it different from other areas? ● بشكل عام، كيف تقوم المؤسسات الدولية بتزويد الخدمات في المخيمات؟ ماهي طرق العمل؟ كيف تنسقون عملكم؟ هل المخيمات مختلفة عن المناطق الأخرى؟ ● How do international actors deal with local authorities, government, and nationala and local NGOs? ● كيف يتعامل الفاعلون الانسانيون مع السلطات المحلية، الحكومة، والمؤسسات الوطنية والمحلية الغير حكومية؟ ● Do you know how residents of refugee camps represent themselves and raise their needs to international humanitarian organisations? How do international humanitarian organisations deal with different community

	• How do international humanitarian aid agencies assess the impact of their interventions? • كيف تقيم المؤسسات الدولية الانسانية أثر خدماتها؟	representations in refugee camps? • هل تعلم كيف يقوم ساكني مخيمات اللاجئين بتمثيل أنفسهم ورفع احتياجاتهم للمؤسسات الإنسانية الدولية؟ كيف تقوم المؤسسات الدولية الإنسانية مختلف الممثلين عن المجتمع في مخيمات اللاجئين؟ • What are the dynamics/factors that challenge humanitarian service provision in refugee camps? • ماهي العوامل التي تعيق او تخلق تحديات لعملية تزويد الخدمات الإنسانية في مخيمات اللاجئين؟ • How humanitarian organizations do identify their priority interventions in refugee camps? How do you evaluate these interventions? What is the role of camp communities in this process? • كيف تحدد المؤسسات الإنسانية أولويات تدخلاتها في مخيمات اللاجئين؟ ماهو تقييمك لهذه التدخلات؟ ماهو دور مجتمعات المخيمات في هذه العملية؟

Annexe B: Research participant information sheet



Participant Information Sheet

ورقة معلومات للمشاركين

1. Research Project Title عنوان مشروع البحث

Socio-spatial dynamics and effectiveness of international humanitarian aid agencies in enhancing the living conditions of people displaced in urban settings: A Study from Urban Refugee Camps in the Gaza Strip

المتغيرات المكانية – الاجتماعية وعلاقتها بفعالية المؤسسات الانسانية الدولية في تحسين الظروف المعيشية للاجئين في الميقات الحضرية: دراسة من مخيمات اللاجئين الحضرية في قطاع غزة

2. Invitation paragraph فقرة الدعوة

You are being invited to take part in a research project. Before you decide whether or not to participate, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Ask us if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part. Thank you for reading this.

أنت/ي مدعو/ة للمشاركة في هذا المشروع البحثي. قبل أن تقرر/ي بالمشاركة أو عدم المشاركة من المهم أن يكون لديك/ي فهم لماذا يتم عمل هذا البحث وماذا يتضمن. الرجاء خذ/ي الوقت لقراءة المعلومات التالية بعناية ومناقشتها مع الآخرين إن رغبت/ي. الرجاء سؤالنا إذا كان هناك أي شيء غير واضح لديك/ي أو إذا رغبت/ي بالحصول على معلومات إضافية. خذ/ي الوقت الكافي للتفكير إذا كنت/ي ترغب/ين في المشاركة. شكرًا لقراءتك هذه المعلومات.

3. What is the project's purpose? ما هو الغرض من هذا المشروع ؟

This is 3 years research conducted by a student to pursue a PhD degree at the department of Urban Studies and Planning in the University of Sheffield-UK. The research aims at understanding effectiveness of international humanitarian aid agencies' interventions and their mutual effects with the urban environment of refugee camps in the Gaza Strip.

هذا مشروع بحثي لمدة 3 سنوات يقوم به طالب من أجل نيل درجة الدكتوراه من قسم الدراسات الحضرية والتخطيط في جامعة شيفيلد – المملكة المتحدة. هذا البحث يهدف الى فهم فعالية تدخلات مؤسسات الاغاثة الدولية الانسانية و الآثار المتبادلة بينها وبين البيئة الحضرية لمخيمات اللاجئين في قطاع غزة.

4. Why have I been chosen? لماذا تم اختياري للمشاركة ؟

In the process of this research, the researcher will conduct interviews with 60 people who are:

عملية هذا البحث تتطلب من الباحث اجراء 60 مقابلة شخصية مع أشخاص من احدى الفئات التالية:

- Working as part of an international agency that provides humanitarian and development services to refugees inside refugee camps in the Gaza Strip.
يعمل مع مؤسسة دولية تقدم خدمات انسانية أو تنمية لاجئين داخل مخيمات اللجوء في قطاع غزة
- Working as part of local community organization that provides services to refugees in the camps through collaboration with international agencies and local authorities.
يعمل مع مؤسسة مجتمعية محلية تزود خدماتها للاجئين في المخيمات بالتعاون مع المؤسسات الدولية و السلطات المحلية.
- Working as part of a local authority that lay down or oversees policies / regulations, or provides services inside refugee camps in the Gaza Strip.
يعمل ضمن سلطة محلية تضع أو تشرف على سياسات أو أنظمة أو تزود خدمات داخل مخيمات اللجوء في قطاع غزة.
- Is part of a community committee in refugee camps in the Gaza Strip.
عضو في احدى اللجان المجتمعية في مخيمات اللاجئين في قطاع غزة.
- A resident or former resident of a refugee camps and/or have experience living or working in refugee camps in the Gaza Strip.
يسكن أو كان يسكن في احدى مخيمات اللاجئين أو لديه تجربة معيشية أو عملية في مخيمات اللاجئين في قطاع غزة



5. Do I have to take part? هل ينبغي علي المشاركة في هذا البحث ؟

It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you do decide to take part you will be given this information sheet to keep (and be asked to sign a consent form) and you can still withdraw at any time without any negative consequences. You do not have to give a reason. If you wish to withdraw from the research, please contact Said Zaaneen by calling 0595942462 or via email: syzaaneen@sheffield.ac.uk الأمر يرجع لك/ي بالمشاركة في هذا البحث أو لا. إذا قررت/ي المشاركة، سوف يتم إعطاؤك/ي ورقة المعلومات هذه للاحتفاظ بها (وسيتطلب منك/ي التوقيع على نموذج الموافقة)، ومع ذلك يمكنك/ي الانسحاب في أي وقت وبدون أي تبعات سلبية. أيضا لا ينبغي عليك/ي ابداء أي أسباب إذا رغبت/ي بالانسحاب من البحث، الرجاء التواصل مع الباحث سعيد الزعائن عبر الرقم 0595941482 أو من خلال البريد الإلكتروني syzaaneen1@sheffield.ac.uk

Please note that that by choosing to participate in this research, this will not create a legally binding agreement, nor is it intended to create an employment relationship between you and the University of Sheffield.

الرجاء ملاحظة ان اختيارك/ي للمشاركة في هذا البحث ليست مرتبطة بأي اتفاق أو علاقة قانونية ولا تهدف لخلق علاقة توظيف بينك/ي وبين جامعة شيفيلد.

6. What will happen to me if I take part? What do I have to do?

ماذا سيحدث معي لو قبلت المشاركة؟ وما الذي ينبغي علي فعله ؟

If you agree to take part of this research. Your participation will be through one semi-structured interview that will last between 60 to 90 minutes, and through following discussion sessions / workshops that will be organised to discuss and validate the initial findings of the research. If you are a staff member of an international or local organisation or a local authority, the interview will be held at your office or at convenient location on an agreed date and time. Otherwise, the interview will be held at a community organisation's office nearest to your residency area on an agreed date and time. During the interviews, you will be asked to answer the interview questions and deeply discuss them and the answers with the researcher. The questions can be with both open and closed answers and will discuss the mutual impacts between humanitarian actions and the urban environment of refugee camps in Gaza. These questions will discuss social, economic, and spatial aspects of the studied refugee camps. When the initial research has been completed, you will be invited to attend a discussion session at a public venue to provide your opinion on the findings. It is up to you whether you choose to attend.

إذا وافقت/ي على المشاركة في هذا البحث سوف تكون مشاركتك من خلال مقابلة شخصية شبه-منظمة لمدة تتراوح بين 60 إلى 90 دقيقة ومن خلال المشاركة في الجلسات أو ورش العمل اللاحقة التي سوف يتم تنظيمها لمناقشة والتحقق من صحة النتائج الأولية للبحث. إذا كنت/ي موظف لاجدى المؤسسات الدولية أو المحلية أو السلطات المحلية سيتم عقد المقابلة معكم في مكتبكم أو أي مكان مناسب لكم في وقت وتاريخ متفق عليه. إذا كنت غير ذلك يمكن عقد المقابلة في أقرب مؤسسة مجتمعية لمكان سكنكم في وقت وتاريخ متفق عليه. خلال المقابلة سوف يتم الطلب منك الاجابة على أسئلة المقابلة ونقاشها بشكل معمق مع الباحث. الأسئلة سوف تكون ذات اجابات مفتوحة ومغلقة وسوف تناقش التأثيرات المتبادلة بين الأعمال الانسانية والبيئة الحضرية بمخيمات اللاجئين في قطاع غزة. هذه الأسئلة سوف تناقش الأوجه الاجتماعية، الاقتصادية، والمكانية لمخيمات اللاجئين قيد الدراسة. عندما يتم الانتهاء من البحث المبدئي، سوف يتم دعوتكم لجلسة نقاش في قاعة عامة لتزويدنا برأيكم حول النتائج الأمر يعود لكم إذا رغبتم في حضور هذه الورشة أم لا.

7. What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?

ما هي السلبيات أو المخاطر المترتبة على مشاركتي في البحث؟

There is no direct disadvantages from participating in this research. However, if the participant feels uncomfortable talking about certain topics or if certain questions brings back stressful memories and distress, she/he can bring this to the attention of researcher and ask to withdraw from the research at any point they wish.

لا يوجد أي مخاطر أو سلبيات مباشرة مرتبطة بمشاركتك/ي في هذا البحث. على أي حال، إذا شعرت/ي كمشارك/ة في هذا البحث بعدم الراحة بالتحدث عن مواضيع معينة أو إذا كانت أسئلة معينة سببا للذكريات مؤثرة أو محزنة، يمكنك/ي كمشارك/ة لفت انتباه الباحث إلى ذلك كما يمكنك/ي الطلب من الباحث الانسحاب من البحث عند أي مرحلة إن رغبت/ي بذلك.

8. What are the possible benefits of taking part?

ماهي المنافع المحتملة من مشاركتي في هذا البحث؟

Whilst there are no immediate benefits for those people participating in the project, it is hoped that this work will contribute to the efforts aiming at enhancing refugees' living conditions and environment in refugee camps in Gaza through developing better understanding of the effectiveness humanitarian interventions in these camps.

على الرغم من عدم وجود منافع مباشرة للمشاركين في هذا البحث إلا أنه من المؤمل أن هذا العمل سوف يساهم بتحسين الظروف والبيئة المعيشية للأجئين الساكنين في مخيمات اللاجئين في قطاع غزة من خلال تكوين فهم أفضل لدى فعالية التدخلات الانسانية في هذه المخيمات.

9. Will my taking part in this project be kept confidential?

هل سيتم الحفاظ على سرية وخصوصية مشاركتي في هذا البحث؟

All the information that you will provide us with during the course of the research will be kept strictly confidential and will only be accessible to members of the research team. You will not be able to be identified in any reports or publications unless you have given your explicit consent for this. If you agree to us sharing the information you provide with other researchers (e.g. by making it available in a data archive) then your personal details will not be included unless you explicitly request this.

سيتم الاحتفاظ بجميع المعلومات التي ستزودنا بها أثناء إجراء البحث بسرية تامة وستكون متاحة فقط لأعضاء فريق البحث. لن يتم تحديد هويتك أو معلوماتك الشخصية في أي تقارير أو منشورات إلا إذا أعطيت/ي موافقتك الصريحة على ذلك. إذا كنت/ي توافق/ي على مشاركة المعلومات التي تقدمها مع باحثين آخرين (على سبيل المثال من خلال إتاحتها في أرشيف البيانات)، فلن يتم تضمين بياناتك الشخصية ما لم تطلب/ي أنت/ي ذلك بصراحة.

10. What is the legal basis for processing my personal data?

ما هو الأساس القانوني لمعالجة بياناتي الشخصية ؟

According to data protection legislation, we are required to inform you that the legal basis we are applying in order to process your personal data is that 'processing is necessary for the performance of a task carried out in the public interest' (Article 6(1)(e)). Further information can be found in the University's Privacy Notice <https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/govern/data-protection/privacy/general>

وفقاً لتشريعات حماية البيانات ، نحن مطالبون بإبلاغك/ي بأن الأساس القانوني الذي نطبقه من أجل معالجة بياناتك/ي الشخصية هو أن "المعالجة ضرورية لأداء مهمة يتم تنفيذها من أجل المصلحة العامة" (المادة 6 بند 1 - e). يمكن العثور على مزيد من المعلومات في إشعار الخصوصية الخاص بالجامعة: <https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/govern/data-protection/privacy/general>

11. What will happen to the data collected, and the results of the research project?

ماذا سيحدث للبيانات التي سيتم جمعها ونتائج المشروع البحثي ؟

Identifiable data will be translated into English and transcribed to be analysed and used in research findings. All the data will be stored on Google drive and will be only accessed by the research team. The researcher intends to publish the results of this research in academic publication forums such as conferences, journals, and books. Other than that and due to the nature of this research it is very likely that other researchers may find the data collected to be useful in answering future research questions. We will ask for your explicit consent for your data to be shared in this way. All sources will be anonymous in the published outputs, unless interviewees wish not to be. The researcher will make every effort to ensure that individual interviewees are not identifiable from these outputs.

سيتم ترجمة البيانات التي يمكن تعديلها إلى اللغة الإنجليزية وتحويلها لتعليقها واستخدامها في نتائج البحث. سيتم تخزين جميع البيانات على محرك جوجل ولن يتم الوصول إليها إلا من قبل فريق البحث. ينوي الباحث نشر نتائج هذا البحث في منتديات النشر الأكاديمية مثل المؤتمرات والمجلات والكتب. بخلاف ذلك، وسبب طبيعة هذا البحث، من المحتمل جداً أن يجد باحثون آخرون أن البيانات التي تم جمعها مفيدة في الإجابة على أسئلة بحثية مستقبلية. سنطلب موافقتك/ي الصريحة على مشاركة المعلومات التي زودتنا هذه الطريقة. ما لم يرغب الأشخاص الذين تمت مقابلتهم في التعريف عنهم في النتائج، ستكون جميع البيانات غير معروفة في المخرجات المنشورة. سيبدل الباحث قصارى جهده لضمان عدم التعرف على الأفراد الذين تمت مقابلتهم من هذه المخرجات.

12. Who is organising and funding the research?

من ينظم ويعول هذا البحث ؟

The University of Sheffield.

جامعة شيفيلد

13. Who is the Data Controller?

من هو مراقب البيانات ؟

The University of Sheffield will act as the Data Controller for this study. This means that the University of Sheffield is responsible for looking after your information and using it properly.

ستكون جامعة شيفيلد بمثابة مراقب البيانات لهذه الدراسة. هذا يعني أن جامعة شيفيلد مسؤولة عن رعاية معلوماتك واستخدامها بشكل صحيح.



14. Who has ethically reviewed the project?

من قام بالمراجعة الأخلاقية للمشروع ؟

This project has been ethically approved via the University of Sheffield's Ethics Review Procedure, as administered by Urban Studies and Planning department.

تمت الموافقة على هذا المشروع أخلاقياً من خلال إجراءات مراجعة الأخلاقيات بجامعة شيفيلد ، والتي تمت ادارتها في هذا المشروع من قبل قسم الدراسات الحضرية والتخطيط.

15. What if something goes wrong and I wish to complain about the research?

ماذا لو حدث خطأ ما وأرغب في تقديم شكوى بشأن البحث؟

You can contact the researcher if you want to complaint or if you have questions during or after your participation in this research. You can access the researcher, Said Zaaneen, by calling 0595944482 or via email: syzaaneen1@sheffield.ac.uk.

If you feel that your complaint has not been handled properly, you can contact the researcher supervisor, who will then escalate the complaint through the appropriate channels. If the complaint relates to how the participants' personal data has been handled, information about how to raise a complaint can be found in the University's Privacy Notice: <https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/govern/data-protection/privacy/general>

يمكنك الاتصال بالباحث إذا كنت ترغب في تقديم شكوى أو إذا كانت لديك أسئلة أثناء أو بعد مشاركتك في هذا البحث. يمكنك الوصول إلى الباحث سعيد الزعائن عن طريق الاتصال على الرقم 0595944482 أو عبر البريد الإلكتروني: syzaaneen1@sheffield.ac.uk. إذا شعرت أنه لم يتم التعامل مع شكواك بشكل صحيح، يمكنك الاتصال بالمشرّف على الباحث، الذي سيقوم بعد ذلك برفع الشكوى عبر القنوات المناسبة. إذا كانت الشكوى تتعلق بطريقة التعامل مع البيانات الشخصية للمشاركين، فيمكن العثور على معلومات حول كيفية تقديم شكوى في إشعار الخصوصية بالجامعة: <https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/govern/data-protection/privacy/general>

16. Contact for further information

مزيد من المعلومات للتواصل

In case you wish to obtain further information about the project, please contact: Said Zaaneen, by calling 0595944482 or via email: syzaaneen1@sheffield.ac.uk. Or Dr. Tom Goodfellow by emailing: t.goodfellow@sheffield.ac.uk

إذا رغبتم بالحصول على معلومات إضافية عن المشروع، الرجاء التواصل مع: سعيد الزعائن من خلال الاتصال على 0595944482 أو من خلال البريد الإلكتروني: syzaaneen1@sheffield.ac.uk

Thanks for participating and taking part of this project. You will be given a copy of the information sheet and a signed consent form to keep.

نشكركم/ي على المشاركة في هذا المشروع. ستحصل/ي على نسخة من ورقة المعلومات واستمارة موافقة موقعة للاحتفاظ بها.

Annexe C: Research participant consent form



Socio-spatial dynamics and effectiveness of international humanitarian aid agencies in enhancing the living conditions of people displaced in urban settings: A Study from Urban Refugee Camps in the Gaza Strip

Consent Form الموافقة نموذج		Yes	No
Please tick the appropriate boxes الرجاء اختيار ما ينطبق			
Taking Part in the Project المشاركة في المشروع			
I have read and understood the project information sheet or the project has been fully explained to me. (If you will answer No to this question please do not proceed with this consent form until you are fully aware of what your participation in the project will mean.) لقد قرأت وفهمت ورقة معلومات أو تم شرح المشروع بالكامل لي. (إذا كانت إجابتك لا على هذا السؤال ، فيرجى عدم متابعة نموذج الموافقة هذا حتى تكون على دراية كاملة بما تعنيه مشاركتك في المشروع.)		☐	☐
I have been given the opportunity to ask questions about the project. لقد أتيت لي الفرصة لطرح أسئلة حول المشروع.		☐	☐
I agree to take part in the project. I understand that taking part in the project will include being interviewed by the researcher and being invited to participate in following discussion sessions / workshops that will be organised to discuss and validate the initial findings of the research. أوافق على المشاركة في المشروع. أفهم أن المشاركة في المشروع ستضمن إجراء مقابلة مع الباحث ودعوتي للمشاركة في جلسات المناقشة / ورش العمل التالية التي سيتم تنظيمها لمناقشة النتائج الأولية للبحث والتحقق من صحتها.		☐	☐
I understand that by choosing to participate as a volunteer in this research, this does not create a legally binding agreement nor is it intended to create an employment relationship with the University of Sheffield. أفهم أنه باختيار المشاركة كمتطوع في هذا البحث ، فإن هذا لا ينشئ اتفاقية ملزمة قانوناً ولا يهدف إلى إنشاء علاقة عمل مع جامعة شيفيلد.		☐	☐
I understand that my taking part is voluntary and that I can withdraw from the study at any time before publishing the findings; I do not have to give any reasons for why I no longer want to take part and there will be no adverse consequences if I choose to withdraw. أفهم أن مشاركتي تطوعية وأنه يمكنني الانسحاب من الدراسة في أي وقت قبل نشر النتائج ؛ لست مضطراً لإبداء أي أسباب لعدم رغبتي في المشاركة ولن تكون هناك عواقب سلبية إذا اخترت الانسحاب.		☐	☐
How my information will be used during and after the project. كيف سيتم استخدام معلوماتي أثناء وبعد المشروع.			
I understand my personal details such as name, phone number, address and email address etc. will not be revealed to people outside the project. أفهم أن بياناتي الشخصية مثل الاسم ورقم الهاتف والعنوان وعنوان البريد الإلكتروني وما إلى ذلك لن يتم الكشف عنها للأشخاص خارج المشروع.		☐	☐
I understand and agree that my words may be quoted in publications, reports, web pages, and other research outputs. I understand that I will not be named in these outputs unless I specifically request this. أفهم وأوافق على أنه يمكن اقتباس كلماتي في المنشورات والتقارير وصفحات الويب ومخرجات البحث الأخرى. أفهم أنه لن يتم ذكر اسمي في هذه المخرجات إلا إذا طلبت ذلك على وجه التحديد.		☐	☐
I understand and agree that other authorised researchers will have access to this data only if they agree to preserve the confidentiality of the information as requested in this form. أفهم وأوافق على أن الباحثين المعتمدين الآخرين لن يتمكنوا من الوصول إلى هذه البيانات إلا إذا وافقوا على الحفاظ على سرية المعلومات كما هو مطلوب في هذا النموذج.		☐	☐
I understand and agree that other authorised researchers may use my data in publications, reports, web pages, and other research outputs, only if they agree to preserve the confidentiality of the information as requested in this form. أفهم وأوافق على أنه يجوز للباحثين المعتمدين الآخرين استخدام بياناتي في المنشورات والتقارير وصفحات الويب ومخرجات البحث الأخرى، فقط إذا وافقوا على الحفاظ على سرية المعلومات كما هو مطلوب في هذا النموذج.		☐	☐
I give permission for the recorded interview narrative that I provide to be deposited in the University of Sheffield's Online Data Set (ORDA) so it can be used for future research and learning أعطي الإذن لسرد المقابلة المسجلة التي تمت ليتم تخزينها في مجموعة البيانات التابعة لجامعة شيفيلد حتى يمكن استخدامها للبحث والتعلم في المستقبل So that the information you provide can be used legally by the researchers وبذلك يمكن استخدام المعلومات التي أقدمها بشكل قانوني من قبل الباحثين		☐	☐
I agree to assign the copyright I hold in any materials generated as part of this project to The University of Sheffield. أوافق على إعطاء حقوق النشر التي أمتلكها في أي مواد تم إنشاؤها كجزء من هذا المشروع إلى جامعة شيفيلد.		☐	☐

Name of participant اسم المشارك [printed]

Signature التوقيع

Date التاريخ

Name of Researcher اسم الباحث [printed]

Signature التوقيع

Date التاريخ

Project contact details for further information:

Principal Investigator/lead researcher: Said Zaaneen, mobile 0595941482, email: syszaaneen1@sheffield.ac.uk, WhatsApp

Supervisor: Dr. Tom Goodfellow: email t.goodfellow@sheffield.ac.uk

Two copies of this consent form will be saved: 1 paper copy for the participant, 1 copy for the research data file

The template of this consent form has been approved by the University of Sheffield Research Ethics Committee and is available to view here: <https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/rs/ethicsandintegrity/ethicspolicy/further-guidance/homepage>

Annexe D: List of interviewees

N	Mode of Interview	Date	General Category	Category of Interview	Second Category of Interview	Refugee Camp	Male/Female	Refugee (Yes/No)	Lived in the Camp (Yes/No)	Still Living in Camp (Yes/No)	Pseudonym
01	Face to Face	18.03.2021	Community/Grassroots	Current Refugee Camp Resident	/	Jabalia	Male	Yes	Yes	Yes	Abu Raed
02	Face to Face	20.03.2021	Community/Grassroots	CBO Staff	Current Refugee Camp Resident	Jabalia	Male	Yes	Yes	Yes	Abu Ayman
03	Google Meet	20.03.2021	National/Municipal Levels	NGO Staff	Previous Camp resident	Jabalia	Female	Yes	Yes	No	Fatima
04	Face to Face	04.04.2021	National/Municipal Levels	Municipality Staff	Non-refugee	Jabalia	Male	No	No	No	Abu Fadi
05	Google Meet	10.04.2021	Community/Grassroots	CBO Staff	Previous Camp resident	Deir Al Balah	Male	Yes	Yes	No	Abu Abdallah
06	Google Meet	11.04.2021	UN/International NGO	INGO Staff	/	General	Male	Yes	No	No	Abu Ammar
07	Google Meet	17.04.2021	National/Municipal Levels	Municipality Staff	Previous Camp resident	Deir Al Balah	Male	Yes	Yes	No	Abu Hamdi
08	Google Meet	24.04.2021	UN/International NGO	INGO Staff	Women committee member	General	Female	Yes	No	No	Amani
09	Google Meet	24.04.2021	Community/Grassroots	Previous Camp resident	/	Jabalia	Male	Yes	Yes	No	Abu Hasan
10	Google Meet	08.05.2021	Community/Grassroots	CBO Staff	Previous Camp resident	Jabalia	Male	Yes	Yes	No	Abu Nader
11	Face to Face	12.06.2021	Community/Grassroots	Current Refugee Camp Resident	/	Jabalia	Male	Yes	Yes	Yes	Abu Ahmed

12	Face to Face	13.06.2021	National/Municipal Levels	Refugees Popular Committee	Current Refugee Camp Resident	Jabalia	Male	Yes	Yes	Yes	Abu Jamal
13	Face to Face	16.06.2021	Community/ Grassroots	Previous Camp resident	/	Deir Al Balah	Male	Yes	Yes	No	Abu Basil
14	Face to Face	16.06.2021	Community/ Grassroots	Previous Camp resident	Activist and member of the Sports Club	Deir Al Balah	Male	Yes	Yes	No	Abu Samy
15	Face to Face	24.06.2021	UN/International NGO	Previous UNRWA Staff	Current Refugee Camp Resident	Jabalia	Male	Yes	Yes	Yes	Abu Mohsen
16	Face to Face	30.06.2021	National/Municipal Levels	Municipality Staff	/	Deir Al Balah	Male	No	No	No	Abu Ali
17	Face to Face	17.07.2021	Community/ Grassroots	Current Refugee Camp Resident	Youth	Jabalia	Female	Yes	Yes	Yes	Warda
18	Face to Face	17.07.2021	Community/ Grassroots	Current Refugee Camp Resident	Youth	Jabalia	Female	Yes	Yes	Yes	Nawal
19	Face to Face	17.07.2021	Community/ Grassroots	Current Refugee Camp Resident	Youth	Jabalia	Female	Yes	Yes	Yes	Narjis
20	Face to Face	09.08.2021	Community/ Grassroots	Current Refugee Camp Resident	Youth	Jabalia	Male	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yamen
21	Face to Face	09.08.2021	Community/ Grassroots	Current Refugee Camp Resident	Youth	Jabalia	Male	Yes	Yes	Yes	Hakim
22	Face to Face	09.08.2021	Community/ Grassroots	Previous Camp resident	/	Deir Al Balah	Male	Yes	Yes	No	Abu Omar
23	Face to Face	09.08.2021	Community/ Grassroots	Current Refugee Camp Resident	/	Deir Al Balah	Male	Yes	Yes	Yes	Abu AlAtta
24	Face to Face	12.08.2021	National/Municipal Levels	NGO Staff	Previous Camp resident	Deir Al Balah	Male	Yes	Yes	No	Abu Suliman

25	Face to Face	12.08.2021	Community/ Grassroots	Current Refugee Camp Resident	/	Deir Al Balah	Female	Yes	Yes	Yes	Zana
26	Google Meet	25.09.2021	UN/International NGO	INGO Staff	Non-refugee	General	Male	No	No	No	Monzer
27	Face to Face	02.10.2021	National/Municipal Levels	Businessperson	Previous Camp resident	Jabalia	Male	Yes	Yes	No	Abu Adam
28	Face to Face	06.10.2021	UN/International NGO	Previous UNRWA Staff	Current Refugee Camp Resident	Jabalia	Male	Yes	Yes	Yes	Raed
29	Google Meet	07.10.2021	UN/International NGO	UNRWA Staff	Previous Camp resident	General	Male	Yes	Yes	No	Abu Mohammad
30	Google Meet	20.10.2021	UN/International NGO	UNRWA Staff	/	General	Male	Yes	Yes	No	Abu Kamal
31	Face to Face	27.11.2021	National/Municipal Levels	Municipality Staff	Non-refugee	Deir Al Balah	Male	No	No	No	Abu Hamdi
32	Face to Face	27.11.2021	National/Municipal Levels	Refugees Popular Committee	Current Refugee Camp Resident	Deir Al Balah	Male	Yes	Yes	Yes	Abu Samer
33	Face to Face	11.12.2021	Community/ Grassroots	Researcher in refugee studies	/	Deir Al Balah	Female	Yes	Yes	Yes	Nadia
34	Google Meet	06.04.2022	UN/International NGO	UNRWA Staff	/	General	Male	Yes	Yes	No	Abu Rami