

*Can Tears and Blood Sprout Olive Trees? After more than fifty-five years Palestinian refugee camps now look more like townships than tent-sites. There is much talk of sustainability in the camps, and I went to one of them—Neirab Camp—thinking that increased greenspace could help contribute to this. Yet with vision blurred by tears and blood and the right to return to their homeland who can speak to these refugees of environmental sustainability?*

### **Exploiting the Vision**

In an under-furnished classroom, on a stiff wooden bench I sit amongst the third generation of Palestinian refugees. It is the first day of summer school and these are the children of Neirab Camp. Do not be fooled by its name, however. After more than fifty-five years Neirab Camp—which lies on the outskirts of Aleppo in northern Syria—looks more like a township than a tent-site. With privately owned farms hemming it in on one side and the Aleppo International Airport on the other, the camp has been growing into itself for decades. It is very urban and very dense.

I traveled to Neirab this summer hoping to have a hand in improving the condition of the camp by contributing to the Neirab Rehabilitation Project, one of the very first efforts at camp upgrading by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA). I would be working on a children's summer school program and, as part of the rehabilitation effort, developing a concept paper for the greening of Neirab Camp. As a graduate student with a focus on the urban environment and a passion for environmental education, I could not have asked for a better assignment.

That first day in the classroom the children and I were listening to a community elder—a retired teacher—tell their story, their history. It is the story of how they went from their bountiful farms and villages in northern Palestine to this camp in northern Syria. The elder spoke of a rich and verdant Palestinian landscape. In the hills there were forests of pine and cypress and endless orchards of olives. All of this was their playground. Along the coast there were groves of palms and citrus, to say nothing of the fruits of the sea. The Mediterranean itself was their pool. This was their Palestine.

It was all left behind in 1948—at the outset of the Arab-Israeli War—as they were forced to flee their homes and villages in what has come to be known as *al-Nakbeh* (literally, the catastrophe). The refugees of northern Palestine first crossed the border into southern Lebanon and then traveled, some by land and others by sea, to Beirut. There they were boarded onto trains in boxcars fit only for animals, destined to land in cities they hardly knew existed. Their journey was difficult and dehumanizing. The very last of them reached Neirab Camp outside Aleppo—the farthest camp from Palestine—to take up what has been their temporary residence here ever since. This is the narrative of a people in exile.

I know this story. I have read about it, I have watched it dramatized on television and have had it recounted to me before, personally, by an old man who lived it. This time it seems different as I sit amongst these children, Palestinian refugees themselves. It feels as if we are listening to much more than just their history. “Each one of you has a house in Palestine, trees in Palestine and land in Palestine,” the voice of the old teacher rings out. These children are at least the third, and in some cases the fourth, generation of Palestinian refugees to learn about their homeland in a setting such as this. They come to yearn for a Palestine that they know only through the stories their elders tell them. Moreover, the memories of their grandparents' childhood in the idyllic Palestinian countryside stand in stark contrast to the harsh reality of the

overcrowded urban refugee camp they dwell in. Neirab Camp is an uninterrupted slab of concrete and asphalt.

In the Palestinian refugee narrative I thought I found a link to the land and to the environment that I could explore and exploit, so the children could grow up learning that their urban environment need not look like it does now. Even a refugee camp can have trees in it and open space for children to run and play. As it stands, open space is at premium in Neirab. It barely exists. A few of the houses have small courtyards—if they can be called that—with a fruit tree or a grape vine growing in the corner. The three schoolyards are the largest open spaces in the camp. Without them the children would be relegated to alleys too narrow for two of them to pass each other in and streets that cars have trouble navigating unobstructed, let alone filled with children playing football. Something needed to be done to increase and then, of course, preserve open space and trees in Neirab Camp. I thought a cultural narrative with a vision of the environment as strong as the refugees' could be employed to achieve this end. Indeed, my time in Neirab taught me just how strong that narrative is, but it also taught me that these refugees' vision of their homeland was not something I could wield as I wished.

### **The Right of Return**

My interview with Lex Takkenberg, the Director of UNRWA Affairs in Syria, is coming to an end, but one topic has yet to come up. It is the topic that always comes up when discussing Palestinian refugees, particularly in the context of camp redevelopment and the relocation of refugees. Palestinian refugees insist—with unremitting support of host-countries like Syria—that they are entitled, under international law, to return to their homes in Palestine. The General Assembly of the United Nations, the organization's highest legislative body, resolved that Palestinian refugees "wishing to return to their homes and live at peace with their neighbors should be permitted to do so at the earliest practicable date."

That was 1948, under Article 11 of Resolution 194 of the United Nations General Assembly. For almost 57 years now Palestinian refugees have pointed to Resolution 194 as the expression of their right to a long awaited homecoming. This has come to be known as the right of return. It means everything to Palestinian refugees. The most powerful symbols of this right of return are the keys and deeds some Palestinians still possess to the homes they were forced to flee during the *Nakbeh*. Yet, like so many other UN resolutions on controversial subjects, Resolution 194 has no teeth to it. In principle, it is international law and, therefore, binding. In reality, it is politically unenforceable.

There is a lesson to be learned, according to Mr. Takkenberg, from the Neirab Rehabilitation Project in terms of the right of return. Almost without fail, the refugee beneficiaries of the project wanted to see where they were being moved to and weigh out the pros and cons of such a move before agreeing to it. They refused to make such a decision in the abstract. According to Mr. Takkenberg, refugees would simply not accept such a leap of faith. In fact, refugees wanted to see model housing units, not just miniature models, before they made the decision on taking part in the project.

Similarly, Mr. Takkenberg explained, questions about the right of return and resettlement simply cannot be posed *in abstracto*. He believes that the choice between exercising the right of return and agreeing to resettle in a host-country will become a relative question as far as refugees are concerned. For example, a refugee living in relatively decent conditions in Jordan or Syria will think very differently about the right of return than a refugee living in poor conditions in Lebanon or the Gaza Strip. Mr. Takkenberg believes that the refugees are painfully aware that

the villages and towns in Palestine that they left behind are now very different places, if they exist at all. Nevertheless, the right of return is an important part of the Palestinian refugee identity. It is important to all refugees. What exists now, according to Mr. Takkenberg, between Palestinian refugees and their host-countries is a political understanding on the right of return; both parties understand that it is not entirely feasible, but neither is willing to give up on the principle.

It has been nine months since I interviewed Mr. Lex. I spent almost three of those months working on the Neirab Rehabilitation Project this summer. I do not claim to know more about the project than the man that first thought it up, but I did learn a few things in Neirab Camp that Mr. Lex did not share with me that afternoon in his Damascus office. I learned that, more than anything—more than better houses, more than open space and a greener camp—the refugees want to exercise their right of return to their homeland. On a deep and subconscious level, they do not want new homes. They want their homes in Palestine. Regardless of whether or not they exist. This is the greatest challenge to the Neirab Rehabilitation Project, and any others like it.

### **Neirab's Rooftops**

Neirab Camp is best seen from its rooftops. There is a spot that official visitors, particularly dignitaries and representatives of donor-countries, are always taken to see Neirab from above. In fact, if you ever happen to see a photograph of Neirab Camp, chances are it was taken from this same vantage point. It is atop the girls' elementary school, looking north out onto the camp. With the exception of the sides of a few buildings in Neirab that rise above one or two stories, all that can be seen from this spot are rooftops. Neirab Camp is that dense. There is virtually no open space in the camp, save the narrow alleyways and small streets. I imagine one could hop and climb from roof to roof in Neirab, weaving one's way on its concrete canopy from beginning to end.

Neirab is supposed to be one of the camps—if not the camp—with the worst living conditions in Syria. Some UNRWA officials and documents even go as far as using the phrase “slum conditions” when describing Neirab Camp. Houses the worst-off—often a mere room or two—are intolerably hot in the summer and bitterly cold in the winter months. Moreover, with makeshift, dilapidated roofs insects are a plague in the hot season and leaks are a constant battle in the wet winters. It is not unheard of to find an extended family of ten or twelve living in two rooms. There is no privacy or personal space in a setting such as this. Instead, there are very real and well-documented psychological effects that take their toll on children and adults alike.

Neirab Camp does, however, have running water, electricity and a proper—although not always properly functioning—sanitation network. As is clear from the large dishes dotting its rooftops, the residents of the camp even enjoy access to satellite television in their homes. Neirab Camp is certainly not the prettiest place on earth, but I would not go so far as calling it a slum.

### **Temporary, not Sustainable**

That first day in the classroom the children and I were listening to more than just the history of how their grandparents came here to Neirab Camp. What they were being taught was their past, present and future; the story of how they came to be as a people, where they came from and where they would return. A rich, verdant and bountiful Palestine is their eternal home. How can Neirab Camp even compare? This narrative means everything to Palestinian refugees. It will soon mean everything to these children, too.

The old teacher at the front of the classroom told the children “someone who’s lost their homeland has lost their dignity, and someone who’s lost their dignity is treated like an animal.” He was the only one in the room to have personally experienced that loss—of both homeland and dignity—yet he wanted to make certain all the children understood and felt it. They did, because while they may not all know what dignity means, they do know what an animal is.

“What is the difference between socialization and brainwashing?” I asked myself as I sat amongst those young, impressionable pupils. I still do not know. Perhaps the answer lies in what these children ultimately do with what they learn. Then the ends may justify the means. I thought the refugee narrative and the vision of Palestine could be used to make Neirab Camp a greener, healthier, happier and more sustainable place. I was wrong. My time in Neirab taught me that what this vision of Palestine really means to these refugees is much more powerful than that.

No attempt at ameliorating the living conditions of Palestinian refugees can succeed without at least acknowledging the vision they have of their homeland. Everything must bow to the power of this vision and the logic it begets; “If we are going back to beautiful, bountiful Palestine, then why should we care about the conditions we live in here?”

Sustainable development is no different. It, too, must bow to this logic. There is much talk of sustainability amongst UNRWA and its international donor-countries. Indeed, projects like the Neirab Rehabilitation Project—so generously financed by international donors—are predicated on the notion of bringing sustainable development to Palestinian refugee camps. No sooner does this notion of sustainability surface, however, then it faces up to the vision of a Palestine that no amount of money or expertise could turn a refugee camp—especially not Neirab—into.

My time in the camp taught me who wins in this face-off between sustainable development and the Palestinian refugees’ vision of their homeland. In a deep subconscious sense Neirab Camp is not home to these refugees and it will never be. For more than fifty-five years it has been their temporary abode. It will always be temporary. Perhaps that is what we should be striving to keep refugee camps; temporary, not sustainable.