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PANEL TITLE: Palestinian Refugees and the Right of Return: The Struggle for Decolonisation before and after the 2023-24 Genocide

PROPONENTE/I – PROPONENT/S: AREEJ JAFARI, FRANCESCO AMORUSO, AND ANDREW MEYER

CHAIR/DISCUSSANT: FRANCESCO AMORUSO

ABSTRACT (1500 parole/words):

Having persisted for over seven decades since the establishment of Israel in 1948, the plight of Palestinian refugees presents a unique and protracted challenge that is distinct from typical refugee scenarios. Unlike most other refugee situations that arise from conflicts or natural disasters, the Palestinian refugees have been described as being in a state of "permanent transience" for 75 years, perpetually displaced in a manner that far exceeds the originally purported temporary refugee status imposed upon them (Taylor, 2013). This extended displacement results from various factors that continue to marginalise and exclude them from their homeland and the societies of host countries. The Al-Aqsa Flood of 7th October and the current genocidal war in Gaza have made extremely clear that no just peace can be achieved without solving the Palestinian refugee issue and that Palestinians are, 75 years after the Nakba, still under the threat of mass expulsion and ethnic cleansing.

Palestinian refugees continue to uphold a profound link between their identity and homeland, which allows even those born in exile to maintain a particularly strong connection to Palestine, setting them apart from other refugee groups in terms of longevity (Betts et al., 2017). The plight of Palestinian refugees has consistently emerged as one of the most pivotal issues, if not the foremost, in the peace negotiations, albeit perpetually deferred to 'final stage' negotiations (Masalha, 2003). The Palestinian refugee population constitutes a significant segment of the broader Palestinian community and holds an inherent right to participate in the exercise of self-determination for the Palestinian people. Israel, supported by the United States, vehemently opposes the return of Palestinian refugees, characterising it as an existential threat to the survival of the State of Israel as a Jewish ethno-state.

The United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) has unequivocally outlined the right of Palestinian refugees to return to their original homes, as expressed in UNGA Resolution 194 of 1948, a principle that has been reiterated on multiple occasions (UNGA, Res194). This entitlement of Palestinian refugees to repatriation finds its foundation within international law and aligns with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and various regional conventions rooted in human rights jurisprudence. The Palestinian refugees forcibly displaced in 1948 and their descendants ardently regard their right to return as sacred one (Abu Setta, 1997).

Palestinian refugees have also occupied a unique position in the global refugee order in terms of their legal framework, which is distinct from established international mandates such as that of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Since December 1949, the management of Palestinian refugee camps and provision of social and humanitarian services have been the prerogative of the United Nations Relief and Works

Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA). UNRWA replaced the previous UN Relief for Palestinian Refugees (UNRPR), established in the immediate aftermath of the 1948 Nakba and mandated with finding a political solution for the repatriation and resettlement of Palestinian refugees. UNRWA's scope was instead limited to the provision of services and humanitarian relief. UNRWA thus operates within a depoliticised framework of humanitarian aid and is rightly criticised for its role in mitigating the impact of Israeli settler colonial violence and weakening Palestinians' claims to their inalienable rights (Farah, 2010).

However, UNRWA has also played a pivotal, albeit often contradictory, role in Palestinian nation-building (Al-Husseini, 2000). Israel perceives UNRWA as a key player perpetuating refugee demands and has been actively seeking to undermine its influence over the past several decades and advocating for the termination of its mandate (The New Arab, 2024). The recent accusations levelled against UNRWA staff allegedly involved in the October 7th events, occurring amid a genocidal conflict against Palestinians, can be seen as yet another facet of Israel's settler-colonial project, aimed at eradicating the Palestinian refugee issue.

Importantly, the majority of residents in the Gaza Strip are descendants of these early refugees (PCBS, 2023) and are now confronted with escalating challenges in the aftermath of the events of 7th October. The re-occurrence of experiences reminiscent of the 1948 ethnic cleansing has deeply scarred subsequent generations, tethering the people in Gaza to their homes and lands. The ongoing genocide in Gaza has also led to the emergence of a new category of Palestinian refugees, introducing uncertain short- and long-term implications for their original right of return as well as their ability to return to their temporarily displaced homes and refugee camps within the Gaza Strip. These refugees are poised to play a central role in any potential political resolution to come.

The most recent developments have come to bear significantly on the question of Palestine. The Palestinian communities at large, and refugees in particular, are reeling from the enduring effects of the ongoing genocide, instilling scepticism among diaspora refugees regarding a just resolution to their cause. Additionally, global support for Israel's settler-colonial mechanisms intensifies apprehension over displacement or being forgotten amid the focus on new refugee waves and their plight. The current situation in Gaza places Palestinian refugees at the forefront of the ongoing genocide, while the broader refugee population grapples with heightened anxiety due to resurfacing the concept of the transfer back in public spheres and led by Israeli right-wing leadership. This intricate scenario underscores the pressing need for discussion and interventions to address the multifaceted challenges confronting Palestinian refugees on the global stage.

Centring the question of return in academic knowledge production on Palestine also comes as a response to calls to counter reifying notions of settler colonial permanence and resist self-fulfilling narratives of triumph and defeat by engaging with the historical dimension of Indigenous resistance and resurgence (Barakat, 2018). This panel constitutes an effort to bring Palestinian agency, and in particular refugee agency formulated around the demand of return, at the forefront of discussions on the decolonisation of Palestine.

This panel speaks to the wider conference theme by highlighting the political cross-pollinations among Palestinian communities inside and outside historic Palestine, the historical dimension of processes of political contamination within host countries, the urgent need to reorient epistemic frames around notions of return defined by and within the Palestinian liberation struggle, the articulation of return as an idea and practice 'in transit', and its suppression as part of ongoing colonial border-making.

Upon this backdrop, we welcome contributions that engage with Palestinian return from a range of fields and disciplinary approaches, including but not limited to refugee studies, migration and diaspora studies, critical/radical geography, political economy, political theory,

and history. We are interested in both the material and discursive dimensions of Palestinian return and welcome papers engaging with attitudes to return among Palestinian refugee communities, the presence and absence of return within regional and international diplomacy, the impact of Al-Aqsa Flood and the ongoing genocide in Gaza on prospects for the implementation of the right of return, the political and humanitarian consequences of UNRWA's defunding following 7th October, return in the context of normalisation agreements with Arab states, return within Palestinian intellectual and cultural production, and the historical trajectory of return as the core demand of the Palestinian national movement.

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PROFILO ACCADEMICO DEL/DELLA/DEI/DELLE PROPONENTE/I – SHORT BIO OF PROPONENTS

Areej Jafari, born and raised in the Dheisheh refugee camp in Bethlehem, is a Palestinian refugee currently pursuing a Ph.D. in the Institute of Arab and Islamic Studies (IAIS) at the University of Exeter. Her research focuses on examining the implications of Palestinian refugee preferences and attitudes concerning the right of return and statehood, with a particular focus on Palestinian refugees in the West Bank and Jordan. Ms Jafari possesses valuable practical experience, having worked for several years in the social and humanitarian sector with various development and intergovernmental organisations in Palestine and Jordan.

Francesco Amoruso is a Lecturer in Political Economy at Boston University and an Honorary Research Fellow at the European Centre for Palestine Studies, University of Exeter. His current research interests include the political geography of Palestine, settler colonial theory and decolonisation, and the political economy of normalisation agreements between Israel and Arab states. His doctoral thesis explored the construction and peopling of the new Palestinian city of Rawabi and the role of urban development in shaping contemporary settler-indigenous relations in Palestine. His work has been published by *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies*, the *Institute for Palestine Studies*, and *Lo Squaderno: Explorations in Space and Society*.

Andrew Meyer holds a PhD in politics from the University of California, Santa Cruz and is a former policy analyst at the Rachel Corrie Foundation. His doctoral dissertation examines the potential role of Palestinian refugee return in a historical process of decolonization, theorising such as an effort toward 'destruction' of settlerness. His broader research interests include settler colonial theory, comparative settler colonialisms, contemporary conceptions of the "political," and Marxist thought.

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Valentina Napolitano, French National Research Institute for Sustainable Development (IRD)

A Long-Term Approach to Palestinian Refugees' Right of Return Mobilization: The Case of Syria in the 2000s

This presentation aims at discussing the "right of return" issue in the light of a long-time history of mobilizations among Palestinian refugees. More precisely it will focus on the emergence of "Committees for the Defense of the Right of Return" (Lijân li-difâ' 'an haqq al-'awda), in the Yarmuk camp in Syria, in the 2000s. Initially founded on the initiative of former political activists who left their organizations after the signature of the Oslo accords, these Committees organized activities focused on preserving Palestinian refugees' culture and heritage. This historical perspective on the "right of return" mobilizations among Palestinian refugees aims at providing some reflection on the way this issue remained central in refugees' narratives and political commitments, being reinvested in a context of delegitimization of political actors. It will also provide an insight on refugees' perspectives on the "right of return" after their second displacement as a consequence of the Syrian conflict, since 2011. This paper is based on data collected in two periods: first, during field research in Yarmuk camp between 2008 and 2011, second, between 2011 and 2019, through online interviews as well as face-to-face interviews with Palestinians who remained in Syria or fled to Lebanon and France.

Areej Jafari, University of Exeter

The Implications of Refugee Preferences on Return and Statehood: The Case of Palestine

This paper explores the preferences and expectations of Palestinian refugees regarding statehood and the potential for return to historic Palestine. Understanding the refugees' return preferences, their desires, and the conditions under which they would do so is crucial for discussions on statehood and self-determination. Utilizing mixed qualitative and quantitative methods, including primary data from surveys and interviews, the study examines demographic and socio-economic factors shaping refugee decisions in the West Bank and Jordan. Insights are drawn from both survey and interview findings, shedding light on refugee preferences for return. Furthermore, the paper considers how these results may be reinterpreted in light of the 2023 Genocide in Palestine, offering valuable perspectives on the evolving dynamics of Palestinian displacement and statehood aspirations.

Hafsa Marragh, Università di Napoli L'Orientale

Right of Return and Anti-Colonial Resistance: From the Nakba to Ongoing Genocide

'Ala al-Quds rayhin shuhada' bil malayin, people shouted in the streets of Amman and in the refugee camps until they joined in a single chorus on 7 October 2023. The ongoing genocide in Gaza seamlessly evokes the images and memories of the 1948 Nakba, when millions of Palestinians were forced to leave their land. This work aims to analyse the renewal and contamination of the Palestinian resistance within the refugee camps, where new strategies of anti-colonial struggle are presented. It is therefore proposed to interrogate the conditions of exile and return as historical, political and epistemic elements in order to read the new perspectives and dimensions of anti-colonial resistance. The intention is to reflect on the possibilities of the return of the Palestinians and how this can correspond to the possibility of an interruption of a catastrophic temporality, claiming a new decolonial perspective in the aftermath of 7 October. The renewal of the struggle in the camps is reflected in a reversal of the verticality of the ideology of liberation, where geographies far from the West are engaged in contaminating the global scenario with new strategies of anti-colonial resistance.

Akram Salhab, Queen Mary University London

Global Palestinian Right to Return Coalition: Background and Prospects for Revival

In the early 2000s, and coinciding with threats to the Palestinian right of return emanating from Palestinian negotiators, Palestinian refugees began a large-scale mobilisation to defend their rights. This mobilisation began with the creation of local Committees for the Defence of the Right of Return organised in every Palestinian refugee camp, and that found a collective expression in the now moribund Global Palestinian Right of Return Coalition. This paper will record the purpose, establishment, activities undertaken by and eventual decline of the Coalition from the end of the 1990s until its last activity, the 2014 Return Unifies Us mobilisation. In tracing the Coalition's trajectory, the paper will explore the modes of transnational anticolonial mobilisation undertaken by Palestinians outside the now dismantled structures of their national liberation movement, and the various challenges to sustaining such structures.

Andrew Meyer, Independent Researcher

Return as Indigenous Resurgence in Palestine: Repatriate the Refugee and 'Destroy' the Settler

While sophisticated understandings of the potential for decolonization in historic Palestine have shaped recent scholarly trends, the dominant political discourse remains locked in a disingenuous "peace orthodoxy" that privileges the question of settler futurity above all other considerations. This is especially true in relation to refugees, where the possibility of implementing the right of return is dismissed as undeserved, impractical, and

dangerous. This paper challenges this characterization of refugee return on both theoretical and empirical bases, first analyzing refugee return as an exercise in Indigenous resurgence and arguing that such a practice forms a crucial component of decolonization as the 'destruction' of the settler. It then turns to the question of practicality, presenting the case for an immediate, clearly feasible program of repatriation for the overwhelming majority of Palestinian refugees.