



Urban Studies Seminar
2015 - 2016

Chaired by Prof Ulrike Freitag and Dr Nora Lafi

Monday, January 25th, 2016, 5 pm

The spatial evolution of the al-Wihdat Palestinian refugee camp in Jordan (1948-2015)

Lecture by Luigi Achilli (EUI)

Twice a month,
Mondays 5 pm - 7 pm

Venue:

Conference Hall
Zentrum Moderner Orient
Kirchweg 33
14129 Berlin-Nikolassee

Please register
at the following address:
Dr. Nora Lafi
nora.lafi@zmo.de
Phone: (+49) (0) 30 80307- 0

The first Palestinian refugee camps in Jordan were established in the aftermath of the 1948 Israeli-Arab war by the Red Cross as temporary, emergency shelter for displaced Palestinians. The refugee camps have since then embodied the humanitarian and political plight borne by the Palestinian refugees. At the same time, after 60 years, many camps have also become thriving urban spaces socially and economically connected with their surrounding neighbourhoods.

Despite appearances, however, camps officially remain temporary spaces. The management and organization of the camps reflect their distinctiveness. Camps are not managed by the municipality but fall under the control of the Department of Palestinian Affairs (DPA – a Jordanian governmental body) and United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA). How can we understand spaces that are still officially defined as “temporary” six decades after their establishment?

Drawing on the influential writing of Arendt, Foucault, and Agamben, much of the literature on refugees and refugee camps has generally emphasized the liminality and extraordinariness of the space of the camp. As a result, camps have often been juxtaposed to the city. Whereas the latter has come to represent normality, the camp has been portrayed as the site of hardened national identities and political ideologies or, conversely, a place of confinement for speechless victims. This approach might result in overlooking the intricate social relations that refugees develop with the city and maintaining unchanged biased representations of them.

In this lecture, I want to bring attention to how Palestinian refugee camps in Jordan do not lend themselves easily to assessment. I suggest looking at camps neither as fully integrated spaces nor as an expression of Agamben’s space of exception—a temporary space that is related to the concept of a threat towards the stability of the political order. I will instead show how closeness and openness might be aspects ultimately interconnected, part and parcel of the fundamental ambiguous status of Palestinian refugees—especially camp dwellers—in Jordan.

Luigi Achilli is research associate at the Migration Policy Centre at the Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies, European University Institute, in Florence, Italy. He holds an M.A. and a Ph.D. in political anthropology from the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS). He taught at Cambridge, SOAS, and various universities in the Middle East. His research and writing focus on irregular migration and smuggling networks, political engagement, nationalism, the Palestinian issue, refugees, and refugee camps. His last research project has culminated with the publication of a book on politics and nationalism in Palestinian refugee camps in Jordan, “Palestinian Refugees and Identity: Nationalism, Politics and the Everyday” (I.B. Tauris, 2015).