The Palestine Refugee Records Project

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Abstract:

Refugees, displaced persons, or victims of political or military conflicts are rarely among the well documented. As an archivist, one is often frustrated by not being able to assist individual former refugees in tracing or documenting their origins, leaving them with unfulfilled existential needs. In some cases the documentation was once available, but has not been preserved. This paper deals with an example where a very rich archival documentation of a special group of refugees has been preserved for future research, namely the Palestine Refugee Records Project of UNRWA (United Nations Relief and Works Agency) As an effect of the prolonged mandate of UNRWA a meticulous registration process has, for over a period of 60 years, produced a comprehensive historical-genealogical archive on paper about the Palestine refugees, the Family Files. The purpose of the Family Files was never to create a historical data bank on the Palestinian refugees, but was purely administrative, namely to document who was eligible for the services of the organisation and who was not. Heavily used in the day-to-day activities of the Relief and Social Service Section of UNRWA, the records in the Family Files were, after 50 years of service, deteriorating badly; simultaneously, researchers became increasingly conscious about the unique information on the Palestine refugees that the Family Files represented.

UNRWA reacted to this situation by initiating a preservation project that went hand-in-hand with the transition from paper based to digital administration.

UNRWA and its records

By a United Nations General Assembly Resolution of 8 December 1949 UNRWA or the United Nations Relief and Work Agency for the Palestine Refugees in the Near East was founded as a temporary institution. UNRWA began its operations in 1950, taking over from the United Nations Relief for Palestine Refugees and from the International Red Cross and the American Society of Friends. Today, UNRWA provides assistance, protection and advocacy for some 4.8 million registered Palestine refugees in the Middle East. Assistance includes education, health and social services. At the moment of writing, UNRWA's mandate – unless renewed by the General Assembly of the United Nations – will expire 30 June 2011. As a temporary organization, UNRWA has proved rather long-lived.

Of course, like any other organisation, UNRWA has produced records all through its existence. Records are produced by the Headquarters (first in Beirut, then in Vienna, and from 1996 in Gaza/Amman) and are archived in the Central Registry. These are the records of the central administration of the various UNRWA programs – Education, Health, Relief and Social Services, Microfinance, and Infrastructure and Camp Improvement – and of the internal administration of UNRWA, external relations, etc. The historic records of the Headquarters are archived in the Amman Headquarters.

Each branch – Education, Health, etc. – in each of UNRWA Fields of Operation creates its own records. The files of the educational and medical services are archived locally and only

preserved for as long as administratively needed. The exception is Relief and Social Services that is responsible for the registration of Palestine refugees eligible for UNWRA services. Also, the Relief and Social Services Division is concerned with the provision of direct material and financial aid to the refugee families in need of such assistance. And, because of the definition of a refugee eligible for services, the administrative value of the greater part of those records – the *Family Files* – will continue as long as UNRWA exists.

One of the first things UNRWA set out to do when taking over in 1950 from other relief organizations was to separate the real Palestine refugees from other displaced persons in their area of operations. The UNRWA definition of a Palestine refugee is "*Any person 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, and descendants of such person including legally adopted children through male line*". If a person fulfils these criteria and resides in the UNRWA fields of operations, he or she is eligible for UNRWA services. The census-taking of UNRWA reduced the numbers eligible for services, because, as stated by the International Red Cross: "*Finally, thousands of individuals, destitute persons and others, have tried to evade the controls by registering themselves in more than one region, or under several names, by increasing the number of family members, or by registering false births and hiding deaths*."[1]

The status of an UNWRA refugee is in other words hereditary. This means that UNRWA has had to collect genealogical information on a large scale. In 2005, the refugee population of 1950 had more than quadrupled. As mentioned, the registration of the Palestinian refugees by UNRWA serves one primary purpose: to establish the identity and number of the families and individuals that are eligible for UNRWA services. It should perhaps be noted that since 1993 UNRWA has registered on demand Palestinian refugees who reside outside the UNRWA fields of operation, and as such are not readily eligible for UNRWA services.

Number of registered refugees[2]

	1950	1960	1970	1980	1990	2000	2005
Jordan	506,200	613,743	506,038	716,372	929,097	1,570,192	1,795,326
Lebanon	127,600	136,561	175,958	226,554	302,049	376,472	401,071
Syria	82,194	115,043	158,717	209,362	280,731	383,199	426,919
West Bank[3]	-	-	272,692	324,035	414,298	583,009	690,988
Gaza	198,227	255,542	311,814	367,995	496,339	824,622	969,588
TOTAL	914,221[4]	1,120,889	1,425,219	1,844,318	2,422,514	3,737,494	4,283,892

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[1] *"UNRWA: A Brief History 1950-82"* p. 63

[2] Based on the voluntary registration of the refugees, and accordingly probably not accurate in a demographic sense; however, the figures reflect the growing challenges of the record keeping systems. (Source: www.unrwa.org)

[3] Until 1967, the figures for Jordan included the West Bank

[4] The lists handed over by preceding NGOs comprised 950,000 refugees. This number was reduced to ca. 860,000 by the UNRWA census efforts.

The Refugee Registration Records and the Family Files

The refugee registration records of UNRWA from 1950 onwards consist of two principal components:
1) The index systems, from card indexes to computerised databases
2) The case files containing documentation on each individual refugee – the *Family Files*.

The growth of the population was mirrored by the increasing bulk of records, created by the routines of refugee registration. In 2000, UNRWA had grown out of a number of different registration systems, ranging from the so-called Master Cards to the electronic Unified Registration System (URS). Also, the funding situation of UNRWA and its (in principle) temporary existence has probably played a role in not putting the record keeping systems among the high priority issues of UNRWA, even though the organisation was conscious of the crucial importance of the refugee registration system.

The Index Systems

1. The Master Cards 1950 – 1956
The Master Cards – one per family - formed a card index based on the investigation reports. The Master Cards have been preserved in Gaza, but not in the West Bank or Jordan. The six-digit registration number assigned on the Master Card was, after the introduction of the punch card system, called the ex-code.

The digits of the ex-code had meaning, referring a family to a field, area, camp, etc. The system was not designed to allow for movements from one camp to another, or to other areas or fields. This system inevitably broke down, but was retained as a reference from the later index systems to the paper documentation in the *Family Files*.

When new families were established, until 1993 – long after the Master Card system had been abolished – a new ex-code was given. In 1993, however, it was decided to bring back the new ex-codes to the original family files, a process that proved extremely time-consuming.

2. IBM Punch Cards 1956 – 1979
The punch card system was based on an eight digit Family Registration Number.
The cards were punched from the "Basic Cards" prepared in the Fields at the time of the introduction of the punch card system.

The original Index Cards, which were issued at the time of the introduction of the punch card system, the subsequent modification forms and the last issued Index Card were also kept in the Field Offices.

3. The Registration Database 1979 – (1993) 1996
The registration database that existed on the Vienna-based IBM mainframe consisted of Family Master Files and Individual Master Files, one file per family and one per individual.
Back-up tapes from this database still exist, and might have been of some historical value. Outputs were delivered to the Field Offices in the form of Registration Cards – in three copies, a laminated one to be given to the family, one for Field and Area offices, lists of ex-codes, alphabetical index lists, based on name of family or head of family, first name, family and individual data lists in registration number sequence.

4. The Unified Registration System 1993 – 2005ff.
The Unified Registration System (URS) since 1993/94, when UNRWA integrated two existing databases, the registration database and the socio-economic database on special hardship cases (SHC).

Of the two, the registration database was the older, established in the Vienna Headquarters in the late 1970s on an IBM Mainframe. The socio-economic database was planned and implemented in the early 1990s in the Amman Headquarters.

The URS became fully operational in the Amman Headquarters when the conversion of the data from the IBM mainframe was completed in 1996. Technologically, the URS was an example of a perhaps unsophisticated but very sound and proven relational database (Unix/Sybase/Paradox).

The Refugee Registration System consisted of the family registration data (about 700,000 files) in the FAM DEM (Family Demographic) database and the individual registration data (about 3,500,000 files) in the IND DEM (Individual Demographic) database. Likewise, the socio-economic database carries both family SHC (Special Hardship Cases) data and individual SHC data.

The greatest weakness of URS was updating the system. It took about one month before new data records for a change of status of the refugees (for instance marriage, change of address) could be entered into the URS database. This delay was due to the information from the area offices first being recorded on a diskette, which then was sent by car to Amman to be checked before transfer to the URS. Seeing that the monthly average of registration modifications (new births, marriages, change of location, deaths) lies around 40,000, an online system would have innumerable advances.

The *Family Files*

The *Family Files* contain the documentation on those families who fulfilled the qualifications for being eligible for UNRWA services. Each original refugee family has a file with a unique and now stable number, the amalgamated ex-code. There are about 700,000 *Family Files*. The *Family Files* have been archived at the five UNRWA Field offices, sorted by the ex-codes.

The key link between the URS and the *Family Files* was the ex-code number. The ex-code refers to the registration system used from the beginning of UNRWA registration in 1950 till 1956, when a new system (IBM punch cards) was introduced, thus giving birth to the appellation "ex-code". In the 1950-52 registration, each family was identified by a 1 to 6 digit number, governed by the location of the family in the host country.

The ex-code number referred to the original refugee family, registered in 1950-52. However, as new families split out from the ones that were registered in 1950-52, new ex-code numbers were assigned. This practice, however, gave rise to some confusion, and in 1993 it was decided to restore the old ex-code number to the new families (the amalgamation of ex-codes) so that the ex-code number in fact can be used to trace a family from 1950 onwards. New ex-codes were from 1993 assigned only to those refugee families that had not previously

been registered by UNRWA. The reason why the registration numbers could not be permanent is the digit codes.
As in a punch card system the digits are used to describe certain circumstances that are common to groups of refugees.

The contents of the individual *Family Files* vary. They fall into three categories, UNRWA, government, and personal documents. The age of the documents may span from pre-1948 to 2009.

According to the research, UNRWA documents may include Red Cross Registration Sheets, Refugee Investigation Sheets (Fact Sheets), correspondence with government offices, certificates for passports, amendment of family particulars, etc. The Fact Sheet contains the numbers and names of family members, former residence in Palestine, accounts of particulars in connection with their flight etc.

Under the heading of personal documents fall certificates of birth, marriage, death, guardianship, testimonies from mukhtars, proof of residence in pre-1948 Palestine (passport/identity cards from the British mandate, curfew passes, etc), and property records (deeds, tax receipts, utility bills, etc.)
The personal documents that the refugees offered as proof of their eligibility for assistance have been given voluntarily. Up until ca. 1970 most documents are original, after 1970 certificates are photocopies.

The files are the backbone of the UNRWA operations and provided back-up to the electronic registration of the URS. However, for precisely that reason and others, the preservation of the files became a growing problem over the years. The files were in constant administrative use, for reference, and for registration modification. They were being damaged by wear and tear, including imperfect-storage conditions, apart from the outside threats that should be considered in an area of conflict.

The Preservation Project

One of the many vain attempts to make the world a bit more peaceful was once known as the Oslo Process. In the mid-1990s, the Oslo Process gave hope that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict might be at least partly resolved, and that a Palestinian State might be established. As we know today, neither happened.

The Oslo Process was not entirely unsuccessful, however. The theme of this paper is one of the successful, if indirect, outcomes of the process, namely the Palestine Refugee Records Project that was initiated partly as a consequence of the Oslo Process. If a Palestinian state had been established, there would have been no further need for UNRWA. In fact, in the mid-1990s the Palestine National Authority began preparations to establish a national archives, and UNRWA indicated that once the organization had been dissolved the Palestine National Archives should have custody over the historical records of UNRWA.[5]

Also, researchers became increasingly aware of the potential of the UNRWA archives. At the Refugee Working Group meeting in 1994 the Norwegian FAFO [Forskningsstiftelsen Fafo]

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[5] Tamari, S. & Zureik, E. (ed) Reinterpreting the Historical Record: the Uses of Palestinian Refugee Archives for Social Science Research and Policy Analysis, Institute of Jerusalem Studies, 2001, p. 52

Institute was commissioned to report the research potential of the UNRWA data on the Palestinian refugees. About the *Family Files*, the FAFO report concluded:

> "*The family files are of unique historical value and of high relevance for the research on the history and background of Palestine refugees. Although the information each file contain may be fragmentary, the scope is comprehensive. A project should be launched to preserve the family files archives and to facilitate historical research based on this material. [...] The immense amount of information, partially as handwritten documents in various languages and of bad physical quality represent an extraordinary challenge for researchers.."*[6]

However, due to lack of funding no actual preservation measures were taken as a consequence.

As a product of these political and archival considerations, in 1999 the then Commissioner General Peter Hansen asked a couple of Danish archivists/historians[7] to report on the feasibility of a preservation project. After having visited and inspected the *Family Files* in the Field Offices of Gaza, the West Bank and Jordan, in their report they concluded that a preservation project was critical. The *Family Files* that were stored in the Gaza Field Office were deteriorating at an alarming rate, probably caused by high humidity in the repository; in the Jordan Field Office in Amman, the storage space was inadequate. In the West Bank Field Office in Jerusalem conditions were better, but far from ideal. In the first report, scanning the *Family Files* and retaining the paper originals was recommended. Another expedition from the Danish National Archives, conducted by digital and scanning specialists, resulted in another report, outlining a scanning and digital archiving project.

One of the results of the second expedition was a more accurate assessment of the number of documents. UNRWA had estimated the number of documents to 25 million, but, based on actual measuring of the shelving, the estimate was reduced to ca. 16 million documents. In the report, a more detailed outline of the scanning operation was given. Special attention was awarded to the question of metadata. The creation and registration of metadata should not be allowed to slow down the scanning process. A production line was described, where the creation of metadata could be automated by inserting bar code sheets to indicate document type etc. The metadata should be as few and as simple as possible; earlier proposals had recommended the creation of metadata on a financially prohibitive level, given the number of documents. The URS – although a well-working, stable system – was technically obsolete with regard to modern administrative needs. Although it might be used as an index for the scanned *Family Files*, a new system would allow the scanned *Family Files* to become part of the future digitized administration of UNRWA. Linking the preservation of the historical documents to the future digital information system was recommended.[8] Special stress was put on the recommendation to avoid meaning-encoded numbers, but to use a system of unique identifiers for refugee families and individual refugees.

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[6] Lena C. Endresen and Geir Øvensen: The Potential of UNRWA Data for Research on Palestinian Refugees. FAFO Report, 1994, p. 13

[7] Mr. Kristian Hvidt, former chief of the Library and Archives of the Danish Parliament, and Poul Erik Olsen, Chief Consultant at the Danish National Archives.

[8] Jan Danielsen, Anders Bo Nielsen and Poul Erik Olsen: The UNRWA Family Files – scanning and registration, 2001.

After completion of the scanning, the day-to-day administrative use of the paper *Family Files* would cease, and the deterioration by wear and tear stopped. Other preservation measures might be taken in the course of the scanning process. The information in the *Family Files* would be online accessible for UNRWA use, thereby greatly enhancing data quality in the future registration process and greater administrative efficiency. Any new registration or modification could be done at any area or camp office, the additions to the *Family File* be scanned on the spot and the system updated online.

On the basis of the two archival reports and consultancies on the registration system by others, UNRWA developed the *Palestine Refugee Records Project*. The project contained a scanning of the estimated 16 million historical documents in the *Family Files*. The scanned images should be accessed by the new Refugee Registration Information System (RRIS) and other relevant systems.

Most important, however, in 2003, UNRWA succeeded in getting the Palestine Refugee Records Project funded.[9] Major donors included the Ruler of Sharjah, Saudi Arabia, the UK, Canada, the EU, and Switzerland.

The Project started on April 1 2003. An Advisory Board was set up, and the organisation of the project put into place. The generous funding allowed scanning in high resolution colour – up to full archival standards. The actual scanning began in June 2004, rather slowly at first, but in 2007 effective assembly lines were in place at the five Field Offices, and the scanning accelerated from an average of 250,000 documents per month to 400,000 in mid-2007. Load sharing was also taking place. The very effective Syrian Field team took care of a part of the Lebanon *Family Files*. A tracking system was developed, so that files moving between fields could be tracked at all times. A DMS system was installed and all Syrian files were migrated into the DMS and linked with RRIS in 2007.

In the scanning process, the *Family Files* were removed from the box files, pins removed, torn papers taped together or sleeved, and a unique set of separator sheets bearing the bar coded ex-code number printed out and placed in front and at the end of the individual file. Standard separator sheets with codes for "fact sheet", "birth certificate", "marriage certificate" etc. were placed with the respective documents, so that the future online user could quickly identify a file and the most used document types. The investigations into the *Family Files* had shown that there could be up to 58 different document types in a file, but the number of standard separators or identifiers was reduced first to 10, then to 7 and lastly to 5. A larger number proved too cumbersome to handle, slowing down the scanning workers.

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[9] Maher Nasser: The Palestine Refugee Records Project (Paper at Stocktaking II Conference on Palestinian Refugee Research, Ottawa 17 – 20 June 2003

Document preparation and scanning in Project Headquarters, Amman.

The scanning process was completed in March 2009. A total of 15.5 million documents and 2.5 million index cards had been scanned. And it was done inside the budget. Accordingly, there was no longer a need for the Advisory Board; it was dissolved by the Commissioner General of UNRWA on 9 December 2009, the day after UNRWA's 60th anniversary.

Roll-out of the RRIS had also started then, first with a test phase in Lebanon. The system is now in use agency-wide. The monthly additions to the *Family Files* are in average 20 to 25 thousand documents, and the local scanning seems to work well.

At the moment, UNRWA still holds the custodianship over the *Family Files*. When UNRWA is no longer needed, the *Family Files* will be turned over "to some appropriate institution".

An administrative copy of the scanned *Family Files* is online with the RRIS and the preservation copies are stored on two sets of DVDs. Another magnetic copy is stored at the DPKO data center. One may rest as assured as one can with anything to do with the Middle East that the documentation contained in the *Family Files* is secure – for future research and for individuals in the Palestine refugee population that in some distant future may seek information about their ancestors and family.