

Sense of Optimism and Perceptions of the Future among Palestine Refugee Students Living in Three West Bank Camps

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Abstract

Many young Palestine refugees in the West Bank continue to reside in refugee camps, often in crowded and poor living conditions with an uncertain future. The present research seeks to explore future aspirations and optimism among 227 Palestine refugee students attending six United Nations Relief and Works Agency schools in three West Bank refugee camps. The research uses focused classroom discussions to gain an understanding of how the students perceive their immediate living conditions, what they think of the future, as well as their personal goals and ambitions. The Life Orientation Test-Revised has been administered to assess the students' general sense of optimism versus their sense of pessimism. The results show that young Palestine refugees as a whole remain more optimistic than pessimistic, with many being motivated to improve their camps and society. However, many of these adolescents also remain concerned about their future and do not believe they will achieve their personal dreams. This is most apparent in camps where students have been exposed to conflict-related violence or have more limited higher education or economic opportunities.

Keywords

Palestine refugees • West Bank • Conflict • Optimism • Solidarity

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From November 1947 to the end of 1948, more than 700,000 Palestine refugees were displaced as a result of the Arab-Israeli War.¹² In absence of a solution to the Palestine refugee question, the number of Palestine refugees eligible for United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) services has grown to five million over the past 68 years. Nearly a third lives in 58 recognized Palestine refugee camps in Jordan, Lebanon, the Syria the Gaza Strip, and the West Bank, including East Jerusalem.³ The West Bank is home to nearly 775,000 registered refugees, around a quarter of whom live in 19 camps.⁴ The majority of refugees reside in West Bank cities, towns, and villages.

Palestinians throughout the West Bank, including Palestine refugees living both in and outside of camps, are subject to the impacts of the continuing Israeli occupation of the territory. On one hand, Palestinian movement in the West Bank is restricted through a combination of physical obstacles, including the Barrier⁵ and checkpoints, as well as bureaucratic constraints such as permit requirements. At the same time, conflict-related violence remains a regular occurrence. In 2014, UNRWA (2016) documented 764 search operations and 99 military actions by Israeli Security Forces in West Bank camps. During this period, 442 confrontations or clashes were documented, often involving the use of tear gas, skunk spray, and rubber-coated bullets. Some 778 Palestine refugees were injured (including 68 minors) while 764 (including 99 minors) were detained.

The occupation has also had significant impacts on the West Bank labor market and economy, with high rates of unemployment being related in part to restrictions on imports, exports, and labor mobility (Kock et al., 2012). In 2013, 19% of Palestinians in the West Bank were unemployed, although the proportion among youth was much higher at 40% (Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics [PCBS], 2014). While no specific economic or political restrictions related to Palestine refugees in the West Bank exist, refugees experience higher rates of both unemployment and poverty.

1 The views expressed in this article are only those of the authors. These are in no way are indicative of the views of UNRWA.

2 Palestine refugees are defined as persons whose normal place of residence was Palestine during the period from June 1, 1946 to May 15, 1948, and who lost both home and means of livelihood as a result of the 1948 conflict.” The descendants of Palestine refugee males, including legally adopted children, are also eligible for registration.

3 A Palestine refugee camp is defined as a plot of land placed at the disposal of UNRWA by the host government to accommodate Palestine refugees and on which UNRWA facilities may be established, including schools health centers, and distribution centers. These plots of land are either state land or, in most cases, land leased by the host government from local landowners. This means that the refugees in camps do not ‘own’ the land on which their shelters were built, but have the right to ‘use’ the land for a residence.

4 The 19 refugee camps are distributed across the West Bank. Some camps are located next to major towns and others are in rural areas. UNRWA does not own, administer, or police the camps. This is the responsibility of the host authorities.

5 The Barrier consists of concrete walls, fences, ditches, razor wire, groomed sand paths, an electronic monitoring system, patrol roads, and a buffer zone. Only Palestinians with West Bank ID cards who are granted special permits can enter East Jerusalem through designated Barrier checkpoints around the city (OCHA, July, 2013).

Socioeconomic conditions in camps are generally poor with high population density, cramped housing and living conditions, and inadequate infrastructure including narrow, inaccessible streets and poor sanitation. In 2013, 23% of refugees living in the West Bank camps were estimated to be unemployed, with 29% being moderately or severely food insecure⁶ (PCBS, 2016).

The present research has been undertaken firstly to understand the aspirations of Palestine refugee students living in the West Bank and secondly to explore whether or not the conditions in which these young people live influence their sense of hope and optimism. This area of research remains largely unexplored. To date, studies around the well-being of Palestinian children and adolescents in both the West Bank and Gaza have focused predominantly on the potentially traumatic impacts of political violence and war (Espie et al., 2009; Hobfoll et al., 2011; Thabet & Thabet, 2015; Thabet & Vostanis, 2011). While a limited number of studies have investigated self-perceived life satisfaction and happiness (Arafat, 2003; Veronese et al., 2012), these have not provided a comparative perspective across different localities or camps, which may vary considerably in terms of basic living conditions and therefore might also be expected to differentially affect the youths' well-being.

Little research has also been conducted on the Palestine refugee experience itself, especially in regards to how this might influence adolescents' capacity to maintain a positive outlook despite growing up in camps under difficult conditions. Research around the world has shown that, despite living under extreme hardship and adversity, many refugees retain a sense of resiliency. While resiliency is most often defined as individual capacity to cope with or bounce back from adversity (Carver, 1998; Smith et al., 2008; Tusaie & Dyer, 2004), it also retains a somewhat ambiguous construct. Ungar (2011) and Betancourt and Khan (2008) have observed that resiliency can also reflect community-level variables that reinforce the mutual support and belief systems that help sustain people through adversity. As an example, Eggerman and Panter-Brick's (2010) study on school children in Afghanistan found the majority retained a sense of hope for their future despite pervasive poverty, economic instability, and persistent violence. This was underpinned by close relationships among family members cemented within a shared experience of adversity from one generation to the next. Moreover, while many saw "no solutions" to key life stressors, a sense of cultural affiliation and ideological commitment remained that gave a sense of coherence to past, present, and future experiences:

Hope arises from a sense of moral and social order embodied in the expression of key cultural values: faith, family unity, service, effort, morals, and honor. These values form the bedrock of resilience, drive social aspirations, and underpin self-respect and dignity. (Eggerman & Panter-Brick, 2010, p. 71)

⁶ Food insecurity is generally defined as lacking reliable access to a sufficient quantity of affordable, nutritious food.

In order to better understand the perceptions and expectations of young Palestine refugees living in the West Bank, the present research focuses on 227 male and female students attending six UNRWA⁷ schools in three different refugee camps, these being the Deir Ammar, Shu'fat, and Aida camps. The Deir Ammar camp is perhaps the most livable camp in the West Bank, bearing more of a semblance to a rural village than a refugee camp. Dier Ammar is considerably more spacious and cleaner than most camps, with wider streets and greater living space, including fields for recreational and sports activities. It is also removed from the Barrier and not subject to the incursions conducted by Israeli Security Forces. In 2014, it was one of only three camps in the West Bank that did not report injuries as result of incursions (UNRWA, 2016).

Shu'fat camp has perhaps the most crowded and squalid living conditions of the 19 West Bank refugee camps. Located within the municipality of Jerusalem but effectively cut-off from the city by the Barrier, the camp is the home of 12,500 registered Palestine refugees, although that number of total inhabitants is estimated at 24,000.⁸ The camp is exceedingly crowded and residents complain of inadequate water, poor sewage, and a lack of security. Most streets have been encroached upon as a result of illegal construction, turning many into narrow alleyways while also restricting living space. While UNRWA provides solid waste management, the streets of Shu'fat are often strewn with garbage as a result of the overcrowding.

Access to Shu'fat camp from Jerusalem is only permitted through a single checkpoint manned by Israeli Security Forces. Long waits and searches are a common occurrence, as are clashes between Palestinian youth and Israeli forces manning the checkpoint. In 2014, UNRWA (2016) recorded 66 confrontations in Shu'fat camp, many of which involved the use of tear gas, skunk spray, and rubber-coated metal bullets. A recorded 61 Palestine refugees were injured.

The living conditions of Aida camp are noticeably better than those of Shu'fat, with far less crowding and greater living space. Water, sanitation, and sewage are adequate, with some space also found for recreational and sports activities. However, Aida Camp is also located adjacent to the Barrier in Bethlehem and is subject to a regular presence of Israeli Security Forces in the camp's vicinity. This has resulted in continuous tensions and frequent confrontations between Israeli Security Forces and the camp population, youths in particular. In 2014, UNRWA (2016) recorded 138

⁷ UNRWA was established by United Nations General Assembly resolution 302 (IV) of 8 December 1949 to carry out direct relief and works programs for Palestine refugees. The Agency began operations on May 1, 1950. The Agency's services encompass education, health care, relief, and social services; camp infrastructure and improvement; microfinance; and emergency assistance, including in times of armed conflict.

⁸ The Shu'fat refugee camp is the only Palestinian refugee camp located inside Jerusalem or any other Israeli-administered area. Because residents carry Jerusalem identity cards, this grants them the same privileges and rights as Israelis. Because of the proximity of Shu'fat camp to East Jerusalem, many non-refugees have also sought to reside there in order to have access to employment and other opportunities. This has resulted in significant overcrowding and overburdening of basic infrastructure services including access to clean water and sanitation.

confrontations and 186 search-and-arrest operations conducted by Israeli Security Forces in the camp. During that period, 281 refugees (including 33 minors) were injured. A recorded 107 persons (including 32 minors) were detained.

Method

Sampling/Study Population

The research was undertaken in March 2014 and targets 9th-grade students in six schools in the three refugee camps, these being the UNRWA preparatory boys and girls schools in the Dier Ammar, Shu'fat, and Aida camps. A class has been randomly selected in each school, with a total of 107 boys and 120 girls being surveyed across the six schools. These respectively include 37 boys and 49 girls from Dier Ammar, 37 and 28 from Aida, and 33 and 43 from Shu'fat. Students' average age is 15.

Participation in the study has been performed voluntary with students' consent coordinated by their respective schools. Information and data has been collected during regular class periods during which the researchers led general discussions followed by the completion of a questionnaire.

Research Design

The research uses a combination of focused classroom interviews and a standardized survey instrument to gather general information about student perceptions as well as quantitative data on their sense of optimism versus pessimism about the future. In each of the selected schools, the researchers spent the initial part of the class period gaining an understanding of student perceptions regarding their living conditions and future. This took the form of open-ended questions to which the students could voluntarily respond. These discussions were followed by the administration of a written questionnaire that was used to attain numerical data that might be compared across both camps and genders.

Data Collection Tools

As noted above, the researchers conducted focused classroom discussions facilitated by a number of open-ended questions. These have been chosen in order to gain a more complete understanding of whether the students who live in the three camps differ in how they perceive their immediate living conditions and what they think of the future, as well as their personal goals and ambitions. The main questions are: (1) How would you describe the living conditions in this camp? (2) How do you spend your free time? (3) What do you think about the future? (4) What would you like to do in the future?

These group interviews are supported by a written questionnaire distributed at the end of each session. The questionnaire is intended for substantiating student

responses to the above questions, including items that assess how much the students like where they are living, whether they think they are better off than their friends, and how they describe where they live, ranging from *terrible* to *quite good*.

To assess student optimism, the research uses the Life Orientation Test-Revised (LOT-R; Carver et al., 2010), which is completed as part of the questionnaire above. The LOT-R is a brief, easy-to-use self-report measure developed to assess individual differences in generalized optimism versus pessimism. The LOT-R can be used to derive scores for both of these dimensions, with three items each being used to measure optimism and pessimism. There are no cut-offs or normative scores for either optimism or pessimism. The LOT-R has been used in a number of culturally diverse settings, including Greece (Lyraeos et al., 2010), Japan (Sumi, 2004), Jordan (Khallad, 2007), Portugal (Ribeiro et al., 2012), Saudi Arabia (Zaidi, 2014), Serbia (Jovanović & Gavrilov-Jerkovic, 2013), and Singapore (Wong et al., 2009).

Findings

The living conditions in the three camps differ remarkably, and this is expected to be reflected in the research findings (see Table 1). As expected, Dier Ammar boys and girls are seen most likely to report their camp as a “good or alright place to live” (97% boys and 94% girls), in addition to liking where they live (82% and 87%, respectively). This drops considerably among students living in the other two camps, with only the girls in Shu’fat (85%) reporting it to be a good or alright place to live. The Shu’fat girls are also the only group of students outside Dier Ammar to indicate that they liked where they live (79%).

In comparison, only 57% of the boys in Shu’fat describe the camp as a good or alright place to live, with 42% describing it as *not good or terrible*. Only 38% indicate they like living there. Among Aida boys, 55% describe their camp as good or alright (45% described it as either not good or terrible). Less than one-half (40%) of the Aida boys state that they like living there. The respective figures for the Aida girls are even lower, at 40% and 28% respectively.

Table 1
Perception of Living Conditions

	Dier Ammar		Shu’fat		Aida	
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls
Good or alright place to live	97%	94%	57%	85%	55%	40%
Like where they live	82%	92%	38%	79%	40%	28%

The above findings have been largely confirmed by the students during the class discussion. Dier Ammar students generally express satisfaction with their living situation, acknowledging that the Dier Ammar camp has better living conditions than other camps in the West Bank. They describe the camp as friendly, clean, safe, and

free from security incursions. They note that everyone knows one another, describing residents as cooperative and helpful. The one consistent drawback is the camp's relative isolation from larger urban centers.

Both boys and girls living in Shu'fat describe the camp as crowded and lacking recreational and living space, as well as being dirty and polluted. They also highlight concern about a lack of safety and security. This has been in part attributed to regular incursions by Israeli Security Forces into the camp; however, considerable concern is also expressed in relation to criminal activity including drug use, robberies, and organized crime. On a positive note, camp inhabitants are noted to support one another and to work together to solve problems and improve camp conditions. Both boys and girls also highlight the fact that they are able to access East Jerusalem,⁹ although frequency differs from as often as once a week to once a year.

In Aida Camp, little mention is given to general living conditions. Rather, students reference living next to the Barrier, with many stating they feel as if they are in prison. Students in both Aida schools also reference clashes in the camp and the use of skunk spray and tear gas. The boys, however, more often describe the camp as dangerous, with a number stating, "IDF [Israeli Defense Forces] can come any time" and "take away family members." When asked to describe something positive about the Aida camp, students mention having extra-curricular activities, supportive neighbors, and decent living conditions.

Interestingly, little difference is found across the three camps in relation to how students spend their free time. The majority cite spending time on the computer and the Internet, studying and/or visiting friends. Perhaps reflective of the greater space that characterizes the Dier Ammar camp, boys here more often cite participating in sports and recreational activities. Girls in all three camps more often cite staying home and helping with family responsibilities.

When asked about their dreams and personal aspirations, students in all camps speak of wanting to make a positive difference. Many students speak of wanting to pursue professional careers such as engineering, teaching, journalism, medicine, and law. At the same time, they talk spontaneously about the importance of contributing to Palestine, with this sentiment being strongest in Shu'fat and Aida. Many students voice a wish to make a positive difference in their camps and society, including building a free Palestine in the future. They also speak of securing their rights as refugees, being able to move freely (including visits to Jerusalem), and returning to visit their former homes. When asked whether they think this will one day be realized, most respond that they don't know but hope to see these changes.

⁹ Palestinians living in Jerusalem are given the status of "permanent residents" of Israel, which typically provides them with greater freedom of movement than Palestinians living in the West Bank. The Barrier and Israeli permit regime has increasingly cut off East Jerusalem (once the focus of political, commercial, religious, and cultural life for the entire Palestinian population of the occupied Palestinian territory) from the rest of the West Bank.

Table 2
Perceptions of the Future

	Dier Ammar		Shu'fat		Aida	
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls
Can achieve aspirations	61%	73%	59%	82%	72%	17% (68%) ¹¹
Optimistic about the future	60%	89%	79%	92%	88%	86%
Expect the best in uncertain times	45%	58%	63%	72%	60%	52%
More good than bad things happen	68%	67%	63%	74%	60%	42%

The majority of students also recognize the importance of education in achieving their dreams. Around 70% of the students indicate that they definitely plan to finish high school, with only ten indicating that they definitely will not. The remaining students indicate that they are unsure. Here, it is important to note that UNRWA provides education up to only grade nine, requiring students to then transfer to usually a Ministry of Education school to complete the final two years of secondary education.¹⁰

Across the three camps, girls are more likely to plan completing high school (78%, compared to 62% of boys). The proportion among girls ranges from 74% in the Shu'fat camp to 78% in Dier Ammar and 82% in Aida. Among boys, the proportion *definitely* planning to complete high school ranges from 51% in Shu'fat to 63% in Dier Ammar and 70% in the Aida camp.

When asked about attending university, 72% of the students report having this ambition. This is particularly strong among girls, with 84% indicating they want to attend a university. This is highest among the Shu'fat and Aida girls (87% for both groups), with 79% of Dier Ammar girls also having this ambition. Among boys, 68% of those from Aida and 64% from Dier Ammar report wanting to attend university; however, this falls to 41% in Shu'fat.

When asked about whether they will be able to achieve their ambitions after graduating from school, the majority of students in five of the six schools (69%) agree that they will definitely succeed in this regard, the exception being the Aida girls' school. The highest scores are found in the Dier Ammar (75%) and Shu'fat camps (70%). However, figures vary considerably between boys and girls, as well as among schools, with girls in both Dier Ammar and Shu'fat being noticeably more hopeful than (the boys 77% compared to 60%). The lowest proportion is found in the Aida girls' school where only 17% are definitely confident that they will achieve their aspirations. However, this figure increases to 68% when considering *maybe* (51%) responses.

Despite these varied perceptions about achieving their aspirations, both male and female students remain generally hopeful about the future. The majority of

¹⁰ Common reasons for UNRWA students not continuing after ninth grade include not having ready-and-easy access to a Ministry of Education school, reluctance or anxiety associated with entering a new and unfamiliar school, and/or pressure or preference to enter the labor market (UNRWA, 2017).

respondents, including the Aida girls, agree with the statement, “I’m always optimistic about my future.” This varies from 79% among the Shu’fat boys to as high as 92% among the Shu’fat girls. While the lowest proportion is found among Dier Ammar boys (60%), notably important is that only 18% indicate they definitely do not agree with the statement. This means that 82% are at least somewhat optimistic.

While retaining a general sense of optimism about their futures, students across the three camps do not always *expect the best in uncertain times*, suggesting that many maintain a measured and realistic understanding of their lives. This varies considerably across the six schools (from 45% to 72%), with girls in two of the camps (Dier Ammar & Shu’fat) being more hopeful than their male cohorts. The highest percentage of students who agree with this statement are the Shu’fat girls (72%). The lowest percentage is found among Dier Ammar boys (45%), although again only 18% definitely disagreed with the statement.

This perception may well reflect the experiences students encounter in their daily lives. Overall, only 62% of the students indicate that *more good than bad things happen to them*, with the lowest proportion (42%) being reported by the Aida girls. While no difference is observed between boys and girls in Dier Ammar (68% and 67% respectively), noticeably more girls in Shu’fat camp report having more positive than negative experiences (74% compared to 63% of boys). While the boys in Aida are more positive than the girls (60% compared to 42% of girls), they are the least positive of the three boy schools.

The LOT-R has been used to derive overall scores for the dimensions of students’ sense of optimism and sense of pessimism. The LOT-R results largely reflect the above findings, namely a positive sense about the future but one that varies among camps as well as between boys and girls. As shown in Table 3, students in all schools, aside from Aida boys, have higher optimism than pessimism scores, with the overall average scores across the six schools being 8.50 and 8.31 for boys and girls, respectively. The highest level of boys’ and girls’ optimism is found in Dier Ammar (8.83), though this is only slightly higher than the combined score found in Shu’fat (8.75). The lower scores for both boys and girls in the Aida camp means that they also have the lowest combined optimism score (7.93).

The lowest average score for pessimism in terms of camps is found in Aida (8.06), though this in large can be attributed to the noticeably lower score found among the girl students (7.23). This is followed by the Shu’fat (8.25) and Dier Ammar (8.42) camps. While boys’ and girls’ pessimism scores in Dier Ammar are similar (8.45 and 8.39, respectively), a comparable difference exists in Shu’fat where the girls are found noticeably less pessimistic (8.05, compared to 8.40 among boys).

11 As noted above, although only 17% of Aida girls definitely believe they can achieve their aspirations, the proportion increases to 68% when considering the maybe responses.

Table 3
Lot-R Scores

	Dier Ammar		Shu'fat		Aida	
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls
Optimism	8.69	8.97	8.68	8.82	8.29	7.57
Pessimism	8.45	8.39	8.40	8.05	8.89	7.23

In terms of gender differences, girls in both the Dier Ammar and Shu'fat camps are more optimistic than the boys. Only in the case of the Aida schools are girls found less optimistic (7.57 compared to 8.29). However, the girls in the Aida camp are also less pessimistic than their male cohorts (7.23 compared to 8.89), a pattern also observed in both Dier Ammar and Shu'fat. The boys in the Aida camp are found to be the most pessimistic of all students.

Discussion

The aspirations and optimism among young Palestine refugees are expected to reflect their respective living conditions. That is, students living in Dier Ammar should show the highest optimism and least pessimism, with this being inversed for the Shu'fat camp where the population lives in what are describable as slum-like conditions. In the case of the Aida camp, student perceptions are expected to be more similar to their peers living in Dier Ammar whose living conditions might be described as reasonable.

This was not found. In fact, with the exception of the Aida boys, students in all camps demonstrate higher scores of optimism than pessimism. Moreover, little difference is found between the scores for either boys or girls in the Dier Ammar and Shu'fat schools respectively, despite the latter camp being characterized with the poorest infrastructure and living conditions of all three camps. The combined optimism scores for boys and girls in the two camps are also similar, being 8.33 and 8.75 respectively. Moreover, neither boys nor girls were found to be more pessimistic in Shu'fat, having a combined pessimism score of 8.25 compared to Dier Ammar's score of 8.42.

This suggests that physical living conditions such as infrastructure, living space, and sanitation may not have as much a determining influence on how young people view their futures as one might expect. By way of reference, 95% of Dier Ammar students describe their camp as a *good or alright place to live*, compared to 71% of Shu'fat students. Moreover, regardless of where they live, the majority of students maintain high aspirations about the future, notably wishing to complete their education and enter professional and vocational careers of their choice. The majority (82%) report being optimistic about their future, with 69% also believing in their ability to achieve their dreams. This suggests that the majority of young Palestine

refugee students—regardless of their living conditions—are able to maintain a greater sense of optimism than pessimism.

This is not inconsistent with other research. [Arafat \(2003, p. 22\)](#) found that while Palestinian children in the aftermath of the Second Intifada¹² were pessimistic about the future in general, they retained

...the belief that they can achieve a degree of success through their own efforts, at least in the personal, academic and social domains of their lives. The degree of self-efficacy is the key to the generally positive outlook of Palestinian children on their own future; their belief that they can do something about their own future is premised on their belief in, and interest in, self-improvement.

This has been similarly observed by [Veronese et al. \(2012, p. 471\)](#) who found the children living in the Tulkarem refugee camp in the West Bank to define themselves as happy, optimistic, and satisfied with their lives, noting that “the want, poverty and fear which they are obliged to face do not diminish their satisfaction and pride in taking active part in the life of the camp.”

This does not suggest that camp environments do not influence the perceptions or well-being of the sampled students. The fact that Aida students exhibit both the lowest optimism and the highest level of pessimism despite having reasonable living conditions suggests that other factors may have a determining influence. This is particularly noticeable in regard to the boys. Aida boy students not only demonstrate the lowest level of optimism among boys (8.29 compared to 8.69 in Dier Ammar and 8.68 in Shu’fat) but also have a higher pessimism score at 8.89 (compared to 8.45 and 8.40, respectively). Moreover, both Aida boys and girls are the least likely to report that *more good than bad things happen to them*. Some 60% of the Aida boys feel this way, compared with 68% of Dier Ammar boys and 63% of Shu’fat boys. Among girls, only 42% of those from Aida expected *more good than bad things*, compared with 67% of girls from Dier Ammar and 74% from Shu’fat.

While this research did not set out to identify specific attributes that impact either optimism or pessimism, one might note the single most distinguishing feature in the Aida camp is a lack of safety and security. Compared to the Shu’fat camp, where [UNRWA \(2016\)](#) reported 66 confrontations between Israeli Security Forces and Palestine refugees, 138 such confrontations were recorded in the Aida camp. Moreover, 36% of all injuries reported in West Bank camps in 2014 occurred in the Aida camp. Because the Aida boys school in the camp is located directly adjacent the Barrier, it is also in close vicinity to where clashes regularly occur. Such incidents

¹² The Second Intifada, also known as the Al-Aqsa Intifada, was the second Palestinian uprising against Israel. Beginning in September 2000 and lasting until 2005, it was a period of intensified Israeli-Palestinian violence.

are repeatedly referenced by the Aida boys during the classroom discussions. The boys describe the camp as dangerous, mentioning Israeli Security Forces “can come any time.” At least 14 of the students report a family member to have been arrested in the past.

In addition to the above safety threats, Aida students also appear to be more aware of various social and economic constraints that might affect them as young adults. Given the Aida camp’s location is immediately adjacent to the Barrier, to assume that many students have become aware of the economic impacts this has had on camp is not unreasonable. Since the beginning of the Barrier’s construction in 2000, the number of permits allowing Palestinians to work in Israel has been halved, from 110,000 prior to the Second Intifada to 45,000 in 2014 (Kleibo, 2014). This has contributed significantly to the West Bank’s unemployment rate, especially in areas that rely on employment opportunities in Israel. This might well explain why only 17% of Aida girls believe they will *definitely* be able to achieve their ambitions, despite having the highest proportion of respondents (82%) indicate that they definitely plan to complete their high school education. On this point, many girls during the classroom discussion stated they want to attend a university (87%) but did not see this as a realistic possibility because of familial financial constraints. Boys on the other hand were more optimistic about their future (72%) but less likely to think of university as an option (67%), instead citing vocations such as auto mechanic and construction.

This was not found in the case of Shu’fat camp, which is also surrounded by the Barrier; the girls are the most optimistic of all surveyed students. The Shu’fat girls not only are the most optimistic as measured by the Lot-R but also the most likely to believe they can achieve their aspirations (82%) while also being the most optimistic about the future (92%). Only one girl indicates that she definitely will not complete high school, while almost 87% cited university as their goal. On the other hand, boys are less likely to definitely complete high school (51%) or express an interest in university (40%). Only 59% definitely think they will be able to pursue their aspirations.

These differences might be attributed to a number of factors. Firstly, while Shu’fat camp is surrounded by the Barrier, residents retain Jerusalem IDs and have access to significantly more economic opportunities than West Bank residents. This may be reflected in the fact that neither the Shu’fat boys nor girls referenced economic constraints as a major hindrance to their dreams, nor do they cite the Barrier as an obstacle to accessing higher education opportunities in the future. The boys, however, may be disadvantaged by pressures to support their families, whereas girls are generally more protected within the family structure. Procter (2016) observed that boys in Shu’fat camp are generally more likely than girls to drop-out of school and

take unskilled, low-paying jobs in Israel's informal work sector. Girls on the other hand not only recognize the importance of staying in the education system as a way of avoiding early marriage but are also more likely to complete Tawjihi and find work in the formal work sector in primary schools or kindergartens.

This differentiating impact of life and living conditions on boys and girls can also be discerned in Dier Ammar. While clearly living in the most favorable living conditions, the construction of the Barrier has meant a loss of access to the Israeli labor market. In 2007, 87% of the economically active population was estimated to be employed; in 2012, approximately 23% of the camp was unemployed ([Applied Research Institute, 2012](#)). The loss of employment opportunities has been particularly felt by young people, with the unemployment rate among youth in the West Bank reaching 40% in 2013 ([PCBS, 2013](#)). One might therefore reason that while the majority of Dier Ammar students like where they live (87%), they are not necessarily more likely than students in other camps to believe they can achieve their dreams (67% compared to 70% in Shu'fat and 70% in Aida¹³). This is also lower among boys (61% compared to 73% among girls), possibly because they are more likely to see their futures mainly in terms of being breadwinners.

These conditions may also have an influence on how young people view themselves in comparison to others. On this point, students have been asked whether they see themselves as being better or worse than their friends. Across all three camps, girls are more likely to compare themselves more favorably against their peers in parallel with their general levels of measured optimism. Whereas 61% of the Dier Ammar girls think they are better off than their friends, this fell to 38% in Shu'fat and 24% in Aida. This pattern is also observed among boys, though to a less noticeable extent; 45% of boys at Dier Ammar think they are better off than their friends, compared to 41% in Shu'fat and 37% in Aida. Such social comparisons, while not directly related to optimism and pessimism, have been found to be associated with positive self-evaluations and well-being, which in turn are commonly associated with positive and negative expectations regarding the future ([Aspinall et al., 2001](#); [Conversano et al., 2010](#); [Gibbons et al., 2000](#)).

Many young refugees, then, are likely to have mixed perceptions about their futures; this is reflected by the fact that both boys and girls in all three camps do not have a wide range of scores for optimism and pessimism. While the average optimism score across the six schools is found to be 8.50, the average pessimism score is only slightly lower at 8.23. Similarly, while 82% of the students state being optimistic about the future, only 62% definitely expect more good than bad things to happen while 60% think they will be able to achieve their dreams and aspirations. This contrast is most apparent among girls in Aida camp, who not only report the lowest optimism score (7.57) but also the

¹³ This figure includes the 51% of the Aida girls who reported that they 'maybe 'would achieve their dreams, bring the overall figure from 17% to 68%.

lowest pessimism score (7.23). Additionally, while only 42% expect more good than bad things and even a smaller proportion (17%) believe they will achieve their aspirations, the majority (86%) agree with the statement that they are optimistic about the future.

This apparent contradiction is not without explanation. Hecht (2013, p. 1) noted that the constructs of optimism and pessimism might be considered “distinct modes of thinking that are best conceptualized, not rigidly and dichotomously but rather, as a continuum with many degrees of optimism and pessimism.” As such, one might surmise that while the majority of students in this study express an optimistic perspective (82% agree with the statement that they are optimistic about their future), this is tempered with a realization that things do not always work out (only 58.3% of the students expect the best in uncertain times). Nguyen-Gillham et al. (2008, p. 291) have similarly observed that while Palestinian youth share many of the same aspirations as other youths around the world (education, travel, economic opportunities, romance/relationships), they nonetheless “paint a picture of resilience that reveals contradictions and tensions ... Despite the desire for order, Palestinian young people complain of emotional distress and boredom. Feelings of desperation are intermingled with optimism.”

This contradiction, while expressed at the individual level, might also be understood within a broader social context. The fact that many students do not separate their own personal ambitions from those of being a Palestine refugee suggests that many young refugees retain a sense of social affiliation and ideological commitment that provides them with a sense of strength and optimism about their future. Indeed, in the Aida and Shu’fat camps especially where the residents live under more difficult conditions, students are most likely to voice a dream of living in a free Palestine, having freedom to move, and making a positive difference in their society. On this point, Nguyen-Gilham (2008) and Sousa et al. (2013) have observed that people and communities who endure collective adversities or traumas (such as displacement, loss of freedom of movement, conflict-related violence) may also emerge with collective memories and a sense of cohesiveness and inter-dependence that can be defined as a type of resilience. In the case of Palestinians, this resilience can be framed “within a context a ‘social suffering’. The Palestinian concept of *sumud* - a determination to exist through steadfast and rooted to the land - is the heart of resilience” (Nguyen-Gillham, et al., 2008, p. 292). Among Palestine refugees, this is further strengthened by their continuing acknowledgement of Nakba Day,¹⁴ the deeply entrenched symbolic key of return,¹⁵ and the conviction that their right to return is an inalienable basic human right that can never be given up (Palestinian Center for Policy and Research Survey, 2003).

14 Nakba Day, or the day of catastrophe, marks the displacement of Palestine refugees from their homes in 1948. It is generally commemorated on May 15.

15 When Palestine refugees fled their homes in 1948, many took the keys of their homes in the belief that their return was imminent. The keys are often passed on from generation to generation as a keepsake—as a memory of their lost homes and as lasting symbols of their desired right to return.

As such, fully understanding the dreams and aspirations of young Palestine refugees as well as their own sense of optimism and pessimism about the future is difficult without taking into consideration their own experience as Palestine refugees. Palestine refugees were displaced 68 years ago. In the interim years, little progress has been achieved in reaching a *just and fair solution* as laid out in the United Nations General Assembly Resolution 941.¹⁶ In the West Bank, a third of Palestine refugees continue to live in camps and not own homes, with many living in poverty. Yet despite their continuing status as refugees, young Palestine refugees not only retain a sense of optimism but have remarkably similar aspirations and interests as other young people around the world. When asking students in this study what they do with their free time, the majority responded that they spend it on the internet, play computer games, visit friends, do home work, and help with chores. The importance of this is perhaps best explained by [Nguyen-Gillham et al. \(2008, p. 296\)](#):

A feature of resilience lies in its very ordinariness ... The capacity to ensure has to be understood within the micro context of ordinary life, all too often obscured by the harsh political realities. For Palestinian youth [and Palestine refugees], resiliency is rooted in the capacity to make life as normal as possible.

The way that young refugees look towards the future, then, is neither straightforward nor unidimensional. While this research did not set out to identify the specific factors that influence the aspirations and sense of optimism of young Palestine refugees, one can nevertheless assume that additional factors such as emotional orientation, characteristics, socioeconomic status, and family resources influence one's basic outlook on life and motivation to address challenges ([Hecht, 2013](#); [Robb et al., 2009](#)). That said, Palestine refugee adolescents nevertheless seem generally optimistic about their futures, regardless of where they live. However, young Palestine refugees also apparently share a sense of pessimism that cannot be overlooked. While many look forward to achieving their dreams, they have also learned to expect the bad with the good and do not expect the best during difficult times. This may well reflect experiences which many young refugees encounter, particularly when these are associated with conflict-related violence that can undermine their sense of safety and security. At the same time, there may also come an understanding among some students that their aspirations and dreams may be out of reach, particularly when they come from poorer families or have mixed prospects of finding satisfactory employment.

In summary, this study perhaps raises more questions than it has answered despite having straightforward objectives, these being to firstly understand the aspirations of

16 The United Nations General Assembly Resolution 194 was adopted on December 11, 1948, near the end of the 1948 Arab–Israeli War. The Resolution defined principles for reaching a final settlement and returning Palestine refugees to their homes. It resolved that “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, and that compensation should be paid for the property of those choosing not to return and for loss of or damage to property which, under principles of international law or equity, should be made good by the Governments or authorities responsible.” (Article 11).

Palestine refugee students living in the West Bank and secondly to explore whether the conditions under which these young people live influences their sense of hope and optimism. The fact that young Palestine refugees are more optimistic than pessimistic despite living in difficult conditions speaks to a deeper sense of hope and resilience than one might otherwise expect. However, also true is that young refugees appear deeply concerned about their futures. This should neither be overlooked nor minimized. Research has shown that exposure to chronic conflicts and violence, restricted economic opportunities, and enduring poverty can change the way people think and feel, including having more negative expectations and less hopefulness (Ayer et al., 2015). One might reasonably expect that young Palestine refugees, too, may become increasing pessimistic in face of the persistent obstacles to their dreams and aspirations. As such, while the optimism of these young people should be acknowledged and appreciated, it should not be taken for granted.

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