The Production of Space, Political Subjectivication and the Folding of Polarity: the case of Deheishe Camp, Palestine

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"The refugee camps. The very mark of our condition, the sign of the original deed which catapulted us all into this unending journey, the embodiment of what might have been, what was, what could be, the body which must be dismembered for so many to breathe lightly, rest back in comfort. The body within our body, the representation of our memory. The actual face of the encounter which has ceaselessly been miscast and untold over the years, but which will not stop telling itself to anyone who will look in its eyes." – Lena Jayyusi[1]

"Spatial form can alter the future course of the very histories which have produced it" – Doreen Massey[2]

"We have triumphed over the plan to expel us from history" – Mahmoud Darwish

Just by the main entrance to Deheishe Refugee Camp in Bethlehem, there is, running over the main road, a pedestrian bridge that at face-value is totally unremarkable; built of concrete and steel, with an austere aesthetic it looks mundane and wholly functional; two murals of martyrs from the camp spray-painted on each side the only visually distinguishing feature. This is, however, no ordinary bridge, for it carries extraordinary political, symbolic and inter-subjective significance and valence. Entirely self-financed and self-built by Deheishans, this, the only pedestrian bridge in the West Bank, connects the new refugee-city of Doha with the 'old' camp of Deheishe; a kind of built umbilical

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[1] Lena Jayyusi (2002) *Letters from the Palestinian Ghetto* [http://ema.revues.org/index936.html] accessed 12 September 2008

[2] Doreen Massey (1993) 'Politics and space/time' in Michael Keith and Steve Pile (eds.) *Place and the Politics of Identity* London: Routledge p. 159

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cord that literally concretizes the connection between the camp and its spillover. What is most striking is that in its construction and use, in structure and process it reflects the readiness of Deheishans to confront multiple power arrangements. First, it flatly contradicts the Oslo Peace Accords which stipulate that no bridges shall be built over roads that are in Area C – that is West Bank territory under full Israeli sovereignty.[3] Second, in its consolidation of the link between Doha and Deheishe, the bridge represents part of a broad transgression of UNRWA's delineated camp borders. Third, it entails the transformation of physical space in the city proper. In other words, in and through this bridge Deheishans have violated the Oslo Accords (and by extension Israeli sovereignty), transgressed UNRWA's cartographic authority and infringed on the jurisdictional territory of a local municipality. The story of this banal-looking bridge neatly signifies the remarkable contemporary achievements of Deheishans. For it is precisely this capacity to actively destabilize the humanitarian and colonial straitjackets by appropriating, transforming and inscribing space not just in their camp but beyond the confines of the camp – in the city proper – that the story of the bridge and the story of Deheishe are all about. It is this capacity, this agency – intelligible and cogent – that categorically confounds the disempowering and pathological conceptualizations of refugeehood and camps in academic literature and official-humanitarian narratives.

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[3] Although it runs right through the centre of the city of Bethlehem, the Jerusalem-Hebron road, which separates Deheishe from Doha, was a route for joint PNA-Israeli patrols and therefore in Area C.
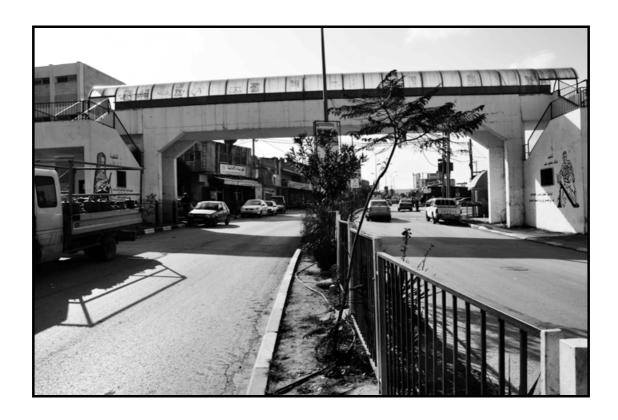
Figure 1 - Pedestrian bridge linking Deheishe and Doha [Photograph N. Abourahme]

The last decade has witnessed a revival of such narratives and a surge of interest in camps and refugees. So much so that the figure of the refugee and the site of the camp, today, occupy central, if at times contradictory, positions in political and spatial theory. Simultaneously, specters of political – even ontological – displacement and at the same time forms of potentially emancipatory and radically transformative spatio-political arrangements. In many ways the camp as abstraction has become a prototype, a modality, a paradigmatic spatial form that can offer some kind of analytical categorization of the plethora of extra-territorial and extra-juridical sites of the contemporary global (dis)order: the offshore prison, the internment camp, the labor camp, the homeless shelter, the asylum processing zones and of course the refugee camp [Alsayyad and Roy 2006: 13]. It is around the latter that the most insightful conceptual syntheses

and interdisciplinary dialogues have emerged. The violent geographies of neoliberal spatiality; the mass displacements, dislocations and ruptures associated with wholesale political-economic restructuring and re-territorialized imperialism; and the complex humanitarian ecologies that have grown around them have stimulated a revisiting of some political theory on refugeehood (chiefly Hannah Arendt's work) and its engagement with new spatial thinking. Arendt's original conceptualization [1976] of the refugee as a living, foundational challenge to the truisms and reifications of the nation-state system, as an interruption to or aberration of "the proper and enduring form of political identity and community – that is, the citizen and the sovereign nation-state" [Nyers 2006: 9] – has combined with Agamben's [2005] formulation of the camp as a space of exception, that is of legal suspension, to frame and inspire an array of theorizations.

These are often articulated as dichotomous polarities that juxtapose the camp (as exception) and the city (as norm). For example, camps are thought of as mimetic spaces that appropriate city characteristics to become camp-cities or city-camps where heterogeneous social groups interact to create fluid and place-based identity configurations [Agier 2002]; or, the opposite, as spaces of pure and hard ethno-nationalism in contradistinction to urban cosmopolitanism, a fundamentally un-urban place – the not-city [Malkki 1995, 2002; Alsayyad and Roy 2006: 15]. In other circumstances refugee camps are pictured as unintelligible spaces, irrational and structurally invisible or absent – a non-place [Auge 1995]. Their closedness or openness is measured in relation to how closely they mimic, resemble or blend into their urban hinterlands [Hanafi 2008]. Temporally, they are conceived as contingent, non-sequential, temporary

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and transient as opposed to the continuous, permanent, even timeless temporality of the city. Normatively they are either spaces of hope – romanticized, idealized – or spaces of despair that are demonized and stigmatized, in both accounts singular and monolithic. In Palestine, these representations have juxtaposed the oriental, inchoate, sinuous Arab urban spaces – essentialized in the camps – with the rational, modern, ordered Israeli city. In all of these accounts, despite their marked differences, the constitutive relationality of the refugee camp with wider society (city or nation) is one-way and hierarchical. It is constructed around dichotomies or dualisms specified in terms of presence and absence, taking the classic form of A/not-A [Massey 1993: 147].

At the same time, most of the literature recognizes a clear liminality in the spatio-temporal and political reality of refugee camps. There is a sense that these camps exist in an 'in-between'; in between the permanent and the temporary, the stable and unstable, order and emergency, centre and periphery – between A and not-A. The problem lies in the fact that these discursively constructed dichotomies are solidified into concrete polarities, vanishing points or fixed hierarchies; they resist change and rule out movement. In both of these frames binarism prevails: refugees are either stuck at the negatively defined pole of a binary or suspended in static liminality between the two poles; their capacity to 're-write' this dichotomous separation wholly unrecognized. What is missing in this understanding of liminality is a sense of how it can subvert itself. If, and how, these binaries and polarities that ultimately reflect power relations can be inverted or at least shift? Can the terms on which center and inside are differentiated from what is peripheralized and outside change? In other words

can refugees exploit liminality to challenge and re-write centre-periphery relations, even as they remain 'in-between'? Can they redefine place and presence even as they remain partially circumscribed by the physical and cognitive boundaries of the camp? How can they resist what Judith Butler [2004: 98] might call the de-subjectivication of camp life without assimilating or integrating and without losing their extraterritoriality? How can the camp, historically constructed and represented as a "device for care and control" [Malkki 2002: 353], emerge as a politically trangressive space? How can refugees uncover the *mutually* constitutive and fluid relationality between them and city or nation?

These are some of the questions that were both inspired by and framed our research into one of the West Bank's refugee camps – Deheishe Camp in Bethlehem. Our proposition is that at different points in time, including the current and critical conjuncture in Palestinian history, Deheishans have been able to exploit and oppurtunize the liminality and exceptionality – including the ambiguity of control – of their refugee camp in ways that contest power and social relations. They have done this through a number of distinct but interlinked spatial practices that are at times material, at times abstract, that can be mundane and quotidian and the same time spectacular and symbolic, that drift between the nominally legal and illegal but that always subvert the ascribed spatial logic of the camp. We identified three main and intertwined modalities: the community-led improvement of the camp's physical spaces; the production of dense institutional and symbolic space in the camp; and the expansion of the camp community beyond the delineated borders of the camp. It is through these quotidian practices that Dehseishans have resisted and disturbed the de-

politicizing categorizations and classifications of the 'humanitarian system', the local autocratic political authority and the colonial order – and by extension the dominant conceptualization of refugeehood. In redefining refugeehood in Palestine they have also re-written their spatio-temporal and political topography in a fashion that is laced with a myriad of novel and irreducible contradictions that are continuously renegotiated at the crossroads of everyday life and political being; it is precisely this ongoing (re)negotiation that becomes constitutive of political praxis.

In trying to conceptualize and theorize this we tried to think of the spatial in political terms and vice versa; or as Doreen Massey put it to "think of spatiality in a highly active and politically enabling manner" [1993: 142]. In this sense we are interested in the politicization of space and its ensuing possibilities, dislocations and dynamism; not, it should be added, as antinomy or contrast to temporality, but as part of temporal rhythms, distortions and reinterpretations. The nucleus of these ideas was inspired through months of engagement and contact with Deheishe refugee camp as part of an UNRWA sponsored community-based urban planning project. Much of the empirical data gathered was obtained through multi-member focus groups with different sections of local society as well as in-depth conversations and interviews with various figures in the camp most of which were carried out between June and December 2008.

Deheishe the liminal, Deheishe the exceptional: context and opportunity

Deheishe refugee camp is, today, home to more than 11,000 refugees who reside on a total area that does not exceed half a squared kilometer. It is the largest of

three refugee camps in the city of Bethlehem. In spatial terms, although the camp is a distinct space, it is physically, economically, and socially interwoven with the surrounding conurbation in a mixture of blending and differentiation. On a social and cultural level and in distinction to many other camps, including others in Bethlehem, it has a striking and immediately discernable sense of identity and particularity that is self-confident, sometimes even brash. The political dynamics of Deheishe have a direct relation – sometimes synergetic with, sometimes contra to – the vicissitudes, oscillating fortunes and dynamics of the Palestinian national project.

In this regard the Oslo Peace Accords of 1993 are the fundamental historical watershed, they mark the key moment or paradigm shift in this narrative. On the one hand the Oslo process created a political landscape in the West Bank in which refugees have little by way of political address. The subsumation of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) – previously the representative of all Palestinians including the diaspora and its refugees – by the statist and bureaucratic Palestinian National Authority (PNA) inevitably meant the effective withering away of the former and with it the main body charged with securing the rights of refugees. Moreover, the structural characteristics of the current negotiation process – on which the PNA's legitimacy with external states and funders is staked – functioning as it does under the dictates of what is perceived as *realpolitik* (a euphemism for Israeli intransigence) are premised on a capitulation with regards to refugee rights. In this political endgame, refugees are not only unrepresented, they are 'unrepresentable'. This, coupled with the class polarization of creeping neoliberal reform and the rise of new elite formations that are linked to the explosion of NGO subsidiarization, has meant

the end of the established structures of solidarity associated with the first Intifada, the generation of multiple new lines of fissure and a fragmentation of political fates. Refugees previously the "most visible, intelligible, and emblematic constituency" of the Palestinian nation [Jayyusi 2007: 108] found themselves 'backgrounded' by an authority fearful of alternative political centers and thrust into a political equation wherein whatever is gained for the native West Banker is done so at their expense [Massad 2001: 119]. It is in this new political landscape that refugees begin to look inwards and embark on a reflexive process that leads to increased self-reliance:

"The beginning was the Oslo agreement – our refusal of this agreement, its lack of clarity…taking a position vis-à-vis Oslo stimulated a reflexive process, a search for answers" [al-Laham 2008].

Or as another community figure put it:

"Oslo and the concomitant political about turn produced a kind of 'crisis of confidence' in many parts of Palestinian society…the Palestinian and particularly the refugee went back to a search for self" [al-Saifi 2008].

On the other hand Oslo signals a moment of opportunity. It involves – in its complexification and obfuscation of the dynamics of control – the creation of a kind of ambiguity and with it political possibility. The colonial sovereign withdraws from the cities and camps and transfers day-to-day control – policing and pastoral care – to the security apparatuses of the PNA. Executive decree and

informal practice, however, grant privileges and relative freedoms to the camps; the latter are immune from the administrative laws of local authorities and governors. PNA security forces, for example, cannot enter the camps unilaterally. In effect, the PNA as a regulatory authority – not as a state – suspends its rules and regulations in the camp and neglects the latter in the processes involved in the fabrication of a legal regime. The camps' juridical (non)status means they remain extraterritorial sites – exempt from tax, voting obligations, service fees and most regulations. Simultaneously, UNRWA, which as leaseholder of the land, in principle, holds a stronger mandate of jurisdiction over refugee camps, begins, with Oslo to fall under greater pressure to scale back its operations and de-classify some refugees [Peteet 2007: 14]. Its regulations, building codes and standards, for example, are increasingly ignored. Israel, still the ultimate coercive force in the territory, now operates a kind of 'remote-control' occupation, and exercises its control over the cities through contracting and expanding rings of closure and paroxysmal military interventions. The latter continually reach into the camps, demonstrating the fact that Israel maintains a territorial suzerainty over these spaces – even as it relinquishes a clear legal mandate. Palestine's camps, then, exist extraterritorially in a convoluted space-power system with multiple and imbricated powers, orders, rules, and suzerains. This is in part the reality of a particular and peculiar kind of 'post-colonial colonialism'. Whether Palestine's camps correspond to or confound (or both) Agamben's formulation of camps as the paradigmatic political sites of the state of exception is a moot point. What is clear is that, the camp while not post-control or post-discipline, functions as something of a white-spot. Control, more than in other contexts, is partial and in continual process of definition. No monopoly of

control exists, local and negotiated formations of power interact with the various suzerains to regulate and administer the space. This creates agentic possibility. For Eyal Weizman the presence of a multiplicity of political agents operating spatially in the West Bank in part constitutes the emergence of what he calls flexible territories or liquid geographies that involve a flattening of the difference between scales of action; in other words, in flexible territory a variety of actors and actions can, with varying effect, "all physically challenge the envelope of political space and transform it" [2005: 228]. It is in this space of relative maneuverability that Deheishans consciously produce a space that challenges their marginalization as political actors in city and nation.

A qualification is needed. It is important to bear in mind that refugees in Palestine posses a considerable political and moral cache. They are 'authorized' to speak politically (without necessarily guaranteeing they will be listened to) because they are the living, undeniable embodiment of the essence of the Palestinian question and predicament, the Witness to the formative act of dispossession. The decisive moment of inception of the entire Palestinian national cosmos (the nativity of the natio), the representation of its memory and the quagmire of its future. They are the symbolic Real of Palestinianness. What is more, still the frontline in the spasmodic but relentlessly ongoing confrontation with the machinery of colonial expansion and violence. This 'authorization' to speak is the 'differentia specifica' of all Palestinian refugees in Palestine. The question we are trying to address through this research is why refugees in Deheishe have been more successful in achieving political visibility, speech and intelligibility – and thereby subverting the spatial logic of their camp – than other refugees who have been more easily marginalized. While some of

the answers lies in the objective historical conditions of their displacement –
chiefly their settlement around the historically more tolerant city of Bethlehem
as well as the strong presence of the Palestinian Communist Party in and the
relative secularism of both camp and city – others lies in the subjective and
subjectifying use of space, body and self.

In the long, episodic confrontation between colonial occupation and
indigenous society in Palestine periods of sustained armed struggle represent
the dominant bodily and spatial practices and performances. They supersede all
other forms of resistance, contestation and political subjectivication. In fact,
these periods and the inevitable human sacrifice they involve lay the foundations
for future mobilization and demands. It is in armed resistance and political
violence (as well as through the experiences of incarceration) that refugees
simultaneously re-imagine and bind themselves to the body politic.[4] That
refugees in Deheishe (and elsewhere in Palestine) have been able to forge
political subjectivity through practices of resistance and empowerment (violent
or otherwise) and at the same time insist on their refugee identity goes to the
heart of the innovative political spaces they have produced. While armed
struggle has been key, Deheishe shows an awareness that political violence is not
the only way to bring political presence to refugee subjectivity and obtain voice
[Nyers 2006: 99]. There are practices – embedded in the distinct spatiality of the
camp – that become more important when phases of armed struggle become
more difficult or are rendered démodé by larger West Bank society and official

[4] Palestinian refugees have been identified by Zolberg et al and others [cited in Nyers 2006: 102]
as the archetypal and first "refugee warriors" – that this description is considered oxymoronic
even by those who coined it underlines the brittleness and disempowering dimensions of legal
and humanitarian categorizations of refugeehood: refugees are prohibited by definition from
engaging in political violence, indeed, in politics per se.

political positions. These spatial practices should be read as part of a conscious effort at subjectivication that insists on political being in various forms and in the process redefines refugeehood.

(Self)Urbanization and the contours of political space

In discussing the democratic insurgency of working classes in Sao Paulo James Holston [2008] identifies the self-construction or autoconstruction of the city's peripheries, of its houses, neighborhoods and urban life as a fundamental variable. Urbanization, he writes, transformed the working classes and "autoconstruction turned the peripheries into spaces of alternative futures, produced in the experience of becoming propertied, organizing social movements, participating in consumer markets, and making aesthetic judgments about house transformations" [ibid: 8]. The struggle for dignified and secure tenure was, then, also a process of political becoming – a battle for substantive citizenship. One can extend aspects of this analysis to Deheishe. Apart from, historically limited and contained UNRWA interventions in the built environment, refugees have had to construct many of their own houses, pave their own roads, organize and deliver most of their basic services, upgrade and maintain their own infrastructure, and build and run their own institutions and recreational venues. The camp's built environment is in some ways in constant motion – perhaps best visually captured by the metal wires that sprout out of so many rooftops restlessly awaiting the next layer of concrete flooring. This is not without political and legal ramification. De jure all houses in the camp are the property of UNRWA as leaseholder of the land – refugees are effectively denied

the rights to property ownership within the camp. In this context the expansion of houses and their personalization is, in a similar vein, if different legal equation, to that of Sao Paulo's peripheries: a means of claiming property, of shifting the benchmarks of legal ownership, and of contesting control.

The difference in contexts – aside from the obvious fact that without a representative state, the idea of citizenship struggle (in the classic sense of reconfiguring state–society relations) is largely meaningless – lies in the fact that urbanization here carries inherent political pitfalls. Urbanization and improvement have been for large periods and with some justification perceived as thinly veiled attempts at integrating refugees and undermining their claims to the 'right of return'. This association is worth explaining: the right of return, as the ground and horizon of liberation, is affirmed in the continued existence of the camp. The camp is the living archive of displacement, the marker of dispossession. The memory of the catastrophe (*al-nakba)* and its sequential connection to the present is expressed in the precarity and transience of the camp's appearance: exposed sewage, bricolage housing, unplanned growth [Sivan 2007: 154]. Improving and 'diluting' the camp, blending or integrating it into the surrounding landscape so that it loses its spatial discernability is seen as an attempt to short-circuit these connections; an attempt to 'de-camp' the camp and dissolve refugee identity. In the early days of the occupation, as part of initiatives aimed at permanently resettling Palestinian refugees in the West Bank, the Israeli Civil Administration itself drew up plans for the urban reform of the camps and was ready to finance them. These were rejected and efforts exerted in maintaining the visual, architectural and social markers that demarcate the camp's specificity as a camp. Whilst official differentiation in Sao

Paulo (in rights, legal status, access to land) fueled insurgency that ended up disrupting, if also partially reproducing, these differentiations [Holston 2008: 166], in Deheishe, as in other Palestinian refugee camps, differentiation is something that is in large part self-ascribed.[5] The tension between equalizing access and rights and maintaining some fundamental differentiation is extremely complex and immanently palpable.   The political stakes whether real or imagined are high. This has in part reinforced an existential culture or paradigm of 'permanent temporariness', what Bauman has called the 'frozen transience' of refugeehood [2007: 46].   Abu Kkalil al-Laham, a leading community figure involved in Deheishe's Popular Committee talks of the stifling effects of this kind of mind-state; Deheishe he says was:

 "A society that resisted change, a society stuck in a culture of exile – 'this is not my house' is what people would say – a society stuck in temporariness; but temporariness kills creativity, it kills and prevents initiative…political and social awareness, our general cultural awareness was inhabited by a culture of temporariness that prevented societal development…*you can not plan tomorrow if you live in a state of transit*" [al-Laham 2008, emphasis mine]

Herein lies the profoundness and novelty of what Deheishans have been able to do. Deheishe (and following its lead other camps in the West Bank) has been able to negotiate this impasse/contradiction by defining and articulating urban and spatial improvement – which has conventionally been viewed as a political trap –

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[5] Of course refugees are also differentiated by urban and rural Palestinian society; the point is that differentiation in this context is multi-valent some of it coming from the refugees themselves.

as a means of strengthening political struggle. In effect, turning the equation on its head. Abu Khalil again: "We fought the temporary. Today we are in the here and now. To have presence, to have factories, to have institutions doesn't negate our role or our rights as stipulated by international legitimacy. On the contrary!" [al-Laham 2008].

Deheishans have done this by explicitly linking urban improvement to the creation of new political space for agency. This marks a serious shift in the way Palestinian refugees interpret and instrumentalize the spaces of their camps. There is a conscious effort to distinguish between the political and legal rights of displaced people and their social and environmental living conditions; or in other words to insist on a political rather than socio-economic definition of refugeehood. In this rejection of 'need' as a constitutive principle of rights Deheishans began to negotiate a path in between the strange complicity of those who want to improve the camp as a means of undermining the right of return and those who reject any improvement to reinforce the very same claims to return. 'Improvement' becomes a process by which refugees forge the contours or the possibilities of the contours of political space by obviating the exigencies of fragile and precarious material life. In her writing on Shu'afat Camp just outside Jerusalem, sociologist Sylvaine Bulle writes that the 'domestication' of the built environment (her term for the humanizing urbanization of the camps), while at some level contrasts with the political face of the camps as a place of resistance, has consequences in the public domain and sphere [2008: 11]. These practices transform the "universe of enclosure into one of intimacy, safety and sometimes into some form of common good…they appear to legitimize the environment, its potential and creativity" [ibid]. Self-urbanization, then, can be

read as a struggle for recognition that connects the private scale with political and collective concerns through the production of the fabric of a livable environment and not through the lobbying of public institutions. In this sense, she goes on, the camp, is posed not only as a refuge but as a space of temporal experiences, open to appropriation [cited in Hijazi 2008: 4].

Institutional spatialization and public life

One manifestation of this wider 'room for maneuver' has been the growth of dense institutional space in the camp.[6] Deheishe contains a staggering 23 active social institutions, a per capita density much higher than the surrounding city of Bethlehem. There are two points to be made about the camp's institutions; the first is about political self-representation. The institutional landscape in the camp is a product of the disjuncture associated with the Oslo process. Deheishe's institutions are, today, largely specialized, with areas of interest ranging from health care to children's recreation and represent something of a shift in institutional and organizational thinking. Undoubtedly, they reflect the movement of the leadership of Palestine's Left into research and special interest NGOs and the separation of the previously fused civil and political spheres in Palestinian society. These are both post-PLO developments. Previous to the PNA's inception, institutions in the camp were few but highly politicized, usually 'belonging' to one of the main political factions. Their agendas were clear and overtly political; the Committee for the Defense of the Right of Return or the

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[6] Most camp institutions are, today, wholly independent of UNRWA. A recent policy statement by UNRWA in relation to West Bank camps clarified the limits of their mandate in this respect: "The West Bank camps are active social agents. UNRWA does not administer the camps, the Agency only administers its own installations and programs. Camp residents run their own activities and camp committees in each camp are regarded as an official body representing the camp population" [cited in Johnson 2007: 3].

seminal Youth Centre in Deheishe (where much of the current generation received their political education) are prime examples. Many lament the replacement of these institutions by contemporary NGO-type bodies and identify the PNA as a force intent on shattering independent power centers in the camp [Abedel-Jawwad 2008].[7] Other readings see the shift as reflective of a gradual loss of faith in these institutions pushed past the tipping point by the Oslo process:

"From here [Oslo Peace Accords] the lack of confidence between the Palestinian street and its representatives in the factions of the PLO began and with it came a lack of confidence in the institutions that were related to these factions", in addition, "those involved in real political action, in resistance against the occupation found that the occupation was all of a sudden distant or remote … political or insurrectionary action, especially armed struggle, found the PNA in its way. Therefore camp leaders looked to other forms of struggle – institutional forms. Large parts of our thinkers, leaders, youth looked to developing mature and active institutions that could have a clear effect on our audiences and people and that in the future could be a platform through which to change reality" [al-Saifi 2008]

Viewed from this angle, the rise of specialized institutions in the camps represents both the relative failure of previous factional institutions and the recognition of the need to be more self-sufficient in the post-PLO political landscape. The political vacuum the camp remained in facilitated this and was

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[7] That the PLO was apprehensive about the West Bank's camps was clear in their reaction to the Far'a Conference of 1995; the latter was a clear statement of intent by the camp and its leadership and signaled their determination to articulate their own positions.

exploited to create the space for political self-representation. The new breed of post-PLO institutions in Deheishe have been able to not only articulate their own political positions but also to exert considerable pressure on national-scale political centers; according to another activist in the camp they were not de-politicized, but rather de-factionalized [Odeh 2008]. They operate within a register in which the political still frames their action and links them to grassroots movements. The Popular Committees (PC) that are present in every camp, are singled out by many, as such an example. While they were imagined and favored by the PNA as a less political and more service-oriented alternative to the Committees for the Defense of the Right of Return, their politicization has not been successfully circumscribed. Undoubtedly they are extremely problematic organizations – their members are not elected and they are accused by some as behaving increasingly autocratically; however, they remain community-based and dependant on a local wellspring of legitimacy. As Palestinian historian Salim Tamari writes "the Popular Committees in the camps remain – despite their institutionalization – major sources of popular mobilization" [2007: 4]. Critically, they have emerged as pan-refugee representative bodies, organized as a network that can advocate and lobby for refugee rights on a national scale. They are clearly willing and able to stake out independent political positions. To this day the PCs maintain their ties to the moribund PLO and officially consider the PNA a 'host country' on par with Syria, Jordan or Lebanon (and are as a result to this day unlicensed as NGOs by the Ministry of Interior). In Deheishe they have openly challenged the PNA on a number of occasions; notably with the construction of the multi-storey Finiq Centre, which was built just outside the camp's UNRWA-delineated borders on

land earmarked by the PNA as future prison site. Nor have they shied away from contesting the policy imperatives of UNRWA, organizing in 2008 a series of West Bank-wide strikes that stalled the Agency's work and incurred its disciplinary wrath but forced the latter into concessions. However, perhaps what is most significant is the fact that the PCs have also established institutional links that extend beyond and outside the camps. Parallel 'refugee committees' have been established in many of the major cities of the West Bank; they are there, according to Abu Kahlil [2008], to "represent refugees and preserve refugeeness as a political identity". He goes on to say that connections with city-based refugees, "even if its in a formal way its grounding is always political, this is – and I say this without exaggeration – the role of Deheishe, the role of its culture and its cadres: to be involved in the affairs of refugees form Jenin [northernmost city] to Ramadeen [southernmost city]." In effect what emerges are the institutional structures and spaces of nation-wide, refugee-specific self-representation on the basis of a politicized refugee identity – an unprecedented development in the self-mobilization of refugees. What is most interesting about this conjuncture, and what distinguishes it from past institutional dynamics in camps is the reversal of power flow; previously national organizations (PLO, Fateh etc.) would enter the camp to organize local institutions, today the camp organizes its own institutions to enter the nation.

The second point to make about institutions is the role they play in the more abstract and less tangible aspects of societal change.[8] Leaders of

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[8] It is also important to add that Deheishe's institutions have played a role in shifting popular perceptions, opening the camp to the city and vice versa, and establishing an international network of solidarity that has allowed Deheishans to emerge as visible and vocal (and unmediated) representatives of the Palestinian national movement. Both al-Finiq and Ibda'a, two

contemporary institutions articulate their social and political role in terms that differ from the more established tenets of advocacy; free from the imperatives of party politics, their work is articulated as an effort at growing a public sphere in the camp and by extension stimulating reflexivity and criticality among refugees. Formal education remains sacrosanct and is the platform for the success of institutional or organizational initiatives (anthropologist Maya Rosenfeld [2004] has written about the astonishing educational achievements of Deheishe in the 1980s and linked these to forms of political agency), but the need to stimulate awareness and social consciousness and open up the space for social contestation in the camp is increasingly identified as something constitutive of political praxis. "The Deheishe experience is unique, particularly in the experience of its institutions or the leaders or vanguard of its institutions; they produced significant results – people today are aware and defend their political, legal, social and human rights" [al-Laham 2008]. Al-Saifi takes this further identifying the pluralism of institutions and ideas as a factor that "creates a kind of revival, creates new efforts in the development of self, creates positive social conflict – conflict which can produce the Palestinian self and the cadres and leaders of the future" [al-Saifi 2008]. Ibda'a, an institution al-Saifi helped found, focusing on children's recreation, has been striving to achieve precisely this.

leading institutions in Deheishe both with multi-story compounds that contain guesthouses, conduct youth and social exchanges with sympathetic institutions and organizations in Palestine and beyond and send Deheishans abroad – in their relatively short history Ibda'a have toured 25 different countries. To add, institutions like al-Finiq and Ibda'a have proved adept at using these experiences to develop connections with international funders, circumventing UNRWA as the only source of project-finance and attracting millions of dollars in the process. Even viewed cynically it is clear that Deheishe's institutions, in other words, are able to exploit some of the romanticized, even fetishistic, international attention that Palestine garners, going so far as to become an established 'stop' on the alternative tourism beat. Deheishe as a result has developed a significant international profile. The camp itself becomes a kind of showcase, used in a variety of ways as a public relations device with all the obvious dangers that entails.

Their programs which involve mixing boys and girls in different recreational activities have stimulated wide-spread debates and conflicts around gender roles in the camp; while not everyone has accepted the rationale put forward, it is incontestable that assumptions and attitudes are questioned. A public debate emerged. In focus groups we conducted with young girls from Deheishe, it was clear that Ibda'a played a role in shifting the image of women or at least stimulating awareness of gender:

"Even if Ibda'a represents a minority in the camp they have a very strong impact on the image of the camp for outsiders. And this helps very much in changing the image of women – from a conservative woman with no relevant role in society to a free woman that can express her existence and is able to contribute to a new image of the camp. Even if this image is contested by many in the camp." [15-year-old Deheishan girl – Focus Group October 4, 2008]

If public life is defined as "associational life where opinions and ideas can be exchanged or joint activities undertaken" [Johnson 2006: 5] then it is clear Deheishe's institutions represent an emergent public sphere in which diverse interests and opinions meet and interact. In her brief comparison of public life in three West Bank camps, Penny Johnson writes that, "Interestingly, camp leaders in Deheishe more often conceive the camp in terms of diversity reconciled by democracy than leaders in the other two camps [Am'ari and Fawwar]" [ibid: 4]. "What are the achievements of Ibda'a?", al-Saifi asked rhetorically, "the achievements are non-tangible. What is the effect of the institution on the understandings of local society? On the acceptance of the 'other' and the

possibilities of civil social conflict? This is the primary achievement" [al-Saifi 2008].

Expansion, territorial conflict and the right to the city

The multivalent production of space inside the camp has been concomitant with an expansion outside of it. The spatial fabric and sinews of the camp are alive with movement and adjustment – encroaching, retreating, modifying, interacting and clashing with the surrounding landscape – built and natural. In the last ten years the pace has been restless and something very significant developed. Deheishans have poured out across Bethlehem's main road to form the city of Doha – today dubbed Palestine's first and only 'refugee-city'. Doha, which has formed its own municipality is home to approximately 20,000 people, the vast majority of them, around 70% according to Doha's mayor, refugees from Deheishe – Deheishans themselves refer to Doha as their 'back garden'.[9] Doha which expanded exponentially in the 1990s was able to officially delineate its own municipal borders in 1996. Previously the land had been part of Beit Jala's municipal district, but the latter fearful of losing its Christian demographic character, conceded much of the territory, changing its municipal borders in coordination with Israeli Civil Administration. Doha was transformed from a small informal conurbation to an official municipal district with its own independent municipality; a municipality entirely controlled by Deheishans, with

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[9] It is worth noting that in the 1970s the Israeli Civil Administration tried to entice Deheishan refugees to settle on the Dohan hillside with promises of subsidized housing but on the condition that they relinquish their UNRWA registration cards. This was roundly rejected as an attempt to permanently settle the refugees.

11 out of the 16 council members coming from the camp. While autonomous in many respects, Doha is in essence an extension of Deheishe into Bethlehem. Deheishe remains the social, familial and experiential centre and reference point for most Doha residents and if asked where she/he comes from the latter will invariable reply that they are Deheishans; Abu Khalil elaborates:

"Dohans doesn't feel that they have acquired a new identity; they feel and live the identity of the camp...they know you cannot 'sell' a Dohan identity on a national basis...indeed its not possible to find someone outside of Bethlehem who identifies themselves as a Dohan! They say I'm a Deheishan" [al-Laham 2008]

Mohammed Malash, a resident of Doha and a member of its municipal council, relates this problematic to himself:

"Of course I feel belonging to Deheishe, even if I now have my home in Doha and I'm a member of its municipality...Deheishe has a very long history, its very rooted and can't be compared with Doha. I didn't even change my residency in my ID card. I'm well known in many parts of the world as a refugee from Deheishe...as a refugee from Deheishe I have a case to fight for." [Malash 2008]

No other refugee community in the West Bank has built its own city adjacent to their camp. The 'formalization' of Doha is not only a challenge to those city-dwellers that would rather maintain iron-clad and hierarchical separations between themselves and refugees but is also part of a banalization of UNRWA's cartographic authority. In this transgression and in the risk it entails – in terms of losing access to humanitarian services and relief (refugees are not eligible for

services outside camps) – Deheishans are actively questioning the cultures and bonds of dependency and patronage that have characterized asymmetrical relations between previous generations and UNRWA.

In this process of expansion Deheishans have created spatial imbrications, laminations and a series of new interstices with their urban hinterland. This is more than the 'bleeding and blending' that some observe in other camp or slum contexts; Deheishans have not only appropriated space in the city proper, they have institutionalized and marked it as their own and created official representative structures to make sure it remains that way. Nor is it the creation of 'third space'. This is not refugees assimilating or melting into complex urban environments creating hybrid environs and identities – it is a much more straightforward claim to land and resources in the wider city. In this sense – through spatial appropriation and central participation in decision-making – it is representative and constitutive of a widening awareness of and claim to refugees' rights to the city of Bethlehem. In contradistinction to the relationship between, for example, Balata Camp (one of the most politicized camps in the West Bank) and Nablus or Am'ari Camp and Ramallah (probably the most diverse city in the West Bank), Deheishe is deeply involved in Bethlehem's local politics even as they refuse to officially participate in municipal elections.

Theorizing the emergent: representation, relationality and the everyday

These three spatial practices represent emergent modalities of political subjectivication. The camp is re-imagined, or re-imagineered, "as an existential

and political site, a lived bodied place that is a locus of agency" [Jayyusi 2007: 128]. They all involve a high degree of iteration and recursion as well as symbolism and representation. There is in the construction, use and inscription of Deheishe's spaces profound symbolism that involves the emergence of new legibility and new representational spaces. Architecturally, while most of the structures are not ornate or aesthetically striking, at times even mundane and banal, they contain a deep cache of meaning and projection. From Ibda'a and Finiq's multi-storey buildings to the murals or the pedestrian bridge, many structures in Deheishe make symbolic architectural statements and bespeak an awakening and self-consciousness. After the Israeli-built wall that fenced in the camp during the First Intifada was bought down, the turnstile gate from which all camp residents had to enter and exit was kept in place. This monumentalization of what was the experiential essence of the occupation's intrusion into and distortion of daily life signals a profound insight into the power of representational space. The turnstile gate once a symbol of oppression is subverted into becoming representational of the political sacrifices that Deheishe has made; the same can be said of the murals, which document and memorialize the camp's human sacrifices. They are both a marker of the camp's contribution to the national 'cause' and are constitutive of a new (and more confident) refugee self-image. Any difference between the symbolic and the real, here, is not paramount, what is striking is the process of articulation and visual communication: through the spaces of their camp Deheishans are (re)representing themselves not just to each other or other refugees but to wider Palestinian society and beyond.

It is precisely this relationality that structures and locates the production of

political and symbolic space within wider national and urban social geographies [Holston 2008: 8]. The camp, as a relational space that mediates experience and information along new coordinates, allows for the possibility of political relationality – it allows for refugees to speak and be heard, it becomes the platform form which they engage the rest of the body politic. So the camp in this sense is a process – a part of social and political interaction. The camp's space and the refugee's location in it, though individuated in absolute space-time, are relational – they are (re)produced as a process of subjectivication that can only be understood in relation to everything else going around it, especially the fate of the Palestinian national project. Space is not just outcome but a process with emergent powers.

There is, then, a kind of micro-politics located in the everyday in which an emergent subjectivity generates its own modalities of representation and knowledge-production. It is here that we uncover consciousness and the connections between the mundane and the political; these practices orbit a space-politics nexus even when they are not overtly political: liberation – and return – are a structuring background. Bulle observes a connection between what she calls "the order of representation" (the values, norms etc.) and the "order of affect" (individual choice and self-realization). In Deheishe, spatial practice as daily negotiation of the injustices of the colonial regime forges a camp-wide notion of the 'common' that links everyday life (and its concerns: dignity, privacy, material security) with larger political futures and 'architectures' [2008: 9]. In this respect, precisely as Bulle points out, pragmatic action and the building of familiar attachments can overcome the traditional break between the political and the moral, the domestic and the public [ibid]

Productive paradox: negotiating the nonnegotiable

These practices, however, are not without risk, they open a Pandora's box of aporias and paradoxes. They engender an immediately discernable series of concatenated or intertwining spatio-temporal contradictions; contradictions that are irreducible and reach to the very core of refugees' politico-ontological being.

This is clear in the dialectical tension in the production of space and place in the camp *as a means* of strengthening the sacrosanct struggle for return. This tension is palpable in interactions with Deheishans; in one meeting with camp residents, a discussion about the actualities involved in return was interrupted by a woman who stood up to say:

"But I don't really want to leave Deheishe! To whom shall we leave the camp? I grew up here and I feel that this camp is a central part of my life. Is there no way to have both our village "our right" and the camp "our life"? What about the life that I built struggling for the right of return"? [Deheishan woman – focus group meeting August 10, 2008]

On the one hand clear attachment, belonging and pride is associated with the camp.[10] Our conversations in the camp were full of stories about Deheishans who had purchased homes or land outside the camp only to find they could not

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[10] There is in the socio-spatial bonds and networks created in the camp immense objective and subjective value for Deheishans. Almost without exception when asked in focus groups what was most positive about the camp, respondents, of different age and social groups, identified the camaraderie and solidarity as the most important. These bonds mediate and manage the encroachment of class polarization in the camp; while class-based differentiation has increased over the last decade the social and cognitive disconnect and discordance afflicting the rest of Palestine's class and urban relations has not surfaced with the same intensity in the camp.

make the move. In a sense Deheishe begins to represent a new positively charged notion of 'the camp'; when talking about a semi-feudal and sanguinary dispute in a more rural camp south of Hebron (Fawwar), Naji Odeh quipped: "they should be ashamed to call themselves a camp" [Odeh 2008]. This is a complete inversion of the dominant representation of camps. On the other hand, the camp is improved, personalized, politicized, inflected with meaning and desire only or primarily as a means of one day leaving it. The (necessarily) abstract, idealized, reiterative but visceral desire to return in the future is manifest in efforts that build real, material, and mundane spaces in the here and now. What one ends up with is a kind of rootedness for return, or place-making for exit. One result of this is a dialectically suspended dual attachment to place: the camp as both the marker of dispossession and the means to its resolution is substantively and cognitively fused with the image or the imagining of the vanquished village. Camp and village produce dual but intertwined narratives and conceptions of home – both with a profoundly lived character, simultaneously distal and proximal – that can sometimes collide but often come to reinforce each other. "These camps *as a political reality* constitute living testaments to the Nakba of the Palestinian people" [Jayyusi 2007: 128/9 emphasis in original] – they, as much as the refugees, are the living archive of still unfolding conquest and dispossession. It is in this sense that protecting the camp as a lived and political space and reaffirming one's presence in it becomes a critical political and existential activity; all means are mobilized to protect the camp from what is regarded as the Israeli objective of erasure. The camp becomes the first and last line of defense in the protection of collective (and political) memory and identity. In this light it is not surprising to hear one

resident of Jenin Camp, cited in Jayyusi [ibid: 130], claim that displacement from the camp would be as hard as 'al-Nakba'.

This same tension structures and animates a similar paradox reproduced in a temporal sense. The camp's spaces are used, to shatter the 'permanent temporariness' that, in varying degrees, afflicts everyone who tries to reproduce their daily lives under the distortive and disruptive patterns of the colonial Leviathan but by extension also end up involving a re-imagining of temporality. One with dislocating dimensions, for it folds the different markers of time into each other. In the camp future 'destination' is predicated on past 'location' – the past as a timeless reference point, preempts and structures the nature of the future. As Jayyusi points out, "refugeedom is now able to reshape and telescope history, to telescope the trajectory of past dispossession with that of future justice" [2007: 129] This is what Bulle [2008: 4] observes in Shu'fat Camp when she points to a collision of time in which past and future, fear and hope intertwine producing the 'pessopitmism' which has come to so powerfully caricature Palestinian political sensibility. In Deheishe Camp past and future are co-embedded trajectories and manifest in a stance of simultaneous 'looking-back, looking-forward'. What emerges is a multi-temporal simultaneity with Deheishans uneasily inhabiting the crossroads of several temporalities. The past, then, is used to make sense of a bewildering and precarious present *but* by the same token is bound to disturb it, bound to hamper the here and now in which significant investments of energy, lives and money are being made. This becomes clear if we complicate what we mean by the past, if the past is not just the idyllic village and the Nakba but the entire sequence of events that has unfolded to leave refuges where they are today. On the one hand the past is

recognized as unfinished, as salient, as critical – not just in its nostalgic aspects but precisely in its injustice and illegitimacy – in the imagining of trajectory and destination. At the same time this collides with a present (and future) that insists on *not* being predetermined by the hellish repetition of the discredited past – the devastating effect of "a seemingly limitless series of failures, invasions, conspiracies, destructions and betrayals" [Said 1999: 70] that are codified in the historical markers: the Nakba, the Naksa, al-Ijtiyah and so on. The past is simultaneously idealized and rejected – this much was clear in Edward Said's recollections of conversations with first generation Palestinian refugees in Lebanon – they could vividly describe the texture and detail of their pre-Nakba lives until they had to recollect the moment of dispossession, at that point memory and words fail, the dissonance is too large [ibid: 68]. In Deheishe, this dissonance or incongruence is exposed and amplified but also mediated through spatial production in its narrativization and representational aspects. It bespeaks a desire to simultaneously engage with the immanent past and at the same time re-write and transcend it; in other words, to become 'author' of one's own time. Deheishans seek to reshape space – at the moment when the perceived betrayal of Oslo becomes clear – precisely to preempt another failure. Deheishe, then, in its social and problematic conception of time, imbibed with agency and desire, is not, to take to task another one of Auge's characterizations of refugee camps, "doomed to festering longevity", even if it is threatened with demolition [1995: 78]. On the contrary, precisely in the temporal paradox, and the lacunae it produces, political possibility emerges.

Beyond the threshold

In turn – and this is the essence of what we are trying to argue – this emergence of political possibility involves a re-conceptualization – conscious and semi-conscious – of refugeehood in Palestine. For one, as many interviewees in Deheishe affirmed, 'refugee' goes from being a pejorative term employed by villagers and urbanites to disparage and stigmatize to an emblematic and protected political identity employed by refugees themselves. In fact, refugeeness – contra to all humanitarian and official conceptualizations – becomes critical in the pursuit of political practice. It becomes a political condition able to connect the human subject with the political agent [Jayyusi 2007: 125]. This creates a new and potentially destabilizing configuration in refugee-nation relations itself mired in contradictions. In order to enter and affirm presence in the imagined (and often abstract) spaces of the nation, refugees consolidate and positively valorize their identity as refugees, as precisely the category that should be most problematic for the nation to absorb. In addition they do this in order to play a role in national politics that will ultimately allow them to dispense with their refugeehood. In Deheishe (and some other Palestinian camps) the condition of refugeeness is now "a positively valued emblematic identity" but only as "a trajectory towards its own overcoming by restitution and return" [ibid: 129]. Refugeehood is affirmed and normatively championed in order so that it may be eventually jettisoned.

This, then, is the contemporary mine-field of contradictions that while negotiated on a daily basis is laced with nonnegotiable redlines that reverberate and course through it. What Deheishans end up with are a series of very *fluid* liminalities in which polarities, while still structuring, cease to be dichotomous,

permanent or hierarchical, they are exposed as discursive and contingent – "they become nodal points with boiling centers held together by 'the that' which it is not…" [Golding 1993: 211]. The rigid and fixed sovereign logic of inside-outside is disturbed. The refugee need not be suspended in perpetuity between, presence and absence, place and non-place, inclusion and exile, exit and entry. The camp *as* camp and the refugee *as* refugee mobilize to challenge power relations without allowing for a dilution of their politico-ontological and constitutive markers as such. The road to return while defined by a number of fixed maxims and principles ceases to be brittle but can in fact embody different paths to the same destination; the right to the city is not mutually exclusive of the right to return, the right to a future does not preclude a right to the present. This is not an erasure of separations but their re-interpretation and re-use; a different way to come at the whole question of the limit or of the division between the 'that' and its other [ibid: 209]. Refugeehood is no longer an aberration to or disruption of the nation but a means into the latter's very core. The camp is not opposed to the city but extends into it and entices the city back in. The periphery also exists at the centre. Exile occurs without absence; commonality is achieved without integration or assimilation; transience is rejected but a provisionality still frames existence in the camp. The camp is *both* the place of being and the place of the negation of being, both A and not-A; it is, to appropriate one of Sue Golding's conceptualizations an "impossible space" – impossible not because it doesn't exist (politically) but because it exists and doesn't exist exactly at the same time [ibid: 206].

The point, then, is *not* to think of refugees as existing in a static in-between, as stuck in liminal tension between antinomies or irreconcilable

dichotomies but to recognize them as acting and speaking politically at a series of intersections between 'inside' and 'outside'. Deheishans do not exist at the borders, the fringe, the perimeter – even if they are still excluded and stigmatized – they are very much at the center of what Edward Said would call the Palestinian interior (*al-dakhel*) itself a kind of symbolic exile [1999: 52-5]. One could go further still, in their appropriation and redefinition of political topography Deheishans have contested what or who constitutes the interior; through a production of space that reinforces an assertion of political self, they enter a complex, power-laced but fluid mutuality with polity and city (which other camps have not been able to achieve).

The point is not to romanticize or idealize this refugee camp or camps in general. The Deheishe 'model'/experience has produced its own fall-out: new hierarchies and power structures, an increased localization and fragmentation in Palestinian political space, autocratic and hegemonic institutions, a new land market in the camp with speculative dimensions and a tendency to look down on other camps. Nonetheless, it is clear to us that Deheishe's positions as de facto leader of the West Bank's refugee camps stems from the fact that it is they that have most successfully been able to 'deactivate' the camp as a device in the exercise of sovereign control and challenge the de-politicization, dehistoricization and objectification associated with their definition (or negation) as one or more of: docile objects of humanitarian aid existing outside political relations; the fragmented shards of colonial domination; or the pawns of kleptocratic and authoritarian local authority. They speak and are heard politically in a public sphere they contribute to forging. There is a double-movement here that is at the core of this accomplishment: there is in Deheishe a

restructuring of the camp as a political space with a parallel insistence on the retention a refugee-subjectivity. They have achieved this through a variety of spatial practices embedded in their camp and that, while quotidian and mundane, reinforce larger and more direct political strategies of resistance, including armed struggle.

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