

Refugees in the Gaza Strip, December 1948–May 1950

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As a result of the 1948 Arab-Israeli war, thousands of Palestinians from some 144 cities, towns, and villages came to Gaza, a small coastal strip of land twenty-eight miles long and an average of five miles wide.¹ Refugees flooded into the tiny area, with estimates of their numbers ranging between 83,000 (September 1948) and 250,000 (December 1948).² By December 1949, a thorough census by village and town of origin had been taken and the number of refugees was established at 202,606.³ The large refugee numbers combined with those of the native Gazans resulted in a population density of 1,800 people per square mile.

Although it is impossible to know exactly how many refugees arrived in Gaza at specific times, it is possible to estimate when the largest numbers left or were forced from their homes. By comparing the December 1949 census with the dates on which each major home area fell to the Israeli army, the assumption can be made that within nine or ten months the population of Gaza had almost tripled.⁴ Table 1 provides a breakdown of the military actions that affected 99 percent of the Gaza refugee population.

Although refugees came from all parts of Palestine, 56 percent came from what had been the Gaza District[†] and another 42 percent from the

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[†]Only those towns and villages in the area of Palestine that became the new State of Israel are included here.

Table 1: Estimated Refugee Movement, April 1948–January 1949

	Phase I	Phase II	Phase III	Phase IV
Israeli Military Action	Jaffa area	Ramlah area	Coastal area Gaza District	Eastern area Gaza District
Date of Action	April 1948	July 1948	October 1948	December 1948– early January 1949
Population of Area Who Became Refugees in Gaza	47,584	45,347	75,203	33,404

Sources: Edgar O'Ballance, *The Arab-Israeli War, 1948*; "Operational Report," AFSC.

Lydda District, as shown in table 2. Most were of peasant origin.⁵ As table 3 indicates, the 1949 census found that 50 percent of the Gaza refugees came from villages with populations of less than 2,500 people, while another 14 percent came from towns and villages of 2,500 to 5,000 inhabitants.⁶ From interviews with 35,400 male refugees, it was determined that 65 percent were unskilled laborers or agricultural workers.⁷ (See table 4.) An estimated 90 percent of the population was illiterate.⁸

Unfortunately, few jobs were available, especially for the unskilled. The refugees joined some 80,000 local residents in their requirements for goods and services. The surplus labor drove wages for those jobs that were available below the subsistence level. The effect was an economic disaster for the populace, original residents and refugees alike. Before 1948 the city of Gaza had been a prosperous market town functioning as a collecting and forwarding center for the citrus, wheat, and barley crops of the Gaza District. Much of its population had worked in the surrounding countryside, and many of the Gazan landowners and farmers had owned or worked on citrus groves and pastures outside the area that became the Gaza Strip. The 1948 War drastically altered the situation. Gaza was cut off from its normal sources of supply and from its markets in the territory that became Israel. The economy was ravaged: within a few months the strip had come to depend almost entirely on imports.⁹

When the refugees arrived, they were able to get by on the few resources they had brought with them, on the good will of the indigenous population, and on whatever assistance they could get from the Egyptian army, which was at the time still engaged in fighting. Generally, the Gazans welcomed the refugees. Those who came first rented rooms,¹⁰ found shelter in private homes,¹¹ or were housed temporarily in public buildings, schools, mosques, churches, and abandoned British army barracks.¹²

Table 2: Percent of Total Palestine Arab Refugees in Gaza

Administrative District	Administrative Sub-District	Number of Refugees Who Went to Gaza		Percent of Total Refugees in Gaza
Gaza	Gaza	74,805		
	Beersheba	39,060	113,865	56
Lydda	Ramlah	41,618		
	Jaffa	44,404	86,022	42
Jerusalem	Jerusalem	480		
	Hebron	224		
	Ramallah	—	704	0.3
Samaria	Nablus	29		
	Tulkarm	186		
	Jenin	185	400	0.2
Haifa	Haifa	1,172	1,172	0.6
Galilee	Beisan	13		
	Nazareth	19		
	Tiberias	37		
	Acre	47		
	Safad	7	123	0.06
Total			202,286 [‡]	

[‡]Not including 56 foreign refugees who were displaced from their homes in Palestine.
Source: "Operational Report," AFSC.

However, the influx was so great that available shelters were soon filled. People were forced to find shelter wherever they could: in huts without windows and often without roofs; in shelters made from branches and burlap bags; in caves; in orange groves; on sand dunes; and on the beaches, their houses made of blankets or palm branches draped around an old oar or mast stuck in the mud. Others lived in doorways and under the eaves of buildings. They filled the sidewalks, vacant lots, public markets, and barnyards—every available space. Asked what shelter they had, many refugees replied simply, "the sky."¹³

As winter approached, the situation became more serious. Although

Table 3: Gaza Refugee Population by City/Town/Village of Origin

Population of City/Town/Village	Number of Refugees	Percent of Refugee Population
to 2,500	101,927	50
2,500 to 5,000	27,440	14
5,000 to 10,000	38,856	19
over 10,000	<u>34,327</u>	<u>17</u>
TOTAL	202,550 [§]	100

[§]Not including 56 foreign refugees who were displaced from their homes in Palestine.

Source: "Operational Report," AFSC.

Note: Population figures of towns and villages were taken from the 1947 food control lists for villages in the Gaza district under the British Mandate government. When those figures were unavailable, figures used were from the 1946 Village Population Estimates of the Mandate government.

Gaza's climate is pleasant for most of the year, winter brings cold weather, wind, and rain. The Egyptian army and various other Arab governments had provided several hundred tents for the refugees, but large numbers remained who were without any shelter. Nor was there sufficient fuel for cooking or for heat. Wood was taken from any available source: the railroad tracks of the Cairo-Haifa railroad, wooden roofs, trees planted during the mandate in reforestation projects, and even wooden toilet seat covers. Brush, twigs, and bits of root were collected. Anything that could be burned was used.¹⁴

Initial Sources of Relief

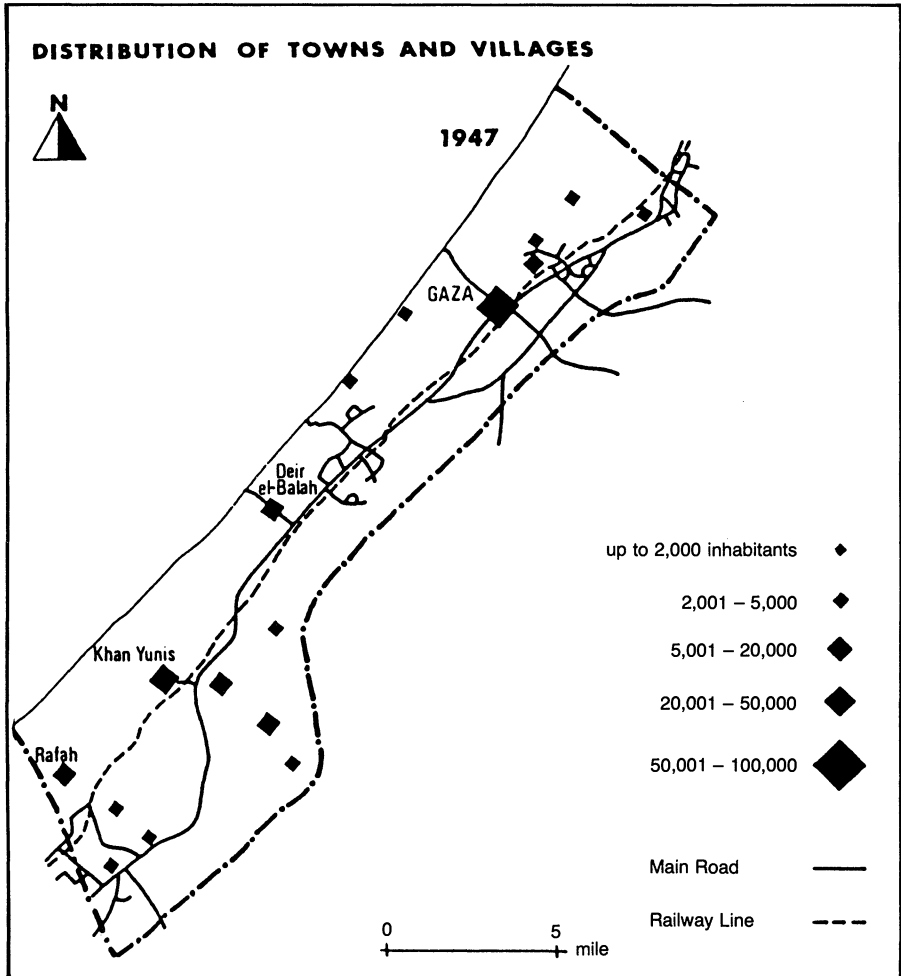
The local residents were swift and generous in responding to the refugees' needs, as they donated money, food, clothing, and other necessities. Not only did they open their homes and allow public buildings to be used for shelter, but women's clubs provided personnel for milk distribution centers and local doctors provided much-needed medical assistance. One hospital was set aside for the exclusive use of refugees.¹⁵ By September 1948, in response to an urgent request by Count Bernadotte, the UN mediator for Palestine, gifts of cash and in-kind relief supplies for refugees in Gaza and those in the other areas of refuge had been promised by the governments of sixteen countries and by several nongovernmental agencies. A representative of the UN Disaster Relief Project was assigned to distribute supplies as they arrived in Gaza.¹⁶

Table 4: Occupational Survey of Arab Refugees in the Gaza Area*

<u>Occupational Group</u>	<u>Group Total</u>	<u>Percentage of Grand Total</u>
Professional & Proprietary	5,533	16
Teachers	161	
Landowners	2,579	
Merchants & Shopkeepers	2,768	
Contractors:	20	
Advocates & Miscellaneous	5	
Clerical & Supervisory	426	1
Clerks	89	
Foremen	17	
Government Officers	183	
Stationmaster & Staff	15	
Telephone Operators	4	
Policemen	113	
Miscellaneous	5	
Skilled & Semi-Skilled	6,551	18
Bakers	268	
Barbers	214	
Butchers	214	
Blacksmiths	268	
Carpenters	988	
Cooks	151	
Electricians	31	
Fishermen	719	
Drivers	43	
Laundrymen	43	
Masons	691	
Mechanics	786	
Painters	78	
Shoemakers	124	
Tailors	314	
Tinsmiths	96	
Weavers	510	
Tanners	11	
Dyers	17	
Miscellaneous	229	
Unskilled	22,890	65
Farm Laborers	12,287	
Other Laborers	10,363	
Peddlers	44	
Miscellaneous	196	
TOTAL	35,400	100

*Rafah camp not included.

Source: AFSC, survey data compiled 11 and 13 June 1949.



Source: Elisha Efrat, "Settlement Pattern and Economic Changes of the Gaza Strip 1947-1977," *The Middle East Journal* 31, no. 3 (Summer 1977).

But the critical supplies did not arrive quickly enough or in sufficient quantities. By mid-November, supplies of flour and rice had been exhausted for all but the poorest. Visitors were overwhelmed by crowds of mothers begging for food and milk for their children. According to reports from the International Red Cross, ten children died each day from starvation.¹⁷ Part of the problem was that refugee numbers had initially been underestimated. Only after careful investigation did the immense scope of the problem become apparent. The mediator had requested relief supplies on the basis of an initial estimate of 360,000 Arab refugees in all areas (Gaza, Jordan,

Lebanon, and the West Bank). This figure soon required a drastic revision upward. The larger numbers resulted from a combination of factors: more complete refugee registration; the fact that many who were able to support themselves at first eventually exhausted their resources and applied for relief; and the arrival of additional numbers of refugees.¹⁸

Both the Egyptian government and its Higher Council for Palestinian Immigrant Affairs contributed additional amounts of flour, but it too became scarce. By mid-December probably no more than half of the refugees were receiving rations of flour, a staple of the Palestinian diet. Many refugees begged for leftovers from the Egyptian army's rations. Others attempted to purchase flour from the local market with what little money they had left.

Despite scarce resources, the Egyptian accomplishments in Gaza were monumental. The refugees had gathered together in eleven areas on the strip, roughly grouped around three towns.¹⁹ Because the Egyptian army officer in charge had little time to deal with all of the refugee problems—at this time the war was not yet over—each area was organized for self-administration. Each was divided into four parts, with village leaders appointed to maintain control and to assist in setting up distribution centers for food and water. Bakeries were established in some camps, with the baker appointed from among the refugees. He would bake the loaves of bread or other foods brought to him by each family for which he was paid either a modest sum in cash or in kind. With the profit the baker was then able to pay others to bring wood, to assist at the oven, or perform other tasks.²⁰

International Relief Efforts

It soon became apparent that the local people and the Arab states (which were still years away from the wealth of the oil boom) who had been giving assistance would not be able to sustain the relief effort.²¹ The United Nations, therefore, moved to conclude an agreement with the American Friends Service Committee (Quakers or AFSC) to provide assistance in Gaza. The arrangement was agreed to be temporary, for a political solution was thought to be imminent.

The AFSC team arrived to give assistance in late December 1948. The effects of the cold and rainy Gaza winter were being felt by all and the local population was exhausted from some eight months of extending assistance from their own meager resources. At the same time, with the last battles of the war taking place only a few miles away, the arrival of additional refugees

seeking safety in the strip only added to the confusion. Meanwhile, Israeli bombardments and air raids on the strip restricted relief efforts.

The initial work of the AFSC team was to integrate and expand the administration of relief. Transport of supplies was coordinated with the Egyptian government. Because it was impossible to ship goods through the new state of Israel, materials were received in Port Sa'id and shipped overland (some 200 miles) across the Sinai by train to Gaza. The Egyptian government provided free port services, transport, and warehousing of the goods.

Once the supplies were in Gaza, however, distribution was difficult. From the early emergency distribution from sand dunes, tents, trucks, small stores, and mosques, a dispersal network was developed that used corrugated iron buildings of a standard design, located in widely separated and strategic locations. Food distribution was organized in such a way that each refugee would know that he/she would receive rations on the same day and at approximately the same hour every two weeks. Blankets and clothing were also dispersed in an orderly fashion. This reassured people that they would indeed receive their allotted rations and eliminated the need for the refugee to come to the center on any but his/her distribution day. It also meant that it was no longer necessary for the refugee to stand in line for hours in the hot sun or the driving rain until rations were received.²²

Dry milk was sent by UNESCO and in time its distribution was handled in a planned, orderly fashion as well. At first, however, distributing milk was particularly difficult without adequate space for mixing the milk and without bulk containers, measuring utensils, or receptacles into which it could be put. Mixing drums had to be made from old oil drums obtained from the Egyptian army. Tinning enough drums to equip mixing centers required several weeks of the combined services of the tinsmiths in the area. Beaters, sieves, stoves, funnels, and other tools had to be brought from Cairo, where purchasing was slow. Further complicating the problem, transport across the desert in the early weeks of January and February was uncertain.

A constant and continuing problem was that of calculating the exact numbers of refugees in the area. Early in the war, the Egyptian army had completed a preliminary census that counted a total of approximately 200,000 refugees. Subsequently, however, additional refugees had arrived, and whereas the original census was valuable, it could not be used as a final basis for determining who was eligible for refugee status. A second census was taken, this time with village leaders making lists of those people under

their authority. Groups in larger cities formed committees to determine eligibility.

Meanwhile, food was distributed to the hungry, pending the verification of the census. Approximately 260,000 people received food rations during the last weeks of February 1949. Throughout the process there was a constant checking and rechecking of lists by both the Egyptian army and the Quakers. Duplications and false ration cards were gradually weeded out. By August the approximate numbers of those receiving regular rations had been reduced to 215,000 people.²³ Despite the arrival of additional refugees,^{††} by September 1949 the figure was reduced to 202,606 bona fide refugees.^{‡‡}

The difficulty in counting refugees stemmed from several sources. First, initially some of the refugees moved frequently from place to place within the strip in search of greater safety or easier living conditions. Nor was there a tradition of keeping such statistics: in villages where the birth rate and infant mortality rate were high, little attention was paid to keeping birth or death records. Polygamy—the law allowed each man four wives, but most had only one—complicated the situation. Households could, therefore, have several children all of the same age, a curious state of affairs for the novice relief workers. The problems in obtaining vital statistics were increased by the refugees' strategy of concealing deaths. A member of the household not reported as deceased could still be counted as a ration recipient. The food received could then be divided among the survivors to augment the very meager rations allowed for the family.²⁴

At the same time, the indigenous poor Gazans who were also without food found it difficult to accept the idea that only the refugees were eligible to receive foodstuffs. The custom in Gaza had been that whoever needed assistance received it, whatever their status. With the influx of refugees and the resulting difficult economic situation, local residents considered themselves as much in need of food as the newcomers.

The success in reducing ration roles owed largely to the special conditions of the strip: the geographical limitation of the area; restrictions against leaving the strip imposed by the Egyptian authorities; and the special efforts of the relief teams who worked according to the policy that all food distribution should be carried out under the supervision of a team member. They also established a punch card system for rations and

^{††}In late summer 1949, some 5,000 Palestinian refugees housed in Qantara camp in Egypt were transferred to the Gaza Strip.

^{‡‡}Bona fide refugees are defined as those persons displaced from their homes as a result of hostilities.

instituted a system of central registration for refugee names and vital family information.²⁵

Shelter and Social Welfare Services

Finding shelter for the refugees was a problem, for it was a matter of finding something where little existed. For the relief workers, it was a matter of providing something in the absence of virtually everything. As a result, during the winter of 1948–49, almost nothing was done to relieve the situation.

In February and March 1949, 2,000 tents donated by Turkey were distributed in the area. But the need was so great that this small number created no improvement of the general situation. During the summer of 1949, a large number of the previously requested 10,000 tents arrived. However, their distribution was postponed for several months while the Quakers sought the most equitable distribution system. Applications for tents numbered in the thousands. Questions of how to distribute, to whom, and where the tents should be placed were considered. Eventually, to solve the problem, a survey of housing needs was undertaken. The survey documented the living conditions of over 80,000 people in the entire area.

The workers were able to meet the needs of only those persons in absolute need. The UN calculation for the number of tents needed in Gaza required an average of 10 people per tent. By requiring a specified number of people to occupy each of the several types of tents, they were able to shelter the maximum number of refugees; however, the requirement also inadvertently broke standing traditions and sometimes housed unlikely groups together. Often it was possible to group relatives together, but at times it was not. In many cases families agreed to live together who were not related. The following incident was recorded by the team member assigned to deal with the tents:

One night at 9:30, a man whose voice betrayed desperation came into my office to beg for a separate tent. His wife was just about to bear a child and the distraught husband could not endure the thought of his wife giving birth in the presence of a foreign family.

There were also problems that arose from the many different types of tents. The tent coordinator recorded another incident as follows:

The arctic tent, called “parachute” by the refugees because they were made of nylon, was the nemesis of our work. This tent, standing just above five and a half feet high, was equipped not with ordinary door flaps permitting entry in an

upright position, but with a round tunnel-like snout requiring the assumption of an all-fours position. Made for soldiers in battle they were completely unsuitable for the conduct of family life. Yet 2,000 of our allotted tents were "parachutes" and they had to be used. This caused endless troubles for us and the refugees.

In Dayr al-Balah an old man and his equally old wife were assigned a "parachute." When he saw his tent, which he had hoped would provide himself and his wife with a decent home, he crumpled down on his haunches and holding his beard, chin in hands, with his wrinkle-hidden, tear-filled eyes turned to heaven, he said: "It is the will of God. I have to watch it. I have to take care of it, but I can't live in it."

In the end, large tent camps were established and village groupings were housed in sections of the camps.²⁶ Indeed, as the refugees arrived they had tended to group together according to their village of origin.²⁷ A fundamental principle of the camp organization was to maintain the village as a complete entity within the larger camp area.

As with all of the relief operations, nothing was accomplished in the field of medical care without the efforts of many outside the relief team. Shortly after the first of the Quaker teams arrived in the area, fourteen local doctors volunteered their services to give medical assistance to the refugees. The public health department, in fair working condition even after the termination of the British Mandate, rendered valuable aid. The World Health Organization also loaned a doctor to head the medical unit and provide other assistance.

One hospital (ninety beds), maintained by the Church Mission Society and in full operation in Gaza when the relief program started, was largely taken over for refugee use. Another hospital (sixty-five beds), under the direction of a Palestinian doctor appointed by the Red Crescent Society of Egypt, received medicines from relief shipments. A few tents and huts (thirty-five beds) for those with contagious diseases were erected in a relatively isolated spot on the seashore. Some months later another hospital (ninety beds), erected by the local and the Egyptian occupying authorities, was equipped and opened. A diagnostic laboratory was donated by the United States navy which provided immediate diagnosis and eliminated the need to wait for samples and specimens that formerly had been sent to Beirut or Cairo for testing. A storehouse for medicines was started in the Church Mission Society hospital compound in addition to various other health facilities and clinics in the villages and camps, some in connection with schools that were subsequently opened.

Thousands of refugees came daily to the clinic nurses, who were available any hour of the day. A doctor was present for only a limited time

each day. Midwives among the Quaker nurses worked with their local counterparts in an attempt to improve the services rendered by local practitioners.²⁸

Among the serious medical problems encountered was the high incidence of trachoma and its resulting blindness or semi-blindness. Eventually all children were treated and those people who had developed cataracts had the opportunity to have surgery at any clinic on Sundays. Refugees were encouraged to wash before touching their eyes and to take measures that would keep flies away from the eyes. For instance, mothers were instructed to put veils over babies' faces to keep away the flies. To rid the camps of the flies that spread the infection, a thorough spraying campaign was instituted and continued on a regular basis.²⁹

Great emphasis was placed on preventing epidemics. The fact that no diseases reached epidemic proportions during this period testified to the hardiness of the people and the vigilance of the medical teams responsible for immunization and spraying. The refugees generally were cooperative in implementing the various sanitary and immunization measures recommended by the medical workers. Children in particular displayed considerable enthusiasm.

The refugees' eagerness to work to rebuild something approaching a normal life and the desire of the Quaker workers to do more than alleviate immediate physical distress prompted several additional activities. Of particular concern to the relief workers was the plight of 65,000 school-age children. A few children were intermittently attending classes in a dark, damp, bomb-damaged building in the refugee camp at al-Maghazi. These few children and one overworked, unequipped teacher constituted the educational facilities for refugee children in the camps situated in the middle section of the strip. In Rafah, in the south, only seven children out of 40,000 refugees in the vicinity were attending the Rafah village school, one of seventeen established in the area under the British Mandate.

In response to this obvious need, schools were opened for more than 16,000 refugee children on 31 March 1949. Under the administration of the director of the Cairo School of Social Work, seconded on a part-time basis, tent schools were set up using volunteer refugee teachers and a few primers furnished by the Egyptian government. The schools were opened without any additional funding or equipment. The children were keen to learn, however, for they kept coming, even though they had to sit on stones, straw mats, or the sand for their lessons.³⁰

Hamdi, a refugee volunteer teacher in Gaza, recently described that period in the following terms:

By far the biggest difficulty was finding somewhere to teach. Usually we'd use the government schools . . . The government would use them in the mornings and we would use them in the afternoons, and if there wasn't enough room for all the children, we'd put up tents next to the school . . . The thing that sticks clearest in my mind is just how enthusiastic we all were—teachers and pupils. I suppose for the refugees who had lost all their possessions, there was nothing else but to learn. But I also think that there was a very strong sense that we were taking things into our own hands and building our own future. . . . Even with almost non-existent facilities—hardly any schools had chairs, blackboards, or textbooks—we always managed to make the most of things. In the middle camps they got around the problem of blackboards by taking the pupils down to the beach to write in the sand with their fingers or by using chalk on the one tarmacked road.³¹

In time, funds came for the schools from the Anglican Cathedral in Cairo and from Church World Service; equipment arrived from the Egyptian Ministry of Education. Later, substantial cash was contributed by UNESCO. The sale of containers (flour and bean sacks, milk barrels, margarine tins, and the like) provided another source of funds. Gradually more equipment was donated: books from London, maps from Norway, tents from Egypt, as well as other miscellaneous equipment and supplies. As the four hundred volunteer teachers gradually used the small savings with which they had arrived, they were paid small token compensation. Eventually they received two sacks of flour a month for their work in lieu of a salary.

The schools were for both boys and girls, were tuition free, and were open to all refugee children to the limit of capacity, without economic, religious, or other preference. Steady attendance attested to the popularity of the project. To supplement the meager rations supplied to the family, each pupil received one glass of milk a day at school. Eventually a hot meal was served for those children from families in particular need. For adults the Laubach literacy program was begun, which also elicited an enthusiastic response from the participants.

Craft and apprenticeship work was also started. In schools where many of the older pupils were starting first grade studies, training in some immediately useful activity was imperative. Weaving, sewing, embroidery, and carpentry were daily activities. Forty-five looms were built for the schools. Warp thread was prepared in the girls' classes and more than one-thousand meters of cloth woven in the schools was eventually turned over to relief workers for distribution to refugees.

Books, including teacher-training manuals, modern history, famous Egyptian authors, psychology, and sociology, were received from the

director of extension at the American University in Cairo, purchased through a special gift. They formed the nucleus of a teachers' library. By the summer of 1949 teacher training courses were set up in Gaza and Khan Yunis. All those engaged in teaching were required to attend for one month.

Efforts were also made to develop standard examinations and certificates for the seven elementary grades. It was assumed that the refugees would soon be settling in another location and that the children were entitled to take not only their knowledge and skill with them, but also some record that would be acceptable to other institutions of learning that they might be fortunate enough to attend. In the higher grades, effort was made to use a curriculum similar to that of the recognized institutions of higher learning in the Middle East.³²

To solve the problem of a substitute matriculation exam for those students finishing secondary school, officials from the Department of Education in Cairo went to Gaza at the expense of the Egyptian government to administer the examinations. Many refugee boys in Gaza from Hebron crossed the armistice lines at their own risk to take the examination at home in the West Bank.³³

Vocational Training

Among the refugees, weavers and those trained in allied skills (dyeing, spinning) comprised one of the largest occupational groups. With clothing deteriorating as the months went by, a weaving project to provide cloth for garments was begun. The intent of this project was to provide much needed material as well as gainful employment for weavers and others. The UN Relief for Palestine Refugees (UNRPR) agency appropriated \$30,000 for this effort, enabling at least one Gaza weaving concern to resume production after more than a year of idleness. The contracts received resulted in the production of about 200,000 meters of cloth.

Based on this experience it was decided to undertake another weaving project, somewhat along the lines of a cooperative. For this UNRPR made available about \$24,000. Nearly half of this was spent on wages, the rest on the purchase of threads and needed tools. Approximately 150,000 meters of cloth were produced. In addition, sewing groups and embroidery classes were started for the women and girls. Hundreds of garments were made for refugee use and eventually they received payment from the sale of various other items.³⁴

With the cooperation of refugee workers and the materials donated by the townspeople of Gaza, a laundry was constructed in connection with one of the distribution centers, an uncompleted mosque. Water taps were installed; tubs, a small water heater, and water storage tanks were provided. With few conveniences in their tents, refugee women were able to put these facilities to good use. Soon tubs were added for bathing babies and children. Use of the facilities was according to a schedule so that each woman had a turn about once every two weeks. Showers and other facilities were added in other locations as rapidly as possible. Very soon after the bathing facilities became available, the seemingly ever-present skin rashes that had plagued the refugees for so many months disappeared.

In an effort to satisfy the need for vocational training for young men, several carpentry shops were opened. A master carpenter from among the refugees volunteered his time and talent to get each shop started and then worked as instructor for a small fee. Crates and boxes that had been used in shipping the food supplies were the source of lumber. Small tables, stools, cupboards, trays, and other useful articles were made and sold to individuals at a nominal cost.

In short, providing relief and services to refugees taxed the ingenuity of relief workers but became an important element in the lives of the refugees. They had available to them some of the support and assistance normally associated with a government social service system.

Displacement and the Desire to Return

Whereas every effort was made to give relief and assistance to reestablish and maintain the social organization and order of the village they had left, people still greatly desired to return to their homes.

The decision to leave homes and villages had been difficult. In many cases there had been divided counsel among elders and families as to whether to leave or stay.³⁵ When the decision was made to leave, however, the resultant confusion and bewilderment caused many families to become separated and members of villages to flee in different directions.³⁶

Although it is impossible to know with certainty, as was previously discussed, it seems that some families moved about within other parts of Palestine for some time, rather than heading to Gaza or neighboring countries.³⁷ In one case a family stayed in a village six or seven miles away from their original village for about four months before going to Gaza. When kin were not available, families found refuge in geographically more sheltered areas. A bedouin man from Mukhayzin near Ramlah told of his

family's living in the Hebron mountains for two or three months before seeking shelter in the sand dunes of Gaza.

Others attempted to go directly to Gaza but encountered difficulties in travel. Travel by sea was particularly hazardous as is illustrated in the following account from a conversation with a refugee in Gaza:

After many nights of hunting for a safe place to sleep in Acre near our house, for we lived on a dangerous main street, my father decided to take the family to Gaza to be with relatives. We tried to go by boat about 7 o'clock one evening. There were my father, step-mother, four boys, and three girls in our family with other families in the boat. We could take only a few things. When we got to Gaza the sea was too high and we had to go back to Acre. By that time it was occupied by the Jews so we went on to Tyre where we found other people from Acre. They took care of us for three days, giving us food and shelter. By then my father took us back to Acre by boat but again we could not stay, for it was still occupied. As we continued again toward Gaza, we passed Jaffa where there were many women on the shore who joined us in the boat. It was very crowded and because of a hole in the boat we had to throw all of our things overboard. We had no place to go and stayed eleven or twelve days at sea. My father was very sad and very worried about his family. We were picked up by an Egyptian ship and taken first to Port Sa'id then to Qantara camp where we stayed four days and nights without shelter, until we were found by other relatives. People tried to help and eventually the relatives in Gaza heard about our being in Qantara and sent for us.³⁸

Others tried to get away by sea but found it impossible. Fayiz, originally from Jaffa, tells his story:

On 25 April [1948] . . . everyone left their homes and fled to the old city on the seashore. Some desperately tried to put their families and possessions into small fishing boats, but the sea was so stormy and they were thrown back onto the shore. Everyone was wailing and weeping and there was total chaos. My brother and I ran all over the town trying to find a truck but there weren't any. They were all either full of people or burned out. There were many dead donkeys too, with their trailers still attached to them, lying in the road. Next we went to the sea but clearly there was no chance of escape there. In the end we found a truck and our family with three others climbed on. We had one suitcase with us: everything else was left at home. . . . It took us seven hours to get to Majdal [about 45 km. away] where we slept the night. Early next morning we traveled on to Gaza. There we were: us and a suitcase.³⁹

Fayiz came by truck. Mrs. Zakariya with her family came by camel from the north, traveling by night and hiding in the groves during daylight hours.⁴⁰

In some cases entire villages came together. Abu Tawfiq remembers:

The whole village walked south. Some people had donkeys to help carry their possessions; a few had trucks. I carried my niece in one arm and a pile of blankets in the other. We didn't bring much because we thought we would soon be going back. Only al-Mughabi stayed behind; even his wife and children came with us. I never heard what happened to him. We decided to head for Khan Yunis where my father had a friend that he used to sell cloth to. We stayed there for a while then we moved to an old British army barracks. The next day I walked to al-Burayj and it was only then that it really hit me: thousands of refugees with no shelter, no food, nothing. Everyone was wandering around looking bewildered and lost. I felt empty and heartbroken. We had no work and no food—and to think that the maize crop which had looked like being a good one, would now be ready for picking in the village! I don't know how we got by. We were so hungry we even took beams and bricks from the barracks to sell. People brought us rations: peas and powdered milk. We mixed them with flour to try and make bread, but it just wasn't the same. We got rations every fifteen days, but it was always a struggle after the first week. Somehow we managed though and this gave us strength and warmth. It was time to forget old scores and pull together.⁴¹

Most of those who went to Gaza were simple peasants or bedouin who were terribly bewildered; their one wish was to return to their homes.⁴² From a Western perspective, it may be difficult to understand why there was such a strong desire to return. Not only did return promise economic and physical hardship, but there was no way the Arabs could predict what the new Jewish state would require of them; it probably would have been an extremely difficult life. The Quaker staff recognized the refugees' attachment to their land. In an interview with foreign correspondents one said simply:

Most of these people want to go home . . . The people have a great love for their land, no matter how poor, it is their home.⁴³

When possible, the refugees camped as close as possible to the border of the new State of Israel, which in some cases meant they could see their homes and fields from Gaza.⁴⁴ Many attempted to return to their homes during initial months. Early visitors describe seeing two streams of people walking along the Gaza highway, one going toward their former homes and the other returning. But such attempts were dangerous. The presence of land mines—the war was still in progress—was evident from the dead camels, donkeys, and cattle along the highway. But even the danger did not deter the refugees. Only those whose villages lay within the no-man's-land between Israeli and Egyptian lines could possibly hope to reach home, but hundreds tried daily.⁴⁵ None were allowed by the Israelis to remain.

By the spring of 1950 the Quaker relief team, writing to their home office on behalf of the refugees, stated:

Above all else, they desire to go home . . . back to their lands and villages, which in many cases are very close. . . . This desire naturally continues to be the strongest demand they make; sixteen months of exile has not diminished it. Without it, they would have nothing for which to live. It is expressed in many ways and forms every day. "Why keep us alive?" is one expression of it. It is as genuine and deep as a man's longing for his home can be.⁴⁶

As each political wind blew upon the refugees, their basic unrest surfaced and was reflected in the general temper of camp and village life. Although there was only one local newspaper, a weekly, and but a few radios in the Gaza Strip, facts and rumors circulated frequently. Every chance rumor that seemed to hold the promise of return stirred up the emotional unrest which was always just beneath the surface.⁴⁷ Nor were such hopes unrealistic at the time: on 11 December 1948, General Assembly Resolution 194 (III) called, among other things, for the repatriation of all refugees who wished to return and live in peace with their neighbors. The resolution, passed 35–15 with 8 abstentions, had the support of China, France, the U.K. and the U.S., among others.

But it was not to be.

Except for 114 women and small children who were permitted to return to the Majdal and Jaffa areas in February 1950, the refugees remained in the strip. Basic living supplies were provided and eventually ancillary services were developed as well. But Clarence Pickett in an interview with the *Philadelphia Inquirer* in March 1949 summarized the feelings of the Gaza refugees when he said:

Even if all the needs of every refugee were taken care of, they would not be satisfied; they would still want to return to their homes . . .⁴⁸



1. "Operational Report of AFSC," December 1949, Annex II, American Friends Service Committee Archives, Philadelphia, 16–23.
2. "Minutes of Meeting Held at the Office of

the Disaster Relief Project," Tuesday, 7 December 1948, American Friends Service Committee Archives, Philadelphia, 1.
3. "Operational Report of AFSC," 16–23.

4. The compilation of this census is shown in "Operational Report of AFSC." For a detailed description of the fighting in Palestine and when cities, towns, and villages were captured by the Israeli army, see also Edgar O'Ballance, *The Arab-Israeli War, 1948* (London: Faber and Faber, 1956).
5. The term "peasant" has been discussed at length by anthropologists. Controversies rage as to its definition. For my purposes I am using a broad definition which I believe is most often accepted by writers when discussing the Arabs of Palestine: populations that are involved in cultivation, including those people who owned and operated their own farms, tenants, and sharecroppers. Included also are those whose livelihood depended on agriculture, i.e. artisans and merchants. Eric R. Wolf, *Peasant Wars of the Twentieth Century* (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), xiv.
6. "Operational Report of AFSC," 16-23.
7. "Occupational Survey of Arab Refugees in the Gaza Area," 11 and 13 June 1949, American Friends Service Committee Archives, Philadelphia, 1.
8. "Report on Education Activities, American Friends Service Committee," 1 August 1949, American Friends Service Committee Archives, Philadelphia, 1.
9. "An Economic Note on the Gaza Strip," 7 December 1949, American Friends Service Committee Archives, Philadelphia, 2-5.
10. Paul Cossali and Clive Robson, *Stateless in Gaza* (London: Zed Books, 1986), 12.
11. "Every permanent home in the community was crowded with relatives and friends from the north." American Friends Service Committee, *Quaker Work among Arab Refugees Undertaken for the United Nations* (Philadelphia, 1950), 7.
12. Confidential Memorandum, John Devine to Ambassador Griffis, 13 December 1948, and "Report of Visit by Dr. Descoedres to Southern Palestine." 11-12 November 1948, American Friends Service Committee Archives, Philadelphia, 1-3.
13. *Quaker Work among Arab Refugees*, 7.
14. The conditions in Gaza are described in: "Excerpts Concerning Suffering in Palestine from Reports of I.R.C. Workers in the Field," 1-2; Confidential Memorandum, John Devine to Ambassador Griffis; Confidential Memorandum, Mr. Evans to Mr. Stanton Griffis, 26 December 1948, American Friends Service Committee Archives, Philadelphia; letter, Delbert Replogle to Howard Wriggins. See also Report of the Secretary General on the Assistance to Palestine Refugees, United Nations Fourth Session of the General Assembly (A/1060), November 1949, 34-38.
15. Progress Report of the United Nations Mediator on Palestine, Third Session of the General Assembly, Supplement No. 11 (A/648), September 1948, 49.
16. Progress Report of the United Nations Acting Mediator on Palestine, Third Session of the General Assembly, Supplement No. 11A (A/689), September 1948, 3.
17. "Report of Visit by Dr. Descoedres to Southern Palestine," 1.
18. United Nations Progress Report (A/689), 1.
19. Letter, Delbert Replogle to Howard Wriggins, 2.
20. Confidential Memorandum, Mr. Evans to Mr. Stanton Griffis, 3-4.
21. W. de St. Aubin, "Peace and Refugees in the Middle East," *The Middle East Journal* 3, no. 3 (July 1949): 253 reports that with other costs included, Lebanon's expenditure on the refugees equalled 20 percent of its national budget. By 15 September 1949, Arab governments had contributed in cash or in-kind \$6,844,906, Progress Report of the United Nations Mediator on Palestine (A/1060), 31.
22. "Summary Statement of the American Friends Service Committee Operation for the Period 1 August 1949 to 30 April 1950," American Friends Service Committee Archives, Philadelphia, 2.
23. "Brief Report upon American Friends Service Committee (Quaker) Unit Operations under United Nations Relief to Palestine Refugees in the Gaza Strip in Southern Palestine," September 1949, American Friends Service Committee Archives, Philadelphia, 4.
24. "AFSC Staff Report," May 1950, American Friends Service Committee Archives, Philadelphia, 11.
25. Rony E. Gabbay, *A Political Study of the*

- Arab-Jewish Conflict* (Librairie Droz, 1959) 158 n.
26. Ruth Van Auker, "Tent Report, Gaza, October 1949–January 1950," 10 February 1950, American Friends Service Committee Archives, Philadelphia, 1–9.
 27. Howard Wriggins to Brigadier R. H. R. Parminter, Letter, 3 March 1949, American Friends Service Committee Archives, Philadelphia, 3.
 28. "AFSC Staff Report," 9–10.
 29. Personal conversation in May 1985 with Elizabeth Colson, nurse, AFSC relief team, 1950.
 30. "AFSC Staff Report," 10–17.
 31. Cossali, 11.
 32. "AFSC Staff Report," 13–15.
 33. "Report on Education Activities, American Friends Service Committee," 15 October 1949, American Friends Service Committee Archives, Philadelphia, 3.
 34. "AFSC Staff Report," 16–17.
 35. Elias Shoufani, "The Fall of a Village," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 1, no. 4 (Summer 1972), 111.
 36. See Rosemary Sayigh, *Palestinians, From Peasants to Revolutionaries* (London: Zed Press, 1979), for similar accounts for those who arrived in Lebanon.
 37. *Ibid.*, 87.
 38. Personal conversation with refugee in Gaza, 1985.
 39. Cossali, 9.
 40. Personal conversation with refugee in Gaza, 1985.
 41. Cossali, 10.
 42. "Report of Clarence E. and Lilly Pickett on Their Visit to the Middle East," 3 March 1949, American Friends Service Committee Archives, Philadelphia, 3.
 43. "Emmet Gulley Interview Notes," 4 August 1949, American Friends Service Committee Archives, Philadelphia, 3.
 44. "Memo," HC-10, NEA, n.d. American Friends Service Committee Archives, Philadelphia, 2.
 45. *Ibid.*, 1.
 46. Letter, Palestine Refugee Relief Unit to Clarence Pickett, 12 October 1949, American Friends Service Committee Archives, Philadelphia, 1.
 47. "AFSC Staff Report," 12.
 48. *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 20 March 1949.