“My heart is Palestinian, my passport is Jordanian,” answered M’hamed, an eleven-year-old, as I was asking a group of Palestinian camp refugee children and adolescents in Jordan what their nationality was. Khaled, a twelve-year-old boy, also a mukhayy-amji (refugee camp dweller), said “I am a Palestinian refugee with a Jordanian passport.” Others from the group offered similar replies, which were remarkable in that these youth were able to express in a cogent fashion the complex status of Palestinian refugees in Jordan.

This article is based on data collected in two Palestinian refugee camps Al-Whidat and Al-Emir Has-san camps, in Amman during fieldwork conducted in 2004–2005. It explores how, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, children and adolescents fashion their identities according to surrounding discourses they hear in the refugee camp, namely discourses of nationalism—Palestinian as well as Jordanian—and of children’s rights. I examine how children internalize values conveyed through the various messages they receive and how they prefer certain discourses over others. Finally, I show how children are shaped by children’s rights discourse, acquiring a new vocabulary to express themselves, hence becoming agents of change.

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# My use of the words “youth, children, and adolescents” or “children” invariably describes female and male individuals nine to eighteen years old.

2 An earlier version of this article appeared in “Children’s Rights Discourse and Identity Ambivalence in Palestinian Refugee Camps,” Jerusalem Quarterly. 37, 75-85.
In Palestinian refugee camps, children and adolescents represent the majority of the population. Large families are the norm. During the two Intifada, or uprisings, against Israeli rule, Palestinian children made history by occupying center stage nationally and internationally. *La guerre des pierres* (Mansour, 1989), or the war of the stones, as the first Intifada came to be called, mobilized children and adolescents. Images of children throwing stones at Israeli tanks have stayed in the collective memory. For many, children with slingshots became emblematic of children’s power and agency in the Palestinian revolt against Israeli oppression. Children of the Intifada, agents of resistance, readily became iconic heroes among their community and peers.

Western anthropology has generally not been much interested in children and childhood, with a few exceptions, including studies focusing on “children at risk” (Fernea, 1995; Stephens, 1995; Scheper-Hughes & Sargent, 1998; Boyden, 1990, 2004; Chatty & Hundt, 2005; Hart, 2008). Earlier anthropology had explored childhood and adolescence mostly in relation to personality formation (Mead, 2001; Kardiner, 1939; Benedict, 1946; LeVine, 1973). Palestinian children have been studied mainly in connection to psychological repercussions of violence and trauma (Baker, 1991; Khamis, 2005) and international legal issues (Veerman, 1992; Alston, 1994). In child psychology, children were initially viewed as part of the cycle of life, in a broad monolithic approach (Piaget, 1954; Ariès, 1962). But in more recent social studies of childhood, the child is no longer seen as a universal category, but rather circumscribed by her culture and recognized as a full agent (Bartlett et al., 1999). British sociologists and their followers (Willis, 1977; Prout & James, 1990; Jenks, 1996; Jans, 2004) suggest the child is a social actor constructing, as well as being constructed by, her circumstances—hence an actor to understand in relation to class, gender, and ethnicity. Such increasing interest in the ways in which children interact with society has arisen not only among social science researchers, activists, and international organizations, but also within communities.

The child has emerged not only as being an agent but also has acquired new rights. These new rights are part of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) that, although problematic in several respects, has been largely ratified and gradually reached many countries and many cultures. While children’s rights have not necessarily been recognized in everyday policy and practice, discourses of children are now widespread. Notably, children’s rights discourse has resulted in children being recognized as full human beings.

Drawing from these new perspectives, I start this article by showing how young Palestinian camp refugees in Jordan make sense of their unusual national identity—refugee and citizen—having beforehand highlighted the specific historic context of their predicament. I then analyze how the children’s rights education they receive at school has affected their perceptions of selfhood. I conclude by recognizing the destabilizing character of the dilemma about their national identity, which is matched by their hope for social change that the discourse of children’s rights brings forth. My study aims to contribute to a nascent literature on children as agents of social change. It urges anthropologists—activists and public anthropologists—to take a stand and conduct more research oriented on children, particularly children who are victims of long-term conflict.

The experience of young Palestinian camp refugees in Jordan, who are sheltered from military violence, is different from that of Palestinian children in the West Bank, Gaza, or inside Israel. These children and adolescents, however, share a common history, a sense of imagined community (Anderson, 1983) and a strong Palestinian identity shaped by the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The young heroes of the two Intifada have inevitably influenced their peers from the refugee camps in Jordan.

### HISTORICAL PROCESSES

The intertwined Jordanian and Palestinian histories, both largely circumscribed by their colonial past,
are rife with division, expulsion, migration, nation building, and the politics of assimilation. Not surprisingly, identity in Jordan presents many complexities, which have been well documented (Brand, 1995; Layne, 1994; Massad, 2001; Nasser, 2005). Among the young mukhayyammjieh that I met, the context in which they construct their identity is largely influenced by historical circumstances and the uniqueness of the space of the camps.

In his work on nations and nationalism, Gellner (1983) conceived of nationalism as engendering nations and not the other way around. In Jordan though, the nation was constructed before nationalism was born. Transjordan, as a state, preceded the birth of Transjordan, as a nation. First, a principality headed by Emir Abdallah, great grandfather of the actual king, it was originally established by the British in 1921 after the collapse and dismantling of the Ottoman Empire at the end of World War I. Other Arab provinces in the Middle East—formerly under Ottoman rule—had followed suit by shifting their allegiance to two powerful colonial empires sharing their influence in the region—the French and the British—who, upon signing the Sykes–Picot Agreement in 1916, divided the Middle East between them. Palestine became ruled by British Mandate from 1917 to 1948, while Jordan gained its independence in 1946. However, for the next two years—from 1948 to 1950—Jordan, renamed the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, would include Palestine. Such tightly intertwined histories of Jordan and Palestine would remain a determinant factor in the lives of Palestinians and Jordanians.

There have been multiple exodus of Palestinian refugees: first, 1948, marking the birth of Israel, then the Israeli-Arab war in 1967 that included the Israeli occupation of the West Bank, followed by another confrontation in 1973. Over one million Palestinian refugees have fled their homeland. The United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), which has provided assistance to the Palestinian refugees since 1950 defines registered refugees as such: Palestine refugees are people whose normal place of residence was Palestine between June 1946 and May 1948, who lost both their homes and means of livelihood as a result of the 1948 Arab-Israeli conflict. The refugee population has since grown—with several waves of refugees following occupation, war, or expulsions related to sporadic border wars and other forms of conflict—to be 1.9 million refugees. The majority, about 80 percent, are an integrated part of Jordanian society and only a portion (20 percent, about 338,000) live in camps. It is that latter group of Palestinians on which I focus here.

5 Exact figures of both groups are not available as the country seeks to present a unified image of its population. There is no official census data on Jordanians of Palestinian descent in Jordan; by most estimates—more than 3 to 4.5 million—it is between 50-70 percent of the population of the country.
To nearly all Palestinian refugees in Jordan, the most important policy established in 1949 by the Hashemite monarchy has been their granting of Jordanian citizenship. This measure, however, carries limitations for several among them: namely for refugees from Gaza; for those who remained in the West Bank after the Israeli occupation in 1967 and later came to Jordan; and for children of Jordanian women married to non-Jordanians, who are not eligible for Jordanian citizenship through matrilineal descent. This climate of exceptions has fostered inequality, competition, and politics between the two main ethnic groups, Palestinian-Jordanians and native Jordanians. Basher, a Palestinian-Jordanian working for a nongovernmental organization (NGO), describes the situation. “Today, Bedouins [read: “native Jordanians of tribal descent”] feel threatened by Palestinians who outnumber them. Bedouins are afraid they could lose their privileges to Palestinians.”

Jordanian society includes a core of old traditional tribal families who operate through a system of affiliations, loyalties, and political influence. Many occupy coveted positions in the Jordanian government and army. Outsiders and critics of this clannish group, including Palestinians, resent the powerful network they own in the country. The privileges to which Basher appears to refer are the stronghold that Jordanians of tribal descent exercise in the public sector in a country where the state is the largest employer; and to wasta, the push that a culturally established way of communicating, including nepotism, favoritism, and clientelism, provides in many transactions between people of some influence. Knowing the right person, using personal connections when getting a job, or obtaining a passport or other red tape annoyance helps to ensure a successful outcome. Wasta plays a significant role in tight traditional societies in the Middle East where blood lineage, reputation, and honor are important values that reinforce the social fabric. Although several Palestinian-Jordanians serve in the army, according to Palestinian accounts, they represent only 10 percent and rarely come from the mukhayyam, or refugee camp (Massad, 2001). It is the dream of many young mukhayyamieh to be enrolled in the army, because of the job security it offers compared to the precarious character of life in the camp.

The many shifts and ruptures in Jordanian history just mentioned over a relatively short period of time—only a few decades—have elicited subsequent changes in rules and laws concerning refugee status and citizenship among Palestinian refugees. These changes depend upon when (before 1948 or 1967) and where (which bank of the Jordan River, west or east) they were born. They have raised the question of who is Palestinian or Jordanian and created significant divisions—class notwithstanding—among Palestinians living in the Hashemite Kingdom. Palestinians have usually occupied the private sector where many have thrived. They are generally assimilated, intermarrying with Jordanians and forming a network of old bourgeois families, which has kin ramifications in neighboring Palestine. This bourgeois Jordanian-Palestinian group usually look down upon camp refugees as lazy and poor and guilty of producing a culture of poverty. The best example of Jordanian-Palestinian fusion is represented by the ruling monarchs, the King and Queen of Jordan, respectively.
dwellers hold Jordanian citizenship, the picture is more complicated as both the UN categories of refugees and Jordanian policies of citizenship have created a divide between the camp populations according to the benefits granted, resulting in feelings of being discriminated against because of unequal and inferior standing. In another study of refugees and nation, Malkki (1995) explores categories of refugees and national identity inside and outside Hutu refugee camps in Tanzania, finding that refugees living inside the camp were more attached to the notion of homeland and nation than those living outside.

For young Palestinian camp refugees born in a context of fragmentation, specific spaces of the camps of Al-Wihdat and Al-Emir Hassan are indeed central to their cultural experience. For four generations the camp has epitomized the pain of the Nakba and the loss of land. Their hardships have generated resentment born of long exile. This is characterized by feelings of loss of dignity; the traumatic experience of the abrupt social change from fellah, small peasant, to urban proletarian; the enduring suffering and liminality of the refugee condition; and the unresolved Israeli-Palestinian conflict. These camps are not only a habitat for refugees, but more important, they are a bastion of Palestinian memory and identity. Although not fenced in, boundaries delimit two distinct worlds in the eyes of camp refugees: Jordanians outside and Palestinians inside. Accordingly, the children expressed their perceptions of these different spheres in a binary, especially of poor inside and rich outside. Their black-and-white view sounded like a class issue in that it excluded the large majority of the well assimilated Palestinian population who live “outside” the camp.

Outside the camp, the grass is greener, as Zohra, a twelve-year-old camp girl, indicated: “Jordanians have better water than we do in the camp.” While for Furat, a fifteen-year-old camp boy, “Jordanians can go to university and we cannot.” His remark points to a deep concern of many young camp people about their education, as only a very small percentage of camp refugee children (UNRWA education stops after tenth grade) make it to college—only 1 percent according to a UNRWA teacher. He observed that going to college today was harder than before for young people as UNRWA funding had decreased over the years even while the refugee population increased.

For many camp dwellers and their children, the perceived temporary quality of the refugee camp defines core Palestinian camp refugee principles: the right of return, the will to go back, and a declared resistance to permanent exile and oblivion. By remaining a paradoxically lived-in virtual homeland, a home away from home, the mukhayyam has helped marginalize the refugees who view it as an embodiment of the Palestinian opposition. It is understood as a bulwark against the outside: from Jordan that stigmatizes them as mukhayyamjieh, and excludes them, and from Israel, which rejects them.

**MAKING SENSE: PARADOXES, AMBIVALENT LOYALTIES AND POLITICS OF ASSIMILATION**

In such a context of social and political instability and fast-changing historical circumstances, how do children shaped by the Palestinian refugee camp predicament make sense of their complex historically-political environment and national identity? Psychologists working with children in conflict zones have observed they develop a sense of their country’s political history (Cole, 1986). Similarly, Palestinian children develop their personality in relation to nationalism (Garbarino, et al., 1991). Adolescents, especially, build their identity in close relation to the Palestinian nationalist struggle surrounding them.

How do Palestinian refugee camp children internalize the values of their society? How do they become socialized in Palestinian refugee camp culture? Family narratives and everyday life in the camp reinforce Palestinian identity. The memory of the Palestinian Nakba, disaster, has been carried through four generations of refugees and is present in the minds and voices of parents as much as children. Living in the space of the refugee camp is in itself highly symbolic of the Palestinian struggle, as refugees would frequently claim. A marker of Palestinian identity also includes holding specific ID cards. Notably, the
Arabic term *Hawiyya* means both identity and identity card. For camp dwellers, however, *Hawiyya*, the identity card, has primarily been connected to their UN refugee status and hence their welfare. To an outsider, such an interesting notion of identity in which the subject is one with a card can be viewed as “ultramodern.”

In addition, the lasting presence on the ground and crucial support of UNRWA, United Nations Relief and Works Agency, the agency in charge of Palestinian refugees, as well as Palestinian teachers in the UN schools, are reassuring landmarks of Palestinian culture and identity. Moreover, ubiquitous news reports of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict on television concur in reinforcing Palestinian identity and claims of injustice.

Palestinians—inside and outside the camp—held conflicting views on Jordan. Refugee camp dwellers expressed feelings of exclusion, a resentment partly fueled by the government’s projected national cultural identity, which is Bedouin-Jordanian. Camp refugees pointed out time and again in our conversations that the Jordanian minority was favored by government policies and complained about the dominance of the Jordanian group. Interestingly, the camp refugee lens appeared to focus exclusively on the Palestinian-Jordanian dyad, disregarding other Jordanians belonging to ethnic groups such as Circassians, Syrians, Kurds, Chechens, or Armenians, who remained consistently absent from our conversations. As small minority groups (together they represent about 3–5 percent of Jordan’s population), they may not be considered powerful competitors by camp refugees.

The legal situation of Palestinian camp refugees as mentioned above—simultaneously refugees and citizens of Jordan—is paradoxical. While Jordanian citizenship brings them a legal status and recognition, it also carries tensions when it intersects with their refugee status and Palestinian loyalty.

Several dividing categories have constituted a formative aspect of the quotidian life of the members of the refugee camp community, including children, who have developed accordingly flexible and ambiguous identities. Children often expressed a lack of Jordanian nationalism, describing Jordan as merely a place of citizenship: “my passport is Jordanian.” A passport is only a piece of paper, a travel document carrying no effect; it is not a part of the body, like the heart that belongs to Palestine. Several children I interviewed were familiar with the concept of a passport, as their father or a member of the family worked abroad. Although a passport may not be a marker of citizenship as is *Hawiyya*, the ID card, both are crucial for camp refugees. The ID card brings economic help, and the passport, freedom to travel. Freedom to travel is extremely limited for camp refugees and their children, considering that attending a funeral of a family member in the West Bank is problematic. Moreover, some children were using either term for passport and citizenship illustrating what Massad (2001:18) calls the “juridical discourse.” He argues that in Jordan “the law produces juridical national subjects,” or put differently, national identity is a product of the law.

The official government discourse, however, has been one of unity and assimilation heralding the government slogan “Jordan First” through a widely advertised national campaign. Palestinian children inside the camps have been influenced accordingly by the discourse of Jordanian nationalism through the Jordanian curriculum that UN schools follow. Jordan seeks to project an image that encompasses its various ethnic groups by ignoring difference and overlooking any underlying issues of identity at play. Its colonial legacy has largely contributed to fostering additional loyalties among “all” Jordanians, regardless of their ethnic descent. Thus, while Bedouins and Palestinians have their respective ethnic allegiances, as previously noted, other minorities living in Jordan, Circassians, Armenians, or Chechens, also have allegiance to their own respective ethnic group.

The “Jordan First” campaign, a campaign deemed to foster unity, has unveiled salient issues of identity and tensions among Palestinian camp refugees, who sharply reacted by saying that “Jordan First” were empty words and that the reality was a far cry from the official discourse. Abu Khaled, a camp refugee

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6  *Dhatiya* also means identity from *dhat*, self, and *al-ana*, means the ego.
parent, compared Jordanian national identity to a saber, a cactus pear, with nothing inside. Although many in the camps shared his views on Jordanian identity as an empty shell, the campaign did enable camp refugees to define and reaffirm their Palestinian identity against the “others,” the Jordanians.

At a larger level, Jordan’s stability is perceived by the international community as crucial in a region of high volatility. While the measures of assimilation adopted by the government are deemed necessary to build a stronger nation-state, they are framed by broader international political and economic processes. Such measures are consistent with the government’s projected image of Jordan as a country at the forefront of the Arab world on issues of democracy, human rights, women, children, and social development. Thus, in order to tackle these issues, the Jordanian government has facilitated the implementation of many education programs, such as the one on children’s rights, with the help of UNICEF and international and local NGOs.

CONSTRUCTING AND BEING CONSTRUCTED: INFLUENCE OF CHILDREN’S RIGHTS ON SELFHOOD

In the UN schools of the two camps where I worked, children’s rights had been integrated into the curriculum, especially in social studies, religion, and Arabic. In addition, UNICEF and local NGOs organized separate workshops for parents and children. They provided parents with counseling and helped them adjust to new parenting practices surrounding the children’s rights principles. Similarly children’s workshops taught young people how to improve their social skills and self-awareness when dealing with taboos, including bodily anatomy, sexuality, or female reproduction. Children and their parents became socialized into the discourse of children’s rights, which carries more credibility as local teachers include examples and quotations from the Qur’an and the hadith (the record of exemplary life of the Prophet Muhammad).

Thus programs based on the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child model for the most part have become locally adapted by NGO workers and Palestinian teachers and purport new concepts of childhood and children. These concepts were conceived in Western terms and episteme through the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, and they are translated from English into Arabic. As a result, educators and students construct new meanings and understandings that, though somewhat confusing, they are able to negotiate by keeping or rejecting what is compatible with their culture.

Urban’s study (2001) about discourse circulation, especially his concept of accelerative discourse, helps us ask questions about why and how children’s rights discourse may have been favored and accepted inside refugee camps and why it has spread faster than Jordanian nationalist discourse. If the message of newness and novelty of a new discourse, like children’s rights, becomes credible because it includes aspects from the past, as Urban suggests, children’s rights discourse has become accepted by camp refugee children because it is deemed to come from the Qur’an. As a result, the “progressive” aspect of rights in its global UN dimension becomes more easily accepted.

In the refugee camps, children’s rights education programs taught by UNRWA Palestinian teachers have exercised a strong influence on children’s sense of autonomous self in a cultural environment that usually emphasizes collectivity over individualism. Children’s rights discourse gives children a vocabulary to talk about themselves. Notably, such vocabulary is channeled by the English language. Here the issue of language is important to my discussion. I argue that the English language of the children’s rights project creates power and subjection by becoming a vehicle of new ideas that filter newly acquired concepts such as identity, self, or citizen. Asad (1993) similarly contends of historical projects in colonial settings translated from one site to the other or from one agent to the other. Thus, a dialectical relationship between English and Arabic has stemmed from the teachings and perceptions of children’s rights and has become embedded in the localization of the UN discourse of children’s rights.7

I do not intend to describe the problems of the UN Convention of the Child model in relation to local cultures. I do not dismiss them, but they fall beyond the scope of this article.
Hakim, a ten-year-old boy, said “I am happy and feel strong to know that I have rights.” The awareness of having rights allows such feelings. Children’s rights teach children to think about themselves as individuals and encourage them to become agents of social change. Sahar, a nine-grader girl, told me “children’s rights teach me to depend on myself.” The sense of independence characterizes the modern individual.

Anissa, a twelve-year-old girl, declared, “my rights will shape my personality.” True, children may not fully understand the concepts they are uttering, but their remarks demonstrate the influence of children’s rights to help define themselves. Rights are empowering children in ways that are distinct from child agency as it has operated in the past. Their responses are strongly influenced by the programs of rights education that use various methods of empowerment.

Thus, a local NGO was also offering a special program to show children ways to protect themselves from domestic violence and abuse. Children were taught not to fall victims to their parents’ abuse and to speak out. “They feel empowered knowing there are ways to take action,” explains Abla, a social worker for the NGO. “They learn skills to help them manage their anger, boost their self-esteem and protect themselves.” She encourages “self discovery” by teaching camp children expressive art like painting, drawing, or drama. “Most children are not aware of themselves and their inner feelings. Those programs teach them to identify and express those feelings,” she says.

Another scheme of empowerment is the children’s parliament. It is an initiative of the Jordanian Women’s Union, which is also supported by UNICEF. Established in 1996 as a model parliament for children and adolescents, it promotes children’s rights and democratic practices as well as gender equality by having equal representation of boys and girls, including children with special needs.

The thirteen–to-eighteen-year-old adolescents who participate are elected for two years and are able to communicate their concerns to the Jordanian government. The parliament aims to create a group of Jordanian children (including children from the Palestinian refugee camps) who actively support the promotion of children’s rights while they are children and who commit to doing so as adults. Several children’s parliaments have been established in the main governorates (administrative regions) of the country.

Peer-to-peer learning is another method used in some UNRWA classes to develop peer relationships and to empower students to share their knowledge. But the most spectacular example of an empowerment method is the Human Rights Day Celebration organized by UNRWA that I attended during my fieldwork. It was a cultural performance in which Palestinian children and adolescents from the refugee camps acted on stage in short plays embodying human rights and children’s rights; children sitting in the audience with their parents and teachers wore UNRWA T-shirts and caps reading “Human Rights Jordan.”

Children rights discourse plays a mediating role in refugee camp society as it shapes young minds and subsequent sentiments—between parents and children and between the government and Palestinian refugees. These revolutionary shifts in perceptions of selfhood involve the entire extended family as well. The new ideas about children represent a significant move from the traditional perceptions of the camp family, where children more often than not were subject to strict patriarchal authority (Sait, 2004). Inevitably, the changes are not taking place without struggles and ambivalence on the part of parents. I have no first-hand evidence of familial conflicts happening in my presence. Parents and children alike would report disagreements and children would report being hit by their father—mainly—when interviewed separately. Domestic violence is an issue addressed seriously by Jordanian family policies, which contain measures to protect women and children.

Even while there is increased recognition of domestic violence, Palestinian camp refugee parents see such government initiatives as restricting their...
parental control. These parents are reluctant to let go of their parental control, and yet, at the same time, they look up to their children and vest them with strong hopes of saving the nation. The long exile has tightened traditional family hierarchical structures of control on which they have relied for survival (Sirhan, 1975).

Umm Mahmood, a local NGO worker in Jabal Nasser camp involved in children’s rights education programs, explained how important it was “to raise the awareness of the youth in the camp.” She defined awareness as “a sense of who one is.” For Os sama, a fifteen-year-old boy from the same refugee camp, “children’s rights give children a role in society.” Children’s rights discourse allows youngsters to be not only self-reflective, but also socially engaged. Although rights are not laws, they confer upon individuals a sense of entitlement to justice. While children and adolescents defer to their elders, they are aware at the same time of the heavy national responsibility for change they carry as Palestinian refugees. Not surprisingly, many boys projected themselves as future liberators, by wanting to become pilots—the model being the Israeli pilot—and saviors of their people by becoming doctors to heal the victims.

When I asked camp children and adolescents how they perceived themselves as individuals, they answered by talking about karamah, or dignity, and related it to children’s rights. And when I asked what was meant by dignity, Ahmed, a fourteen-year-old boy, explained “it is to know your own value,” which I interpreted as self-esteem. For Furat, a fifteen-year-old boy, it was “not feeling like a second-class citizen in Jordan.” When describing their understanding of children’s rights other young people invoked honor, a strong value in the Middle East. Thus, adapted within local present-day and historical contexts, children’s rights appear to be perceived as a discourse of power and honor.

In contrast, other young camp people expressed frustration and pain at “having no rights at all in the Middle East and not being valued as full individuals” and reported feelings of exclusion. Data shows that a sense of self has been developed through several structural sources, including children’s rights education programs. It further reveals that self identity presents less tension at home for young boys than for girls, as several girls reported.10

CONCLUSION

Concepts like citizenship and nationality which stem from state and nation, are complex and have often been conflated (Gellner, 1983); I conflated them when I asked a group of Palestinian camp refugee children and adolescents in Jordan their “nationality.” The ambivalent identity they expressed, as M’hamed conveyed at the beginning of this article, reflects the problematic character of selfhood and identity in contemporary Palestinian society.

The entangled histories of Palestine and Jordan have engendered entangled identities. This article highlights the dilemma young camp refugees face: on the one hand, they yearn to be assimilated into Jordan while resisting and denying such assimilation, and on the other hand, they remain loyal to Palestine. My research shows that their dilemma is articulated through a newly acquired sense of selfhood that children’s rights’ discourse helps develop.

Children’s rights provide Palestinian camp refugee children with a space in which they perceive themselves in ways different than those they have learned from their family and the Palestinian community. This was evident during interviews at home where children, surrounded by their parents and older aunts and uncles, were considerably less outspoken than at school. At home, among the extended family, the young ones were not given space to speak out, as age is a marker of authority, and those not in authority are expected to remain silent.

Rights education also helps them negotiate ambivalence with respect to their identity. The newly acquired discourse contributes to synthesizing the discourses of Jordanian and Palestinian nationalism and providing children with empowering tools such as confidence and awareness that they can use in their claims of inclusion in the ruling group. Furat

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9 There are two words for honor in Arabic. The honor of a man is sharaf and that of a woman is ard.

10 For more on this, see Bjawi-Levine (2007).
and his friends would claim children’s rights as a synonym for self-esteem, the right to be and feel Jordanian and Palestinian at the same time, the right to their ambivalence. With children’s rights, children explained their honor was restored and that they could aspire to equality with the dominant group, the Jordanians.

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is indeed a central feature for youngsters who, unlike their peers in Palestine, live outside the combat zone but who watch it on television and constantly hear about it. While they are safely protected from fire (Jordan is not usually a combat zone), they are also unable to directly participate in collective action as they would in a place such as Gaza. Their complex position gives way to deep feelings of frustration. They are not able to resist as their peers in the Intifada or as the older generation of refugees, male and female, who had been involved in the Palestinian resistance of the 1970s. Mahmood, a twelve-year-old refugee boy, said “If I had rights, I would be able to go and fight for my country. But here in Jordan I cannot do anything. What are rights for?”

The oscillating movement between nationalistic emotions at the core of their Palestinian identity (“my heart is Palestinian”) and the anxiety of being validated as citizens in their Jordanian identity is destabilizing for young camp refugees. Further, children may find some aspects of children’s rights discourse abstract and hard to grasp, which simply adds more confusion. In examining the relationship of Palestinian children and the discourse of children’s rights, one may wonder about the merits of such rights. What about children in Palestine—as in Gaza—who are at the front line of armed conflict and fall victim to blatant violations of their rights, or the camp refugee children in Jordan who are indirect victims of ongoing violence? Despite the grim socio-economic conditions of the camp and the limited social upward mobility, most camp children praise the challenging power and potential agency for social transformation that children’s rights provides them, as they carry hope, which is a promise for change.

While children’s rights programs affect children and their families in a complex manner, they also purport (as development programs often do) less-desirable effects (see Brown & Bjawi-Levine, 2002; Ferguson, 1990; Escobar, 1995). Ultimately, camp refugee youth in Jordan find themselves in a bind. Their strong feelings of national identity are of the “wrong” kind: Palestinian instead of Jordanian. Although Jordanian assimilation is officially encouraged and part of a national project like “Jordan First,” from a camp refugee child perspective it has failed to produce true equality between Palestinians and Jordanians. After six decades of residence in Jordan and despite Jordanian assimilation policies, Palestinian identity remains deeply rooted in the camps, as the children quoted here express.

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