



Responding to Precarity: Beddawi Camp in the Era of Covid-19

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How are refugees responding to protect themselves and others in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic? How do these responses relate to diverse local, national, and international structures of inequality and marginalization? Drawing on the case of Beddawi camp in North Lebanon, I argue that local responses—such as sharing information via print and social media, raising funds for and preparing iftar baskets during Ramadan, and distributing food and sanitation products to help people practice social distancing—demonstrate how camp residents have worked individually and collectively to find ways to care for Palestinian, Syrian, Iraqi, Kurdish, and Lebanese residents alike, thereby transcending a focus on nationality-based identity markers. However, state, municipal, international, and media reports pointing to Syrian refugees as having imported the virus into Beddawi camp place such local modes of solidarity and mutuality at risk. This article thus highlights the importance of considering how refugee-refugee assistance initiatives relate simultaneously to: the politics of the self and the other, politically produced precarity, and multi-scalar systems that undermine the potential for solidarity in times of overlapping precarities.

In memory of Mustafa Qasmiyeh (1943–2020)
Born in Palestine, died in Lebanon

THIS ARTICLE TRACES the different ways that residents of the Beddawi refugee camp in North Lebanon have been affected by Covid-19 since March 2020, and how they have been responding to protect themselves and other conflict-affected people in the midst of the pandemic.¹ These responses include processes that resonate with a long history of Palestinian-led mutual aid initiatives. In this context, focusing on the responses developed both by and for Palestinian *and* non-Palestinian residents highlights the importance of relationality, which in this context encompasses relationships between different groups of refugees (including Palestinians and Syrians) in the camp, but also the relationship between local-level responses and diverse local, national, and international structures of inequality, exclusion, and marginalization. This is particularly pertinent given that on 21 June 2020, after relatively few confirmed Covid-19 cases among Palestinians and Syrians in Lebanon,² the state-run National News Agency reported that municipal testing of Syrian refugees working in

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Tripoli's port had confirmed that a number of Syrians who live in Beddawi camp and on the camp's outskirts in Wadi al-Nahleh had contracted the virus.³ A flurry of public announcements, including by the Health Department of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) asserted that the confirmed cases in Beddawi camp marked a significant tipping point in the country: "The epidemic no longer just threatens our camps—it has now entered them."⁴ With Syrian refugees identified by the authorities and the media as the vector of disease, Beddawi camp was sealed off and residents quarantined until further notice. By delineating the rapidly developing situation in Beddawi camp between 24 March and 28 June 2020, this article argues that it is critical that we consider the significance of relationality when discussing Palestinian mutual aid initiatives and how such initiatives relate simultaneously to: first, the politics of the self and the other; second, politically produced precarity; and lastly, multi-scalar systems that undermine the potential for solidarity in times of overlapping precarities.

Responding to the Threat of Covid-19

On 10 March, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) launched its Covid-19 appeal, aiming to develop strategies and mechanisms to provide support for all refugees around the world, *except* Palestinians in Lebanon, Jordan, Syria, Gaza, and the West Bank. Seven days later, on 17 March, UNRWA—the agency responsible for Palestinian refugees in Lebanon, Jordan, Syria, Gaza, and the West Bank—launched a major campaign to secure funds to support Palestinian refugees as they face the pandemic. A week later, on 24 March, UNRWA reported the first confirmed case of the new coronavirus among the Palestinian refugee population in Lebanon.⁵ An UNRWA spokesperson noted on 26 March that the agency had "not yet received financial support to provide medical precautions in order to cope with coronavirus in Palestinian refugee camps."⁶

With Palestinians in Lebanon historically denied access to key rights and state services—including health care—both of the UN refugee agencies currently operate in Lebanon's Palestinian camps, which have been home to Palestinians since the 1950s and have also been hosting refugees from Syria since 2011. UNRWA is ostensibly responsible for the wellbeing of Palestinian refugees, while UNHCR has a mandate to protect all non-Palestinian refugees. However, far from two UN agencies meaning that refugees in Palestinian camps have access to two forms of support systems, with their widely divergent budgets, mandates, and programmatic activities, these international actors have created and solidified a bifurcated system of assistance, consolidating a hierarchy of worth and exclusion between different groups of refugees on the basis of their nationality and place of origin.⁷ Furthermore, even in the midst of the pandemic, these agencies have so far failed to cooperate in their efforts to support displaced people living side by side in such spaces.

As Covid-19 cases have expanded across Lebanon—with fears that cases have been dramatically underreported⁸—so too have xenophobic, anti-refugee, and discriminatory responses on diverse levels. Mobilizing the well-worn trope of refugees as spreaders of disease,⁹ Lebanese officials and politicians promptly demanded that Palestinian camps be placed under even greater control and governmental surveillance,¹⁰ invoking the threats that have long been imagined as emanating from what are referred to by nationalists as foreign and polluted spaces. Although infections in

Lebanon are reported to have originated among Lebanese nationals returning from countries such as Iran and Italy,¹¹ these kinds of demands were implemented in early March, with local municipalities discriminating against Palestinian and Syrian refugees alike, including through the implementation of long curfews that did not “apply to other foreigners or Lebanon’s citizens,”¹² and by “coordinating with security forces to stop ‘unnecessary’ movement from camps.”¹³ In March 2020, the Lebanese Red Cross also reportedly “refused to transfer a patient from a refugee camp to the RFUH [Rafik Hariri University Hospital in Beirut—the only public hospital where Covid-19 patients are being quarantined and treated free of charge], causing more anxiety amid camps residents.”¹⁴

Such residents—including Palestinians, Syrians, Iraqis, Kurds, and Lebanese—are acutely vulnerable to the impacts of Covid-19: living in overcrowded urban camps with poor infrastructure; afflicted by preexisting health conditions that have multiplied and worsened in exile; treated by fragile UNRWA health systems that have been defunded and weakened over decades both by fickle funders such as the United States and international agencies;¹⁵ and faced with a long history of Lebanese health systems discriminating against and denying treatment to refugees. Against this backdrop, it is not surprising that Palestinians’ mistrust toward international and national actors alike remains high as they face Covid-19. It is also unsurprising that Palestinians in camps in Lebanon, like other displaced and dispossessed people around the world, are drawing on long-standing traditions of mutual aid and solidarity to seek ways to protect themselves and others.

Beddawi Camp: A Space of Refuge?

As we wait for the disease, in echoless rooms, doors locked up, shutters dusted, thrust to the heart. . . .¹⁶ The disease that will sign a pact with our diseases. In patience bereft of patience, we stand still behind our walls: without seeing, we shall see the disease that will be. . . .

With a third eye, I see the catastrophe.

In light of the pandemic, Beddawi camp’s Joint Security Forces Committee (a coalition of Palestinian factions), Popular Committee, and Mosques Committee announced on 22 March 2020 that a curfew would be enforced on the camp’s residents and businesses. Unlike previous curfews and camp lockdowns (of which there have been many since the camp’s establishment in the 1950s), this curfew was not imposed by Lebanese authorities asserting that the camps are sites of danger. Instead, after Covid-19 cases were confirmed in a neighboring area, Beddawi camp activists lobbied for the camp’s entrances and exits to be closed in order to help protect camp residents. In Beddawi, as in other displacement and hosting contexts, refugee camps are not isolated spaces but are intimately connected to urban and nonurban areas beyond the boundaries of the camp. While Palestinian camps have often been perceived as “islands of insecurity,”¹⁷ in this context many camp residents promptly identified the risks that exist *outside* the camp and worked to encourage people to remain within their homes.¹⁸ Simultaneously, and indeed since before the curfew started, many advocates and volunteers in Beddawi camp have been working tirelessly to prepare and distribute information, guidelines, and resources to help keep camp residents as safe as possible in the context

of this pandemic, developing inclusive approaches designed to reach all residents, irrespective of their nationality or legal status.

Mobilizing Information and Resources in Beddawi Camp

The disease is not yet here. Alongside our heavy hearts, we have what will be: flour, beads of yeast, whole and crushed lentils, potatoes, their red soil to nurture escaping blessings in dryness.

With UNRWA having been perceived to be both slow and inadequate in implementing appropriate measures to inform and support camp residents facing the risks of Covid-19,¹⁹ drawing on their intimate knowledge of life and needs in the camp, members of Beddawi's Palestinian Cultural Club (hereafter the "Cultural Club") promptly adapted existing evidence-based information posters (including WHO materials), translated them into Arabic, and shared the posters and other forms of guidance in print and through social media networks to reach camp residents of all demographics in an accessible manner. In addition to running special programs on its radio station, the Cultural Club has been working with and through social media networks established and run locally over many years that have previously been used to inform residents about everything from school closures to which areas of the camp to avoid in light of armed clashes or sporadic shootings. While the threat of Covid-19 is less visible, or audible, the threat to life is no less real, and information is one of a range of resources that are essential for survival in these circumstances.

Food is another such essential resource. Over the past few years, in preparation for the holy month of Ramadan, Palestinian camp residents—including members of the Cultural Club—have collected financial donations (*zakat* and/or *sadaqat*) from other Palestinians to prepare iftar food baskets²⁰ for distribution to those residents identified as being in particular need of additional food supplies, irrespective of their nationality or place of origin.²¹ In 2020, however, with fear and restrictions on movement arising from Covid-19, the organizers were originally concerned that it would not be safe for large numbers of people to collect financial donations door to door, or to buy ingredients and cook meals together as a group before collectively distributing hot meals during Ramadan.

Importantly, the group of camp residents in need of additional supplies is significantly larger than in previous years not "simply" because of Covid-19, but precisely because of the ongoing collapse of the already-fragile Lebanese economy. The accentuated financial crisis since 2019 has meant that those people lucky enough to receive salaries through bank transfers have been unable to withdraw money from their bank accounts for months (dollar withdrawals from banks were suspended entirely on 30 March 2020 due to a national liquidity crisis.)²² In turn, those residents who once relied on international remittances from family and friends have been unable to receive international money transfers; and the closure of the airport and land borders has made it nearly impossible for relatives to send cash contributions directly. At the same time, camp residents have witnessed the devaluation of the Lebanese lira alongside the more than two- or even three-fold hike in prices for basic necessities over the course of only a few months. In essence, people's situation in

the camps is dire, not merely because of displacement, but because of the national context, politics, and policies that frame their lives.

With limited cash flow in March 2020, when residents were unable to access funds from abroad, and with restrictions of movement inside the camp, the abovementioned Cultural Club started seeking out other ways to safely collect and distribute donations to people in need. In the first instance, club members contacted local businesses including groceries and mini-marts, both inside and on the outskirts of the camp, to ask for financial and in-kind donations. The club's online channel also produced and broadcast a "Who Will Donate a Million?" fund-drive, echoing the title of the popular gameshow *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?* As donations were secured, the Club's premises was converted into a storage and packing unit while the next steps were decided upon. Having initially considered that distributing tinned food items for people to cook their own iftar meals would be the safest option, the club soon recognized that many people were unable to afford cooking gas or may not have had appropriate cooking or refrigeration appliances. This led to the decision to maintain the original plan of working together, safely, to cook hot meals for distribution to camp residents during Ramadan.

As the limits of local resources became increasingly apparent, just a few days before the first day of Ramadan, on 21 April 2020, the Cultural Clubs in Beddawi and in Mar Elias camps joined an emergency relief fundraiser in partnership with al Naqab Centre in Burj al-Barajneh camp, and two U.S.-based Palestinian initiatives—Al-Awda: The Palestine Right of Return Coalition and the Palestinian Youth Movement. The aim of the initiative was to raise \$50,000 to buy and distribute food and sanitizing packages (each worth approximately \$50) for the residents of those three camps in Lebanon to be able to practice social distancing.²³ With \$51,481 raised by 21 June 2020, this campaign noted that the major crisis that hung over the residents of camps such as Beddawi was their inability "to withstand the economic impact of this public health crisis with the camps shutting down²⁴ and refugees losing their jobs."²⁵

The (Re)Production of Precarity in the Covid-19 Pandemic

Indeed, as has been noted among the members of communities living in poverty around the world, the risk of contracting Covid-19 is paralleled, or indeed surpassed, by the risks of destitution and starvation arising from different policies and political decisions being implemented on different scales. Social distancing is ultimately impossible among people who live in cramped and overcrowded conditions, have no savings to draw on to buy food, and whose survival is contingent on precarious daily labor in the informal sector.²⁶ In the case of Lebanon, it is Palestinian and Syrian refugees whom the Lebanese national authorities have long directly excluded and prohibited from entering the formal labor market and who are among those least likely to be able to afford practicing social distancing, and thus are particularly at risk of contracting the virus.

While local initiatives have attempted to support people's capacity to practice social distancing, with national policies and politics in Lebanon having created diverse structures of inequality and exclusion over the past decades, in 2020, Lebanese national and municipal authorities have created new forms of marginalization and discrimination through Covid-19 testing programs that target people on the basis of their *nationality*. These include the abovementioned municipal tests rolled

out specifically among *Syrian* workers in Tripoli's port area in June 2020,²⁷ and the subsequent labelling of *Syrians* as having imported the virus into the otherwise safe space of Beddawi camp. On the one hand, local responses developed in Beddawi camp—including those funded locally and those supported through transnational networks—demonstrate the ways that camp residents have worked individually and collectively to find ways to care for Palestinian, Syrian, Iraqi, Kurdish, and Lebanese residents alike, thereby transcending a focus on nationality-based identity markers. On the other hand, however, such modes of solidarity and mutuality are now at risk precisely due to national and municipal interventions that align with policies and political discourses that have constituted the refugee Other as the threatening carrier of disease and risk.

Such processes have been further reinforced by Lebanon's state-run National News Agency stating that "random tests had previously been carried out on 119 people living in Beddawi camp, and all had come back negative,"²⁸ and UNRWA's implicit assertion that the (previously safe) camp was "now" at risk *due to* the Syrians' confirmed infections. While UNHCR—as the UN agency ostensibly responsible for Syrian refugees—has been conspicuous by its absence inside and beyond the camp,²⁹ local actors, including Beddawi camp's Palestinian factions and its Popular Committee, subsequently publicly declared that they had identified the location of the two Syrians' places of residence in Beddawi camp, implicitly marking these as being the epicenter of the risk of contagion in the camp. With contact tracing from this epicenter immediately set in place under the supervision of the camp's Health Committee and the Lebanese Ministry of Health (the latter had committed to transferring any individuals testing positive to state hospitals),³⁰ some camp residents have equally started to associate Covid-19 with Syrians in ways that resonate with the xenophobic discourse that emerged among Lebanese politicians at the onset of the epidemic.³¹ The camp has once again been subjected to closure: a space and people in quarantine.

By Means of Conclusion

While I write this with trepidation at not knowing what is to come in the following days and weeks, acknowledging the many roles that people who have been displaced play to protect members of their own communities, as well as others', is an essential means of challenging monolithic representations of refugees as either passive recipients of aid provided by international actors, or as threats to different forms of security. Documenting, or archiving (following Yousif M. Qasmiyeh³²), such local responses is also a vital means of stressing the ways that refugees seek to fill gaps and redress inequalities that have been created and reproduced by national and international actors alike. Well before Covid-19, mutual aid initiatives in Beddawi camp transcended nationality-based identifiers to provide support to camp residents with wide-ranging backgrounds, in turn highlighting the importance of critically examining the ways that preexisting support systems and networks are being affected both by the virus itself and by the different policies and politics emerging in the context of the pandemic. Discourses and policies that demarcate the sanctity of the "self" through the denigration of the "Other" heighten the dangers of politically produced precarity while undermining the potential for solidarity in times of overlapping precarities.

In essence, we cannot understand either the vulnerabilities that people face in displacement or the responses they are developing without considering the ways that local experiences and responses are framed by national and international systems, including long-standing structural inequalities and processes of marginalization and exclusion. The vulnerabilities that the residents of Beddawi camp—Palestinians and Syrians, alongside Iraqis, Kurds, and Lebanese—are facing are caused by political failures that have deep historical roots, and whose repercussions will continue to be palpably felt in both the near and distant future.

When the camp falls ill, tomorrow falls ill for its sins.

By tomorrow, by its disavowed promise, we promise the disease what we have of wishes: a camp big enough for death, a camp with fewer deaths.

About the Author

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ENDNOTES

- 1 This article is informed by research conducted in Beddawi camp as part of two multiyear research projects in Lebanon, Jordan, and Turkey examining local community responses to displacement from Syria—Refugee Hosts (refugeehosts.org funded by the United Kingdom's Arts and Humanities Research Council: AH/P005438/1); and Southern Responses to Displacement (southernresponses.org, funded by the European Research Council under the European Union's Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation program under Grant Agreement no. 715582)—in addition to my intimate knowledge of a camp which is still home to my husband's and daughter's family. My reflections build on an earlier piece (see Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, "Refugee-Led Local Responses in the Time of Covid-19: Preliminary Reflections from North Lebanon," Refugee Hosts, 3 April 2020, <https://refugeehosts.org/2020/04/03/refugee-led-local-responses-in-the-time-of-covid-19-preliminary-reflections-from-north-lebanon/>) and are interspersed with the poetry of Yousif M. Qasmiyeh—who was himself born in Beddawi camp—written in response to the outbreak of Covid-19 in Lebanon.
- 2 On 21 June 2020, UNRWA reported a total of twelve confirmed cases of Palestinian refugees infected with Covid-19 across Lebanon. See UNRWA, "UNRWA COVID-19 Health Brief Update," 21 June 2020, <https://us10.campaign-archive.com/?u=354e66081503459e50f2236ec&id=8dd7f4513f>. At the time of writing, the most recent Covid-19 update UNHCR published reported a total of thirteen confirmed cases among Syrian refugees in Lebanon. See *UNHCR COVID-19 Update*, UNHCR, 8 June 2020, <http://reporting.unhcr.org/sites/default/files/UNHCR%20Lebanon%20COVID-19%20Update%2020200605%20FINAL.pdf>.
- 3 *Daily Star*, "Virus Confirmed in Tripoli's Camps, UN Warns of Escalation," 21 June 2020, <https://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Lebanon-News/2020/Jun-21/507807-two-covid-19-infections-confirmed-in-beddawi.ashx>; and phone interview with two camp residents, 21 June 2020.

- 4 Quoted in *Daily Star*, "Virus Confirmed."
- 5 UNRWA, *UNRWA Covid-19 Brief Update: 29 March 2020*, 29 March 2020, https://www.unrwa.org/sites/default/files/unrwa_covid-19_update_29_march_2020_-_english.pdf.
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- 9 Dalal Yassine, "Clamping Down on Refugees Will Not Save Lebanon from the Pandemic," *Al Jazeera*, 11 April 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/clamping-refugees-save-lebanon-pandemic-200411104018784.html>.
- 10 Islam Khatib, "What the Coronavirus Outbreak Means for Thousands of Palestinian Refugees in Lebanon," *Open Democracy*, 20 March 2020, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/north-africa-west-asia/what-coronavirus-outbreak-means-thousands-palestinian-refugees-lebanon/>; Yassine, "Clamping Down."
- 11 Yassine, "Clamping Down."
- 12 Timour Azhari, "Covid-19: Lebanon Municipalities 'Discriminate' against Refugees," *Al Jazeera*, 2 April 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/04/covid-19-lebanon-municipalities-discriminate-refugees-200402154547215.html>.
- 13 Yassine, "Clamping Down."
- 14 Khatib, "What the Coronavirus Outbreak Means."
- 15 Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, "The Changing Faces of UNRWA: From the Global to the Local," *Journal of Humanitarian Affairs* 1, no. 1 (January 2019): pp. 28–41, <https://www.manchesteropenhive.com/view/journals/jha/1/1/article-p28.xml>.
- 16 Ellipses in the original. For all poetry epigraphs, see Yousif M. Qasmiyeh, "With a Third Eye, I See the Catastrophe," *Refugee Hosts*, 16 April 2020, <https://refugeehosts.org/2020/04/16/with-a-third-eye-i-see-the-catastrophe/>.
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- 18 On many Syrian refugees' perceptions of these camps as safer than non-camp areas in Lebanon, see Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, "Refugee-Refugee Relationality."
- 19 On local critiques of UNRWA's response in Lebanon, see Samar Maqusi, "The Displacement Virus Is Much Stronger than the Coronavirus: Reflections from Burj el-Barajneh and Baqa'a Camps in Lebanon and Jordan," *Refugee Hosts*, 12 May 2020, <https://refugeehosts.org/2020/05/12/the-displacement-virus-is-much-stronger-than-the-coronavirus-reflections-from-burj-el-barajneh-and-baqaa-camps-in-lebanon-and-jordan/>.
- 20 See Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, "The Poetics of Undisclosed Care," *Refugee Hosts*, 21 May 2019, <https://refugeehosts.org/2019/05/21/the-poetics-of-undisclosed-care/>.
- 21 On refugee-refugee humanitarianism and faith-based local responses, see Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, "Refugee-Refugee Relationality," and *Faith and Displacement* (blog) series, *Refugee Hosts*, <https://refugeehosts.org/tag/faith-and-displacement-series/>.

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- 25 Al-Awda, "Global COVID-19 Crisis."
- 26 On the dangers of poverty and starvation among Palestinian and Syrian refugees in Lebanon and Turkey, see Jasmin L. Diab, "Syrian Refugees in Lebanon amid Confinement, Health Scares and Escalating Needs," *Refugee Hosts*, 9 April 2020, <https://refugeehosts.org/2020/04/09/syrian-refugees-in-lebanon-amid-confinement-health-scares-and-escalating-needs/>; Selma Akay Erturk, "The Effects of COVID-19 on Syrian Refugees in Turkey," *Southern Responses to Displacement*, 24 April 2020, <https://southernresponses.org/2020/04/24/the-effects-of-covid-19-on-syrian-refugees-in-turkey/>.
- 27 *Daily Star*, "Virus Confirmed."
- 28 *Daily Star*, "Virus Confirmed."
- 29 In spite of UNHCR's latest Covid-19 update for Lebanon stressing that UNHCR is committed to advocating for the rights of (non-Palestinian) refugees, including the "non-stigmatization of any individual or community based on real or perceived infection," as of 28 June 2020, the agency has remained notably silent vis-à-vis the abovementioned announcements of 21 June explicitly linking Syrian refugees with Covid-19. UNHCR has also remained absent as the contact-tracing process started from their homes in Beddawi camp. See *UNHCR COVID-19 Update*. In contrast, the infections of six Syrian refugees in Beddawi camp were included for the first time in the Lebanon section of UNRWA's "COVID-19 Health Brief Update" on 28 June 2020, <https://us10.campaign-archive.com/?u=354e66081503459e50f2236ec&id=7411faf66d>. Rather than receiving assistance from UNHCR, it is notable that these Syrians and their families have reportedly received food supplies from United Nations International Children's Fund as a means of supporting them while they are under quarantine (phone interviews with three camp residents on 27 June 2020).
- 30 *Daily Star*, "Virus Confirmed." According to my interlocutors in Beddawi camp, the homes of the Syrian refugees whose positive test results were reported on 21 June have been under surveillance by members of the Palestinian Security Committee since that date, in order to prevent any interactions with the community (phone interviews with three camp residents on 27 June 2020). As of 28 June, the Lebanese media has reported that all tests conducted in the camp on/since 22 June by the Lebanese Ministry of Health have been negative. See National News Agency, "PCR Tests in Baddawi Camp Turn Out Negative," 27 June 2020, <http://nna-leb.gov.lb/en/show-news/117101/PCR-tests-in-Baddawi-Camp-turned-out-negative>.
- 31 Phone interviews with camp residents on 22 June and 28 June 2020.
- 32 Yousif M. Qasmiyeh, "Writing the Camp, Writing the Camp Archive: The Case of Baddawi Refugee Camp," in *Refuge in a Moving World: Tracing Refugee and Migrant Journeys across Disciplines*, ed. Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh (London: UCL Press, 2020).