MERCY TRAINS AND RATION ROLLS
BETWEEN GOVERNMENT AND HUMANITARIANISM
IN GAZA (1948–67)

Ilana Feldman

As I complete this essay in the summer of 2006, Gaza is once again facing a crisis. Officials of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees [UNRWA], the organization which since 1950 has been responsible for aiding displaced Palestinians, have been trying to raise the alarm about worsening conditions in the Strip. Under regular assault by the Israeli military, with all means of entrance and egress frequently closed, the population is suffering what may by the most significant humanitarianism crisis since the immediate aftermath of the 1948 displacement—a moment known to Palestinians as the nakba [catastrophe]. What is striking about Gaza, and the case of Palestinian refugees more generally, is that since 1948 moments of crisis have punctuated a broader on-going, seemingly permanent, humanitarian condition. In the Palestinian experience the humanitarian emergency is (most of the time) no longer emergent. That is, while humanitarianism is self-defined as an exceptional mode of intervention, it has been the normal order of things for Palestinians. Further, however much practitioners might seek to avoid it, over the longue durée humanitarianism necessarily becomes something like government.

Taking the case of Gaza in the aftermath of the 1948 nakba [catastrophe] as an example, this essay explores this often slippery zone between humanitarianism and government. Since 1948 Gaza has been a space ‘shared’ by government—the Egyptian Administration until 1967—and humanitarian organizations—the American Friends Service Committee [AFSC] from 1948–1950 and UNRWA thereafter. Given that refugees formed a significant majority of the population, services provided by humanitarian organizations occupied as much space in the service landscape as those provided by government. Not only were there frequent jurisdictional quarrels among these various bodies, the question of what sorts of practice counted as “humanitarianism” and what as “government” was often unclear. This lack of clarity is not unique to Gaza—though it was heightened by the difficult conditions pertaining
there. Considering such practices as Egyptian government-sponsored “mercy trains” which brought aid to refugees in Gaza, the AFSC development of ration rolls and other procedures to manage and regularize the delivery of relief, and the regular tussles between the Administration and UNRWA about who would pay for particular public works projects, this essay explores the interactions among the various actors in these processes.

The Gaza Strip is itself an entity created out of crisis. Before 1948, this territory had been part of the Gaza District of Palestine, governed like the rest of the country by British Mandatory authorities. In the course of the war over the establishment of Israel, around 250,000 refugees from other parts of Palestine joined the 80,000 native inhabitants of the area. The boundaries of the Gaza Strip are those of the 1949 armistice agreement that halted fighting between Israel and Egypt, whose forces were in Gazan territory. The terms of this agreement recognized Egypt as the administrator of this newly constricted space with its newly expanded population. In the years that followed, Gaza was the only part of Mandate Palestine that was not absorbed into another state—Israel was established on the largest portion of this territory and Jordan annexed the West Bank. Per Egyptian policy, Gaza remained a Palestinian space, but it was a space without an actually existing sovereign. The unusual status of this territory necessarily contributed to the particularities of humanitarianism here.¹

In the immediate aftermath of displacement, the United Nations commissioned the AFSC to manage relief provision in Gaza (other organizations were given responsibility for Palestinian refugees in other areas), a responsibility which it maintained until the establishment of UNRWA in 1950 (the Agency was formally established at the end of 1949, but it took another few months for it to be ready to take over relief work). The establishment of UNRWA brought relief for all Palestinian refugees—whether in Gaza, the West Bank, Jordan, Lebanon, or Syria—under the same administrative umbrella. In each place, though,

¹ Debates about the extent to which humanitarian organizations should defer to local sovereigns have long been a part of this field (see for example, Michael Barnett, “Humanitarianism with a Sovereign Face: UNHCR in the Global Undertow” International Migration Review 35, 1 (2001): 244–277 and Tim Allen and David Styan, “A Right to Interfere? Bernard Kouchner and the New Humanitarianism,” Journal of International Development 12, 6 (2000): 825–42. The fact that there was government, but no sovereign in Gaza created particular challenges.