New Askar
A Photo Essay

Cristina Taulet

Cristina Taulet is a political science student at Davidson College, graduating in 2020. Her research at Davidson focuses on identity politics in the Arab World and its impact on diffusion dynamics in the Middle East and North Africa. This photo essay is the result of Taulet’s works in Nablus, Palestine.
As another day rises in the New Askar refugee camp, thousands of Palestinians strive to create a normal life under the ongoing Israeli occupation of the West Bank. For some, waking up every day not knowing the whereabouts of their possessions, their legal status, or the next time they will have access to running water has become a crude, normalized reality that the world seems to have forgotten. Three generations of refugees living in their own land have built communities that are trying to move forward and reconcile their living conditions with their desire for freedom.

Askar camp was first established in 1950, on the outskirts of the Nablus municipality in the northern West Bank. Significant Jewish immigration to Israel between 1950 and 1960 forced many Palestinians to leave their land and move to camps in the West Bank and Gaza. Askar experienced a rapid population increase,
which led to a region-wide shortage of space, resources, and aid that was especially severe in the camp. As a result, thousands of Palestinian refugees started settling down in an area one kilometer away from Askar, which soon became known as “New Askar.” As New Askar expanded independently from “Old” Askar, the UNRWA (United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East) began providing it with basic services such as education and healthcare, although it was not officially recognized as an independent refugee camp until 1995. For this reason, international aid was rarely equally distributed, and there were never enough resources to sustain basic standards of living while allowing for any type of development. It was not until the Oslo Accords (1993-1995) that the legal separation was recognized, and it was agreed that Askar camp would be under Palestinian control (Area A). However, New Askar fell under joint Palestinian-Israeli control (Area B), which meant that the Israeli Defense Forces would have a powerful impact on the management and life of the camp.

Despite the official status of Area B, Palestinian autonomy over New Askar is no more than an illusion. In practice, the IDF controls almost every aspect of Palestinians’ lives at the camp, and limits the entry of supplies. Water and energy scarcities are a daily occurrence, and many problems the refugees experience cannot be easily solved given the numerous existing mobility challenges. Due to the uncertain legal status of Palestinian refugees in the West Bank, families living at New Askar do not have the national documents certifying official citizenship that would allow them to move freely. The majority of residents never leave the camp or the Nablus region, and those that do must pass through strict checkpoints to travel even a few miles away.

The three greatest challenges that the community at New Askar faces on a daily basis are overcrowding, unemployment, and drug addiction. The boundaries agreed upon in the Oslo Accords prohibit the construction of buildings outside of the camp’s compound, but the population still grows rapidly, resulting in overcrowded shelters and cramped living conditions for the majority of families. “In New Askar people don’t really have privacy. We’re too many in too little space. However, this makes us a community. Here, solidarity is as strong as it can get,” asserted a father-of-five who was born and raised in the camp. In addition, many of the refugees do not have legal permission to work outside the camp, leaving them with extremely limited job opportunities. The resulting conditions cause many physical and psychological challenges, especially among the youth. “Many teenagers have lost hope for a better future. They are bored. They are almost certain they won’t get a job after studying, so they drop out of school and rarely go to university. A lot of them turn to drugs as a way of escaping their boredom and crude situation,” said Amjad Rfaie, the current director of New Askar camp.

“We are young. We were born here, raised here. Most of us have never left the Nablus region. We feel there is something wrong, even this is the only reality we know. We start asking questions about the occupation: Who is responsible? Why are we refugees in our own country? Why can’t I go see my grandma in Gaza?,” asks Mohammed, a twenty three-year-old born in New Askar who dropped out of his engineering studies to become a volunteer serving the children of New Askar. “I want to dedicate myself to these kids. I want them to have a better life than the one I and my parents have. They deserve opportunities just like any other human being.”

Efforts to improve living conditions in New Askar are manifold, though limited by larger political realities. Many inhabitants of the camp have come to accept the occupation as a fact of life and now seek a way to move forward with the current circumstances rather than placing their hopes in the next peace treaty. Many local and international organizations attempt to promote alternative forms of education and entertainment, including arts and sports. In the last two years, a soccer field and an outdoor theater have been built for programs designed for the younger generations. Other activities such as painting, photography, boxing, basketball, and gymnastics are included on the camp’s programs.

Even though New Askar’s residents support various parties and differ on numerous political grounds, they
are unified by the Palestinian struggle and the desire for freedom. “Of course everyone’s life in Palestine is political. It has to. All of us have different opinions on how things should be done to reach our freedom,” said Abdul, born in Askar as a second generation refugee.

"However, we have that in common. Our same goal of liberating Palestine makes us brothers and sisters. In the end, superficial differences don’t matter when we’re all together in this struggle.”

Above: Ahmed, seven years old, rides his bike through the narrow streets of New Askar. Children at the camp have very limited access to healthcare and water, but still manage to find entertainment.
Top Left: Above: Children in New Askar play in the camp's narrow streets. Unable to leave due to their refugee status, their life is confined to cramped, often unhygienic spaces.

Top Right: A co-ed school managed by the UNRWA. Located in New Askar Camp, it is designated as aid for the entire Askar region. Co-ed education is increasingly welcomed in Palestine as a method to achieve gender equality and provide equal opportunities after graduation.

Bottom Right: Infrastructure at New Askar is fragile and incomplete. There is no functioning trash recollection system, causing widespread hygiene and health issues.
Top Left: Two children perform a skit on the top floor of the theater, while it was still under construction.

Bottom Left: The population at New Askar is very engaged with Palestinian politics and holds on to voices of the past that gave hope to the Palestinian liberation movement. Characters such as Yasser Arafat are considered icons of resistance and freedom, and their images are prominently displayed even today.

Bottom Right: Amjad Rfaie, current mayor and director of New Askar, was born and raised in the camp. He became part of the resistance movement and was imprisoned at age fifteen. Six years later, he was freed and now works to build organizations and networks to peacefully fight against the situation. “I believe in fighting through education. We have seen that violence does not work to create peace. If we want peace, we need an educated generation that can maintain dialogue and can live together accepting other belief systems and cultures. When I returned from jail, I wanted to build a library. Ten years later, here it is. I am proud of our achievements but there is still so much we have to do. Little by little, but there is still some hope.”
*Top Left:* A Palestinian child watches the life of the camp through his window. Some families prefer to keep children in their homes to prevent them from exposure to infections, criminal environments, and illegal substances.

*Bottom Left:* The Palestinian flag is present in almost every corner of New Askar, reproduced in different forms and sizes.

*Bottom Right:* Graffiti art, used to communicate ideas about freedom, occupation, beauty, religion, and Palestinian identity, is one of the most popular forms of resistance among Palestinian refugees.