

A Site of Contestation: Neutrality, Incitement, and Palestinian National Identity Under UNRWA Education

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Introduction

Since 1948, Palestinian education has been a site of contestation and discord. To explore the dynamic of how institutional change effectively shapes a population and its future, this project investigates UNRWA’s education system in depth. More specifically, my research question is: how do UNRWA’s neutrality mandate and the incitement narrative shape Palestinian national identity in refugee education?

Goals & Objectives of the Work

This research aims to analyze the relationship between UNRWA’s neutrality mandate, pro-Israel incitement narratives, and Palestinian national identity and consciousness.

Instead of referencing dominant institutional and political narratives, I focused on Palestinian’s lived experiences in hopes of uncovering what UNRWA systemically withholds.

The study seeks to answer the following questions:

- How does UNRWA’s neutrality mandate shape what Palestinian students are—and are not—taught about their own history, culture, and national identity?
- How does the pro-Israel incitement narrative function to justify continued scrutiny, censorship, and defunding of Palestinian education?



Methods & Positionality

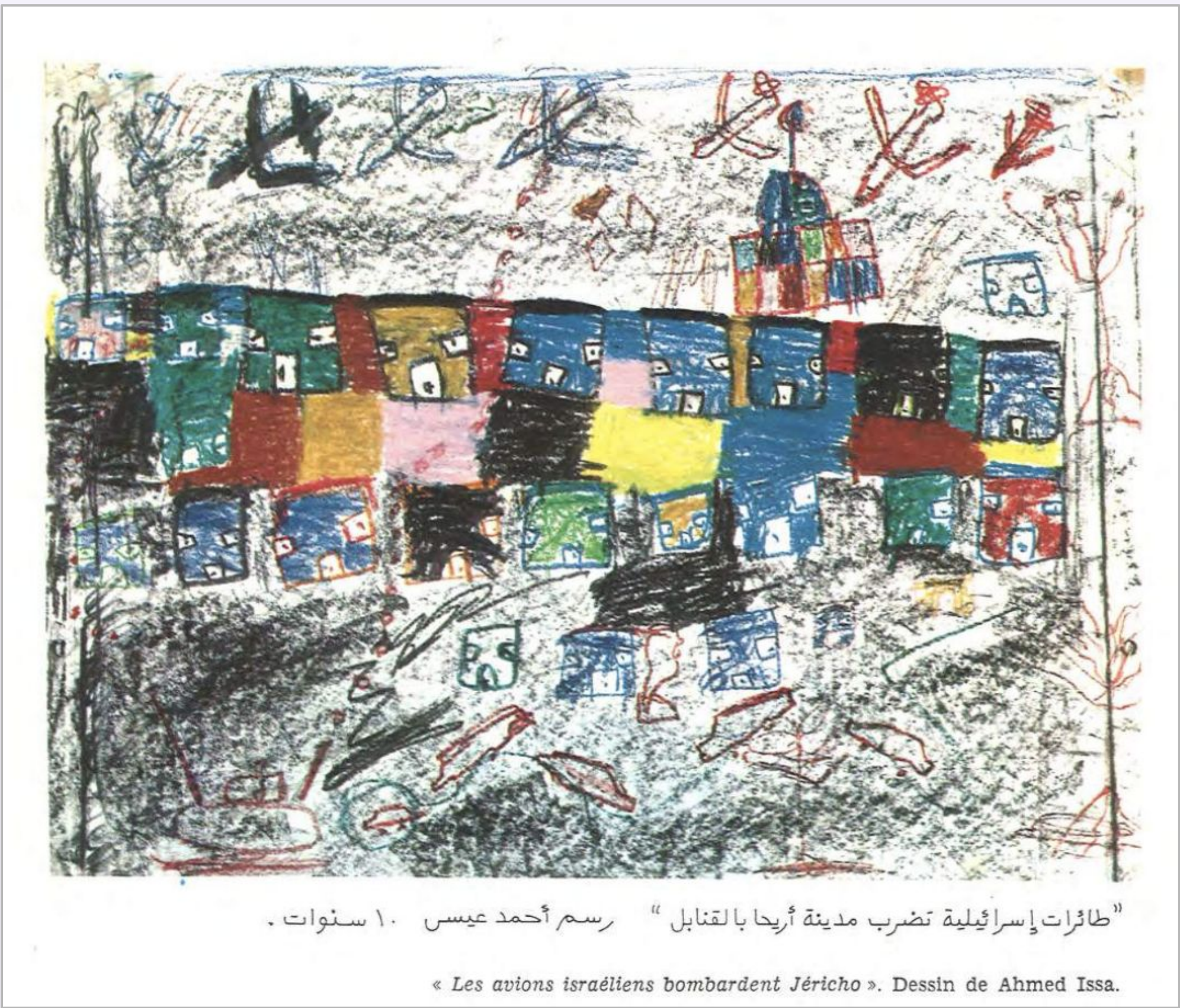
This research draws on a literature review of existing scholarship, UNRWA policy documents, historical accounts, and organizational reports published by UN Watch and IMPACT-se. Primary sources include published interviews with Palestinian refugees and UNRWA staff; these ground this research in lived experience rather than just institutional narratives alone.

As a white Jewish woman born and raised in the West with limited Arabic knowledge, I arrive at this field as an outsider looking in. Given the sensitivity of this subject, direct interviews were not feasible, so I relied on existing published interviews and translated sources.

Discussion

- UNRWA’s neutrality mandate treats Palestinian identity as too political to teach. This opens the door to incitement accusations from groups like IMPACT-se. These accusations trigger more censorship, curriculum review, and suspension of staff, thus reinforcing the same neutrality mandate and suppression of Palestinian identity and national consciousness.
- The Human Rights, Conflict Resolution, and Tolerance Programme was created to address curricula avoidance of relevant educational content for Palestinians, but donor conditionality shaped it—turning it into another mechanism for censorship
 - Adoption of host-state curriculum reflects a broader bias towards resettlement over Palestinian’s right to return
 - Material flagged as incitement by pro-Israeli organizations are just a reflection of Palestinian daily life under occupation

Michael Apple’s concept of “official knowledge” shows curriculum is never neutral and Paulo Freire advises that treating students as passive recipients can instill the oppressor's worldview in them.



Conclusions & Next Steps

- This study shows that UNRWA’s neutrality mandate and the pro-Israel incitement narrative work together to reinforce the erasure of Palestinian identity
 - Neutrality isn’t actually neutral. It protects donor relationships and funding more than it protects the Palestinians it supposedly serves
 - Despite this, Palestinian identity persists through everyday acts—captured by the Arabic concept of Qahr which holds both the weight of injustice and the transformation born from it
- I hope to continue this research by interviewing Palestinian refugees on their UNRWA experiences and education journeys
 - With the Palestinian refugee crises growing and thousands of children out of school since the genocide began in 2023, how will Palestinian education systems have to adapt and develop to cater toward the ever changing needs of Palestinian students?

References

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