



## THE TIME BENEATH THE CONCRETE: PALESTINE BETWEEN CAMP AND COLONY

### BETONUN ALTINDAKİ ZAMAN: KAMP İLE KOLONİ ARASINDA FİLİSTİN

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**ABSTRACT** Nasser Abourahme's work, "The Time Beneath the Concrete: Palestine between Camp and Colony," offers an original and theoretically rich examination that treats Palestinian refugee camps as spaces at the heart of the struggle between settler colonists and the indigenous Palestinian people. The author approaches the phenomenon of refugee camps not merely as temporary humanitarian shelters, but as both concrete socio-political objects and abstract concepts. He analyzes ongoing settler colonialism in Palestine through the lens of the camps and discusses the applicability of this analysis to patterns of displacement on a global scale. The book's central argument is that the existence of Palestinian refugee camps prevents the Israeli state from concluding the process of displacement and dispossession of Palestinians and moving towards normalization. Refugee camps embody what Abourahme calls the temporal condition of "settleness," in which aggressive settler projects are constantly disrupted by anti-colonial resistance before they can be completed, leading to a perpetual stalemate. The author presents the historical development of the Palestinian Question in the context of refugee camps within a rich conceptual framework. In the data collection phase, the author draws on UN archives, official Israeli state documents, and literary works such as novels written by Palestinians. Abourahme's work contributes not only to Palestinian studies and debates on settler colonialism but also to the literature on global migration and displacement.

**Keywords:** Palestine, Settler Colonialism, Refugee Camps, Israel.

**ÖZ** Nasser Abourahme'nin "Betonun Altındaki Zaman: Kamp ile Koloni Arasında Filistin" adlı eseri, Filistinli mülteci kamplarını yerleşimci koloniciler ile yerli Filistin halkı arasındaki mücadelenin merkezindeki mekânlar olarak ele alan özgün ve kuramsal açıdan zengin bir inceleme sunmaktadır. Yazar mülteci kampı olgusunu yalnızca geçici bir insani barınak olarak görmek yerine onu hem somut bir sosyo-politik nesne hem de soyut bir kavram olarak ele almıştır. Böylece Filistin'deki devam eden yerleşimci sömürgeciliği kamplar ekseninde analiz etmiş ve bu analizin küresel ölçekteki yerinden edilme örüntülerine aktarılabilirliğini tartışmıştır. Kitabın temel argümanı, Filistinli mülteci kamplarının varlığının İsrail devleti için Filistinlileri yerinden etme ve mülksüzleştirme sürecini sonlandırıp normalleşmeye geçmesini engellediği yönündedir. Mülteci kampları, Abourahme'nin "yerleşimcilik" (settleness) olarak adlandırdığı zamansal durumu somutlaştırmakta, saldırgan yerleşimci projelerin nihayete ermeden sürekli olarak antikolonyal direnişle sekteye uğramasına ve sürekli bir çıkmazda kalmasına yol açmaktadır. Filistin Meselesinin mülteci kampları bağlamında tarihsel gelişimini zengin bir kavramsal çerçeve oluşturarak sunan yazar, veri toplama aşamasında Birleşmiş Milletler arşivleri, İsrail devletine ait resmî belgeler ve Filistinlilerin yazdığı romanlar gibi edebiyat eserlerinden yararlanmıştır. Abourahme'nin çalışması sadece Filistin çalışmaları ve yerleşimci sömürgecilik tartışmalarına değil, aynı zamanda küresel göç ve yerinden edilme literatürüne önemli katkılar sunmaktadır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Filistin, Yerleşimci Sömürgecilik, Mülteci Kampları, İsrail.



Nasser Abourahme's "The Time Beneath the Concrete: Palestine between Camp and Colony" offers a groundbreaking analysis of Palestinian refugee camps as key sites in the struggle between settler colonizers and the indigenous population over time and space. The author grounds the analytical framework of the study in the concept of the camp. The camp is both a concrete socio-political object and an abstract concept in the book, and it is used as a heuristic framework for reading the socio-political history of the Palestine Question and the dynamics of settler colonialism.

The central thesis of the book is that the very existence of Palestinian refugee camps, born of the Nakba's expulsions, prevents Israel from ever moving past the past, trapping the Zionist project in an unresolved founding moment of conquest. The camps embody an unfinished colonial encounter: they are the time that will not and cannot pass, a living reminder of dispossession that keeps the settler state in a condition of perpetual unsettlement (pp. 26-28). In turn, Palestinians' unwavering insistence on the right of return represents an anticolonial refusal to let the past be sealed off into a finished settler future. Rather than a mere relic of history, the refugee camp emerges in Abourahme's account as a dynamic political institution that holds open an "irresolution of the present" (p. 23). This temporal impasse, in other words, the protracted inability of the settler project to resolve its foundational crime, is both the product of Palestinian resistance and the defining feature of Israel's colonial condition, which Abourahme terms "settleness." Rather than defining settler colonialism only by its structural logic of eliminating and replacing natives, Abourahme emphasizes its unstable and unsettled condition. Settleness describes the mix of aggressive expansionism and perpetual anxiety that characterizes settler polities that have not (and cannot) conclusively supplant indigenous presence. The Palestinian refugee camps are the material embodiment of this unsettled condition. Those refugee camps "keep the settler colony a settler colony" (p. 28), never allowing it to evolve into a normalized post-colonial state. By foregrounding this temporal impasse, Abourahme shifts settler colonial studies beyond debates over definition and toward an analysis of how settler politics and anticolonial refusals constitute a field of struggle shaped around time. This is a remarkable contribution to the settler colonialism literature that illuminates time as a battleground alongside land and sovereignty.

The book shows that Zionism's drive to indigenize itself in the land has been thwarted by Palestinians' refusal to disappear. The persistent presence of the refugees keeps Israel suspended in the temporal impasse of settleness (p. 25). It is, as Abourahme writes, a battle over time itself — over whether the Nakba will be consigned to a closed past or remain an open, unresolved ongoing history of colonial struggle. The book thus positions temporality as a central dimension of settler colonial power and anti-colonial resistance. By keeping alive the possibility of return and refusing any final settlement, Palestinians actively keep time open as a horizon of political struggle. The book gives many examples that show how Israel's state-building project is fundamentally a project of temporal engineering. Through laws, urban planning, and discursive narratives, Israeli governments seek to "çölse Theo temporalinse of the camps" (p. 152) and normalize the present as if the colonial violence were over and done. In turn, Palestinian practices of refusal and return thwart this teleology by keeping time unresolved, undefined.



The book combines conceptual discussion with a historical grounding. In this way, the text moves forward chronologically through Palestinian camp history (from the 1940s to the present), while each chapter also develops a theoretical theme drawn from that history. The author's collection of data for each of the four main chapters is impressively deep. Each chapter stands on a robust base of primary sources, from United Nations files to Israeli state archives to Palestinian literature, making the analysis rigorous and credible and strengthening the theoretical claims.

The first Chapter (pp. 33-62) serves as a prehistory of the Palestinian refugee camp system. Drawing on the personal papers of Gordon Clapp, the former director of the Tennessee Valley Authority, Abourahme uncovers how the blueprint for UNRWA's camp regime in 1949 was laid in a "techno-imperial moment" rather than a purely humanitarian one. Clapp's team imported to Palestine the racialized development logics of the US South, aiming to turn idle refugees into productive workers. Abourahme labels the fusion of technical expertise and moralizing colonial attitudes "technomorality," arguing that the ostensibly apolitical technical plans for the camps hid an imperial agenda of social engineering (pp. 56-62). The chapter illuminates how colonial power shaped the very design of refugee camps from the outset: "The technical is an imperial alibi," (p. 60) as Abourahme succinctly puts it.

The second Chapter (pp. 63-92) examines how authority was exercised and contested in the early decades of the camps, using UNRWA's own archives as the primary source. Abourahme details the Agency's efforts between 1950 and 1969 to regulate and domesticate the camps' space, for example, imposing strict rules on shelter construction and layout, in effect turning the refugees into governed inhabitants of a new semi-permanent domain. He shows that when the ambitious work programs envisaged by Clapp failed, UNRWA's authority came to rest on managing the everyday material life of the camps. Paradoxically, this technocratic authority was both powerful and fragile. The chapter follows a turning point in 1969, when the Cairo Agreement allowed the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) to take over administration of the camps in Lebanon. At that moment, UNRWA's top-down control broke down. This chapter's analysis of camp architecture, regulations, and riots demonstrates how refugee inhabitation became a site of struggle over who gets to govern camp life.

In Chapter Three (pp. 93-125), the book turns to the period of the Palestinian Revolution between 1968 and 1982. Abourahme shifts to cultural and literary archives to explore the relationship between the guerrilla movement and the camps. He investigates how the revolutionaries sought to transform the camps from spaces of confinement into bases of insurgency, thereby creating a new historical time of revolution. Abourahme juxtaposes political discourse with three Palestinian novels of the revolutionary era, works by Ghassan Kanafani, Rashad Abu Shawir, and Yayha Yakhliif. He observes that in those novels, the protagonist's journey from camp exile to fighter comes unstuck, as the story itself struggles to move beyond the camp's gravity. This literary analysis enriches the chapter's conceptual insight: the camp imposed a form (both material and narrative) that could not be shed even in revolutionary praxis. Abourahme concludes that the PLO's revolution was not a straightforward linear progression toward statehood, but rather an open-ended mode of subject formation, a becoming revolutionary. In other words, the



revolutionary project remained unfinished, its time perpetually deferred – much like the fate of the camps themselves.

The fourth chapter (pp. 126-163) enters the mindset of the settler-colonial state by mining Israeli state archives to understand how Israel has conceived of the refugee camps over time. Abourahme introduces the concept of “negation” to characterize Israel’s persistent drive to erase the political threat the camps represent. He documents a series of Israeli schemes that developed after the 1967 occupation of the West Bank and Gaza and aimed at making the refugees vanish from plans to physically demolish camps or disperse their populations, to diplomatic efforts to resettle Palestinians in far-flung areas. This negational logic, as Abourahme defines it, is more than just denial of Palestinian rights; it is an active, often vindictive, campaign to confirm that there is no longer such a place as Palestine, and there is nothing for Palestinians to return to (pp. 131-132). By examining internal Israeli planning reports and proposals, the chapter reveals how deeply the specter of return haunts the Zionist imagination: officials repeatedly identified the camps as the core of the problem due to the consciousness of an unruly time they nourish. In Israeli discourse, the very temporariness of the camps, the refugees’ refusal to settle elsewhere or abandon hope, is anathema, so the state fixates on eliminating that temporality through permanent solutions. Abourahme’s analysis shows that even decades after 1948, “normal” polity was undermined by the continued existence of these zones of Palestinian liminality. The concept of negation thus ties together the book’s themes: it is the settler’s counterpart to refusal, an endless project to erase unresolved time.

Following these chapters, Abourahme concludes with a brief coda titled “The Politics of Inhabitation,” which casts the book’s insights onto a global canvas. He argues that the Palestinian camp is not an aberration but rather a forerunner of a world increasingly defined by mass displacement and mass encampment. From refugee camps to migrant detention centers, “this is our present of mass encampment,” he observes (p. 165). The enduring plight of Palestinians thus offers insight into the future. “Palestinian camps — the world’s longest-running case of continuous encampment — are in growing company. In hindsight, they are our global harbingers, the great forerunners of all but permanent encampment” (p. 168). Abourahme asserts that the concept of inhabitation – making life in conditions of enforced temporariness – is a defining political question of our era. Moreover, he suggests that every struggle of migrants and refugees today carries a kernel of anticolonialism. In a striking final provocation, Abourahme urges us to read the world from Palestine, implying that the lessons of Palestinian refusal and perseverance can illuminate global patterns of dispossession and resistance.

If one were to find a limitation in this remarkable work, it might be that the very richness of its theoretical framework demands careful, patient reading. Abourahme introduces numerous neologisms and conceptual nuances, which, while illuminating, require the reader to be conversant with critical theory and the history of Palestine. In a sense, the book assumes a scholarly audience, but general readers might find some sections dense.

*The Time Beneath the Concrete* is a significant contribution that will reverberate across several fields. For scholars of Palestine, Abourahme’s book offers a new lens on the “Question of Palestine,” one that transcends familiar debates about statehood, peace processes, or humanitarian crises. By recentring the



refugee camp and the temporal struggle, he reframes Palestine’s story as an open-ended anticolonial saga of global importance. It compels scholars to rethink assumptions about victory and defeat, showing how endurance and refusal have been forms of political agency with lasting effects. For settler colonialism studies, Abourahme’s work extends the field’s analytic vocabulary with concepts like settlerness and negation, challenging researchers to incorporate temporality and unresolved struggle into their analyses of settler societies. His emphasis that settler projects are haunted by what they have not erased will likely inspire comparative work. In political theory, especially theories of memory, futurity, and resistance, Abourahme’s arguments carry significant weight. Political theorists concerned with history and justice will find in this book a compelling case of how an oppressed people’s refusal to let go of the past, insisting on return, and sustaining life in exile functions as a powerful counterweight to the dominant power’s attempt to normalize oppression. Finally, the book encourages scholars and practitioners of migration studies to link contemporary displacements to longer histories of colonialism and to recognize refugee communities as active political agents within the political struggle where issues of justice, memory, and the right to time are at stake.

## REFERENCES

The Time Beneath the Concrete: Palestine between Camp and Colony, Nasser Abourahme (Author) 2025 Durham and London: Duke University Press, 248 pp., \$27.95 (paper), ISBN: 9781478031444 (paper).