



MAPS, TECHNOLOGY, AND DECOLONIAL SPATIAL PRACTICES IN PALESTINE

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The practice of mapping in Palestine-Israel has long been an exercise in power, imperialism, and dispossession. From the British Mandate to the present day, Zionist (later Israeli) cartographers have used maps to obfuscate and eradicate physical, geographic, and social markers of Palestinians' connections to, and possession of, the land.

During the British Mandate, the colonial forces produced an array of detailed surveys for military, political, social, and economic planning. The geographic distribution and activity of Palestine's indigenous Arab inhabitants were rarely depicted on the maps. However, the geographic language was almost entirely comprised of transliterated Arabic names.

In the wake of the First Zionist Congress in Basel in 1897 and the first Aliyah, or wave of European Jewish immigration from 1881 to 1903, Zionist maps began to proliferate, many featuring topographic and religious markers designed to redraw the map in the image of a proposed Zionist state.

After the Nakba of 1948, the new state of Israel set out to transform the national map from Arabic to Hebrew as a way of Zionist nation-building. The Hebrew map continues to be an exercise in state formation, a living document of Zionist colonization where Zionist ideology is folded into the spatial practices of the Israeli state.

Today, legislation such as the Kyl-Bingaman Amendment (KBA), which restricts the availability of high-resolution satellite imagery by preventing US satellite operators and retailers from selling or disseminating images of Palestine-Israel at a resolution higher than that available on the non-US market, as well as the complicity of technology firms in privileging Israeli spatial control at the expense of Palestinians – such as how Google Maps routes are designed for Israelis and illegal Israeli settlers – represent a missed opportunity to use technological advancements to democratize mapping.

However, technology can serve as a tool to tangibly imagine the right of return. Detailed historical maps and uncensored, high-resolution images, for instance, allow Palestinians to catalogue the remnants of villages and towns destroyed during the Nakba. Such images not only provide substantial proof of the ongoing colonial encroachment into Palestinian land, but allow Palestinians to actively imagine an alternative reality.

For Palestinians living under martial law in the Occupied Palestinian Territory or under siege in the Gaza Strip, despite technology creating an opening for democratizing spatial practices, mainstream mapping applications fail to account for the walled-off reality on the ground and the restrictions and repercussions it has on Palestinian movement. Yet Palestinians and allies continue to subvert and resist colonial maps through counter-maps.

There are some other concrete steps forward:

1. As recommended by 7amleh, the Arab Center for Social Media Advancement, Palestine should be named properly on Google Maps, in line with the UN General Assembly Resolution of November 2012.
2. According to Resolution 181 of the UN General Assembly, the international status of Jerusalem should be correctly displayed on Google Maps. Google must also identify and correctly label illegal Israeli settlements on occupied land, according to Article 49 of the Fourth Geneva Convention and Article 55 of the Hague Regulations.
3. Google should clearly distinguish areas A, B, and C in the West Bank and account for all movement restrictions and restricted streets.
4. Google should locate “unrecognized” Palestinian villages within Israel as well as Palestinian villages in Area C.
5. The United States should dispose of the KBA, leveling the commercial playing field between US and non-US imagery providers. This would allow satellite operators to share high-resolution images of Palestine-Israel on widely-used open-access platforms. It would also enable archaeologists, researchers, and humanitarians to accurately document changes on the ground and allow for better accountability of the Israeli occupation.
6. Palestinian civil society should encourage and promote the active use of counter-maps as an alternative to incomplete contemporary maps. Simultaneously, Palestinian civil society and allies should focus their efforts on pressuring (a) the US government to abolish the KBA and (b) Google to make the changes outlined above.