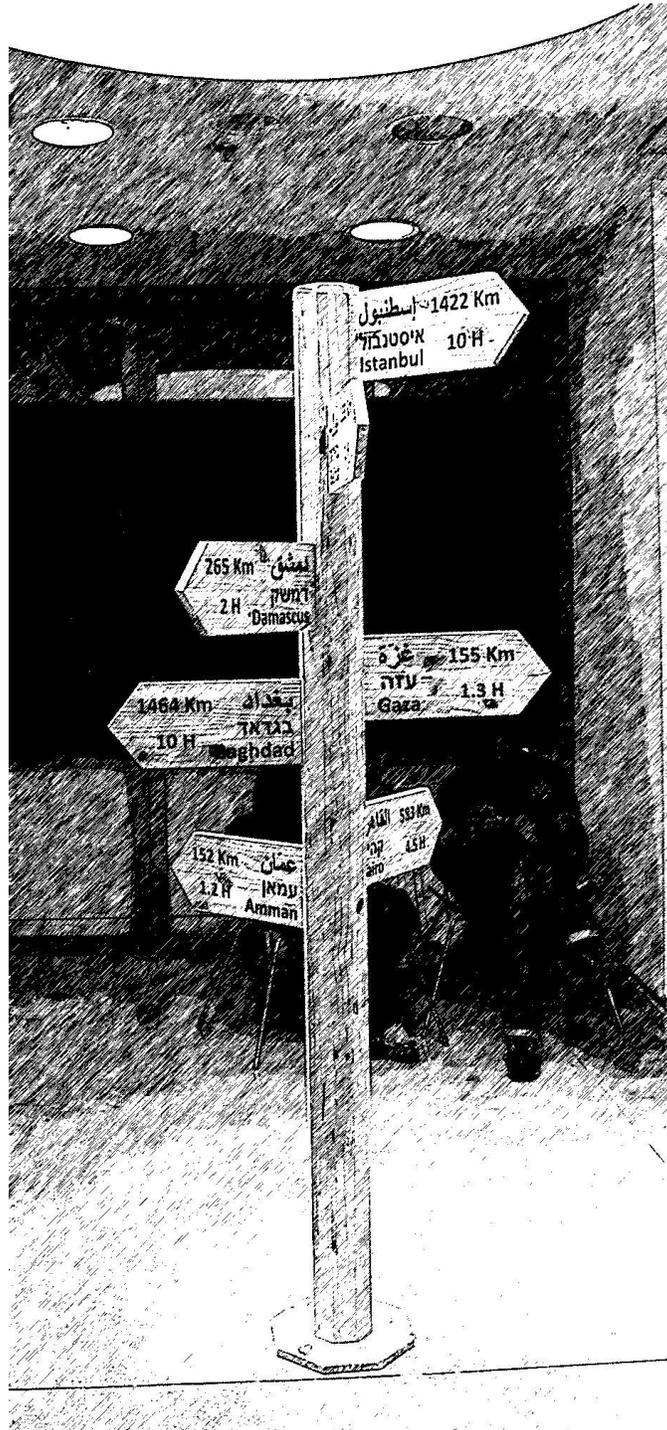


Geography, Borders and Creativity

Lecture and text by Fadwa Naamna



Middle Eastern cities distances from Haifa (Palestine)

Borders, mobility and spatial perception

The first time I came to Europe, I was obsessed with the idea of crossing countries without seeing actual physical fences or boundaries, so I traveled by car from Rome to Amsterdam in twenty-two hours and then all the way back, just to experience the feeling of open borders. I was also fascinated to see previously active checkpoints turned into non-active places or museums, forts turned into memorials, and other weapons and residues of the previous century's war in Europe, all turned into inactive historic objects and artifacts, that can help one to understand and learn geopolitical transformations of the place. Living between Europe and Palestine today is moving between totally two different contradicted realities, which demands a mind-mode shifting each time. While one could pass European countries by train, a car, or a cheap flight, the reality in the Middle East is much more involved with ruthless physical boundaries, documents, paperwork, visas, passports, complicated procedures and often it is impossible to travel to most of the adjacent Middle Eastern cities.

The perception of the landscape affects cultivating memories, identities, and cultures. Landscapes are usually marked by lines which separate lands and scatter them into fragments. Frontiers and Borders are lines drawn to score and secure a property, a territory or an area of control. In the past, people used to build forts and fences around their cities for security reasons, and they often used the natural geography to separate between larger territories. However, in modern times, borders are the physical liminal areas which separate a sovereign national state from the other, they are agreed or fought upon, depending on the international relations. This is when identities stopped to be culturally exclusive, but more national titles, papers, identities, numbers, and passports, that decide where they can go and what borders they can cross or cannot. Borders might be natural, like rivers, mountains, seas, oceans, lakes and other areas marking natural geomorphological transitions in the landscape. However, frontiers can be more than merely seeming lines drawn on maps, but rather physical man-made artificial interventions like geographical boundaries constructed to separate land, people and cultures, this is well noticed especially in regions and times of wars and conflicts.

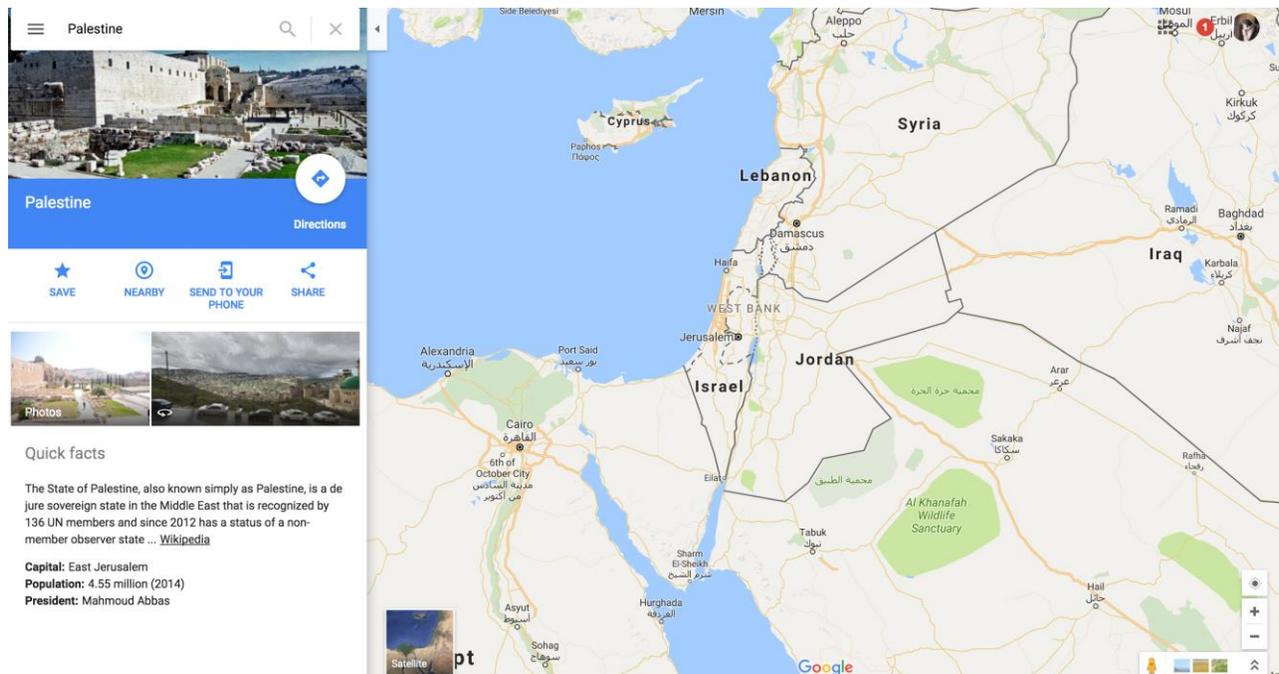
As a Palestinian, traveling was always involved with expressions that might be irrelevant or even ironically nostalgic in some places today, such as borders, checkpoints, security checks, borders defense, militant presence and so forth. The Palestinian territories including West Bank, Gaza Strip and some parts of Eastern Jerusalem are all placed on an area of less than 6020 km² square¹ with a population of 4.8 millions², while the Israeli area is 22072 km² square³ with a population of roughly 8.2 millions⁴, of which 20% are native Palestinians with Israeli citizenships. However, this tiny land with a total area of less than 27000 km² square is divided unevenly and is currently full colonial boundaries that cut off the natural sequence of the landscape and place inhabitants from different cultural backgrounds at unequal freedom of mobility levels. Each border and border has various names and narratives told by different contradicted sides who inhabit the area, these borders and narratives are the visual and theoretical cornerstones that influence essentially cultivating the collective memories of the place.

¹ [UNdata](#) - World Statistics Pocketbook (2014)

² Ibid (2016)

³ [UNdata](#) - World Statistics Pocketbook (2014)

⁴ Ibid (2016)



Where is Palestine? [Google maps](#)

To travel from Palestine abroad, each group of the aforementioned has to pass through different procedures and borders crossing points. Palestinians in the West Bank and Jerusalem can apply for issue passports from the Palestinian authorities, then they have to get to [Allenby Bridge](#) near Jericho, and pass heavy security checks to cross to the Jordanian side, where they have to take the transportation to Queen Alia airport to be able to fly abroad. Gazans typically use the Egyptian borders for traveling, borders between Gaza and Israel have been closed since the siege started in 2006, the Egyptian side is not safe to travel either as Rafah crossing point is not always opened, hence freedom of mobility in the area is much limited and a coming back home is not guaranteed after leaving Gaza. Generally speaking, traveling for Palestinians from both areas involves applying and waiting for documents, long hours of travelling in curved roads, delays in the crossing points while being thoroughly checked under intolerable treatment and conditions. For Palestinians inside the Green Line⁵ it is another story, with Israeli passports, they can fly from Ben Gurion airport. However, this privilege comes simultaneously with a curse, on one hand, they may be able to travel from a nearby airport, on the other, hand they cannot travel to most of the Middle Eastern and Arab countries, hence they are generally socially and culturally isolated from the other Palestinians, also from the outer Arab world, and they are often excluded from debates, texts, researches and other things related to Palestine or otherwise, a thing which has further consequences...

⁵ The Green Line stands for the Israeli borders between 1948 until 1967. Palestinians who inhabit areas which are totally under Israeli governance since 1948 are also called "The Green Line Palestinians".

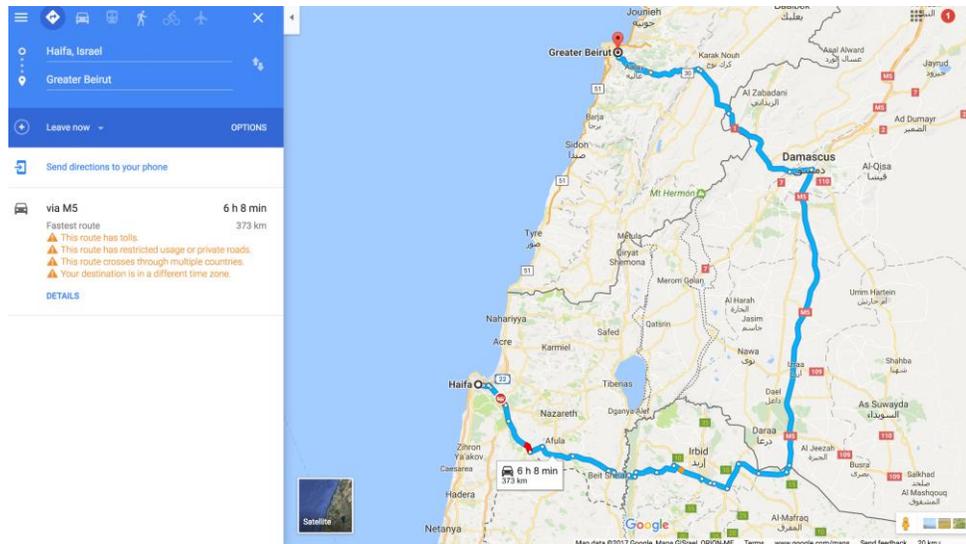


Palestinians waiting on Allenby Bridge when it was closed for several hours, a thing which happens very often in this crossing point



Ben Gurion airport

Searching “Palestine” in the Google Maps, one can not find it. However, it can be searched under the name of “Israel”, the reasons for that are involved with questions about the political colonial power systems which control the media and the technology. When navigating the way from my hometown, [Haifa to Beirut](#), a road which would should take less than 1.5 hours for 130 km by a car if it was opened, the Google Maps would give a curved way of 373 km distance, crossing through [Sheikh Hussein Bridge](#), located eastern to ([Beit She'an](#)), then passing Jordan to Syria and finally Lebanon. However, this journey is doable only for a valid passport which allows its holders crossing those specific borders. Though I am a Palestinian, this journey is still impossible for me, as I have Israeli citizenship and passport.



The only ground route between Haifa to Beirut, [Google Maps](#)



Israeli forces on the Lebanese border fence, 2012. Photography: Yaron Kaminsky

The border from **Syrian side** is also totally closed and fenced, as Syria is also declared an “enemy country” by Israel as well. This border side was fought upon and redrawn in different phases such as 1948, 1967, 1973 and 1981. Though the UN Resolution 242 law declared in 1967 and 497 law in 1981 which cancel the Israeli occupation in the Golan Heights and other occupied areas and demands retreating of the Israeli forces. The laws were never respected by the Israeli government, more new Jewish settlements have been initiated thereabout the border with Syria, on a land which is occupied and even internationally declared as Syrian.



Israeli - Syrian border. (photo credit: Moshe Shai/Flash90)



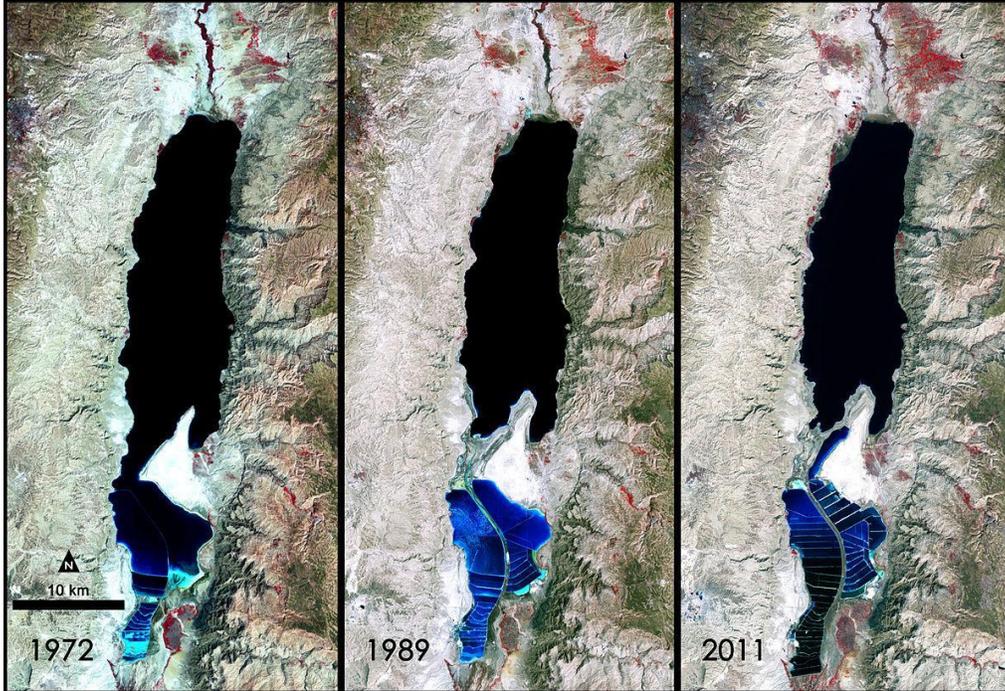
(Atef Safadi / European Pressphoto Agency)



Israeli-Jordanian border, followed by the borders with Syria and Lebanon

The border with Syria in the Golan Heights is followed from east-south by a long **border with Jordan**, where the natural geological transformations are quite striking. This border is also closed with 3 crossing points available for citizens (two for Israeli passports holders and tourists and one for temporary Palestinian passport holders), this border was totally closed until the Israeli-Jordanian peace agreement in 1994. Primarily, the border between Israel to Jordan was described in different old books as the Bible as the Jordan rift valley, a division which flows with the natural geographical landscape and allows both sides to enjoy the natural resources of the area, this region has long served a resting station for millions of migrating birds annually. However, the Jordan river natural route is interrupted by Degania dam which is in the Israeli side, blocking the water before it gets into the Jordanian territory. This artificial intervention seems to cause further severe consequences such as the disappearance of oases, lakes and hence ecosystems and other organisms. the Jordan river is supposed to pour in the Dead Sea, the lowest and saltiest spot in the world which is also claimed as World Heritage by the UNESCO, but the water almost does not get to that point today. The area which is mostly privatized in the Israeli side, containing of chemical factories in the south, the sea is dehydrated until the northern and southern parts got separated. The dehydration phenomenon is causing other phenomena such as sinkholes, interrupting ecosystems and disappearance of organisms. To solve the problem a project called the *Red Sea - Dead Sea Water Conveyance*⁶ was proposed, the project was also supposed to solve water problems that Jordan is suffering due to the lack of natural resources. However, all this was never escalated to practical steps, basically because of political reasons.

⁶ From Waterworld.com



A map which shows the accelerated dehydration of the Dead Sea

**Sinkholes in the Dead Sea area:

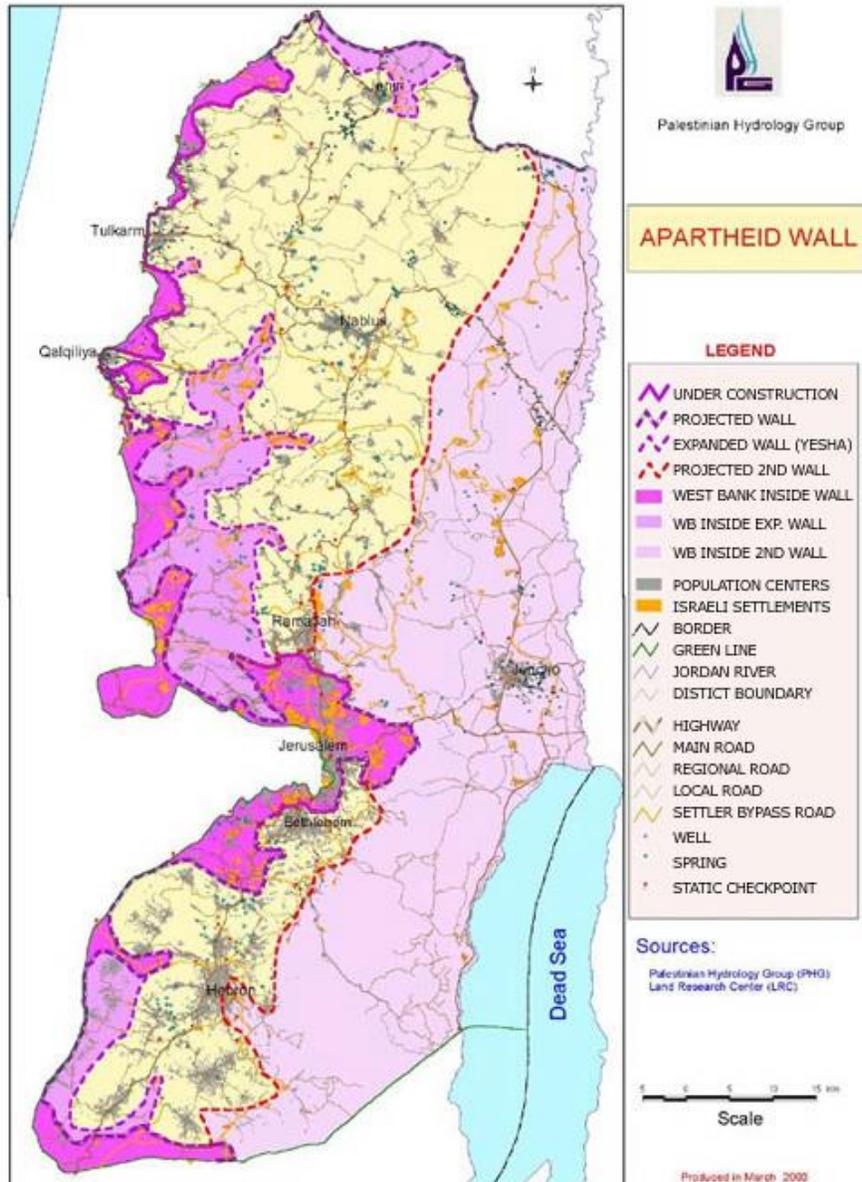
http://res.cloudinary.com/haaretz-trial/video/upload/c_scale,q_80,w_920/v1456508212/Bolan_Eng-1_xplyup.mp4



Photo: ilvangelo-israele.it



The internal borders in Israel are even more gigantically harsh. As the Palestinian territories spaces are shrinking day by day. Around the West Bank and some parts of Jerusalem area there is a high concrete fence, separating between families and neighborhoods of the same city and also interrupting natural sequences. There are 98 fixed checkpoints, 59 internal and hundreds of flying ones.⁷ Palestinians can pass to the Israeli side only with approved documents that are not easily to be reached. And Israelis are basically forbidden from entering the area for security reasons. However, Palestinians from inside the Green Line, from Jerusalem and other areas, do use several checkpoints to pass to the Palestinian territories.



⁷ From [B'TSELM](#) website



The Separation Wall in Jerusalem area



Walking to Qalandiya Checkpoint on the second Friday of Ramadan, 2015.



Border Police at the Qalandiya checkpoint, October 23, 2012 (Oren Nahshon/Flash90)



Photo: B'TSELEM

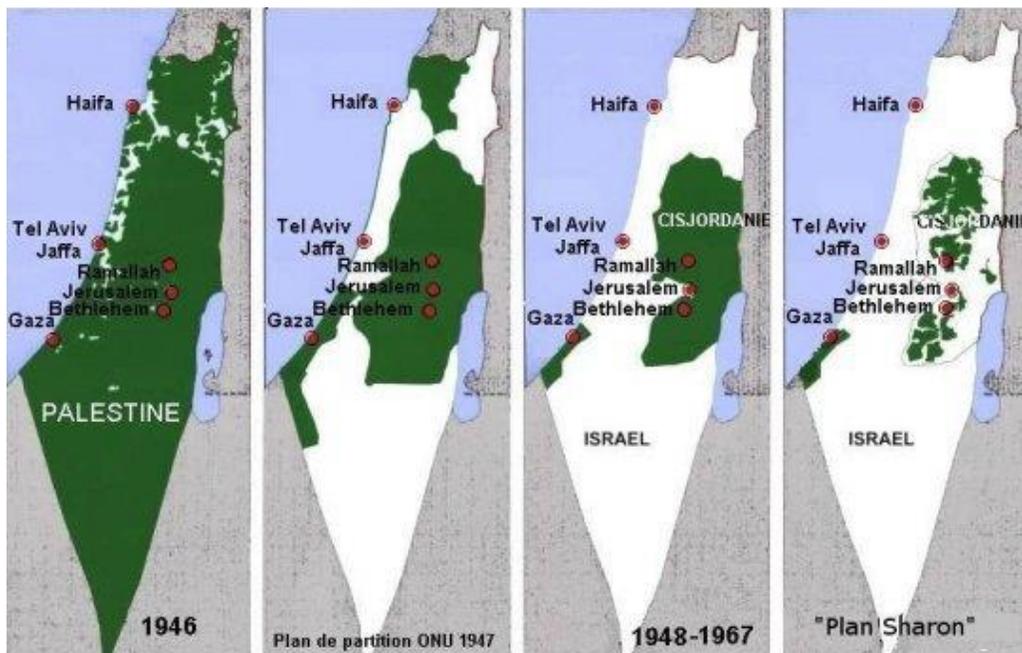


Palestinians wait to cross Qalandia checkpoint on their way to attend Ramadan Friday prayers in Jerusalem on Aug. 3, 2012. (Photo: Xinhua/Fadi Arouri)



People need to move, and this might be the result...

Passing the checkpoint is involved with heavy security check, waiting hours standing, unrespectful inconvenient conditions and of course heavy traffic. For Israelis, regions like this is even declared as a “Dangerous Zone” by Israeli GPS applications and telecommunication companies. When Israelis enter the West Bank, they often start getting floods of sms messages by the Israeli communication operator systems asking them to leave the place because it is dangerous. The situation in the West Bank is actually not as dangerous from the Palestinian side as it is often described by the Israeli media, the most threatening reality which brings different severe political consequences: is the acceleration of building new Israeli settlements on Palestinian land together with imposing more colonial enforcement that suffocate the Palestinians.



The shrinking of the Palestinian land against expanding the Israeli area in different periods since 1948. The map shows the borders changing and also the establishment of new Israeli enclaves during the last decades.

From the Western side, the Israeli borders go into the Territorial waters (22 km) and into the Contiguous waters (44.5 km), and even in the water, the political tension does not disappear. On the northern coast, there is a conflict with Lebanon over drilling gas and specifically from Tamar gas field which was discovered in 2009. The Southern coast of Palestine where the Palestinian coast meets the Egyptian ones is the Gaza strip. The area is around 365 km², with a population of around 4 million Palestinians, surrounded by high fences and walls. Gaza has been under a siege since 2006 after Hamas winning the legislative elections in the area, Israel enhanced the security and declared a land and air blockade over the strip. Since then, Hamas has dug tunnels from Gaza out to Israel from one side, and to Egypt from the other side, those tunnels were used for military uses and smuggling merchandise and people. In 2009, the Egypt started building a fence on the Egyptian-Gazan border and in 2013-2015, when Abdel Fattah el-Sisi became a president, tunnels were demolished and the liminal area of borders was expanded for several goals, as preventing building tunnels, preventing smuggling and more important preventing the Gazans from getting out of the strip.



Tamar, The Natural Gas Production Platform / Getty



An Egyptian army watchtower on the Rafah border with the Gaza Strip, July 2013. (Abed Rahim Khatib/Flash90)



An Israeli tank parks in position overlooking the Gaza Strip on December 25, 2013. (AP/Tsafir Abayov)



An Israeli soldier sits in a neutralized Hamas tunnel on July 25. Jack Guez/AFP/Getty Images

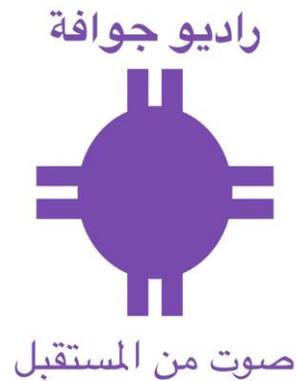
Visual arts in the reality of separation borders

Looking at the history of maps worldwide and especially in Palestine, they have been redrawn all the time, a collage of all maps might be quite an interesting artifact which describes the cultural clashes over a conflictual land. This was well-emphasized in Shilpa Gupta's artwork "One Hundred Hand Drawn Maps", which shows one hundred drawn abstract maps without texts or names, some of the maps are with the Golan Heights, others include the West Bank, while some visualize the Greater Israel even with more Syrian and Jordanian territories, other maps might be too humble to be visible when the pen lines layers accumulate upon each other, and no one map resembles the other, which arouses questions about the subjectivity of maps, controversial borders, and geopolitical conflicts.



Shilpa Gupta, **One Hundred Hand Drawn Maps, 2010**, pen on paper (Gallery Dvir, Tel Aviv)

The Middle East was more opened in the past, before the Israeli state and the British Mandate existed in the area, while maps of region were never empty of lines, people could travel all over the region on monkeys, horses and later by Ottoman trains all the way, from Istanbul to Mecca, passing through Haifa as a middle resting station. Today, borders are much more physical boundaries and it is hard to even to imagine and visualize a possibility for opening the borders in the Middle East and especially in Palestine / Israel, as the political tension is being only escalated all the time, and people can only think how to survive the next year. One of the first projects I have worked on is Radio Guava project, which is an artistic platform created by artist Thalia Hoffman to open the stage to discuss ideas around "Open Borders and the Middle East" in the public space, on a street in Haifa. The program hosted different specialists from various fields to speak about related topics, as well as an open stage for people, walkers in the street, to express and share their ideas publicly. It was amazing to find that most people could not think about the future of the Middle East further than 3 months forward (the Israeli elections, March-2015), and how most of them are frustrated and tired from the political tension, and that peace or open borders are not more than a fairy tale.



Thalia Hoffman and others, **Radio “Guava” - A voice from the future**, 2014 (Beit Hagefen Gallery, Haifa)

With an old ongoing conflict and accelerated occupational policies in Palestine, it might be hard for most locals from both sides to visualize a better version of the existence. However, some creators approach the dystopian reality of borders and separation with a spirit of irony and humor, like “Gaza Canal” mockumentary by Tamir Zadok, which proposes making Gaza a multi-cultural city after separating it as an island by a canal to be an utopic example a multicultural Mediterranean city. Another example would be Larissa Sansour work “Nation Estate”, where the colonization architecture including borders and checkpoints are marketed as a national estate in an ironical version of the future⁸, which in my point of view might be already happening with launching a luxury Banksy hotel fronting the separation wall in Bethlehem⁹. Sharif Waked created a special collection of uniforms called “Chic Point”, specially designed to fit the security environment in the checkpoints, where Palestinians are intensely checked which involves intimate physical contact and often exposing different parts of the body.¹⁰

⁸ Larissa Sansour’s [Official website](#)

⁹ Al Waleed Off Hotel is a luxury accommodation designed upon the concept of fronting the separation wall and containing artworks by Banksy as well as other Palestinian artists ([The Guardian](#)).

¹⁰ Chic Point (excerpt) - Fashion for Israeli Checkpoints, [Ibraaz](#) (24th of September.2015)



Tamir Zadok, [Gaza Canal](#), 2010, video, 09:00 minutes



[Al Waleed Off Hotel](#), BeitLehem



Sharif Waked, [Chic Point](#), 2003, video

Borders limit the artistic thematic but also mobility and practice. But can an art give a solution for the geopolitical complexity? Apparently not. However, it can give the space to see the reality differently. Artists Alessandro Petti and Sandi Hilal are based between Bethlehem and Europe. During their daily life in the West Bank, as other millions of Palestinians, they have to deal with complicated paper and procedures at the checkpoints. However, the architects suggest starting decolonizing our minds by decolonizing architecture projects such as turning illegal settlements into a school or turning an abandoned military base into a resting station for migrating birds and, or creating a natural park in Bethlehem with an absolute lack of public spaces. ¹¹

The geopolitical reality gestures influence the individual and collective spatial perception, memory, and identity. In places like Palestine where the geopolitical reality is complicated, and the occupation is ongoing, daily functions might become vulnerable and commonly politicized. This situation creates urgency for extraterritorial creativity and influences the cultural and artistic production practically and thematically. Geopolitically controversial borders separate people, cultures, and so the artistic scenes and social integration within the practice. While colonial politics and media often fail to deliver true stories, creativity comes to give more points of views and aspects, that accumulate upon each other, to give a clearer understanding of the geopolitical map and history.

¹¹ [A Lecture by Alessandro Petti](#), TedX-Ramallah.