

Palestine from Above

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Editor
ZEYNEP ÇELİK

Abbreviations

AFP	Agence France-Presse
AP	Associated Press
AWM	Australian War Memorial
CZA	Central Zionist Archives
DAI	German Archaeological Institute
GPIA	German Protestant Institute of Archaeology
IWM	Imperial War Museums
İBB	İstanbul Büyükşehir Belediyesi
İÜMNEK	İstanbul Üniversitesi Kütüphanesi Nadir Eserler Koleksiyonu
JNF	Jewish National Fund
LoC	Library of Congress
NLI	National Library of Israel
BOA	T.C. Cumhurbaşkanlığı Devlet Arşivleri Başkanlığı
OCHA	United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
PEF	Palestine Exploration Fund
UNRWA	United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees

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To the brave, long-suffering, and oppressed people of Palestine,
and with great respect for their continued resistance...

Foreword

ÖMER M. KOÇ

The Palestine From Above exhibition first opened at the A.M. Qattan Foundation in Ramallah in 2021 and was brought to my attention by my good friend Zeynep Çelik. It was with great alacrity that we agreed to hold a modified version of the exhibition at ANAMED in Istanbul. So, special thanks go to her, the other curators, and organisers who worked indefatigably to make it a reality. Not only did we want to give Palestinians a voice and a platform, but we also thought it very important to show the world what a prosperous place Palestine was before the end of the First World War.

I do not wish to go into the details of the human tragedy which has been unfolding in Gaza since October 2023. However, the hypocrisy and the inhumanity of the West in allowing such a genocide to take place in Gaza are beyond shocking. One horror cannot justify another. Unfortunately, the West has no moral credibility left in the eyes of the world and this, I fear, will have terrible consequences for all of us.

As no exhibition in my opinion is complete without a proper catalogue, I strongly urged Professor Çelik to prepare one worthy of the show.

I hope you will appreciate the catalogue and those of you who will have the opportunity to visit the show will find it as impressive and intriguing as I did.

Prologue

RASHID KHALIDI

Today, in an era of genocide in Palestine, we are haunted by ubiquitous satellite images of the Hiroshima-like devastation of historic cities and towns like Gaza, Khan Yunis and Rafah that were once links in an ancient trading network that connected Egypt and the Levant. *Palestine from Above* offers us a window into that earlier time and into others, before Gaza became a byword for Israel's unrelenting, studied cruelty. The calculated brutality has killed, maimed, starved and traumatized untold hundreds of thousands of Palestinian residents of the Gaza Strip, and has systematically destroyed every single university in Gaza, and most of its health care system, and water and sewage treatment systems. All of this has been enabled, made possible, and covered up, as it always was in the past, by the sanctimonious hypocrisy of Western politicians and the complicit Western media. For them, rights –to “self-defense” so-called, to freedom, to life itself– belong only to certain approved groups, but not to others. For them, those who kill hundreds are “terrorists,” while those who kill tens of thousands are “the most moral army in the world.”

The images and the texts that accompany them in the catalogue represent an exhibition that was first shown in Ramallah, Palestine, and then with many modifications in Istanbul. They are meant to restore historical depth to our visualization of Palestine, which is purposely flattened by those who would pretend that the land had only a biblical past and a shining Israeli present, with nothing of significance before the former, or between the two. In those in-between times, for those of this view, Palestine was simply a land without a people for a people without a land. For them, it was *terra nullius*, an empty land whenever its sole rightful owners did not bestride it like colossi. This willed amnesia, this purposeful erasure of history and context, these distortions, are a chronic, necessary feature of settler colonialism, for, as I have written elsewhere, the surest way to eradicate a people's right to their land is to deny their historical connection to it.

The images and texts presented here seek to counter this amnesia, this erasure, and these distortions. Thus we see photos that show how the Ottoman government and the Arab inhabitants of southern Palestine populated the new town of Bi'r al-Sabe' (Birüssebi, Be'er Sheva), and began to make bloom that desert region of Palestine long before it was conquered by Israel in 1948. We see how the manipulation of images made possible by the

early development of photography, long before AI and photo-editing apps existed, produced composite photos and composite myths that continue to have purchase to this day.

We see how Jerusalem was visualized by Muslims for centuries in terms of their tradition, anchored in the Quran, of the Prophet's night journey from Mecca to "the Farthest Place of Prayer" in Jerusalem. Soon after the Muslim conquest, this became the site of *Masjid al-Aqsa* (the al-Aqsa Mosque) commemorating the event, a structure documented by a Christian pilgrim, Bishop Arculf, during a visit to Jerusalem around 670. In the early 690's, the Umayyad Caliph 'Abd al-Malik expanded the mosque and supplemented it by the Dome of the Rock. They constitute the world's oldest surviving works of Islamic architecture, and two of the most beautiful.

In the current volume, we see images of the monuments, as well as the villages, railways, ports, and topography of Palestine at different periods. These images are linked to cartographers' attempts to render them in maps, starting with the famous sixth century Madaba map of Jerusalem. Cartographic efforts were measurably aided during World War I, when several of the combatants used some of the first aircraft to photograph and sketch the landscapes of Palestine, and the military positions of their adversaries.

We see as well signs of modernity that have been erased, like the branch of the Hijaz railway that used to run down to Haifa from the main Damascus-Medina line, or the Yasser Arafat International Airport in Gaza, since destroyed by Israel. The volume covers many other aspects that involve erasure and distortion, including the impact of Orientalism, as shown in a variety of texts and images, as well as the contributions of travelers, some accurately recording what they witnessed, and others seeing only what they wanted or expected to see.

With its illustrations and texts, this volume brings to light realities about Palestine that have been purposely obscured or inadvertently forgotten. It offers the viewer/reader an insight into the realities in and about Palestine that are unavailable via even the most eloquent text operating on its own, as images, live-streamed video, films, theater and other visual media have a power far greater than text alone. This is why the elite gate-keepers of museums, theaters, cinemas, and other cultural institutions fight so fiercely to keep out such visual productions, in the vain hope of keeping alive the faded positive image of Israel. That same objective, of defense at whatever cost of whatever Israel does, explains why the elite gate-keepers in universities and their allies in governments fight so hard to crush activism in support of Palestinian rights and in condemnation of Israel's genocide in Gaza.

Given that so much of the supposed knowledge about Palestine and Israel of so many people, especially in the United States and Europe, is the result of a narrative generated by one of modern history's most formidable myth-making machines, the Zionist project and its offspring the state of Israel, *Palestine from Above* is an important, as well as a singular and laudable achievement. The unrelenting impact of a live-streamed genocide in Gaza has produced fundamental changes in public opinion throughout the West, in spite of the desperate efforts of powerful elite gate-keepers. The changes have been especially pronounced among a younger generation that has far better and more diverse sources for knowing what is actually happening in Palestine than the biased and complicit mainstream media, for which this generation has justifiable contempt. In light of the recent changes, there is hope that powerful re-readings and re-envisionings of the history of Palestine will gain more traction in the near future.



The Past, the Present, and Hard Truths

ZEYNEP ÇELİK

History, memory, erasure, modernity, holiness, valorization, manipulation, suppression, marginalization, occupation, land, intervention, surveillance, artistic creativity, Orientalism, resistance, struggle, aggression, propaganda, wars, colonialism, genocide: Randomly listed here are only some of the key words that describe various aspects of Palestine's charged past and present. Although intertwined, each refers to a chapter in the historic and continuing saga of Palestine, reaching the heinous scenes the world is currently encountering every day.

Palestine from Above first opened at the A.M. Qattan Foundation in Ramallah in 2021. The title demarcates the overarching theme and beginning point. Palestine has always been viewed from the sky. Tracing the implications behind this powerful, albeit abstract and distant, representation revealed a complex web of issues, urging us to consider the particular circumstances, that is, the realities on the ground, alluded to by the terms above. In 2021 the situation in Palestine was already devastating; by the time the exhibition was brought to Istanbul in March 2025, the death toll from the post – October 7, 2023 genocide in Gaza had reached 48.577. Not claiming to come close to addressing the gravity and the pace of the tragedies, we nevertheless attempted to provide a parallel trajectory.*

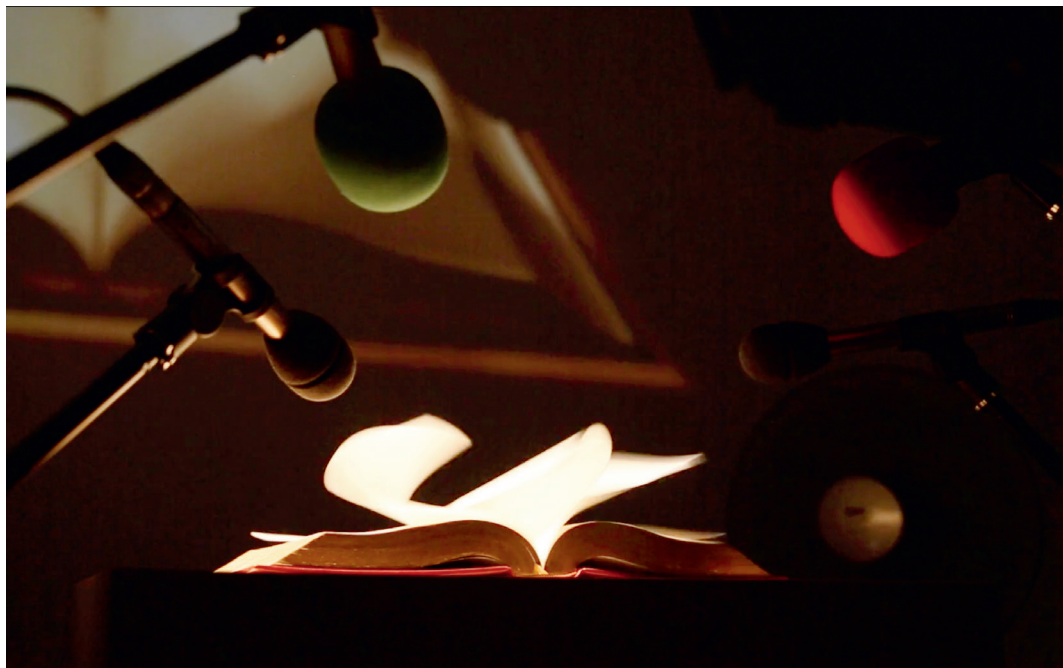
As a team, our different backgrounds and interests complemented and expanded our individual contributions, with knowledge and visions that brought multidimensional readings to the exhibition. Yazid Anani's wide-ranging expertise in curating and his intimate familiarity with contemporary art were supplemented by three historians with distinct but symbiotic approaches: Zeinab Azarbadegan's social and political angle, my concentration on urban and architectural forms, and Salim Tamari's reading of history from the "bottom up." If Professor Azarbadegan and I had some agility in using official archives, Professor Tamari masterfully brought "ordinary" people to the foreground. However, we did not work as islands. We all aspired to interdisciplinarity and benefitted tremendously from a steady exchange of ideas and feedback. The continuously worsening

* As we go to press, the addition of the hunger crisis has swelled the death toll to 65.000 – an official number that can only hint at the tragedy's vastness and relentless pace.

political situation and the gravity of the crimes against humanity provoked us, ultimately playing a crucial role in sharpening our arguments.

In an unconventional sequence, the current catalogue follows the Istanbul exhibition with a delay of several months, a delay that calls for an explanation. We designed the Istanbul version of *Palestine from Above* in a record time of four months. Yazid Anani and I discuss the changes and additions –not only based on current events, but also the choice of Istanbul as a venue, which called for radical revisions– in our introduction to the panel held online on May 2, 2025 (pages 159-171). We had integrated the late Ottoman context into the Ramallah exhibition, but bringing it to Istanbul necessitated its expansion. Furthermore, reconsidering the exhibition design itself turned into a major task due to the spatial differences between the two galleries. During those frenetic four months, we could not even entertain the idea of a new catalogue. Thanks to Ömer Koç's persistence and support, the pressure we received from a large number of visitors to the exhibition, as well as many others abroad, to produce a related publication nonetheless convinced us of the value of the project. Fortunately, we had the time to complete it before the exhibition closed and the rush challenged us to think about a “nontraditional” catalogue closely locked into the displays. We relied largely on the wall texts and the captions and did not turn them into academic texts.

The structure of the catalogue thus corresponds directly to the six chapters of the exhibition. A 2015 installation by the artist Nida Sinnokrot, *Exquisite Rotation*, precedes the chapters as an open-ended inquiry and invites the visitors to think through the multiple meanings it evokes. The work initiated a dialogue with the viewers, which went even beyond the artist's eloquently tantalizing narrative, included in this catalogue in its entirety. We heard insightful comments, for example, further qualifying the *Exquisite Rotation*, as the “erased history” of Palestine, and, more optimistically, as its future, waiting impatiently to be written.



Nida Sinnokrot,
Exquisite Rotation
(*Fakir Fans*), courtesy of
the artist, 2015.

Custom-made gilded
manuscript, lectern,
theater spotlight, video
camera, microphones,
speakers, projector,
and fans.

The six chapters are organized around main themes, starting with surveillance and control from above during World War I (Chapter One: Sky Spies); continuing with an episode that contrasted the romanticized bravery of the British and Australian soldiers against the hard Ottoman realities of the land (Chapter Two: Myth and Order); visual depictions of Jerusalem through history (Chapter Three: Jerusalem Represented); exit and entry points, that is, railways, seaports, and airports (Chapter Four: Ports of Memory); tourism, excavation, and appropriation of antiquities (Chapter Five: Travels and Aspirations); and aggressive interventions to the land in more recent times (Chapter Six: Landscape and Power). The chapters may seem as unlikely partners to coalesce into a unified story, but there are many links that become obvious even during a quick tour of the exhibition. The title, *Viewing Palestine from Above* is the overarching one.

In character, railways wove the different sections together metaphorically. They formed part of the regional Ottoman project to unite the extensive territories of the empire, with the primary goal of reaching Mecca and Medina to facilitate pilgrimage. They also connected Palestine to the broader network and linked its shoreline to inland. In our exhibition, they emerge multiple times through photographs and maps: in Chapter Two, in a photography album accompanying the creation of the new town of Birüssebi (Beersheba) in the Negev/Naqab Desert; in Chapter Four, by means of a map aimed for Muslim travelers, an imperial album documenting the line from Dara'a to Haifa, and Lumière Brothers' early film on daily life in Palestine; and in Chapter Five, in tourist guidebooks. Maintained and extended under the British Mandate, the Palestine branch of the Hejaz Railway was demolished gradually in the decades after World War II. It survives only in fragments, its bridges and railway stations in ruins as moving testimonies to the project and to the history of modernization in Palestine. Railways appear in two other guises in the exhibition. The first is their memory kept alive in folk songs and poems, analyzed by Salim Tamari; the second is their engaging integration by Jack Persekian into his photographic collage, *The Hejaz Railway in Palestine* (2024). Among the many contemporary artists in the exhibition, Persekian references the imperial album in the same chapter, asks knotty questions, and exemplifies one of the myriad ways art relates to the past.

Vegetation provides a very different sort of link. We encounter it in the work of Gustaf Dalman, whose interests range from air photography to flowers (Chapter One), as well as in the delicate watercolor landscape paintings of Sophie Halaby (Chapter Three). Their intensions diverge: for Dalman, in the service of the German Empire with aspirations to control the region, all aspects of the unfamiliar land had to be understood and documented – a common European practice since Napoleon's monumental *Description de l'Égypte* (1809–29). Halaby, in contrast, painted her beloved landscapes, conscientiously or instinctively in reaction to Orientalist artists' works. Conquering the land through cultivation is another venue where vegetation becomes a major actor in the convoluted political practices of imperial powers. The “blooming” of the desert predates the Israeli claim and surfaces in the trees, bushes, and flowers planted in the central public park of Birüssebi during the last years of the Ottoman rule (Chapter Two). Trees, which epitomized the “miraculous growth” of Israel from “sand” in the words of Golda Meir, hence had some history. Israel's much advertised campaign to bring civilization to Palestine capitalized upon the planting of pine trees targeted to give a deliberate European

veneer to the soil. Pine trees, foreign to the land, could not easily survive in the climate of Palestine, but stood in opposition to native olive trees whose life spans could go back thousands of years.

The curators' panel elaborates on some of these issues. Originally planned to be held in person at ANAMED (the Koç University Research Center for Anatolian Civilizations) in Istanbul on March 19, it had to be postponed due to political turmoil and official directives. We delivered it online on May 2. Rather than attempting to cover the entire contents of the exhibition, each curator focused on one theme, revisiting and highlighting particular subsections. We selected the Muslim pilgrimage to sacred burial grounds in processions known as *mewasim* (Tamari), aspects of Ottoman modernity in Palestine (Çelik), the role played by cartography in controlling the land (Azarbadegan), and contemporary artists' engagement with history and the present (Anani). These are not more important than the other subjects, but reflect the personal choices of the individual curators. In accord with the other decisions we made, we did not turn our talks into academic papers but instead maintained the panel's conversational tone.



The current violence and political turmoil in Gaza and the West Bank do not allow a conclusion to the exhibition and the catalogue. We leave them open-ended, taking the viewer back to the beginning, to Nida Sinnokrot's inaugural work, *Exquisite Rotation*. The strength of *Exquisite Rotation* derives in part from its ambivalence, its call for multiple readings. The closing piece, Forensic Architecture's video installation *Ground Truth: Destruction and Return in al-Araqib, Negev/Naqab Desert* alerted us against putting a full stop at the end, this time in a more factual manner. *Ground Truth* is an ongoing project that started in 2010. On July 27, 2010, the Israeli forces demolished the Bedouin village al-Araqib in the Negev/Naqab Desert at eight kilometers from Beersheba (Birüssebi), with the pretext that it occupied the land illegally. The villagers rebuilt it in a few weeks, only to see it torn down again, rebuilt, and torn down once more – in an endless cycle. Picking up random dates, by June 2017, it had been demolished 170 times; by May 2023, 215 times; by November 2024, 232 times, and by March 2025, 238 times. The latest devastation came on June 3, 2025, culminating in the consecutive demolition number 241. Recorded and broadcast worldwide, each assault was countered by reconstruction, firmly declaring the villagers' profound attachment to their land. In brief, they say: "no other land."



Forensic Architecture,
*Ground Truth: Destruction
and Return in al-Araqib,
Negev/Naqab Desert*,
courtesy of the artists,
2010–ongoing.
Video 15:14
(still from the video)