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Mikel Maron :: Building Digital Technology for Our Planet

[Misconceptions and Objections to Gaza Mapping: My Response](#)

January 12, 2009 at 2:17 am · Filed under [openstreetmap](#), [palestine](#)

Over the past week, the response to OpenStreetMap in Gaza has been overwhelmingly supportive. There have been a few exceptional objections, and some common misconceptions, and I want to respond to from my perspective, and perhaps the "OpenStreetMap perspective". Some of these objections have come from people familiar with operations in Gaza, so I take their perspectives very seriously. Please consider this part of a discussion .. I'm very interested to hear from your perspective.

Gazans are in no position to contribute to a map now. Let me just clearly say, *we have no expectation of working with anyone inside Gaza right now, and are not actively seeking their involvement. However, if people familiar with Gaza geography are available outside Gaza, we'd love to talk to you.* Gazan's priority is plain and simply survival during this crisis. They have all our support, and our map hopes to assist in any small way. Some [exceptional bloggers](#) are getting communications out to the world, at great personal risk, [Ushahidi is providing a medium for reporting incidents](#), but I think OSM won't get to this point without significant development work. When the crisis subsides, and Gaza becomes a safe place to work in again, we will be looking to collaborate with Gazans, remotely or similarly to [JumpStart's work in the West Bank](#).

Maps are already available. This objection goes right to the heart of OpenStreetMap. Yes, there are various maps available, from authorities like the UN, Palestinian govt, from international media. The presumption that these authorities have complete, accurate, consistent, and verified data is unfortunately incorrect. They do a fantastic job, and the maps serve many useful purposes. But just for instance, the roads layer from the European Commission that underlies all the UN maps is missing road names, and at even a quick look has inaccuracies. These sources disagree with each other on place names and locations.

I've had the privilege of working with and discussing issues with all of these entities, but like many institutions, they are struggling to effectively collect, update, and share geographic information effectively. Just take a look at the [OSM discussion page for Gaza](#) to get a sense of what's possible when discussion and sharing happens in an open transparent environment — we are very rapidly getting to an accurate interpretation of geographic reality, it's wonderful to see.

And what is "available" is not mapping data, but rendered maps. [AidWorkerDaily](#) has an excellent critique of this situation, in response to the very good UNOSAT maps (which are derived from the same Digital Globe imagery we are looking to purchase). If you happen to know the right person, they haven't transferred to a new job, and you represent the right entity, you might get a hold of the actual data, in which you can make your own map or application. I'm all for ad-hoc networks, but any sort of closed access makes them totally inefficient, especially in a crisis. When you do get data, there are likely with provisions on what you can do with it .. that's the case with the [EC roads data](#) (which is available, but non-

commercial, non-modifiable).

Maps can endanger Gazans This is honestly one of the most preposterous and disheartening things I've heard. The argument is that by providing maps in the open, we are potentially aiding the Israeli invasion. I guess such paranoia is an understandable response within this emergency, but it's frankly the same security through obscurity argument peddled for centuries, brought out [most recently in Mumbai](#), a strategy on the verge of finally dissolving in a world of openness and transparency. The IDF access to much better intelligence and imagery than we'd ever have, they fly drones over Gaza, there's a 2m resolution commercial limit in all satellite imagery over Israel — guess who gets to see the sub-meter imagery? Gazans have nothing to gain by trying keep secrets, the asymmetry of that game is overwhelmingly not in their favor.

Some of this fear is based on the misinterpretation of [statements that UNRWA gave coordinates of their schools in Gaza to the IDF](#). The insinuation is that the IDF specifically targetted these facilities, based on that information. The intention of UNRWA was to help protect their schools; it's possible we'll never know what happened, but can anyone honestly think that the GPS coordinates were used to base attacks?

Is there a [level of detail](#) OpenStreetMap should not pass? I have a hard time thinking of what OSM can feasibly do that would be a problem. Put the question another way — rather than what should be mapped .. what kinds of things shouldn't be mapped?

Gaza is a small place This is the argument I'm most open to .. but still disagree. Gaza is small, smaller than the San Francisco peninsula. People living in Gaza know it well. People who have operated in Gaza know it well. They don't need maps?

Imagine a large earthquake in San Francisco. How effectively could aid be coordinated if there was no current map of San Francisco? Firefighters could possibly arrive from throughout California, and further. Is it better use of SF firefighters' time to explain the geography of SF to all the newcomers, or to hand them a good map?

There's a again an presumption of insider knowledge here, that anyone who is operating in Gaza is going to know what's up. I don't believe that.

There are better things for you to do for Gazans. Don't do this. Most of us can't do anything directly. Actually no one from anywhere can get into Gaza to help. Why discourage a contribution? Please read [Clay Shirky](#)

Discuss

I probably haven't adequately addressed these concerns, but I think this is a good start. Maybe there are more objections. Let me know what you think.

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7 Comments

1. **Eric Wolf said,**

   January 12, 2009 @ [2:37 am](#)

After the Katrina disaster in the US, parts of New Orleans were completely submerged. The street signs and house numbers were missing, destroyed or obscured. First responders were having to convert street addresses to lat/long in order to get to survivors. Even if Gazans know Gaza like the back of their hand, there is need for accurate streets.

As for publishing information, the only real defense Gaza has now is information to counter the disinformation created by the Israelis. Good maps, accessible to the world press, help demonstrate the severity of attacks.

2. **[Tom Chance](#) said,**

   January 12, 2009 @ [10:16 am](#)

   Mikel, this is fantastic work and it gives a lot of activists and ex-pats something small but immediate and practical that they can do in the face of the violence. Keep it up!

3. **[Paul C](#) said,**

   January 12, 2009 @ [2:07 pm](#)

   Mikel – all of your points are valid, and these objections to OSM are nothing that we haven't heard before against mapping in general. I would say that ground truthing is the critical component that is missing in this instance – for very good reasons, of course, but it seems a little unfair to criticise the EC data on those grounds. What you see as a closed source they see as maintaining a level of control over their datastream (which I think is a valid reason, although not one I share – but they're a big bureaucracy and I'm not)(at least, I think I'm not.). The trick is to bring the streams together to build a stronger overall picture – this is where OSM is playing the critical role.

4. **mikel said,**

   January 12, 2009 @ [5:40 pm](#)

   Paul — Certainly OSM Gaza wouldn't stand up to the same criticism at this point. We don't have ground truthing, only a lot of web investigation. There's the potential for ground truthing, in partnership with Gazans and responders, but that's of course not very close to reality yet for anyone.

   I wasn't so much criticizing the EC — as these guys do excellent work, and I believe they really reached out by releasing their data in any way at all. Rather I was criticizing the perception of bureaucracies as the only ones who can generate trustworthy data.

   I'm working hard to see hybrids happen. OSM is constantly changing and adapting, and the mapping is going to be stronger when both approaches work together. That's not without huge questions, but I'm glad to see many receptive minds in the humanitarian community.

5. **[David Megginson](#) said,**

   January 14, 2009 @ [2:13 pm](#)

There are, unfortunately, people in the world who equate information with power, and want to hoard that (imaginary) power to themselves. They'll always try to think up reasonable-sounding excuses to stop a project like yours, whether they consider themselves left- or right-wing, pro-Palestinian or pro-Israeli, and so on. Good work answering them with clear, well-reasoned arguments!

6. **Paul C** said,

January 14, 2009 @ 8:20 pm

Rather I was criticizing the perception of bureaucracies as the only ones who can generate trustworthy data.

That's a fair point, although perhaps we could say "institutions" rather than "bureaucracies"?

7. **mikel said,**

January 14, 2009 @ 9:02 pm

I've conferred with my subcommittee on proper blog nomenclature, and after two rounds of voting, we accept this proposed change to "institutions", but reserve the right to revert back to "bureaucracies" as we see fit.

Seriously you're right, and thanks for check.

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Mikel is in Nairobi.

mikel

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