

THE JERUSALEMS ON THE MAP

Valentina Carraro and Bart Wissink

City University of Hong Kong (valentina.carraro@posteo.net / bartwissink@me.com)

PROLOGUE

In 1993 the Oslo Accords are signed. Soon thereafter, Edward Said critically characterises the negotiations that resulted in this agreement as an uneven confrontation between Israelis armed with ‘unmatched facts, files and power’ and Palestinians caught between ‘disaffection and unrealistic optimism’. Palestinians need to turn geography into resistance by creating a counter-strategy, that is, a counter-map: detailed, surveyed and drawn by Palestinians, connecting Palestinians into a greater unity, with Jerusalem at its centre.

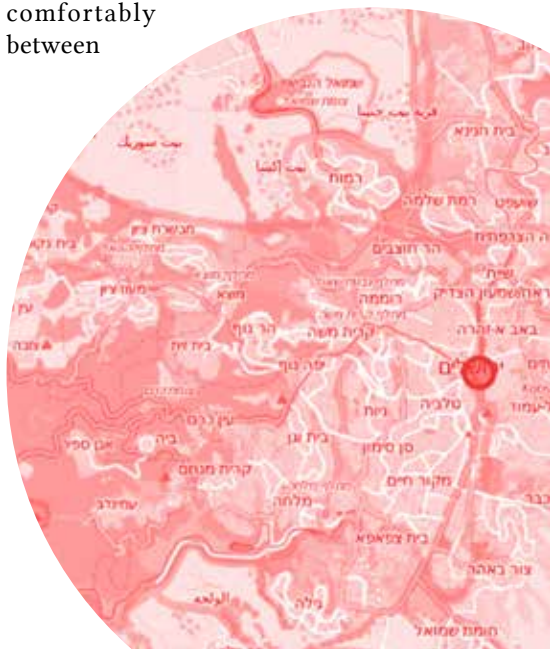
*The first thing is to grasp as concretely and as exactly as possible what the facts on the ground really are, not in order to be defeated by them, but to invent ways of countering them with our won facts and institutions, and finally of asserting our national presence*¹.

The Oslo Accords avoided tackling whether Jerusalem should belong to Israel or the future Palestinian state. In theory, the city is still under international control. In practice, however, Israel has full control and regards it as its ‘undivided capital’. Many maps lend legitimacy to these claims.

MAPS BETWEEN SCIENCE AND POLITICS

Maps are practical tools for navigating space. What is the shortest route home? Where is Latvia, exactly? But they are not mere factual representations. The lines delimiting Latvia on a map contribute to make Latvia what it is: a state. Whether laid out on the desks of army officers or hang in classrooms, maps shape our views of the world, producing new worlds. They are always political. While these two ways of understanding maps are at odds with one another, to some extent we embrace both. After all, as Alan MacEachren notes, when taking a plane even a postmodernist hopes the pilot will use a map that sticks to the facts. Nonetheless, Said’s words remind us that maps lay uncomfortably between

1. Said, E.W. (1996) ‘Facts, Facts, and More Facts’. *Peace And Its Discontents: Essays on Palestine in the Middle East Peace Process*. New York: Vintage, p.31.



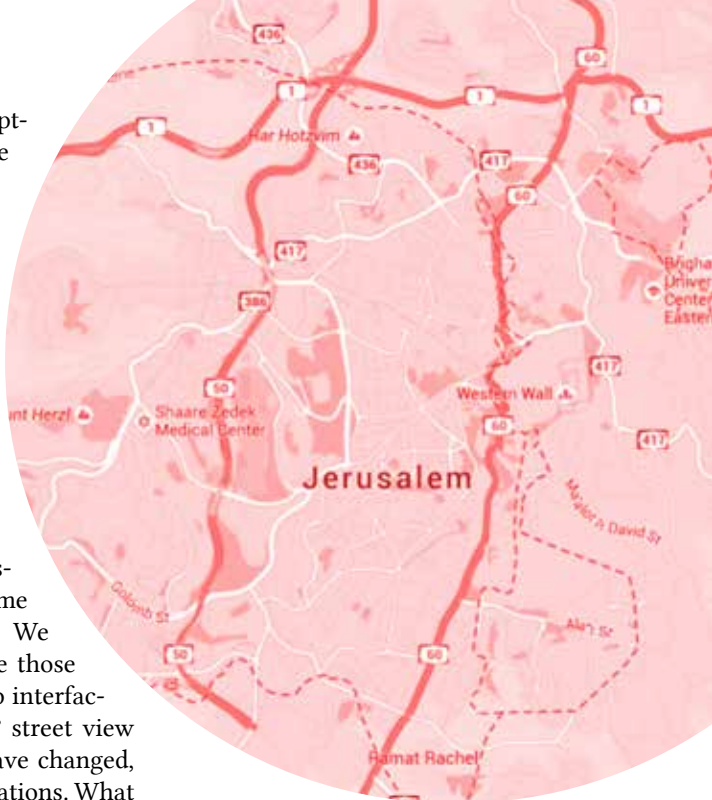
‘science’ and ‘politics’ – disrupting the neat boundary that we draw between the two.

DIGITAL EMPIRES?

Since the emergence of modern states in the seventeenth century, maps have been associated with state-power. Cartography was a means to control, and conquer. With digital technologies, this seems to be changing. Mosaic, the first web-browser, was launched in the same year of the Oslo Accords. We have come a long way since those first, slow-loading GIFs: map interfaces, map apps, geo-tags, 360° street view services; our geographies have changed, and so their digital representations. What happens, when corporations like Google replace the state as providers and mediators of geographic information? As the introduction to this pamphlet asks, how can we contest Google’s version of the map, and Google’s version of the world?

COUNTER MAPS

Do participatory, open-source web projects offer an alternative? Talking about maps, the most significant example of such projects is OpenStreetMap, or OSM. A Google search (we know, the irony) informs us that OSM is “a collaborative project to create a free editable map of the world”. Two principles underpin OSM. First, local people should decide what the map of their



home place looks like. Second, decisions about what should be mapped, and how, should be taken collectively. The result is an online mapping-project, edited thousands of times a day, by now covering nearly every corner of the planet. Maps and apps based on OSM have helped bring humanitarian aid to Haiti, improve infrastructure provision in Kenya’s slums, and encourage bike-use in Austria. Appealing? Of course. But it is important to remember that OSM is not a parallel universe, where ‘real world’ dynamics magically disappear. OSM is part of the real world. Economic interests, ideas about gender, class and race, levels of education, geographies, geopolitics, and infrastructure: not only do they matter, but they constantly redefine what OSM is. In other words: open discussions are

great, but they do not guarantee everyone a fair chance to speak, nor do they necessarily result in fair outcomes.

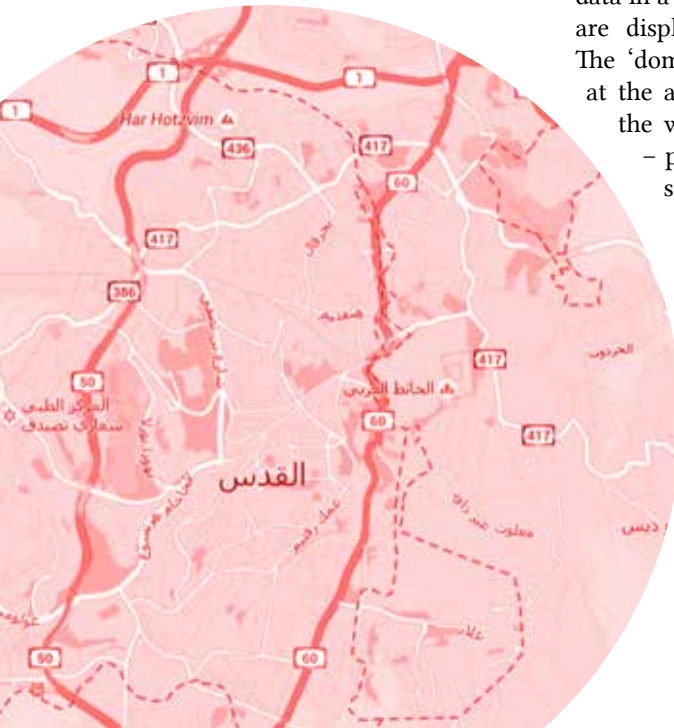
THE JERUSALEMS ON THE MAP


This brings us back to Jerusalem, the focus of our research. As the archetypal contested city, Jerusalem is a good case study: an opportunity to look deeper into our “cartographic alternatives”. The introduction to this pamphlet claims that Google improperly describes Jerusalem as the capital of Israel. However, to be precise, Google is presenting us with Wikipedia’s entry about Jerusalem. So it is actually Wikipedia, a collaborative platform, that is taking a stance about geopolitics. Granted, Google plays an important role in consolidating of this ‘fact’. By contrast, the map on right side of the screen sticks to the UN position, depicting the city as split along the Green Line. To the right of the line, where a majority

of Israeli lives, the map is very detailed, pointing us at shops, landmarks, bus stops, etc. To the left of the line – the Palestinian half –neighbourhoods are empty grey blobs. Depending on the domain from which the map is accessed, name tags are displayed in different languages. The Arabic (and English) version of the map, however, mostly transliterates Hebrew names into Arabic, rather than adopting the names used by Palestinians. Now let us minimize that window, and bring up OSM. In case of contested spaces, OSM encourages the local community to resolve any arising dispute. The only guideline: if in doubt, what counts is what is ‘on the ground’. Given that the OSM community is overwhelmingly Israeli, and that creating ‘facts on the ground’ is a declared Israeli strategy, both factors work at the Palestinians’ disadvantage. While Google offers its map in different languages, OSM presents its data in a single map-space, where names are displayed in the ‘local language’. The ‘domain of Hebrew’ does not stop at the armistice line, but encompasses the whole municipal administration – pushing the Israeli boundary by several kilometres.

COUNTER-COUNTER MAPS

Google maps and OSM have both been used by Palestinian groups to create their own maps. In the case of Google, this has meant overlaying the standard map with new layers, showing, for example, the villages and neighbourhoods destroyed since the Nakba. By releasing its data for free reuse,





on the other hand, OSM allows for greater freedom in editing and ‘remixing’ the data into entirely new maps. Perhaps more importantly, OSM provides discussion forums where the community’s decisions can be called into question. This is a crucial difference: not only does OSM enable groups to counter-map; it also offers a space where these different views are exchanged. Examining the debates around Jerusalem, however, shows something surprising: OSM users insist on defining this space as at once democratic and apolitical. OSM is about data, data are facts, and facts are the opposite of politics – or so goes the mantra.

EPILOGUE

Two map-applications and two models of cartographic production. But none of the resulting Jerusalems resonates with how Palestinian Jerusalemites see their city. Perhaps, a map of Jerusalem satisfying all parties involved cannot exist at this moment. Israeli and Palestinians are divided – even among themselves –

about the representation of ‘their’ city: should it be split and how? Where are the boundaries? How should it be called? Digital technologies have made map-making easier, and multiplying the number of Jerusalems that we may find as *cartographic* representations. That said, not all maps have the same weight, so this is in itself no guarantee of fairer *political* representation. Inequalities extend to digital geographies, and influence online maps, whether provided by powerful corporations or built by a community of volunteers. This is not to say that the differences between the two models are not significant. On the contrary, to better understand what potentials and risks online maps bring with them we should look deeper into the details of maps: the fine prints in the licence agreement, the footnotes, the tags on the map feature. Maps are always political, even when rendered from open data.