

Palestine Mapping under occupation

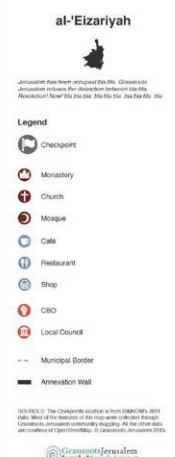
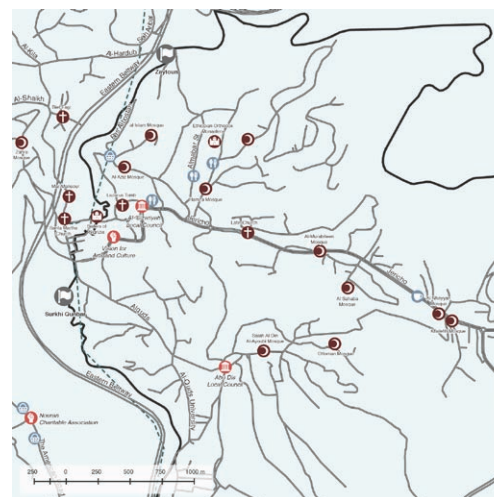
In an age in which most maps are produced through satellites and computer-generated algorithms, cartography is often viewed as an objective discipline, that has overcome the political biases of its past. The case of Palestine, however, serves as a powerful reminder that modern maps remain a long way from objective and often, in fact, actively contribute to perpetuating colonialist practices.

Grassroots Jerusalem (GJ) is a Palestinian NGO engaged in participatory mapping projects in the Jerusalem district, with the idea of challenging the dominant, Israeli narrative and portraying the city from a Palestinian perspective. That is, a perspective that has been systematically blanked out from mainstream international and Israeli maps.

Maps produced by the Israeli authorities identify the Israeli administrative quarter, in West Jerusalem, as the centre of the city, showing the Old City on the far right edge and leaving the entire Palestinian-majority Eastern Jerusalem out of the frame. If on the map at all, these areas are depicted in grey or green to mark them as “empty” land. Entire villages and neighbourhoods are erased in this way, while the more centrally located Palestinian streets and landmarks are relabelled from Arabic into Hebrew.

A similar process of erasure happens on web-maps produced by corporations. Google and Bing, for example, leave the Annexation Wall completely out of the picture, and represent Palestinian areas as unlabelled grey blobs. Google requires local businesses to be verified through a postal address in order to be included on their maps: a condition

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impossible to meet for businesses in East Jerusalem, where there is no functioning postal service.

The idea behind GJ's work is to provide a platform for Palestinian voices, giving visibility to their stories, the challenges faced under the Occupation, and initiatives to resist it. The fundamental idea behind Grassroots Jerusalem is that none of the existing NGOs and institutions really expresses Palestinian views on Jerusalem, whether because they're driven by international bodies' agendas, manipulated by Israeli authorities, or bogged down by private interests. Smaller realities in local communities are more in touch with what people think, but sometimes fail to "see the bigger picture" and connect with each other. GJ strives to link these local organisations with each other. For the past three

years, GJ has been working in 37 communities within the Jerusalem district, building partnerships with over 60 local organisations – local councils, youth organisations, women's cooperative, sport clubs and so on.

Mapping is a way to bring stories to light, while at the same time providing a tool for community members to identify issues of shared concern, connect with one another, and coordinate action. So far, GJ has conducted mapping workshops in 12 of these communities. Over the course of these workshops, community members and GJ staff discuss the implications of existing maps. An important topic is the ownership of data: open-source mapping providers such as **OpenStreetMap** offer an alternative to private companies. In this way, what is represented on the map is discussed by community users, rather than decided in closed-door meetings in the Google Headquarters. Finally, community members are trained to use GPS devices to collect their own data. The trainings are tailored to the specific interests of the different community groups, and the technical aspects are generally kept to a minimum in an effort to involve a wider range of people.

The cost of the materials for the project is extremely low: all the software GJ uses is free, and the only equipment needed is a computer and a device with GPS technology, such as a smart phone or a GPS unit. Community members are welcome to borrow this from the GJ office.

After the workshop, community members go into the field, mapping their community according to their own perceptions of what their story is. To give some examples, a youth group from al-Ezareha has chosen to use a community map to promote tourism, while the communities of Jabel AlMukabber and Sheikh Saed are trying to raise awareness of the way in which the Wall has violently divided the two villages, which used to be only a few hundreds meters apart.

GJ is currently in the process of finalizing these maps. They will be distributed through GJ's online platform, due to be launched at the end of March 2015. Community groups are of course also encouraged to take the initiative in this respect, and use the maps in their own publications and campaigns to ground their claims.

It goes without saying, these maps lay no claim to being representative of the whole community, or "telling the whole story". Ultimately, it is not a question of countering existing maps with more truthful or "objective" ones, but a matter of providing alternatives. Grassroots Jerusalem strives to give Palestinian communities a chance to be heard, reclaiming a place on the map, not as grey blobs, but as rightful inhabitants of this land. | **Valentina Carrero**

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