This essay is the most recent text in an ongoing investigation and series of interventions that have been taking place at DAAR – Decolonizing Architecture Art Residency, in Beit Sahour, Palestine, since 2010. Previous research episodes were published in Architecture after Revolution (Sternberg Press, 2014), the London Review of International Law 1, no. 1 (2014), and Limes, Rivista italiana di geopolitica, no. 3 (2011).

What a Palestinian businessman wanted to build in his home village of Battir, close to Bethlehem, was a house that would be testament to years of success abroad. Construction began in 2009, and the outline of a grand villa soon started to take shape—an edifice of impressive white marble towering over the valley below. More than six years on, the house remains unfinished, suspended in a legal limbo, as the project remains mired in a fight against demolition orders from the Israeli Civil Administration. The businessman’s dream has fallen victim to the effects of the Oslo II Accord, a set of measures that were supposed to be commonly negotiated and temporary, but which time has revealed to be neither.

The relationship between cartography, separation, and dispossession in the Middle East has a long genealogy. The most salient example for Israel-Palestine is the UN partition plan of Mandate Palestine in 1947, the process for which the Palestinians had no say in. But it is not the only example in the region: from the Sykes-Picot Agreement to the annexation of Jerusalem to Israel, to name just a few, colonial powers or the international community have repeatedly split Arab countries, often without the consent of their populations.

Most recently, twenty years ago, the Oslo Accords divided the West Bank into zones of differing control in anticipation of a planned, phased transfer to full Palestinian sovereignty. In Areas A and B—roughly 40 percent of the land—the Palestinian Authority (PA) was awarded civil control and empowered to make planning decisions. In Area C, however, the Israeli Civil Administration remained in charge of the planning process. There, building permits for Palestinians are expensive to apply for, take years to process, and are rarely granted. The Israelis therefore view much Palestinian construction as illegal, and the penalty in many of these cases is the demolition of the home.

The Palestinian businessman who wanted to build his dream villa did not think that the plot of land he owned was fully in Area C. The plan provided by the local village council showed where the dividing line bisected the building, with the majority in Area B. As this meant the house would be subject to both Palestinian and Israeli jurisdictions, the owner

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1 “In 2014, the Civil Administration demolished the homes of 969 Palestinians—a total of 493 homes and ancillary structures—built without permits, in Area C of the West Bank, which under the Oslo Accords is under exclusive Israeli control.” Amira Hass, “UN: Israeli Demolished Homes of 1,177 Palestinians in Jerusalem and West Bank in 2014,” Haaretz, February 1, 2015, http://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium-1.640147.
submitted a planning application to the village council as well as a request to the Israeli Civil Administration to expand the area of the plot permitted for building. While the former was approved, the latter was denied, and a demolition order soon followed. The order revealed that the Civil Administration placed the line between Areas B and C some seventy meters to the southwest of where the village council placed it. This meant, according to the Civil Administration, that the house was completely in Area C, and therefore subject entirely to Israeli jurisdiction.

How had a line that was jointly agreed upon become a subject of dispute?

Lawless Lines

The cartographic work undertaken during the Oslo peace negotiations was conducted digitally—on computer screens—but the maps, signed by Yitzhak Rabin and Yasir Arafat, were prepared in hard copy. A one-dimensional line (in Euclidean space, a line has no width) became a two-dimensional surface. Much smaller than a centimeter wide when printed on a cartographic annex, the line when translated to real space acquires a width of a few meters.

Some years ago, the Israeli political scientist Meron Benvenisti famously asked: “Who owns the 'width of the line'?“ He was referring to the 1948 cease-fire lines between Israel and Jordan. The lines were drawn on a 1:20,000-scale map by the two countries’ military commanders, Moshe Dayan and Abdullah al-Tal. Benvenisti’s query applies equally here: Who drew the Oslo lines? And who owns their width? Who governs them?

These banal questions are crucial, for these lines are ubiquitous in the West Bank. Slivers of extraterritorial space, they run at the margins of almost every town and village. The Oslo negotiations collapsed before reaching a settled definition of space, and so the lines remain an open legal and political question, paradoxically challenging the very partition they enact. They run across and through villages and towns, olive groves and orchards, fields, roads, gardens, kindergartens, fences, terraces, houses, public buildings, a football stadium, a mosque, and, more recently, the businessman’s dream villa in the small village of Battir.2

Drawing the Oslo Maps

The terms according to which the Oslo maps were organized, and the tools used to draw them, were mainly Israeli. Given the deleterious effects the maps have gone on to have on the prospects for Palestinian self-determination, one might expect that the different actors involved in the negotiations would have masterminded their drawing with more attention. In reality, the cartographic process—which has gone on to significantly affect the lives of millions of Palestinian through the resultant fragmentary Oslo “Swiss cheese” it created—was rather careless. Despite this carelessness—or indeed, because of it—the freshly drawn map reproduced the existing structural inequalities between the negotiating parties, just as the power differential between colonizer and colonized was transferred to the act of mapping.

Shari Motro, at the time a secretary in the Strategic Planning Division of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) and currently a professor at the University of Richmond School of Law in Virginia, wrote as much in a 2005 article for Legal Affairs:

Late one night during the negotiations, my commander took me from the hotel where the talks were taking place to an army base, where he led me to a room with large fluorescent light tables and piles of maps everywhere. He handed me some dried-out markers, unfurled a map I had never seen before, and directed me to trace certain lines and shapes. Just make them clearer, he said. No cartographer was present, no graphic designer weighed in on my choices, and, when I was through, no Gilad Sher [an attorney on the Israeli negotiating team] reviewed my work.3

Further, Motro acknowledges that “the agreement made no mention of a future Palestinian state.” She critiques the lack of care with which the maps were presented, noting that the aesthetic choices of the mapmakers had political ramifications. Had the maps been drawn with different colors, argues Motro, ones that did not make the discontinuity between areas under...
Israeli control and those under Palestinian control seem so great, they would have created “a different vision of Israel and Palestine”—a different worldview. She goes on to argue for greater consideration to be taken in the presentation of the maps that were, at the time her article was published, still being drawn as part of the peace process.

However, a conversation with Shaul Arieli, a former IDF officer responsible for producing the maps that would be signed by Arafat and Rabin, and who drew the maps Motro went on to trace, reveals that no amount of aestheticization could have covered-up the structural inequality that marked their drawing. In an interview, he explained:

The process was very easy. In the agreement signed in ’93, all those areas that would be part of final status agreement—settlements, Jerusalem, etc.—were known. So I took out those areas, along with those roads and infrastructure that were important to Israel in the interim period. It was a new experience for me. I did not have experience of mapmaking before. I of course used many different civilian and military organizations to gather data on the infrastructure, roads, water pipes, etc. I took out what I thought important for Israel …

Arieli, despite having absolutely no cartographic experience, was able to deploy the state’s bureaucracy to safeguard that which was necessary for the security and comfort of the settlers. As the settlement project had been explicitly designed to break up the Occupied Palestinian Territories, disrupting the contiguity of any future Palestinian state, Arieli’s casual subtractions consigned Palestinians to live in the “unimportant” spaces that remained.

The involvement of the Israeli occupation’s bureaucracy in the process was of no small importance. During an interview, Ahmad Saleh, the head of the Palestinian Authority’s National Spatial Plan, highlighted its reach:

Before signing, [the Israelis] asked for a period to review the maps. They sent it to all departments in the Civil Administration. Each one of them had their own remarks and their own modifications, and they put their changes on the map, originally prepared by the Israelis. So now the maps are prepared by them, reviewed by them, and modified by them.

Time and again, the Israelis leveraged their access to information, which only the occupiers could have, to produce favorable outcomes in their “negotiations” with the occupied. This pattern has not been limited to the negotiations themselves, but has carried over into the subsequent implementation of the ostensibly joint agreements between the two parties.

Modern State Power

The central imbalance that marks the Oslo negotiations is that a colonial power was negotiating with the people it had colonized, in order that a state might be brought out of nothing for them. These were not negotiations that necessarily aimed at abstract notions such as peace, reconciliation, or justice, but were rather a technical set of discussions about a political entity that Israel and the US hoped would satisfy—or make less urgent—Palestinian demands for their rights. However, a state is not merely a set of lines on a map or a declaration of names on a piece of paper. As we know from Michel Foucault, the modern state is marked by the shift from “people” to “population.” That is, the modern era introduced the development of a set of techniques to operate disciplinary power through the transformation of discrete people into a singular object that could be known, and therefore operated upon: the population. Modern states have developed a host of institutions through which this connection between power and knowledge is articulated. Israel brought to bear the full weight of all these institutions in the Palestinian territories occupied after 1967, including conducting an exhaustive census, building massive disciplinary and intelligence infrastructures, instituting new regimes of taxation, and surveying in detail the land they had occupied. The Palestinians in the territories occupied after 1967 were colonized not only by the military might of Israel, but by a ravenous state bureaucracy that hungered for information about the land and people it had just conquered—knowledge it used to effect control. When the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and the Israelis came to the negotiating table in the early 1990s, the PLO had none of the civil institutions that the Israelis did, and therefore no information about the
land or people they were returning from exile in order to rule. Edward Said, in 1993, wrote how the PLO negotiating teams face Israeli experts armed with facts, files, and power that have no equivalent on the other side. We have been unable so far even to undertake a census of our own people. We rely on Israel for facts about land and water, and to this day have rarely produced our own sources of reliable information. Is there an accurate and usable Palestinian map of the West Bank, Gaza, Jerusalem?6

The answer, we know in 2016, was that there was not.

“It’s Nothing!”

The walls of Ahmad Saleh’s office in the Ministry of Planning in Ramallah are lined with detailed maps of the West Bank and Gaza. These maps did not exist at the time of the negotiations in the 1990s. “At that moment actually there was no Palestinian mapping system. The only source for maps was the Israelis,” he explained during our 2015 conversation. The Israeli military produced the maps available at that time, maps that emphasized features of the landscape relevant to war over others more pertinent to the task of planning. In addition to this, the Palestinian geographer Khalil Tafakji told us, the Israeli military maps used at Oslo were made in 1985. As the Palestinian negotiation team had no access to aerial photography and no maps of their own, there was no way of knowing how the villages, towns, and cities had grown in the eight years that passed before negotiations began. The line between where Palestinians would be able to build and where they would not was drawn without reference to this information. Thus it was that houses that had previously received building permits—had been within village master plans, even—suddenly were rezoned into Area C, where, from that moment on, permission for Palestinians to build or alter houses was given only in a vanishingly small number of cases.

In any case, as Dr. Saleh explained, the Palestinian negotiating team had not been—was not able to be—prepared properly: “The Palestinian team, most of them were not able at that moment to read the maps. If you present a map to someone who cannot read it, then you can present whatever you like.” At the time it was drawn onto the map, Area C was intended to be a temporary cartographic feature, a zone whose sovereignty was to become Palestinian, but that, until 1999, would remain under Israeli control. The planned transfers largely did not happen, and the 1999 deadline for a final status agreement between the Israelis and Palestinians on all the questions left open after Oslo—settlements, Jerusalem, etc.—passed without resolution. Therefore, to this day, Area C remains under full Israeli control, and Palestinian development of the land is more or less completely prohibited.

The intervening twenty years following the original negotiations have shown that the problem with the Oslo areas is greater than just out-of-date maps. As the case of the businessman’s house makes clear, the failure was in reality twofold. Firstly, no thought was given to the fact that a map never precisely mirrors the territory it represents. Secondly, the systems put in place to implement the maps’ working reveal that the Accords were not considered a common program by Israel, but rather one controlled by Israel.

The seventy meters that separate the village council’s line and the Israeli Civil Administration’s line seem like a lot. However, on a map of 1:50,000—the scale of the signed Oslo maps—that distance is represented on paper by just 0.14 cm. The lines that show the borders of Areas A and B on the maps are thick, and easily swallow much of that seventy meters on the ground. The question then becomes how to interpret the line: Does the border fall at the line’s outside, its center, or its inside? After Oslo, the possibility for divergent interpretations, and the mistakes that accompany all such tasks, increased through the way in which both sides prepared the maps for use.

Only the hard copies of the physically signed maps have legal status. Therefore, in order for the maps to be turned into instruments on whose basis decisions could be made, the paper copies needed to be digitized. Dr. Saleh explained that the Ministry of Planning received the hard copy of the map from the Palestinian president’s office and scanned it. The borders were then traced onto the scanned image using geographic information system (GIS) software. At both the scanning and tracing stages, it is possible for distortions and errors to occur. These might be small on the map, but given that the line represents up to fifty meters
on the ground, the margin for error quickly comes to represent a wide swath of real territory. “As a boundary for about three hundred to four hundred locations,” explained Dr. Saleh, “this fifty meters means you are talking about maybe hundreds of thousands of dunums [1,000 square meters] that you cannot manage. It’s not Area A, it’s not Area B, it’s not Area C: it’s nothing!”

Compounding this uncertainty is the fact that the Israelis also undertook the same process separately, and that there was no attempt by the Palestinians or the Israelis to cooperate on it. This confused situation means there are two different maps, with two different sets of lines, both of which represent different areas tens of meters wide where control is neither strictly Israeli nor strictly Palestinian. And yet, in court cases where there has been conflict over the path of the line, the judges have ruled that only the commander of the Israel Defense Forces in the West Bank has the ultimate power to decide.

In this zone of indistinction sits the businessman’s house near Bethlehem. It is here that the absurdity of the Oslo maps reaches its zenith. Here, where the line is nowhere, Israel is free to rule by force and fiat, to mobilize its full power as a colonial state, to cast off any pretension of equality or dialogue with the Palestinians.

This is a problem not just with the Oslo maps, but with all maps. However, we at DAAR do not argue for a better map: we have no interest in lobbying for a more precise drawing of where the line lies that separates A from B, B from C. Instead, we want to seize on the potential of this zone of indistinction as a space of political autonomy, unpromising as it seems.

This zone is the space where the colonization of Palestine is at its most nakedly powerful, but it is also the space where it can be undone. It is where it becomes plain that the “rational order” of colonial sovereignty is founded upon a space where legal arbitrariness and uncertainty reach their apex. A space where the power of mapmaking breaks down, becomes contradictory, fades in the face of the territory that it is supposed to represent. This space is an opportunity because it is the aporia where the colonial project can be undone by exposing its inherent inconsistencies.

The thickness of the line has potential because it makes the constitutive aporia of colonial sovereignty visible, and because it contains the potential undoing of that A-B-C spatial-legal organization that the Oslo peace process has made familiar to both colonizer and colonized. Colonial sovereignty cannot work without a lawless space and its lawless lines. It is this counternintuition—whereby perceived solid and clear politographic signs are ultimately unmasked as uncertain spaces—that enables us to understand the foundations and vulnerability of an order. How to utilize those spaces’ untangling potential is the open question that DAAR wrestles with.

The Oslo Line with signatures of the parties of the Accords
Photo: DAAR
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