

# Mapping Segregation

**7amleh**  
Arab Center  
for Social Media  
Advancement

Google Maps  
and the Human Rights  
of Palestinians



| September 2018

## **7amleh – Arab Center for Social Media Advancement**

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# INTRODUCTION

In August 2016, Google came under global scrutiny for its representation of Palestine following the removal of the terms “West Bank” and “Gaza” from its maps. Google responded by stating that the names were removed due a technical bug and additionally asserted that it had never previously named “Palestine” on its maps. Furthermore, some critics have pointed to Google Maps as perpetuating the Israeli government’s refusal to recognize Bedouin ownership over certain areas of the land by leaving out names of Palestinian villages as well as prioritizing illegal Israeli settlement routes on its map.

In a context where land and ownership are highly contentious and inherently political, Google holds immense power as the largest source of digital geographic data in the world, to shape and legitimize certain interpretations of the physical world and the politics that underpin it. As this report will show, because human rights extend into the digital sphere, the ways in which this physical world is represented in online maps can even run counter to the exercise of the most basic and essential human rights. This report analyses the mapping practices of Google Maps in relation to the occupied Palestinian territories and how that helps form public opinion that serves the interests of the Israeli government, while simultaneously contradicting Google’s responsibilities under international human rights frameworks.

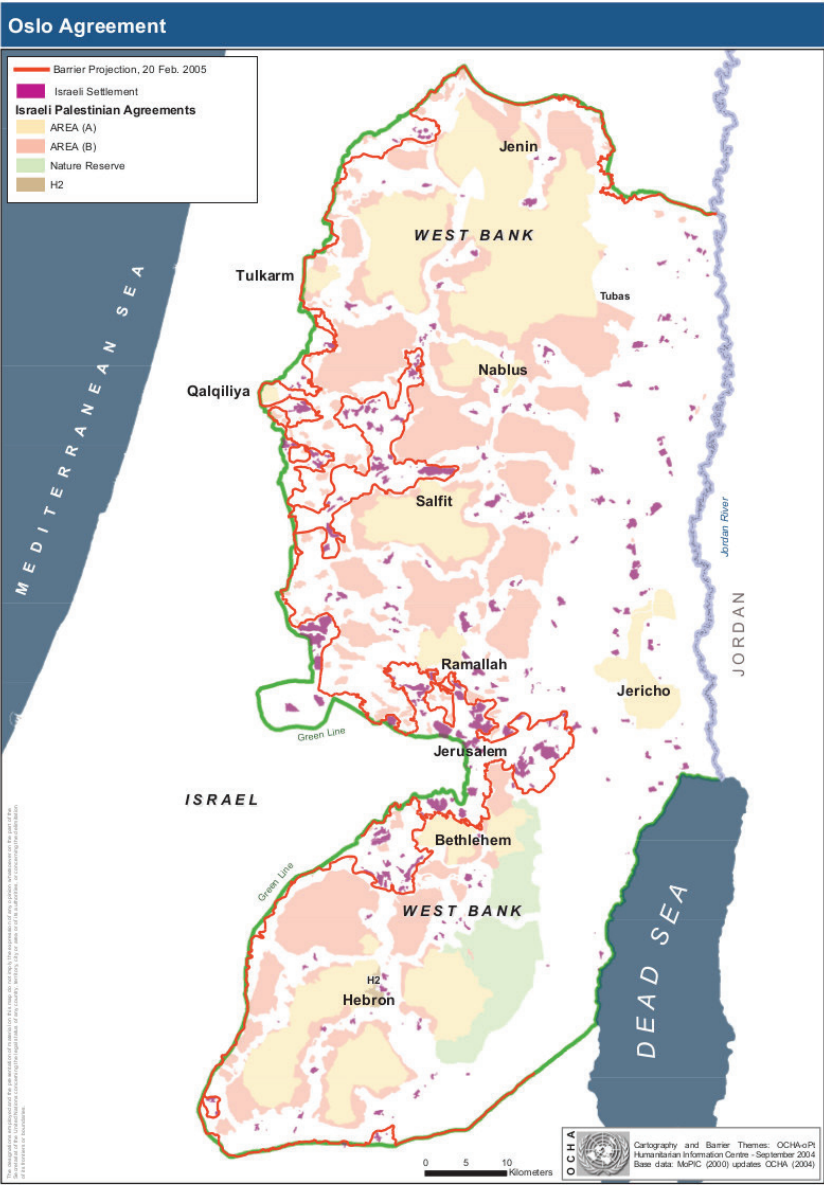
This will be done by firstly summarizing the geographical and political situation of Israel and the occupied Palestinian territories and analyzing Palestinian villages and their representation on Google Maps, including Google’s route planning within these locations. Finally, the terminology that Google maps uses and its route planning in specific locations will be examined, before presenting conclusions and recommendations. The methodology used for this report is based on international human rights standards.

Despite countless attempts, a Google Maps representative could not be reached to comment on this issue. Although a few Google representatives initially agreed to answer questions about the issue, in the end, none of the persons at Google were actually available to comment.

# Geopolitical Background

In this section, an outline of the following will be given: the terminology used when discussing the occupied Palestinian territories, the territorial division and fragmentation of historical Palestine and its repercussions on Palestinian human rights, and the movement restrictions for Palestinians residing in the West Bank and Gaza.

Israel geographically exists within the internationally recognized Green Line and excludes East Jerusalem. Palestine consists of the two geographically separate territories Gaza and West Bank (which includes illegally annexed East Jerusalem). The West Bank is further divided into Areas A, B and C. Officially, according to the Oslo II Agreement (1995), Area A is under control of the Palestinian Authority, Area C is under Israeli military control, and Area B is under Israeli security and the Palestinian Authority's civil control.



RefWB\_OsloGov&Brr220705

Image: Oslo Agreement - UNOCHA, 2005

In Area C, 150 settlements have been established as of 2016, which are deemed illegal under Art. 49(6) of the IV Geneva Convention prohibiting “[t]he Occupying Power [from] deport[ing] or transfer[ing] its own civilian population into the territory it occupies” (Art. 49, IV Geneva Convention 1949). Such settlements are also in breach of Article 55 of the Hague Regulations, which state the obligation of the occupying power to safeguard occupied properties and maintain the status quo (Art. 55 Hague Regulations 1907). This internal fragmentation of the West Bank, which was intended to be temporary under the 1995 Oslo Interim Agreement, creates a system of movement restrictions enforced on Palestinians, as visually represented by UNOCHA’s interactive map of the occupied Palestinian territories <sup>(1)</sup>. These movement restrictions directly violate the universal right to ‘freedom of movement’ as stated in Article 13 of the Human Rights Charter. The ramifications of such restrictions include inadequate access to essential services and diminished economic activity. For example, in order to travel between different locations within Area A, it is necessary to pass through Area C or at least one checkpoint (Zahriyeh 2014). This is because Areas A and B are formed by numerous ‘islands’ within Area C.

This fragmentation is further reflected in the colour-coded ID system enforced by the Israeli administration throughout all of Israel and the Palestinian territories. The colour and type of the ID determines the scale of movement restrictions and the legal jurisdiction that differs between ID types. Palestinians and Israelis residing within Israel have a blue Israeli ID, which allows movement throughout Israel and Area C of the West Bank. Although the same rules apply for Palestinians living in Jerusalem, they hold a specific Jerusalem ID that grants them ‘permission’ to reside there. This can be easily revoked by Israeli authorities. Palestinians in Gaza or the West Bank hold a green ID which allows movement only within the territory they live in. Permits are required to access other areas of the occupied territories or Israel.

The two ID systems have the following dimensions: blue ID holders exist under Israeli civil law, in which they are considered innocent until proven guilty. Green ID holders are subject to Israeli military legislation, and are considered guilty unless they can prove otherwise (Alsaafin 2017). In the military court system, over 99% of cases are convicted (Military Court Watch 2016).

## **Palestinian Villages Misrepresented or Missing on Google Maps**

There are 36 unrecognized Palestinian villages in the Naqab (Negev) desert in southern Israel (Nasasra 2018), and numerous unrecognized Palestinian villages in the West Bank’s Area C that are faced with a constant threat of demolition. These villages are not officially recognised by Israeli authorities, who systematically deny building permits to Palestinians in order to justify their illegality. The villages often lack basic services, which includes connection to the electricity grid and water supply, as well as infrastructure, health care and education (Jarzmik 2018). Israeli civil law applies to the villages located in the Naqab, and military law is enforced upon the villages inside Area C of the West Bank.

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(1) <http://geomolg.ps/L5/Index.html?configBase=http://geomolg.ps/Geocortex/Essentials/REST/sites/A3/viewers/V1/virtualdirectory/Resources/Config/Default>



# The Naqab – Palestinian Bedouins as Israeli Citizens Under Civil Law

There are in total 46 Bedouin villages in the Naqab, the majority of which existed before Israel’s creation in 1948. Some claim to have existed since the 7th century. Israeli authorities do not recognise Bedouin ownership of the land, and instead label them as ‘trespassers on state land’ (Adalah 2018). The infrastructure and socio-economic living standards in these Bedouin communities are among the lowest in Israel (Adalah 2018). The Praver Plan (2011) and the Memorandum of Law on the Regulation of Bedouin Settlement in the Negev (2016), which approve the mass forcible transfer of over 70,000 Bedouins and the destruction of their villages, have created an atmosphere where the threat of demolition and forced evacuation is constant. In contrast, 70 Jewish farms in the Naqab have received recognition from the Israeli authorities in order to sustain a Jewish majority population. (ACRI 2012; ACRI, Bimkom, RCUV 2011; Swirski, Hasson 2006; Adalah n.y.; 2011; 20174; Arab Center for Alternative Planning 2013; Bimkom 2014; Bimkom, RCUV 2012; Mossawa Center 2017).

A method of enforcing the eradication of unrecognized Palestinian villages is to ensure their misrepresentation on maps. As part of this policy, these villages do not appear at all on Israeli maps, with the exception of army and hiking maps. Likewise, they do not appear on first sight on Google Maps or at all on Israeli maps, with the exception of army and hiking maps. They are labelled on NGO maps designed to increase their visibility. On Google Maps, the Bedouin villages are marked – in contrast to cities and other villages – under their Bedouin tribe and clan names (Bimkom) rather than with their village names and are only visible when zooming in very closely, but otherwise appear to be non-existent. This means that when looking at Google Maps, these villages appear to be not there, only when zooming on to a very high degree, do they appear with their tribe or clan

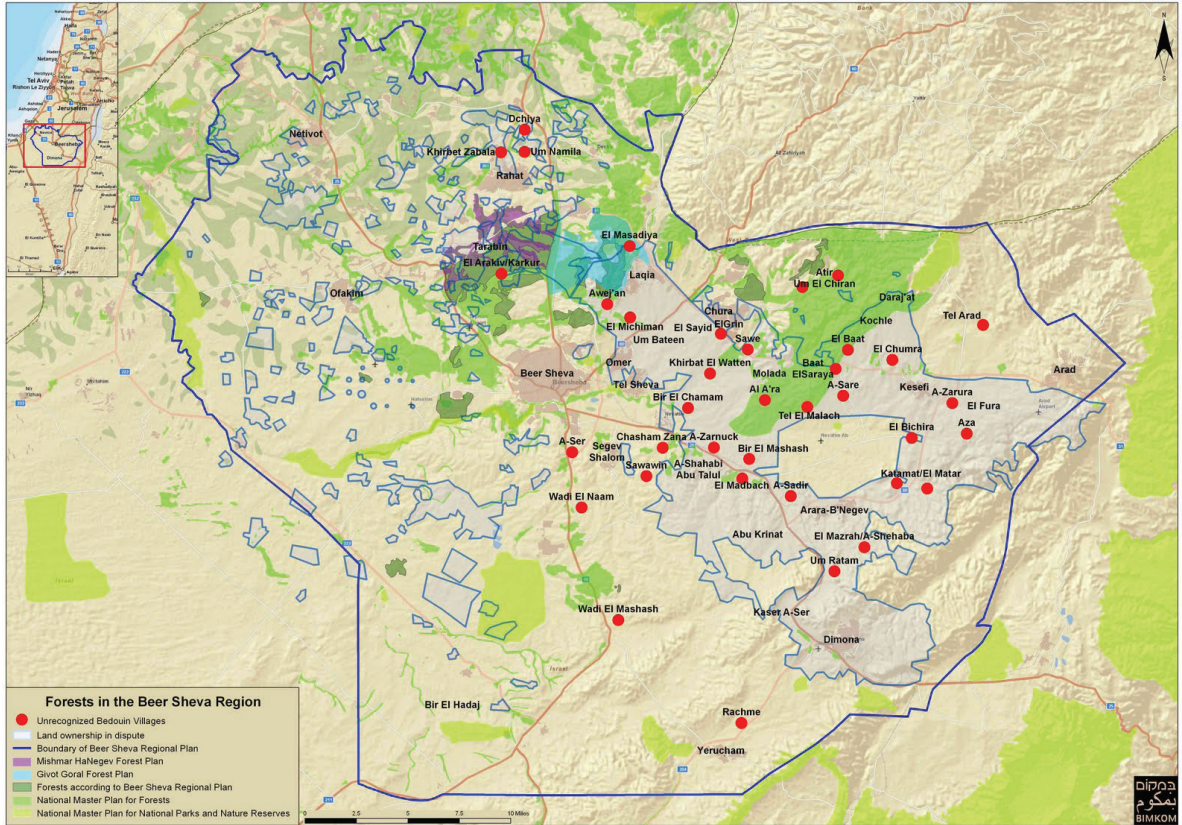
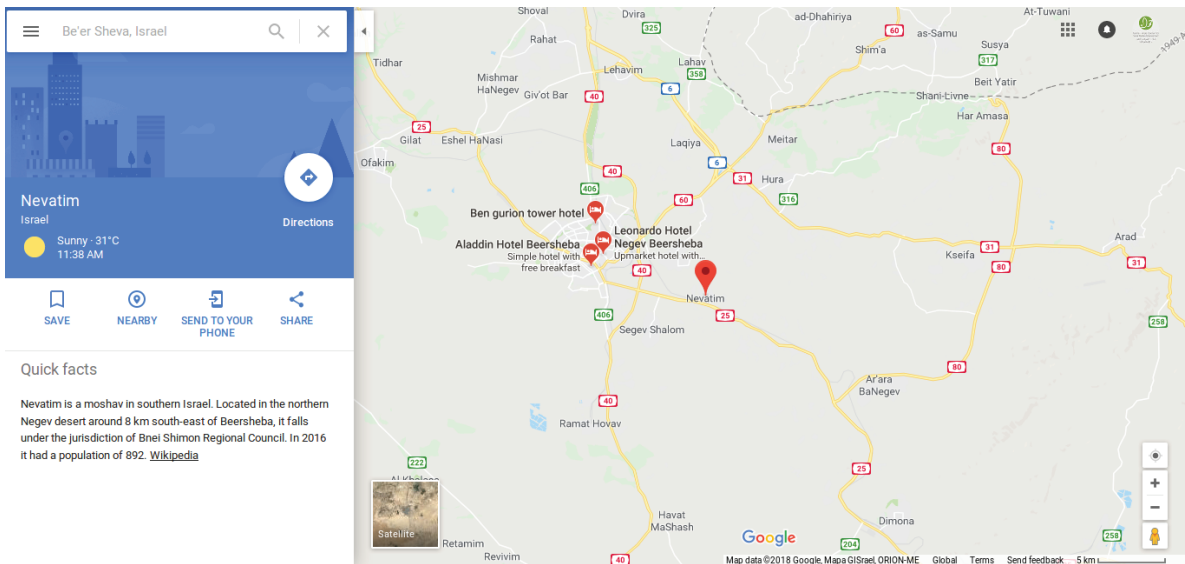


Image: Unrecognized Villages in the Naqab - Bimkom



Screenshot (18th April 2018): Unrecognized Villages in the Naqab - Google Maps

names. At first (and second and third) sight, therefore, these villages are simply not there. Despite their small size, Israeli villages are displayed even when zoomed-out, while unrecognized Palestinian Bedouin villages, regardless of their size are only visible when zooming in very closely.



Screenshot (18th April 2018): Nevatim Israeli village visible on Google Maps despite low level of zoom



## **Basma Abu-Qwaider, Al-Zarnooq village**

The village is not only not connected to basic services like water and electricity, forcing them to connect to private and thus much more expensive lines, or the public transport system, but also permanently faces demolition threats. Her brother's home had been demolished, so the entire family helped to rebuild to provide him shelter. This cost them a lot of money.

"Google Maps acts in a discriminatory manner towards the unrecognized village the same [way] as the Israeli government does. Google ignores the existence of these villages just like Israel and for me if you do not exist on the map it means that you are invisible and that's exactly what Israel wants us to be."



## **Area C – Palestinians Under Israeli Military Law**

Responsibility for land planning and zoning in Area C resides with the Israeli Civil Administration (ICA), the power of which is centralised within the Israeli military (ACRI 2012, Bimkom 2008). The Israeli zoning policy has only delegated 1% of Area C for Palestinians to build on; building on the remaining 99% is prohibited (UNRWA n.y.). The Palestinian Authority<sup>(2)</sup> Geomolg portal for spatial information in Palestine provides an interactive map showing the building restrictions for Palestinians, which includes illegal settlement boundaries, approved master plans, British Mandatory Plans, nature reserves, demolition orders of 2017 and outlines Bedouin communities.

Between 2010 and 2014, only 1.5% of Palestinian building permit applications were approved, forcing Palestinians to build structures illegally and risk demolition. In 2015, 11,000 demolitions of Palestinian buildings were ordered, impacting 149 Palestinian villages in Area C (OCHA opt 2015, OCHA opt 2009). The ramifications of home demolitions and planning policy in Area C of the West Bank are visualized in B'Tselems interactive map<sup>(3)</sup>.

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(2) <http://geomolg.ps/L5/Index.html?configBase=http://geomolg.ps/Geocortex/Essentials/REST/sites/A3/viewers/V1/virtualdirectory/Resources/Config/Default>

(3) <https://www.btselem.org/map>

## Raed Abu Judeh, Jiftlik, Jordan Valley

“Jiftlik suffers from many problems caused by the occupation, people here are deprived from basic needs of the 21st century: water and electricity are big issues besides settler harassment. Whether we are on the map or not, the occupation wants us to leave by all means. The village doesn’t have a structural chart to define its borders, we cannot build and if we do, then we are under demolition threat.”

The absence of a structural chart outlining the borders of the Jiftlik village, entirely located in Area C, means that it is under constant threat of demolition. When the village was first connected to the water network controlled by the Israeli company Makarot in 1982, around 1000 people were living in Jiftlik. Now, in 2018, the same amount of water is provided for the approximately 5000 villagers. Some parts of the village have been declared a ‘closed military zone’ by the Israeli forces.



Unlike Palestinian villages in the Naqab, some villages in the Jordan Valley in Area C are represented on Google Maps. While the Israeli settlements can be seen when looking at the larger area of the map, Palestinian villages are only visible when zoomed in, as a result of data provided and pressure by the NGO Bimkom<sup>(4)</sup>. The settlements in the occupied West Bank appear on the map as being located within Israel, despite the fact that the term ‘West Bank’ also appears on the map.



Screenshot (18th April 2018): Jordan Valley on Google Maps zoomed-out

(4) <http://bimkom.org/eng/>



Screenshot (18th April 2018): Jordan Valley on Google Maps zoomed-in

## International Law and Human Rights Law Perspective

The Israeli authority's systematic refusal to issue building permits for Palestinians, denial of official recognition of villages and continued demolitions constitute a violation of human rights, including rights to land, resources, property, dignity and equality. Every Palestinian has the right to adequate housing in accordance with the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (Art. 11 ICESCR, 1976), which was ratified by Israel in 1991. However, this basic human right is continually being denied by the Israeli authorities.

Whilst Palestinians in the Naqab have Israeli citizenship and are thus entitled to equal treatment as Israelis under Israeli domestic law, Palestinians in Area C live under Israeli military rule. Destruction of Palestinians' property by the 'Occupying Power' is prohibited by Art. 53 of the Fourth Geneva Convention (1949) unless "[...] absolutely necessary by military operations". This prohibition is routinely ignored.

In the Naqab and Area C, Israeli authorities are using strategies to forcibly transfer the Bedouin communities, which are both direct, such as the enforcement of discriminatory legislation, and indirect, such as the constant threat of demolitions. The aim of these practices is to disposses and expropriate Palestinian land.

Israel's refusal to officially recognise Palestinian villages in Area C as well as inside Israel, is reflected in Google Maps' representation of the area. The failure of Google Maps to depict Palestinian villages on its maps suggests that their practices are politically influenced and biased in favour of Israel's systematic violation of the human rights of Palestinians.

# Route Planning

The territorial fragmentation of the West Bank is exacerbated by the divided road system, which places restrictions on Palestinian movement. 79 kilometres of so-called 'sterile' roads are only accessible to blue ID holders (Israeli citizens with yellow car license plates) and cannot be used by West Bank Palestinians (with green IDs). Palestinian presence on these roads, which usually connect Israeli settlements, is illegal. The roads designated for Palestinian use are often sub-standard non-paved or dirt tracks, which are sectioned off from the Israeli roads with high fences and can be closed without prior warning by Israeli forces. The consequences for Palestinians accessing Israeli-only roads include arrest, delays, detainment, confiscation of cars, and even death. 155 kilometres of road have restricted access for West Bank Palestinians, and often require special permits that are very difficult to obtain. B'Tselem<sup>(5)</sup> and Ma'an Development Center<sup>(6)</sup> provide lists of the location and length of these 'sterile' roads, partially prohibited and restricted roads (B'Tselem 2004; Ma'an 2008).

These restrictions are further exacerbated by the maltreatment Palestinians receive at checkpoints. The map above outlines the various movement restrictions for Palestinians on foot and in vehicles, imposed via checkpoints. On roads shared by Israelis and Palestinians, it is common for Palestinian cars, which are easily identified by their green licence plates, to be delayed and searched frequently (B'Tselem 2004; Ma'an 2008).

There are potentially severe consequences for West Bank Palestinians who attempt to pass through checkpoints into Israel or Israeli settlements within the West Bank. Therefore, the need for accurate mapping and route planning services is immense. The movement restrictions on Palestinians can have life-threatening consequences: West Bank Palestinians have died at checkpoints after being denied passage by Israeli authorities (B'Tselem 2004). Palestinians have also died at settlement entrances and bus stops after being shot by Israeli soldiers under the pretext that they allegedly posed a threat (Brown 2014).

This section explains and compares the route planning applications Google Maps, Waze and Maps.me, including how these apps name checkpoints and Israeli settlements. The section also provides an analysis of route planning with the following five routes: (1) from the central West Bank city of Ramallah to the northern West Bank city of Nablus, (2) from Ramallah to the southern West Bank city of Bethlehem, (3) within the south Hebron Hills rural communities in the West Bank: from the town of Yatta to the village of At-Tuwani, (4) from Gaza to Haifa within Israel, and (5) from Gaza to Ramallah in the West Bank.

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(5) <https://www.btselem.org/>

(6) <http://maan-ctr.org/>

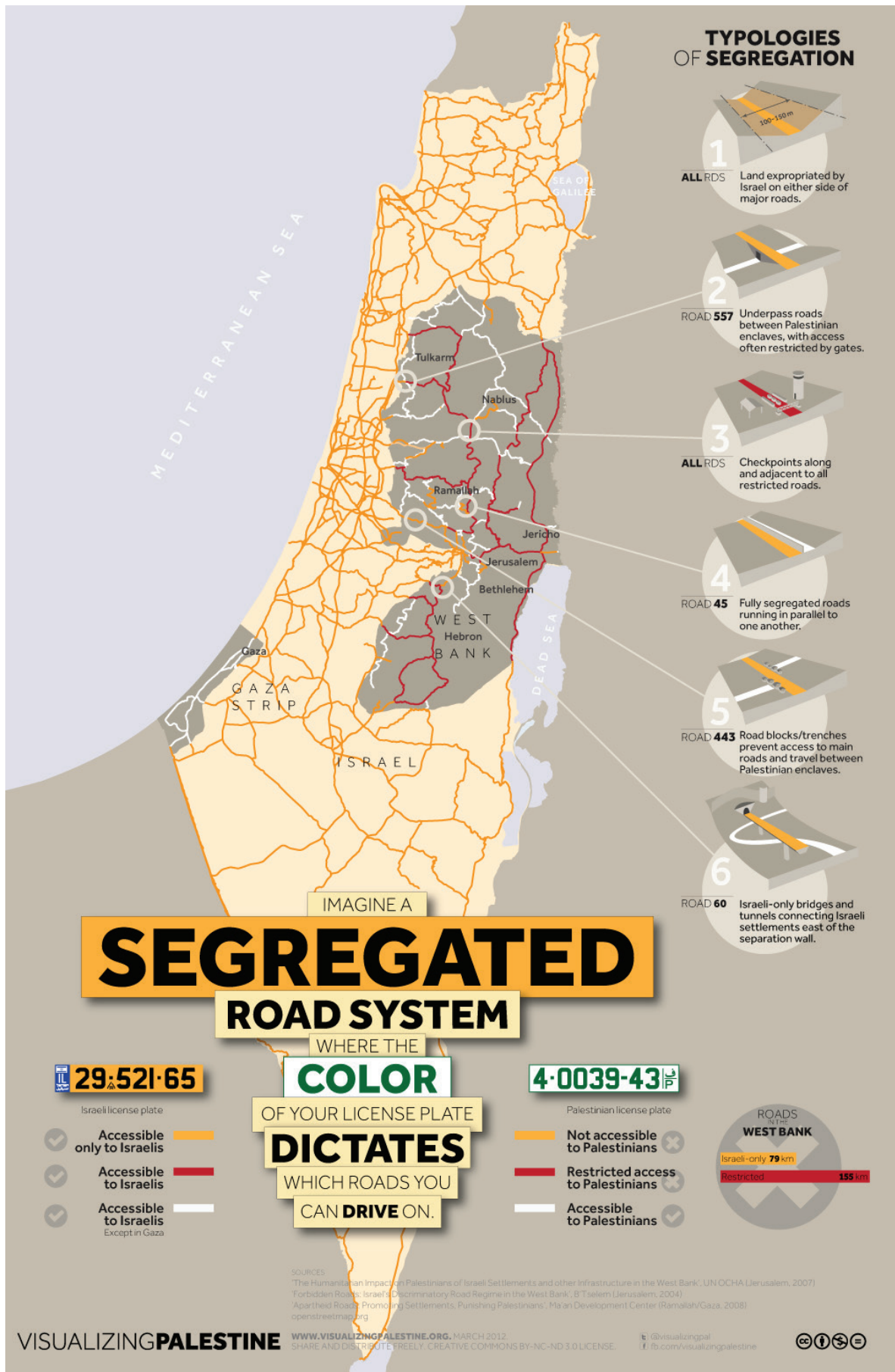
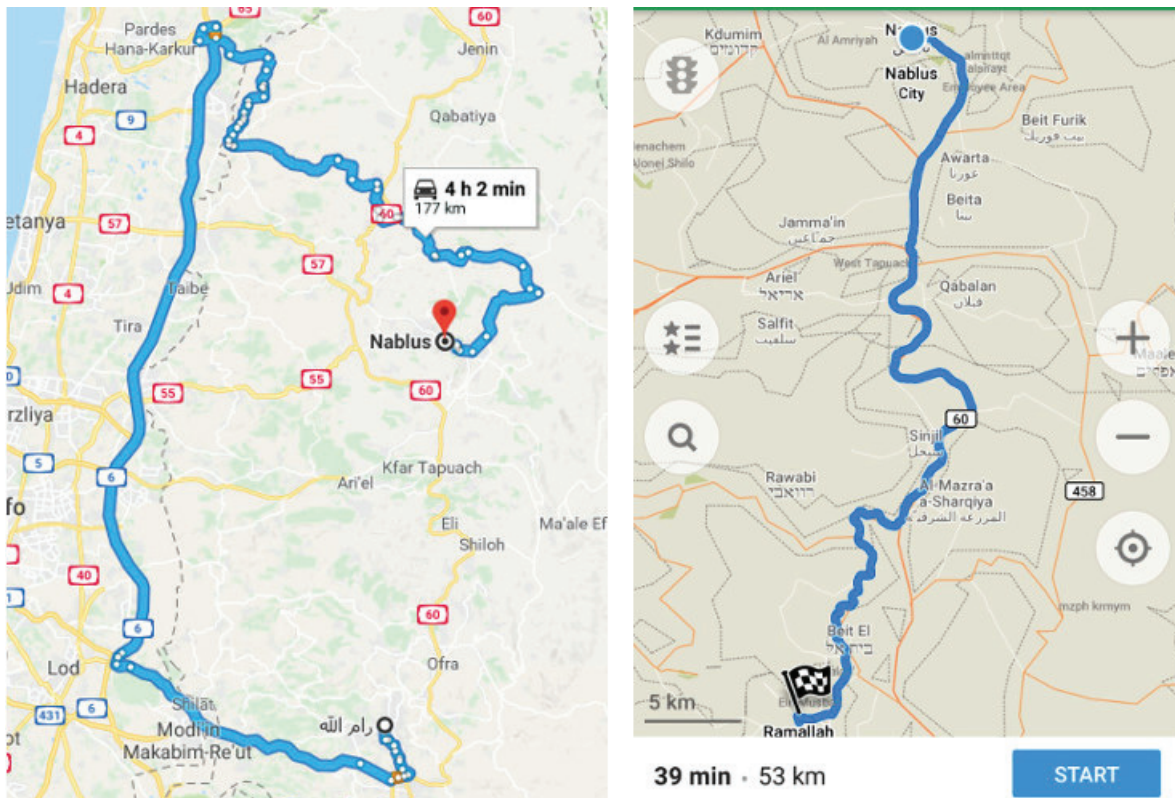


Image: Israel's System of Segregated Roads in the Occupied Palestinian Territories - Visualizing Palestine, May 2012



## Google Maps

On routes within the West Bank, Google Maps prioritizes directing users through Israel rather than through the West Bank, even if this adds considerable distance to the journey. The drive from Ramallah to Nablus through the West Bank usually takes 45 minutes, however when using Google Maps, the journey takes a long route through Israel and takes 4.5 hours. In contrast, the shortest route from Ramallah to Bethlehem takes the driver through Jerusalem, which is inaccessible for Palestinian West Bank ID holders. Whenever a route passes through the West Bank, Google Maps shows two warnings on the route description: “This route has restricted usage or private roads” and “This route may cross country borders” and fails to highlight Israeli settlements or checkpoints. Google Maps is unable to calculate routes within Palestinian rural communities, or to and from Gaza, displaying the message “Sorry, we could not calculate driving/walking directions from x to y”. The app offers the option to “add a missing place” and edit information, but this “might take some time to show up on the map” as they must be reviewed first.



Screenshot (6th April 2018): Google Maps vs. Maps.me routing Ramallah - Nablus

## Maps.me

While Maps.me does not mark Israeli settlements, it does have special markers for checkpoints, which are marked as “checkpoints” with names such as “Israeli occupation border\_control” or by number, for example “Checkpoint 56”. However, routing goes through checkpoints without clarifying the movement restrictions for Palestinian green ID holders. When using Maps.me for the first time, a long general warning is displayed. All routes within

the West Bank and from Gaza to Israel or the West Bank can be calculated. Generally, routes between Palestinian cities within the West Bank take the driver through the West Bank, with the exception of Ramallah to Bethlehem, which is routed through Jerusalem. In the rural communities in the South Hebron Hills, Maps.me displays a small dirt road that is used by the Palestinian population in this area instead of the settler highway. Thus, Maps.me is generally usable for Palestinian West Bank green ID holders. It also offers logged-in users the option to add and edit locations based on the open-source OpenStreet Map<sup>(7)</sup>.

### Waze

Waze is an Israeli-developed app (Waze 2014) that is now owned by Google. The app works within Israel and Area C, and includes warnings about traffic, accidents and police controls. All directions given are exclusively within Area C and thus stop before entering major Palestinian cities. For instance, when indicating a route to Ramallah, located in Area A, the directions will abruptly stop at the checkpoint in Qalandiya. Only when the option to “avoid high-risk areas” is switched off is it possible to plan routes that reach Palestinian cities. When searching for Palestinian locations such as Bethlehem, primary suggestions with the same name are all located inside Israel, and the Palestinian city of Bethlehem is located further down the list. Before calculating routes within “high-risk areas” – Palestinian areas – Waze displays a warning, including the number to call in case of emergencies, and requires a user confirmation to start the route planning. Routes in rural Palestinian areas and to or from Gaza are not possible, and instead an error message is displayed. Waze has an “active community of online map editors who ensure that the data in their areas is as up-to-date as possible” and offers logged-in users the option to “edit the map” and add places and infrastructure such as roads (Waze n.y., Waze Support 2018).



Screenshot (6th April 2018): Route-planning to Ramallah - Waze

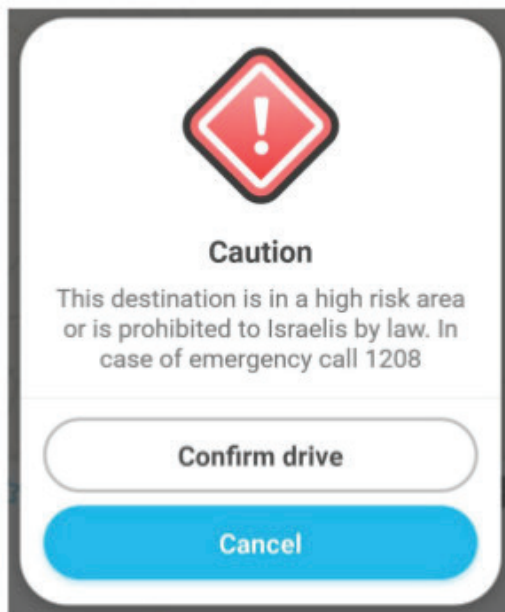
(7) <https://www.openstreetmap.org/#map=8/31.438/35.074>

## Comparison

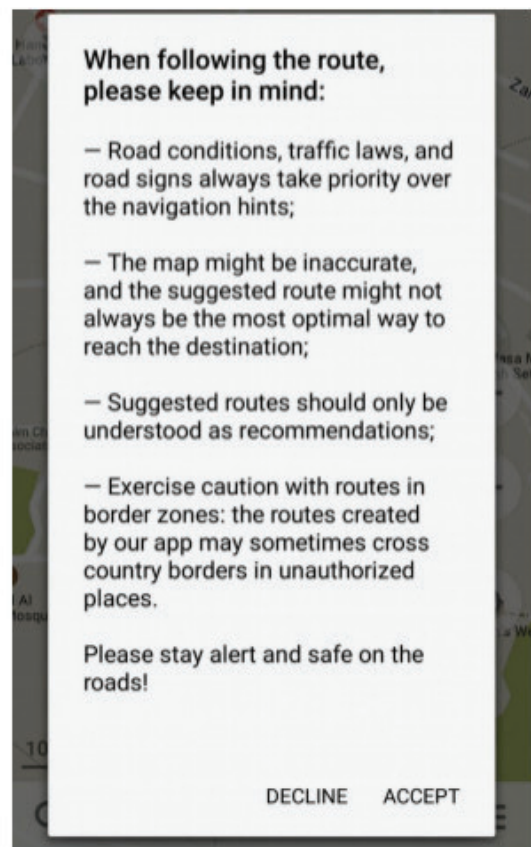
None of the three route-planning apps analysed mark Israeli settlements as being illegal, in accordance with Art. 49 IV Geneva Convention and Art. 55 of the Hague Regulations. Maps.me is the only service that marks checkpoints on its maps, but it does not take them into consideration when planning routes and navigating users. All three services display a warning, different in length and specification concerning borders and accuracy of the route. Waze specifically warns when entering a Palestinian area as a “high risk area” and requires a confirmation to begin the route planning.

- ⚠ This route has restricted usage or private roads.
- ⚠ This route may cross country borders.

Google Maps



Waze



Maps.me

Screenshots (6th April 2018): Warnings given by the different applications

All three mapping apps fail to take into account the movement restrictions and repercussions for Palestinians when planning routes. The clearest example of this is the route between Bethlehem and Ramallah. Google Maps takes the fastest route, which goes straight through Jerusalem, thus crossing from the West Bank into Israel, then back into the West Bank, which is only possible for blue ID holders and holders of foreign passports. The alternative routes proposed by Google Maps also go through Israel. Maps.me takes the longer route which avoids Jerusalem, and can be used by green ID holders (who are generally not allowed to access Israel in their cars, and can only pass through checkpoints if they have an Israeli-issued permit). This issue is illustrated in a video<sup>(8)</sup> showing an international passport holder (who has no movement restrictions) and a Palestinian green ID holder attempting to reach the same spot. Both Google Maps<sup>(9)</sup> and Waze<sup>(10)</sup> use the same platform for reporting errors on maps and/or editing, suggesting edits and adding places to maps. The copyright information on the lower left hand side of Waze's Help Center is credited to Google.

The following table summarizes differences and similarities in the route planning of the three different services. While on some routes, certain apps will direct the driver to routes which are accessible and safe for West Bank Palestinians to travel on, there is no certainty or guarantee with any of the apps that this will be the case. Even when a recommended route is technically available to West Bank Palestinian drivers, they will still have to check this route against current reality and consider it cautiously. This shows that the analyzed mapping apps favour routes that can be used by blue ID holders, even inside the West Bank, contradicting obligations under international human rights norms. As seen in the table, Google Maps automatically calculates routes specifically for Israeli ID holders, and marks neither checkpoints nor Israeli settlements.

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(8) <https://support.google.com/waze/answer/6262592?hl=en>

(9) <https://support.google.com/maps/answer/6391179?hl=en>

(10) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4oE4jAsEPGg&feature=youtu.beviewers/V1/virtualdirectory/Resources/Config/Default>

## *Google Maps, Waze and Maps.me comparison on route-planning within the occupied Palestinian territories and Israel*

|  | <b>Google Maps</b>                          | <b>Waze</b>  | <b>Maps.me</b>                        |
|--|---|--|---------------------------------------|
| Illegal settlements marked as settlements in accordance with international law     | x   | x  | x                                     |
| Checkpoints named/ marked  | x   | x  | √                                     |
| Warning when traveling through Area A (under control of the Palestinian Authority) | General warning, on every route-description | √<br>(confirmation required each time)                                     | General warning, once at start        |
| Warning when travelling through Israeli settlements                                |   | x  |                                       |
| Routes passing through Israeli settlements / blue-ID holder areas                  | √   | √  | x / (√)<br>(rarely)                   |
| Routes circumventing Palestinian controlled areas (Area A)                         | √   | √  | x / (√)<br>(rarely)                   |
| <b>Example-Routes:</b>   |   |  |                                       |
| Ramallah to Nablus / vice-versa (West Bank)  | Blue-ID holder / not available              | Routing stops before Palestinian cities (unless 'high-risk areas' allowed) | Green-ID holder                       |
| Ramallah to Bethlehem / vice-versa (West Bank)                                     | Blue-ID holder                              |  | Blue-ID holder / green-ID holder      |
| Yatta to At-Tuwani / vice-versa (West Bank)  | Not able to calculate route                 | Not possible (Routing Server Error)  | Possible (dirt-path)                  |
| Gaza Strip to Israel (Haifa)   |   |  | Through checkpoints (requires permit) |
| Gaza Strip to West Bank (Ramallah)   |   |  | Through checkpoints (requires permit) |



# Terminology and Availability

When the terms 'West Bank' and 'Gaza' disappeared from Google Maps in late 2016 and were replaced with the general term 'Israel', an uproar on social media ensued. The hashtag #PalestinelsHere went viral and reaffirmed the existence of Palestine – a term that had never been used on Google Maps. Google offered an official apology for the deletion of Gaza and West Bank, stating that a bug had caused this (Dent 2016). The hashtag has since been used to advocate the existence of Palestine and its culture, and in early 2018 an online petition to 'put Palestine on the map' reached 350,000 signatures (Change.org 2016).

Google Maps labels countries in bold black letters, and 'undisputed international boundaries', with solid gray lines (Google Support n.y.). Israel is given a country label and boundary. Jerusalem is clearly marked as the capital of Israel. The demarcation between Israel and the West Bank and Gaza Strip is marked with a dashed line, which for the West Bank is presumably along the Green Line, which Google says indicates 'treaty and de facto or provisional boundaries' (Google Support n.y.). The border-marking appears to be the same from both within the Palestinian West Bank and Israel. Google Maps' different marking of e.g. the Crimea<sup>(11)</sup> depends on whether the service is accessed from Russia or the Ukraine illustrates how different perspectives can be included in a mapping service.

In Google Street View, most of Israel is available to view. However, in Gaza only a few places are marked with photos, as is the case with other Palestinian cities in the West Bank. Within the West Bank, the only places available on Street View are Israeli settlements, with the exception of the Palestinian cities Jericho, Bethlehem and Ramallah. The majority of Route 60 is also available. In Jerusalem, most of the Palestinian neighborhoods are left out, however the Old City, which is located in illegally annexed East Jerusalem, is available (Google Blog 2012).

Palestine was recognized as a 'non-member observer state' by the United Nations on 29th November 2012 (UN 2012). Jerusalem was designated international status in UN General Assembly Resolution 181 (II) on 29th November 1947 (UN 1947) and was only recently recognized as the 'undivided' capital of Israel by the United States. President Trump's decision to recognize Jerusalem as the capital of Israel in December 2017 was strongly condemned by the UN General Assembly (UN 2017) and was opposed by the majority of the UN's member states.

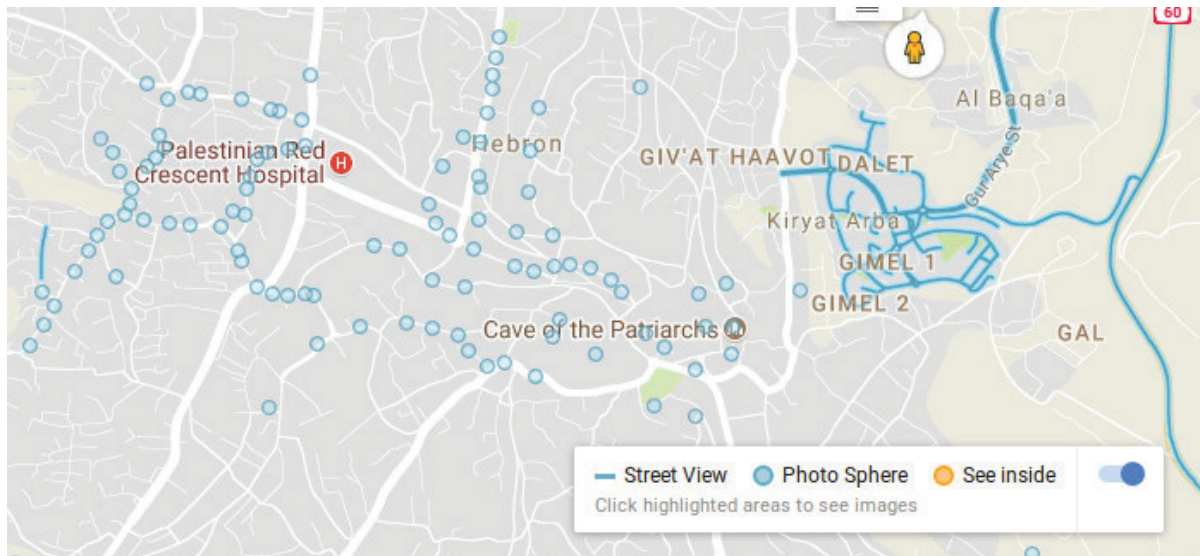
Through its mapping and labelling, one can deduce that Google Maps recognises the existence of Israel, with Jerusalem as its capital, but not Palestine. The West Bank and Gaza do not appear as part of any country or state, as Palestine is not labelled. The terminology used by Google Search was changed in March 2013 from 'Palestinian territories' to 'Palestine' (MEMRI 2013), although the classification of Palestine doesn't exist at all in Google Maps.

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(11) <https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2014/04/12/302337754/google-maps-displays-crimean-border-differently-in-russia-u-s>



Screenshot (6th April 2018): Marking and terminology of borders and capitals in Israel and the occupied Palestinian territories



Screenshot (6th April 2018): Availability of Street View in the Hebron area

## Technological Feasibility and Google Maps Alternatives

The Californian NGO The Rebuilding Alliance regularly holds 'Map-Athons' where Palestinians and mapping experts add missing Palestinian villages, streets, and residential and agricultural structures to Google Maps. In 2016, The Rebuilding Alliance and Bimkom, another NGO, succeeded in making Google Maps add 236 missing Palestinian villages to their maps (Rebuilding Alliance n.y.).

Unlike Google Maps, the Good Shepherd Engineering (GSE) PalMap<sup>(12)</sup> service provides maps of the West Bank that show both Israeli settlements and Palestinian villages, as well as marking checkpoints, refugee camps, and the separation wall. On their map of historic Palestine, the separation wall is marked in different degrees of completion, with a colour-coded system to mark settlements, Palestinian built-up areas, evacuated Palestinian land, Israeli military bases, as well as the Areas A, B and C and the Green Line. GSE offers a route planning app called iGoPalestine for smartphones, which focuses on guiding Palestinians through the numerous movement restrictions they face. It also offers Street Recordings, similar to Google Street View, for the Palestinian cities Bethlehem, Hebron, Nablus, Ramallah, Jenin and Jericho. GSE depends largely on user subscriptions and fees. Additionally, their 'Palestine 1948'<sup>(13)</sup> initiative allows users to locate information about Palestinian villages and towns that were depopulated or destroyed during the 1948 Nakba ('catastrophe', ethnic cleansing and displacement of Palestinians). Similarly, Palestine Open Maps<sup>(14)</sup> uses historical maps of Palestine to illustrate depopulated villages or areas destroyed from present official maps by combining emerging technologies with immersive storytelling to bring to life stories of Palestinian displacement.

These different initiatives, illustrate how the absence of Palestinian villages on Google Maps is not a technological issue, but rather a systematic omission. Despite countless

(12) <https://palopenmaps.org/#/>

(13) <http://palmap.org/palestine1948/>

(14) <https://palopenmaps.org/#/>

attempts, a Google Maps representative could not be reached to comment on this issue. Although a few Google representatives initially agreed to answer questions about the issue, in the end, none of the persons at Google were actually available to comment.

## Conclusion & Recommendations

Google Maps does not include Palestinian areas that are unrecognised by Israel, or the term 'Palestine', yet it features illegal Israeli settlements within the West Bank. It ignores all movement restrictions that exist for Palestinians, such as checkpoints and restricted roads, which impede free movement for Palestinians, and, if not taken into consideration can cause severe danger for Palestinians. Route planning with Google Maps favours Israelis over Palestinians, given that the default routes are often only accessible for Israelis. In its failure to display checkpoints and restricted roads, and Palestinian villages in the same detail as Israeli villages, Google Maps demonstrates its complicity in violating international law and human rights agreements. Instead of aligning itself with the policies and practices of Israeli authorities - or any one particular state - mapping services should operate in alignment with human rights standards and international law. Google Maps, as the largest global mapping and route planning service, has the power to influence global public opinion and therefore bears the responsibility to abide by international human rights standards and to offer a service that reflects the Palestinian reality. Instead of living up to this responsibility, Google has adopted the Israeli narrative, and only rarely allowed for mapping of some Palestinian cities in its Street View product.

### Google's Vision and Responsibility

In its company description, Google defines its goal as the following: "To organize the world's information and make it **universally accessible and useful**, through services that can "[...] improve the lives of **as many people as possible**" (Google n.y., emphasis added). According to this description, Google aims at universality rather than marginalisation. This assumption can also be made from its slogan: "Not just for some. For Everyone."(ebd.). In a letter penned by Larry Page and Sergey Brin in 2004, they claim to "[...] provide **unbiased, accurate** and free access to information for those who rely on [them] around the world" (Page, Brin 2004, emphasis added), in order to add to "a well functioning society" (ebd.) and "make the world a better place". In the same document, it is stated that "Google [...] has a responsibility to the world" (Page, Brin 2004).

Google, as part of the Global Network Initiative (GNI) is furthermore dedicated to an upholding of international human rights standards, and in specific that "[i]f national laws, regulations and policies do not conform to international standards, ICT companies should avoid, minimize, or otherwise address the adverse impact of **government demands**, laws, or regulations, and seek ways to honor the principles of internationally recognized human rights to the greatest extent possible" (GNI n.y., emphasis added). By completely adapting the Israeli government narrative, Google contradicts not only the dedication to internationally recognized legal frameworks, but furthermore this guiding principle of GNI.

Google and its services have become essential to everyday life across the globe. As it provides these services, claims neutrality even though it has adopted a highly political stance. Google openly acknowledges its responsibility to its customers, stakeholders, and the world at large, yet Palestinians seem to have been left out of this pledge. This discrimination against Palestinians is a clear contradiction of the values Google claims to have, and its unwillingness to provide a true account of the reality in Palestine reflects Google's bias in favour of advancing the Israeli government's agenda vis-a-vis Palestine.

## Recommendations

Google Maps should:

- Incorporate all 'unrecognised' Palestinian villages into its maps in the first layer
- Provide the same level of detail in its representation of Palestinian villages in Area C as it gives to Israeli settlements
- Recognize and mark the illegality of Israeli settlements on its maps in accordance with Art. 49 IV Geneva Convention and Art. 55 of the Hague Regulations
- Clearly mark Areas A, B and C within the West Bank
- Recognize all movement restrictions and restricted roads for Palestinians and clearly display them
- Name Palestine on Google Maps consistent with UN General Assembly resolution of November 2012
- Clearly distinguish routes which are only available to Israeli ID holders
- Offer route planning for West Bank Palestinians which takes into account all restrictions on movement
- Recognize Jerusalem as designated international status in accordance with UN General Assembly Resolution 181
- Live up to its values, ideals and responsibilities and reflect them in all its services by providing services in a non-discriminatory manner in accordance with the [UN Guiding Principles Reporting Framework](#)
- Engage in meaningful consultations with Palestinian civil society in order to discuss an improvement of policies and services to meet the needs of Palestinians



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