

Contested Space: Maps in Teaching About Israel

Derek J. Penslar

I have a colleague at the University of Toronto who teaches a course called “How to Lie With Maps.” Supporters of Israel might well suggest as required reading for this course Palestinian maps that show a unitary Palestine from the Mediterranean to the Jordan with no sign of Israel’s existence. Yet Israeli maps, and those produced by and for Diaspora Jews, rarely mark the Green Line that constitutes the country’s internationally recognized borders.

This was the case even during the height of optimism during the Oslo years. A map from 1999 by the Israeli Nature Reserves and National Parks Authority displayed Israel as reaching from the Jordan to the sea. (map 1) “Israel” includes not only the Golan Heights and greater Jerusalem, which Israel has annexed, but also the West Bank, which it has not. The territorial integrity of Greater Israel is emphasized by the empty, white space surrounding it and connoting foreign lands. A map from 2000 produced for the Israeli National Tourist Office just before the outbreak of the Second Intifada, is somewhat more sophisticated; it shades the urban areas on the West Bank that, at that time, were under full Palestinian control but the rest of the West Bank blends imperceptibly into Israel proper.

Jewish youth in North America are not well educated about the barrier between pre- and post-1967 Israel. A map currently available on the Web site of the American United Synagogue Youth* depicts a Greater Israel in which the northern West Bank is presented as part of “Tel Aviv and the Sharon Valley,” and the southern West Bank is divided between “Jerusalem and Area” and the “Coastal Plain.” This classification is topographically illogical, since the West Bank is a hilly spine, but it is ideologically satisfying for Zionists as it attaches the territory to familiar Israeli spaces.

In Israeli schools, textbooks often excise the Green Line and include the West Bank in maps of Israel. In December of 2006, Education Minister Yuli Tamir declared that future textbooks must depict the Green Line, and the Education Ministry was asked to implement a new high school curriculum on the delineation of Israel’s borders. The issue,

according to Tamir, is educational, not political: as part of their training to be informed citizens, Israeli youth need to know how and when Israel assumed control of the territories in which its population currently lives. This knowledge is a necessary precondition for intelligent debate over the feasibility of border adjustments as a component of a sustainable Israeli–Palestinian peace accord. Tamir’s proposal set off a firestorm of protest from the Israeli right, which will not countenance any challenge to the legitimacy of the conquests of 1967. But underneath Tamir’s proposal is a sound pedagogical issue: the need to educate young people that borders are artifacts, not works of nature or God. The concept of “natural boundaries” (seas, mountains, and rivers) has always been more of an ideal than a reality. Borders change constantly, in both the course of war and the negotiations that lead to peace.

Modern cartography is a manifestation of the state’s assertion of sovereignty within its borders and the nationalist idea that each people should dwell within its own land. But reality rarely conforms to the ideal. The world is filled with porous borders and autonomous regions under nominal state jurisdiction. Most states, even the most zealously nationalistic, are multiethnic. The modern map is an assertion of what historian Thongchai Winichakul calls a “geo-body”: a coherent, integral nation realized in space. It is an abstraction and a fantasy, simultaneously a legitimization for domination and a denial of hegemony’s limits.

The early Zionists imagined a Jewish national geo-body. The Yishuv was a new entity, projected onto not only the small, venerable Jewish communities of the four holy cities (Jerusalem, Hebron, Tiberias, and Safed) but also the hundreds of Arab villages that dotted the Palestinian landscape. An accurate map of Mandate Palestine would depict more than a thousand places of settlement, mostly Arab. In 1914, after two waves of Zionist immigration, Jews made up a tenth of Palestine’s population. By 1948, they were a third. But old Zionist maps depicted only the Jewish settlements and mixed cities, with the occasional large Arab town as a point of reference, al-

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* <http://www.usy.org/yourusy/israel/map/>

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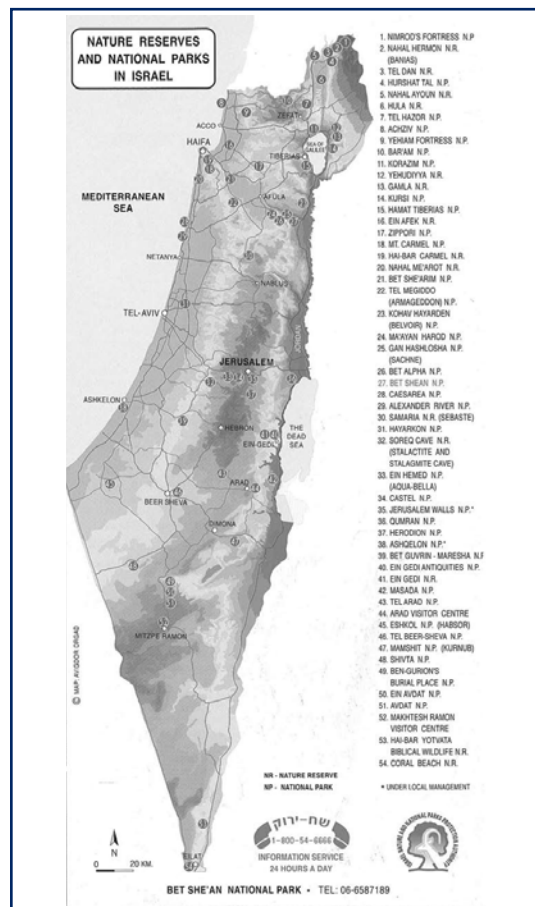
though most Palestinian Arabs lived in the countryside.

Even recent books on the history of Zionism reproduce this point of view. The maps in Howard Sachar's *History of Israel*, revised and republished in 2000, show just a handful of Arab communities. My first book, a 1991 study of Zionist settlement in Ottoman Palestine, features a detailed map of Jewish settlements, but Arabs are represented only by a few cities. (map 2) At the time I thought that my approach was justified because my topic was the Zionist enterprise, not Palestine's native population, but I have come to believe that the two cannot be separated. I have been convinced by two decades of scholarship that presents the history of Jews and Arabs in Palestine holistically, with each people constantly influencing and shaping the other.

The best way to illustrate this new approach would be through maps that faithfully depict the constant presence of Jews and Arabs in the same landscape. (Overlaying film transparencies is an old-fashioned but effective technology. In PowerPoint, one can create transparency overlays using maps in .gif or

.jpeg image format.) Superimposing maps would display the geographic structure and distribution of each community along with the points of intersection between them. By displaying change over time — say, at ten-year intervals between 1917 and 1948 — one could see how Palestinian settlement patterns were influenced by Zionist immigration and the British administration. Overlaying maps would display rupture and absence as well as continuity and coexistence. A map of Israel in 1953, superimposed on one of Palestine in 1947, would show new Jewish towns, suburbs, and agricultural settlements where hundreds of Palestinian villages had been. The same could be done for the post-1967 West Bank, where Jewish settlements have profoundly affected Palestinian landholding and population distribution.

Maps can also trace changing borders, both in pre-1948 Palestine and post-1948 Israel. The Green Line is but one of these borders, but it is of vast importance. It cannot be wished away. The truth, be it about intermixing of Jews and Arabs or division between Israel and its neighbors, must never be erased.



Map 1: Israel's Nature Reserves and National Parks Reprinted with permission of the author



Map 2: Jewish Settlements in Palestine 1870-1918 Reprinted with permission of the author