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RECENT BOOKS

MAPPING THE NAKBA

The Atlas of Palestine, 1917–1966, by Salman Abu Sitta. London: The Palestine Land Society, 2010. Part I: General Review to p. 155. Bibliography to p. 161. Part II: The Atlas to p. 655. Index to p. 689. \$250.00, cloth.

Reviewed by Ilan Pappé

In its first edition published in 2004, *The Atlas of Palestine* was already an essential item in the library of anyone seriously interested in the history of Palestine. At nearly 700 pages (almost 300 more than the earlier edition), the 2010 edition contains valuable information available nowhere else on 1,600 towns and villages, 16,000 landmarks, 30,000 place names, and much more. If I emphasize the richness of this cartographic representation of Palestine's modern history, it is because this *Atlas* is the strongest rebuttal yet of the Zionist cartographic representation of the country's history, exemplified in publications such as Martin Gilbert's *Atlas of the Arab-Israeli Conflict* (Oxford University Press, 1993) and the various other atlases produced by Israeli geographers over the years. It challenges those projects both as a meta-narrative of Palestine's history and as a detailed project that rescues the native population from the invisibility to which they are condemned by Gilbert and others. In other words, this huge volume is a detailed refutation of the attempt to erase the Palestinians from the history of Palestine.

This is the *Atlas's* sole mission, and it fulfills it effectively and convincingly. Although the Israeli and Zionist version of the 1948 war has almost disappeared from serious academic works, and even to an extent serious media in the West, the struggle over memory is

not yet over. The official Israeli position, as manifested in publications and materials put out by both the Israeli Foreign and Education Ministries, is that the Palestinians lost Palestine because of their Islamic fanaticism and Arab primitivism. Surprisingly, this is now also the line taken by the now repentant ex-New Historian Benny Morris, who has enthusiastically embraced the role of Israel's leading court historian, as can be seen from his new book *1948: A History of the First Arab-Israeli War* (Yale University Press, 2009), which essentially refutes the findings and conclusions of his own earlier works.

So the battle is still on, and Abu Sitta's cartographic treatment of the 1948 events is thorough, comprehensive, and vivid in a way that no narrative—however competent and eloquent—could ever convey. The war crimes committed during the Nakba, the disappearance of more than 500 villages, some going back to ancient times, the destruction of the landscape, the confiscation of property and water resources, are all recorded in Abu Sitta's illuminative method of representation.

It is through aerial photographs, diagrams, and focused maps, as well as data in the text and tables, that one absorbs the story of the dispossession both as a master plan executed on a grand scale in 1948 and as a piecemeal, incremental project that began in the period before the Nakba and that has continued since. A novel and very instructive example of the gradual dispossession are the maps that follow the changes in the Israeli 1949 armistices lines: a tale of creeping annexation and encroachment not only into what was left of Palestine but of neighboring Arab countries as well. I was struck by the power of the aerial photographs taken by World War I German pilots, which Abu Sitta has matched with Mandatory maps and enhanced satellite images. These combined images bring to life—both in their minute details and in the most comprehensive manner possible—the lost Palestine.

Ilan Pappé, professor at Exeter University, is the author of numerous books, including *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2006).

Walking through these very locations today and digesting Abu Sitta's *Atlas*, one grasps fully what an ecological disaster Zionism has been. The opening pages of the *Atlas* provide a detailed cartographic description of the villages as they were on the eve of their disappearance (some of this is conveyed later in the photographic section). Even a cursory look reveals proximity to water sources—springs, natural ponds, deep wells. Life was bearable even in the hottest summers because villages were situated and built in ways that made the best use of water resources, wind patterns, and topography. All this has disappeared. The water sources are gone, and the winds are blocked by concrete buildings, particularly devastating in the Western Galilee that no longer enjoys the Mediterranean breeze. Jewish inhabitants of Haifa and Tel Aviv suffer from these changes as well, with the seafront in both cities now blocked by walls of American hotels and high rises. Instead of the desert being made to bloom, as Zionist myth would have it, the Mediterranean landscape became a desert.

One could add to this ecological disaster the destruction of the local fauna and vegetation that formed an essential part of the local Palestinian diet and traditional medicinal practices. It is now a crime for Palestinians to collect whatever is left of that rich natural heritage—it is protected by the green authorities in Israel as rare vegetation, yet one suspects that the Jewish industry of herbal medicine and food is not regulated in such a way. It is not just the human tragedy and the dispossession of the native population that the *Atlas* so forcefully demonstrates. It is the brutalization of an ancient land which, judging from similar environments around the Mediterranean, could have been a gem and tourist attraction of the first order today. Instead, it became what the Zionist national poet Nathan Alterman promised very early on: “we will dress you, O motherland, in a cloak of concrete and mortar.” This *Atlas* gives you a glimpse of what lies below the concrete straitjacket that modern-day Israel has spread over Palestine in the name of modernity and enlightenment, a landscape from which arose the world's great monotheistic religions, Judaism

and Christianity directly, and Islam through them.

The *Atlas* can serve as the source and confirmation of the macro story, or, if you are a refugee or related to one, almost as your own private register, because it also reveals Abu Sitta's relentless and unfailing commitment to the right of return. This book, like other projects Abu Sitta has completed in the past, seeks to translate for us the slogan of return into a feasible reality. Thus the *Atlas of Palestine 1917–1966* is as much a map of the future as it is the map of the past. The concrete and mortar cloak cannot easily be undone. But perhaps the *human* landscape will one day return, when, as Abu Sitta envisages, refugees are allowed to return—not only because it is geographically feasible, but also as it becomes increasingly clear that it is the only way to peace and reconciliation.

Abu Sitta stands in stark contrast to members of the Palestinian Authority and other Palestinians (including the president of al-Quds University, Sari Nusseibah, in his recent book), who categorically reject the Palestinian right of return, preferring to look for a two-state solution that satisfies Israeli security needs and territorial greed. Through the maps, images, and photographs of his *Atlas*, Abu Sitta presents the antithesis to this position. He cannot easily be brushed aside as a dreamer, as the “realist” camp would have it. In fact, the hard and determined work done by this one man persuasively shows that the only reason Palestinians can reject the right of return is because they believe in Israel's invincibility and everlasting supremacy. This may seem to be a “realistic” assessment, but, as a historian, I doubt whether invincibility of this kind is eternal, and I share Abu Sitta's belief that reconciliation is based on justice. Even if the term “right of return” itself sounds too abstract to some ears, or at times be seen as serving propagandistic purposes, it gains a whole different meaning when a diligent and professional scholar takes it and turns it into a strategy and a vision in an age when citizens in Cairo and Tunis have proven how *realpolitik* scholarship melts in a day under the heat of hope and human determination.