Palestine from Above
Curatorial text & Introduction to the 6 Chapters

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Dima Abu Ghoush, Forensic Architecture, Irene Anastas and Rene Gabri, Kamal Jaafari, Lumière brothers, Nahed Awwad, Nida Sinnokrot, Pier Paolo Pasolini, Raed Helou (Rosa Luxemburg Foundation), Rania Stephan, Studio CAMP (Shaina Anand, Ashok Sukumaran and Nida Ghouse).

Artwork and memorabilia from the collections of the Fawzi Nastas Sculpture Studio and the George Al Ama Collection.

Palestine from Above – Curatorial Text

According to legend, the prophet Moses caught glimpses of the Holy Land twice in his lifetime – both from the towering heights of mountains surrounding Palestine: the first, from Mount Sinai when he received the tablets of the ten commandments; and the second, from the heights of Mount Nebo across the Jordan when he led the Israelites to 'the land of milk and honey'. He died before fulfilling his mission to tread the sacred land.

Historically, Palestine has always been a place where the sacred landscape is gazed from above –regardless of different ideological doctrines and positions. From parables portraying the sudden blood rush that occurs when prophets and heroes viewed the holy landscape from the heights for the first time and were immediately tempted to dominate the geography, to the Israeli unmanned aerial assault vehicle (the heron TP drone), constant raids on Palestinians, raises fundamental questions about the environment and de-territorialisation. The holiness of the Palestinian landscape has been a curse to those who have lived there, who were always seen as an affliction on its sacredness or as a part of the exotic Orient that lies under the colonial disposal.

Viewing Palestine from the sky is historically part of a clear colonial war of subjugation and control, waged through cutting-edge photography, cartography, remote sensing and surveillance, hand-in-hand with the operations of armies on the ground. In contemporary times, it has become a complex technology of security, hence deterrence. With the support of computer-aided algorithms, feature and facial recognition, and remote audio surveillance, juxtaposed with layers of on-ground metadata from the health, social, and educational sectors, as well as social media, the Israeli government accumulates hybrid complex datasets that aim at analysing and predicting patterns of behaviour within the Palestinian population for purposes of its security apparatus and biopolitics.

Reading the aerial gaze on Palestinian geography does not only concern itself with the interpretation of what is depicted on aerial photographs, maps, or films. It requires scrutinising the politics behind placing the technology up in the sky, and the reasons behind the generation of these images. What has been produced from the sky cannot be understood without contextualising and examining it in terms of the realities on the ground, unseen from the sky.

This exhibition juxtaposes layers of historic material with films and artworks. Archival material that depicts power and colonial hegemony is unpacked, and sometimes subverted, by means of artistic agency that dismantles the colonial, historical, and contemporary constructs.

Chapters of the Exhibition

Chapter 1: Sky Spies – Imperial German Air Squadron AF304b

The First World War (1914–1918) witnessed the advent of systematic usage of aerial photography for military purposes. Palestine was at the centre of such technological advancements that equipped airplanes – first flown in 1903 – with more advanced photography cameras. Both sides of the war – the Ottoman-German and the British-Australian – had units that photographed Palestine from above. They gradually began using photography not only for military reconnaissance, strategic planning, and manoeuvres, but also for location and mapping of archaeological sites, urban infrastructure, and religious landscapes.

Photographs taken by the British air force from this period have not been located. The German and Australian photos, however, are accessible through the Bavarian State Archive and the Australian War Memorial, respectively. While most of the photos show a bird's eye view and are oblique – taken at an angle, unlike vertical satellite photos – they revolutionized mapping of the mountainous terrain and the urban landscape by incorporating topographical details. The German aerial photography was also useful in the ethnographic survey of Palestine's geography, fauna, and flora.

During the British Mandate, despite many suggestions and plans to map Palestine systematically from the sky, the British used aerial photography in a limited capacity, such as gathering strategic information in both urban and rural areas for the suppression of the Arab Revolt (1936–1939). With technological advancements in both photography and map-making techniques, the British began using aerial photography to document Palestine from above during the Second World War (1939–1945).

Today, satellite and drone imagery has replaced aerial photography in controlling the skies, mapping the land, and surveilling Palestine from above. These technologies have become affordable and accessible domestically and via the global market. Some of its subversive uses can be seen today in monitoring police movement in demonstrations and tracking environmental degradation perpetrated by governments and industries. Nevertheless, the Israeli judicial system is still using old British and Bavarian photographs, which lack clarity and accuracy, in order to obliterate and exclude Palestinians by showing their lack of evidence in the area.

Chapter 2: Travels, Cravings, and Desires

Palestine – both as the Holy Land and as an important crossroad of routes connecting Egypt to Syria and Anatolia – has inspired people throughout history to visit as traders, pilgrims, tourists, soldiers, settlers, crusaders, sovereigns, adventurists, and scholars. From the late nineteenth century onward, Palestine became the object of intense study and knowledge production for imperial rivalries between Ottomans and Europeans, and between Europeans and Americans.

In the late nineteenth century, the Ottoman state invited European monarchs to visit Palestine in order to construct political alliances. Upon entering Palestine, the monarchs posited themselves as modern crusaders symbolically conquering the Holy

Land through the peaceful means of travel and pilgrimage, memorialized through photographs and paintings.

With their governments' support, European and American Christians set up colonies and settlements in Palestine, and helped produce an immense body of knowledge about Palestine through new disciplines of archaeology and anthropology to bolster Western and later Zionist military, economic, and cultural needs.

The Ottomans in turn used these visits to posit their power as protectors of religious sites, bestowing land on the European monarchs for establishment of hospices and churches. They demonstrated their military might through ceremonial marches that re-invented traditional pilgrimages to civic and religious festivals. They mapped the land, conducted censuses, and categorized the Palestinian population to serve their own imperial ideologies and needs.

Palestine also became a main destination for the new tourism industry – its land, history, and people reframed as 'sights' to travellers on grand tours. Postcards, travel guides, and travelogues conveyed Palestine solely as the Holy Land, unchanged or dissipated from biblical times, to fulfil the array of messianic, colonialist, and nationalist cravings of Europeans and Zionists.

Photography, cartography, cinema, and print have all been essential technologies in creating particular narratives about Palestinian history, land, and customs to serve multiple and competing imperial and colonial ambitions.

Chapter 3: Jerusalem Represented

Jerusalem has been represented in text, in visual arts – illustrated manuscripts, paintings, prints, photographs, maps, and film – and in objects replicating its holy sites or aspects of its history. Models of the city at different stages in its long history have been produced that range from miniatures to even large-scale theme parks. The centrality of the city to Jewish, Christian, and Islamic histories and theologies has led to production of an immense body of knowledge about its history, geography, and population. In contemporary times, it has also led to the city becoming a commodity in a capitalist culture through which its history and sacred sites are consumed.

While Jerusalem's origins date to pre-biblical times, it is its biblical history that has been most frequently depicted and the foremost subject of debate. With the Ottoman conquest of Jerusalem in the early modern period, this became amplified. For the city that loomed large in the European imagination, secure pilgrimage routes gave rise to a proliferation of travel guides and accounts of visits to its sacred sites.

Early modern representations of Jerusalem, whether by Europeans, Orthodox Christians, or Muslims, had religious purposes. These bird's-eye view depictions appearing in pilgrimage guides did not strive for accurate topographic representation since their main aim was to emphasise the spiritual value of the city. Such distorted representation became the reference for Western culture of truth about the Holy Land, for which Jerusalem is central to its depiction. From miniatures and illustrations appearing in manuscripts to printed and mass-produced maps, depictions of Jerusalem emphasized the city as a pivotal connection between heaven and earth, offering an

imaginary view of biblical Jerusalem. While these representations reflected some depth of scholarship and knowledge of history and theology, they often had little to do with the geographical and material reality of earthly Jerusalem.

The nineteenth century witnessed a race in production of knowledge to satisfy the intertwined religious and colonial ambitions of the Europeans and Americans. This was manifested in the Orientalist art movement, especially through paintings, which exoticized Jerusalem and its inhabitants. With the advent of new technologies of modern cartography, photography, and lithography, Jerusalem was meticulously recorded and represented from above in order to put forth particular claims about its history, land, and resources.

The British occupation of the city in the First World War was cast as the end of the Last Crusade and the beginning of fulfilment of Zionist dreams. The British introduced the idea of sectarian quarters – reducing the Ottoman ethnic plethora in the city – based on religious affiliation through maps, aerial photography, and urban planning schemes.

After the Nakba and the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948, the city and a particular interpretation of its biblical past was represented through a myriad of tools in order to support Zionist claims and justify the military occupation of a now divided city. Jerusalem has been surveilled and represented increasingly from above through Israeli security devices, exemplified by the barrier wall that severs the city from its environs and connections to other enduring Palestinian towns and cities.

Chapter 4: Ports of Memory

Palestine, with ports on the Mediterranean and located at the juncture of Anatolia, Syria, and Egypt, connects Asia, Africa, the Mediterranean, and the Red Sea. From the late nineteenth century, Palestine became increasingly accessible through the construction of secure land roads, seaports, railways, and airports. Many of the ports of entry to Palestine were destroyed and reappropriated beginning with Ottoman rule, throughout the British Mandate, and finally with the Israeli occupation – consigned to the domain of memory and archives.

Planning the repair and expansion of existing ports and construction of new ports, railways, and airports necessitated surveying the land. Palestinian landscape was thus captured from above in photographs from natural and man-made vantage points, aerial photographs, and in maps. Imperial and colonial infrastructural programs required cheap labour, which was provided by the local population.

In the nineteenth century, new infrastructure projects integrated Palestine into the larger span of the Ottoman Empire. Ottoman Palestine also became more important as a pilgrimage destination. With the advent of steamships, the railways in Palestine, namely the Jaffa–Jerusalem and Haifa–Dara'a lines, facilitated travel for Christian and Muslim pilgrims to the Holy Land. The Jaffa port and Gaza also functioned as important commercial transit points for agricultural produce. During the First World War, the British constructed a number of military railways as they pushed out the Ottoman armies. They connected Egypt through the Sinai to Haifa, which continued to operate passenger trains after the war, while the short al-Bireh–Jerusalem line functioned only

as a temporary military railway and was dismantled at the conclusion of the war in 1919.

In 1942, the Haifa–Beirut–Tripoli railway line was built. Initially intended for military purposes during the Second World War, it was subsequently acquired by the Lebanese government. Had it opened for public traffic, it would have made Palestine once more the bridge between Africa, Asia, and Europe. Unfortunately, the scheme remained on paper, never implemented, as a result of the Nakba.

Ottoman military aviators began to fly aeroplanes over Palestinian skies prior to the First World War with the Istanbul-Cairo Expedition in 1914. The Ottomans established multiple airfields across Palestine with the help of the Germans so that German planes could photograph the land and bomb the British positions throughout the war.

After the war, commercial air travel became possible. The first International Airport in Palestine was constructed by the British in Lydda in 1934 followed by a second airport in Jerusalem in 1936. After 1948, Palestinian infrastructure was targeted by Zionist takeovers and destruction. While the Lydda Airport was captured by the Zionist forces in 1948 and renamed, the Jerusalem Airport functioned under Jordanian occupation of Palestine until the 1967 War, when it was also captured by the Israelis. Since the second intifada it has been shut as a civilian airport.

Palestine had been without an airport after 1967, until the Yasser Arafat International Airport opened in Gaza in 1998 in fulfilment of the second Oslo agreement. It was owned and operated by the Palestinian Authority until 2000, when the Israeli government destroyed its radar station, control tower, and runway. Since then, Palestinians have had to rely on international airports in Israel, Egypt, and Jordan for any air travel. The Israeli government, which has held Gaza under siege since 2007, has proposed constructing an artificial island off Gaza's coast with air and sea ports – considered by Palestinians as a way for Israel to escape responsibility for the two million Palestinians under its occupation in Gaza.

Chapter 5: Landscape and Power

The landscape reveals human interaction with the land and the consequent reordering of its surface. Imperial, colonial, and Zionist projects over the past two centuries have turned Palestine into a politically fragmented landscape. The land of Palestine, surveyed and surveilled from above, has been transformed through massive settlement and infrastructural projects. Through ad hoc construction and planned interventions, architects and urban planners have engaged in a process of Israeli nation-building and Palestinian erasure. This has occurred in the face of various forms of continual resistance by Palestinians that seek to preserve the evidence and memories of Palestinian presence on the land.

One of the main instruments used in the transformation of Palestinian landscape has been town and settlement planning by Zionist architects. The various forms of settlement since the early twentieth century, from the kibbutz, moshav and development towns, to illegal settlements established in the West Bank, have served as the means of colonization. Each is a manifestation of different ideological, social, and political leanings within the larger Zionist project.

From their inception, the kibbutz and moshav strove to establish a renewed connection between the Jewish diaspora and the land through collective and individual agricultural production. Part of the goal was to transform the Jewish individuals, mostly urban immigrants coming to Ottoman and Mandate Palestine. The projects were sponsored largely by private enterprise and philanthropy from the global Jewish diaspora, organized through the Jewish National Fund (JNF).

The establishment of Israel brought about a different set of priorities and settlement projects. The fabricated space of Israel emerged because of comprehensive, controlled, and efficient modernist architectural experiments. Central planning reorganized the land by the construction of rural and urban settlements in concert with networks of roads, electricity, water, ports, and factories. The main aim was to disperse the Jewish population across the whole land. This process continued after the 1967 War, when the Israeli government set out systematically to colonize the occupied Palestinian territories in the West Bank and Gaza.

Another aspect of Israel's master plan to transform the landscape was afforestation of land that Orientalist narratives had depicted as deserted and desolate. The Jewish National Fund's attempt to 'bloom the desert' by planting foreign tree species, especially quick-growing pine trees, has been a staple of the Zionist narrative of modernization and rejuvenation of the landscape.

Zionist/Israeli plans have implemented the erasure of Palestinian existence on the land. Forests were planted intentionally over the many destroyed Palestinian villages that the population was forced out of during the Nakba. The illegal settlements in the occupied territories have cut through and violently divided the Palestinian land in order to impose Israeli military control and mastery. Modern technologies of aerial photography, cartography, and architectural planning greatly facilitated all of this.

Palestinians have resisted the Orientalist narratives of an empty and barren land by preserving the memories of their homes and collecting evidence to fight for their legal rights in local and international courts. This resistance stretches across the politically fragmented Palestinian landscape – from the villagers of al-'Araqib in the Naqab desert using aerial photography from cameras attached to kites to Palestinians in the West Bank recording the persistent cultivation of the land by documenting their olive groves. In the aftermath of the failure of the Oslo accords (1993 and 1995), artistic projects such as 'A Blurry Real Landscape' about the Jordan Valley, and 'Gaza/Strip' about the atrocities after the Israeli assault in 2014, have recorded the Israeli exploitation and destruction of the Palestinian landscape from the river to the sea.

Chapter 6: Australian Carnivalesque

World War I was an important turning point for Australia as a former British protectorate. It was the first war in which they participated as an independent nation alongside Britain, and marked the beginning of the 'Anzac Legend' that mythologized Australian soldiers. The legend embodied the perceived comradeship of front-line soldiers, the rejection of conventional discipline, physical strength, egalitarianism, loyalty, self-sacrifice, courage, and other early twentieth-century conceptions of masculinity.

During the war, the government commissioned fifteen Australian artists and photographers through the Australian Official War Art Scheme, ten living in England and five who were already part of the Australian Imperial Force. Advised by Charles Bean (1879–1968), the official war correspondent and historian, the artists and photographers not only recorded the war as eyewitnesses, but became actively involved in shaping and propagating the 'Anzac Legend', and the Australian nation-building project.

Palestine played an important role in the Australian self-image. In the Battle of Beersheba, the Australian Light Horse, a mounted infantry brigade, charged from the east across a plain to push back the Ottoman forces and take over the city. In Australian paintings and photographs, the Light Horse soldiers in Palestine were evocations of the popular cultural heroes of the nineteenth century. They mirrored the stereotypical European pioneers colonizing Australia. The recently federated nation was now seen as a colonizer of the ancient biblical lands. Much of the imagery also directly referenced Australian landscapes, making foreign lands familiar to the Australian audience.

The absences in the Australian paintings and photography are more telling than what they actually depict. They show empty and abstracted landscapes without the presence of the local population, propagating the myth of Palestine as a deserted place ripe for colonization. They also lack any engagement with the Palestinian population or culture, reducing it to an interchangeable background for the Light Horse triumphs. In glorifying the Australian soldiers, they also ignore the atrocities committed by them, such as the massacre of the male population of Sarafand village to avenge the murder of a soldier during a robbery.

After the war, Bean's efforts led to the founding of the Australian War Memorial in 1919. Their archives incorporated documents collected throughout the war in London, the 11,243 photographic negatives by official photographers, and the paintings and sketches by the official war artists. All glorified the battlefield and the soldiers, minimizing the devastating impact of the war.

The visual vocabulary that artists and photographers created during the First World War was evoked later during the Second World War by their counterparts. Although Palestine was not a theatre in that war, the Australian Imperial Force did use it as headquarters and for deployment of Australian soldiers from Palestine to battlegrounds in Italy, North Africa, and Vichy-held Syria and Lebanon.

Palestine was more of a training and recreational ground for the artists and photographers, who spent time there travelling through the land and exploring its biblical past. At the same time, local photographers recorded Australian activities, especially the distinctive Surf Carnivals held in Gaza and Tel Aviv to boost morale and display the Anzac spirit – comradeship, strength, and ideal Australian masculinity.

Today, the Australian government's colonialist and Orientalist attitudes towards the Palestinian population continues. The Australian World War I effort has been re-dressed as their contribution to the Zionist project and the establishment of the State of Israel. The Australians have erected a monument in Beersheba to the Light Horse and even re-enacted their triumphal charge. At the same time, there has been little to no support or engagement with the Palestinian cause.