

Drawing from the Jawlan

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Drawing from the Jawlan

Nora Akawi

On May 15, 2011, on the commemoration of the Nakba, and as part of a mass movement calling for freedom, justice, and the toppling of colonial and oppressive regimes in the Arab region, thousands marched in nonviolent protest toward the trenches and barbed wire in Majdal Shams' Valley of Tears, which separates the occupied Golan Heights from the rest of Syria. Protesters were primarily Palestinian and Syrian refugee youth whose families had been forcibly displaced from their land by the systematic ethnic cleansing that accompanied the creation of the Israeli state in 1948 and by its continued colonial expansion, including the occupation of the Jawlan (Golan in Arabic) in 1967. Marches of return were organized simultaneously toward the borders with Lebanon, Egypt, and Jordan, and in various towns and cities in Palestine. The Jawlanis' and Palestinians' refusal of these borders, and with it the implicit challenging of the maps that inscribe them, was performed in a choreography of collective resistance.

"Drawing from the Jawlan" is a project dedicated to producing geopolitical maps and architectural drawings that are aligned with indigenous Jawlani narratives and with their practices of refusal of settler-colonial exploitation of the land and its people. The project, part of the larger "Mapping Borderlands" initiative begun by Nora Akawi and Nina Kolowratnik in 2014, is a pedagogical experiment at Columbia

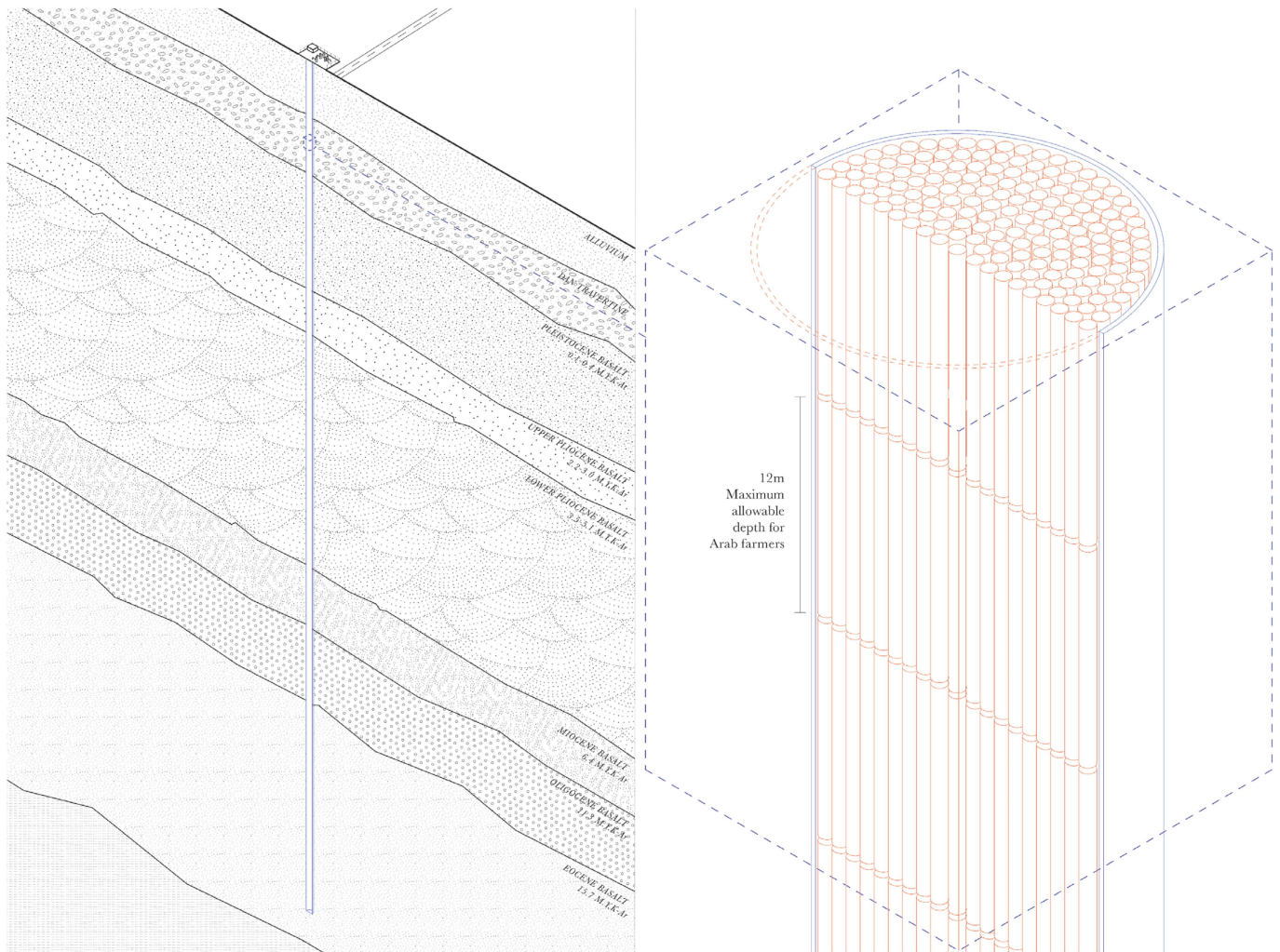
University's Graduate School of Architecture, Planning and Preservation (GSAPP) taught by Akawi and Khaled Malas, in partnership with Aamer Ibraheem. The project matches the skill sets of students of architecture (who redraw maps of the Jawlan) with organizations and groups working toward a new imaginary of territorialities, one that fights the static and exclusive nature of the state system. The project takes as a starting point the problematization of our understanding of territoriality, which is still heavily rooted in our imagination of the world as divided into compartmentalized, distinct, and mutually exclusive political formations. Following Arjun Appadurai's proposal to shift the emphasis from "trait geographies" to "process geographies," "Drawing from the Jawlan" aims to visualize movement and its suspension, both regular and irregular, recognized and unrecognized, as the central elements that define contemporary territories and geopolitical formations. The hope is that through critical analysis and representation — not of static conditions but of processes both of building and dismantling fortifications — other imaginaries for shared terrains can emerge.

Al-Marsad — Arab Center for Human Rights in Golan Heights has been leading the colossal effort to redraw maps of the Jawlan by locating and retracing the narratives of over one hundred fifty razed towns and villages, over hundred destroyed farms, and around 130,000 people expelled in 1967 (95 percent of the population at the time), as well as

by organizing for the rights of those still defiantly present in the few remaining towns. Learning from and in alliance with Al-Marsad, the course organizes readings, writings, and drawings around four core notions: edges and borders, ruins and excavations, resources and extractions, and images and imaginaries. Students explore each notion primarily through writings, films, and images produced by artists, writers, and researchers from the Jawlan, with relevant theoretical texts complimenting these works. During the first quarter of the course, participants develop a focused area of study, then travel to the Jawlan to meet with inhabitants of the area and authors of the studied works to evaluate with them the relevance of their writing and drawing proposals. The remaining time in the semester is dedicated to developing the mapping projects. The projects build on the course readings, on-site drawing and documentation, statistical data, satellite imagery, and photographic and other image and text-based archives. They trace the exploitation of subterranean resources, agricultural produce, and archaeological remains as tools for colonization, as well as the persistent civic resistance against it. Projects identify images from the 1960s and 1970s in the archive of the Israeli military and, by adding to these documents the layers they omit and geolocating and redrawing the scenarios they depict in today's contexts, repurpose them to build a new archive that joins the testimonies to the massive erasure and expropriation of

Syrian lands, peoples, and histories. The following three mapping projects illustrate the purpose and objective of the experiment.

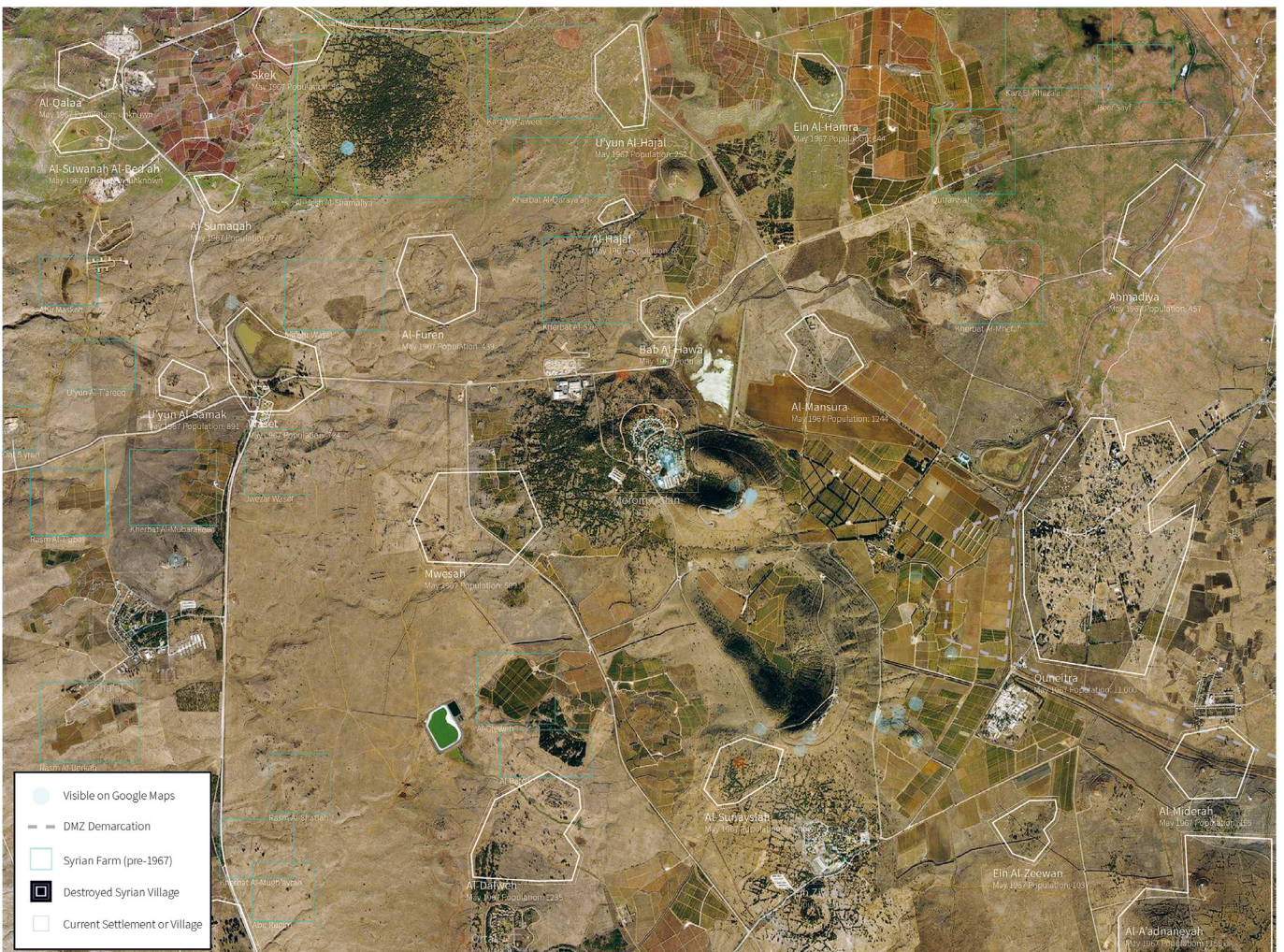
Xiao Wei Lim gathers geological maps, corporate advertisements for Israeli water companies, Arab farmers' narratives, and on-site research to visualize and compare the differences in the provision of water infrastructure and access between Israeli settlers and



indigenous inhabitants. The maps draw together layers of information that are typically not combined (remaining Syrian villages, Israeli settlements, potable water pipelines, wells, and other water infrastructure), visualizing the research and comparing the distribution of resources between Israeli settlers

and Syrian inhabitants. To make up for water shortages and the tendency of state infrastructures to bypass them, Syrian farmers began forming cooperatives to connect their lands to sources of water, including the building of rainwater collection tanks (many of which were regulated by the Israeli military and often fined, perforated by bullets, or completely destroyed). Learning from the work of environmental researcher and activist Muna Dajani and other experts on water in the region, Xiao Wei Lim redraws the map of the Jawlan to reveal the discriminatory patterns of water provision to Syrian farmers, in juxtaposition to Israel's large-scale extraction and subsidy of water for settlement expansion and large-scale corporate production and export.

Alicia French analyzes, locates, and catalogs the designed obstruction of the traces of colonial violence, showing how the terrain has been reconstructed to obscure unwanted narratives, both in the digital realm and physically on the ground. Digital obstructions include actual cut-outs from images of destroyed villages, the planting of trees over ruins, which render them invisible in satellite and aerial imagery, dead links and removed websites, the omission of certain places from official maps, and so on. With over two hundred fifty destroyed farms and villages scattered across the landscape, physical obstructions such as fences, minefields, newly planted forests, artificial topographies, and so on are designed to direct visitors away from their traces. The resulting maps,



identifying and locating these elements, have the potential to transform the very objects designed to divert attention into recognized signage for those hoping to gain an understanding of the land that is alternative to the one dictated by the state.

Stephan Anton van Eeden started with a video found online of a route filmed in the Jawlan by a traveler unaware of, or disinterested in, the many invisible forms of violence present within each frame. The route became van Eeden's site for the project. Having studied the invisible histories of the areas surrounding the route prior to the GSAPP class trip to the Jawlan, van Eeden drove this same itinerary and documented the traces that attest to violence and erasure. He



drew a set of maps formatted as a printed road atlas but including layers typically invisible to travelers; for example, the names and locations of erased villages are juxtaposed with the names given to the Israeli settlements and tourist attractions built in their stead; plot divisions of farms destroyed since 1967 are traced through aerial imagery. Still under development, the atlas is designed to be an alternative travel guide and road map for the area.

Together, the mapping and drawing experiments form a gesture toward visual languages that can represent the ways in which the colonization of the Golan Heights has been performed through the violent removal of its original inhabitants and

the destruction of their built environments, as well as the ways in which even subtle manipulations of the land have become participants in the ongoing colonial project. The hope is that this continued experimentation can contribute maps that are drawn not to exercise control but that overlay contradictory fragments, haunting memories, and incomplete narratives. More important, the hope is to contribute to the proliferation of future maps of the Jawlan that are drawn from the memories and imaginaries of its people, and that together these will one day outnumber and render irrelevant the ones drawn to repress them.

fig. 1/fig. 2/fig. 3 Drawings by Xiao Wei Lim, Alicia French, and Stephan van Eeden for Drawing from the Jawlan seminar, Columbia GSAPP, Fall 2017.