

Bashar Alhroub: Insight into Palestine

Part of *Visions of War*, running until 12 March 2017 at IWM London

IF you look in the right places, the Imperial War Museum London's art exhibitions provide an opportunity for kids and adults to be introduced to current global conflicts and their historical background in a gentle way through art. IWM London has been recalcitrant in acknowledging the historical role of Britain in Palestine – a section of history that is absolutely vital to understanding the modern Israel-Palestine dispute. However, [with *Electrical Gaza*](#) by Rosalind Nashashibi and, currently, the work of Bashar Alhroub, the IWM art department has recently opened up some space for Palestinian voices.

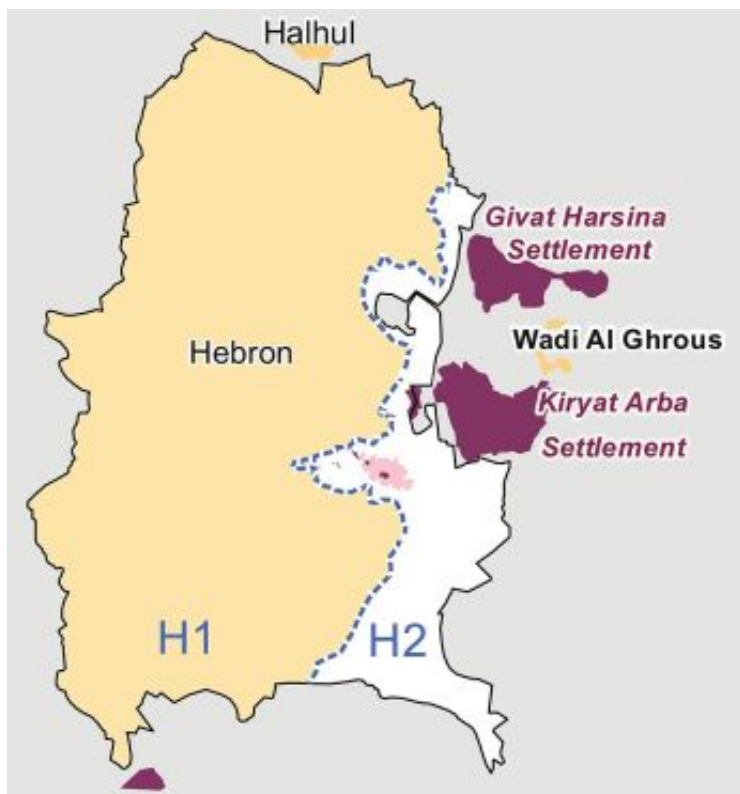
Tucked away at the back of a temporary art gallery, "[Visions from Above and Below](#)" is a video installation by Ramallah-based Palestinian artist, Bashar Alhroub. On initial viewing, "*Heavenly*," as it is called, might seem unremarkable. It consists of rather [shaky footage](#) of someone pointing their camera to the sky as they travel through a market, with rather an ominous score playing. The film captures wire netting overhead and pieces of rubbish, shoes, wood, bottles trapped on top.

The context of this piece, however, makes it extremely significant. The footage was taken in Hebron in the West Bank and the market is a Palestinian souk whose stores and streets have long been largely emptied. The wire netting has been put up overhead to protect the remaining Palestinians from the rubbish thrown by members of the local right wing Jewish settler population.

Bashar Alhroub [writes](#), "(t)he place is now two conflicting spaces – the Souk and the rooftops – which are separated by netting that the settlers use as a rubbish dump, hanging over the heads of the Palestinian passers-by. And the Souk itself has been emptied of the clamor of the salesmen and of its shoppers. Now, there are only children and cats running around, and old people staring in despair at the shops that no longer carry goods."

Hebron, the largest city in the West Bank, is divided into areas of control. Legally, area H1, is controlled by the Palestinian authority and the smaller area H2 is controlled by a presence of the Israeli army which enforces the existence of an enclave of 800 settlers amidst a population of 30,000 Palestinians. H2 covers the holy sites in the centre of the city, the former economic centre and is connected in the east to a large Jewish

settlement called Kiryat Arba.



Within H2, there are areas exclusively for Jews and areas exclusively for Arabs. Buffer zones are enforced by the Israeli army and police; whole streets and markets have been closed and emptied. This is exemplified by [Shuhada Street](#), once the main thoroughfare in the city, which is now forbidden to Palestinians. Israeli armed soldiers patrol the deserted road. Residents of Shuhada Street are forced to enter via back entrances as their front doors were welded shut by the army in the mid-1990s.

The climate in Hebron has been compared to a "[pressure cooker](#)." In June 2016, the Israeli army reacted to the killing of two Israelis nearby by putting Hebron and surrounding villages into lockdown. It was [described](#) as the largest military operation since the mass raids and arrests carried out following the kidnapping and murder of three Jewish hitchhikers in 2014. Those actions were a major part of a chain of events

that would result in Israeli attacks on Gaza and the deaths of 1,462 Palestinian and 6 Israeli civilians during the 51 day conflict in 2014.

The June 2016 Israeli army lockdown of Hebron made it more difficult than usual for Palestinians to get to hospital and the state of tension in the city was exacerbated by raids and arrests. Whilst violence is occurring on both sides, Palestinians are suffering in far higher numbers. Human Rights Watch [reported](#) that, in 2015, Palestinians killed at least 17 Israeli civilians and injured 87. On the other hand, Israeli security forces killed at least 120 Palestinian civilians and injured at least 11,953 in the West Bank, Gaza and Israel.

Prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, responded to the Palestinian attacks this summer by reducing the funds received by the Palestinian Authority – the ostensible governing body of areas of the West Bank which relies on Israeli funds to pay public service employees, from teachers to doctors.

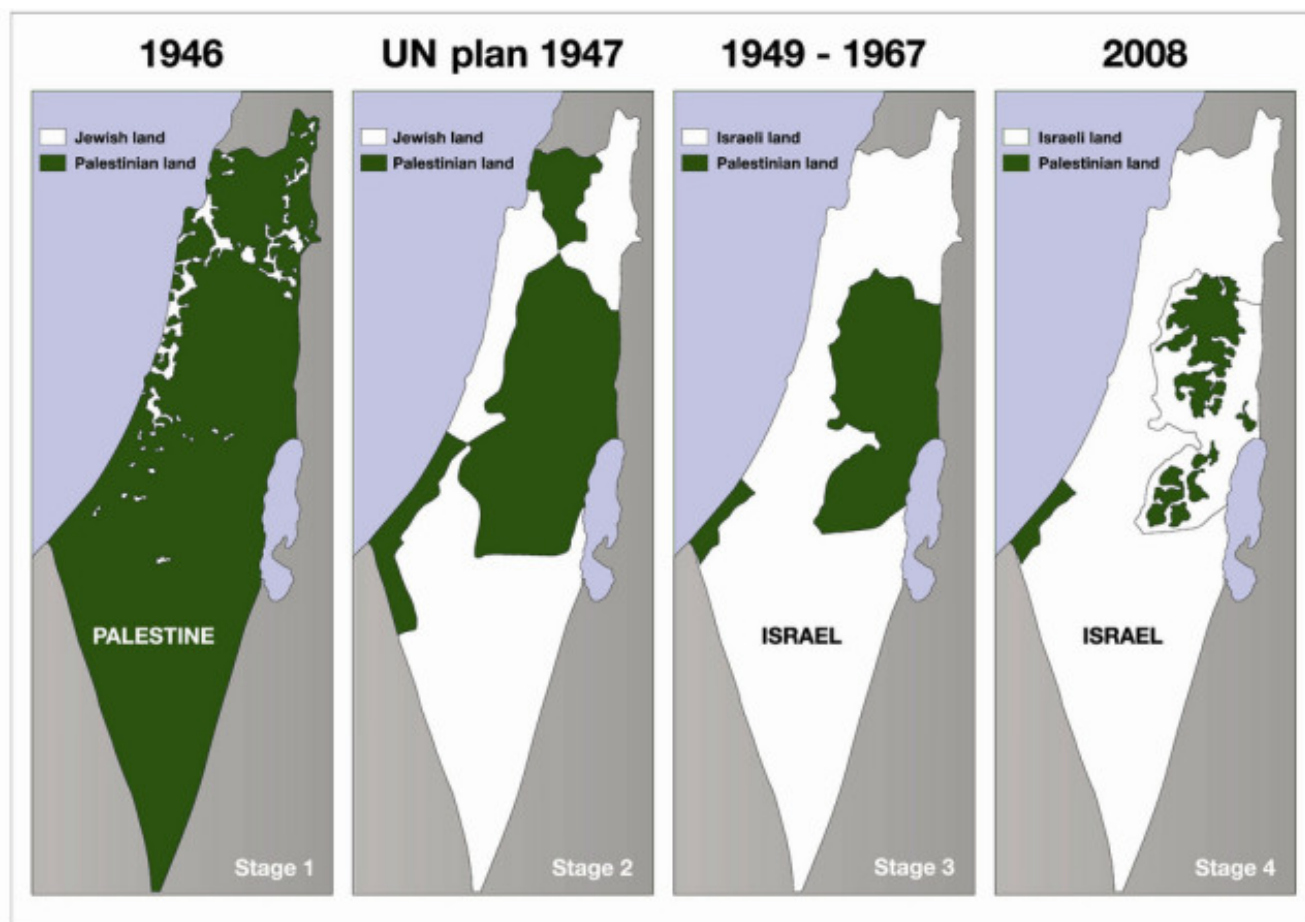
With Israel continuing a policy of building unlawful settlements, taking inadequate measures to protect Palestinians from Jewish settlers, conducting arbitrary arrests, detaining children, sometimes in the [middle of the night and at gunpoint](#), for alleged stone-throwing, destroying Palestinian homes and preventing construction on the basis of discriminatory practices and thus forcibly displacing Palestinians, the tensions in the West Bank continue to simmer and threaten another boiling point.

In the other part of the Occupied Territories, Gaza remains under blockade – a flotilla of female activists trying to break the blockade were [recently detained](#) in international waters by Israeli forces. In 2010, a Turkish-led flotilla was also raided by Israeli forces but they were also fired upon and 10 Turks were killed. On the mainland, Israel continues to hit Gaza with bombs in what is claimed to be responses to rocket attacks into Israel. Such actions, as demonstrated most vividly by the 2014 Gaza attack, are grossly disproportionate and seem do little for long-term peace for Israel.

The coming year, 2017, will feature two significant anniversaries in the history of the Israel-Palestine conflict. June 5, 2017, will mark 50 years since the Six Day War during which Israel conquered the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, and, also the Golan Heights and Sinai Peninsula. What is considered as an act of self-defence by Israel against threats by the Egyptian leadership, turned into a half-century long occupation of 2-3 million Palestinians.

Meanwhile, November 2017, will mark 100 years since the British government issued the Balfour Declaration – a promise to facilitate a Jewish homeland state, despite

previous promises of granting Arab independence for Arab support during WW1. In the post-war carve up by the Imperial powers, Britain took control of Palestine under mandate and proceeded to enable the conflict that continues.



Historical shrinking of Palestinian territory (PCS)

Today, Britain is still not a neutral observer of the conflict in the Middle East. Within weeks of the 2014 attack on Gaza, which left over 2,000 Palestinians dead and 1,500 orphaned children, Britain approved a [fresh arms deal](#) of £4 million to Israel, including components for drones and air-to-surface missiles. This is despite the fact that the UN warned that Israel could be guilty of committing war crimes for its bombing of residential areas in Gaza.

The history of the Israel-Palestine conflict is painful, revealing and vitally important to understand the modern world and, for children and parents, the indirect perspective into Hebron and the West Bank offered by artists like Bashar Alhroub at IWM London may be a useful starting point.

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