

Interview

Succinctly Verbose

Visualizing Palestine in conversation with Haig Aivazian

In early 2012, mainstream news finally caught on to the plight of Palestinian prisoners held in Israeli jails. The attention was brought on largely by a hunger strike undertaken by Khader Adnan prior to his April release that same year, after 66 days of imprisonment without charge: the longest hunger strike in the history of the Palestinian struggle. But while the resolve of Adnan's protest was clear to see, the physical effects of hunger strikes are little known to the mainstream public. But in February 2012, a timeline began

Visualizing Palestine,
Homes, 2013. Licensed
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circulating on social media, designed by a group called *Visualizing Palestine (VP)*. The work portrayed the durational progression of a hunger strike – its dangers and physical effects – alongside a history of the use of hunger strikes as a tool for non-violent struggles. In this conversation, VP talks about the power of telling stories through the use of data and infographics and why they think their succinct infographics are so discursively rich with information, history and affect.

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Haig Aivazian: Can you tell me a little bit about what you think infographics actually do? What in your opinion is important about presenting information graphically and why did *Visualizing Palestine* choose to embark on such an endeavor?

Visualizing Palestine: Perhaps we can start with a quote by Robert Horn, a scholar at Stanford’s Center for the Study of Language and Information, who described visual language as having the potential for increasing ‘human bandwidth’ as well as ‘the capacity to take in, comprehend, and more efficiently synthesize large amounts of new information.’ While visual language is a common way to highlight social injustices, it is an underutilised medium to relay data, typically represented in the form of reports and dry graphs. That’s the foundation of infographics: they bridge the gap between the unedited information – that packs relatively little punch – and the viewer, who wants to get the whole story quickly.

Ramzi Jaber, who initiated the idea for Visualizing Palestine, came up with the idea while living in Ramallah between 2010 and 2011, when he and a team were working on TEDx Ramallah. He came face-to-face with facts like the number of Palestinian children

Visualizing Palestine,
Jobs, 2013. Licensed
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prosecuted in Israeli military courts yearly (it's 500-700, according to Defence for Children International) and the percent of water in Gaza that's fit for human consumption (just 5%). All this important data conveying the injustices that Palestinians face is readily available in reports by organisations like the United Nation's OCHA (Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs) and Amnesty International, to name just two. Yet it seemed far removed from the media and the general public. Jaber saw visual media as an essential tool for communicating suppressed social justice issues to a mainstream audience in a resonating manner.

HA: Perhaps you can talk about *Visualizing Palestine's* structure. How does the collective function? How many of you are there? What is the division of labour and what are some of the ways in which you output the materials produced?

VP: Visualizing Palestine has nurtured a core team of professionals in research, storytelling, design and communication, now spread between Ramallah, Amman, Beirut and Paris. We also partner with designers and researchers on a per-project basis. There are eight people in the core team working full-time or part-time. Ramzi Jaber and Joumana al Jabri co-founded VP and have done everything from developing storytelling details for individual projects to project management and talent-sourcing, to partnership-building and financing. Hani Asfour and Naji el Mir are the lead designers, each with his own company in Beirut (Polypod) and Paris (Naji El Mir), respectively. Ahmad Barclay leads research, with a particular focus on concept development. Saeed Abu Jaber, Zaid Amr, and Christopher Fiorello are instrumental in research, design, and impact tracking and measurement. The VP team has developed a [process wheel](#) in order to illustrate our process of visualisation.

With regards to your question about platforms of exposure, we publish our visuals first and foremost on our website, but our infographics have also been widely published online, everywhere from Al Jazeera English to the Huffington Post and Fast Company, among others. We also often publish in print, most commonly at conferences, social campaigns, exhibitions and in university literature. Besides English and Arabic, the infographics have been translated to seven other languages (Finnish, Polish, Korean, Chinese, Hebrew, French, Spanish).

HA: In a few of the articles that I have read about VP, I've gotten into the habit of looking at the comments section. There is a pattern I've noticed on the part of people who disagree with the perceived politics of the graphics you produce and the information they represent to ask for a more nuanced context. It is as if – once you narrow down the occupation to the very fruits that it yields in the form of pure data – there is a need to go back to a more discursive form of representation, a form with more maneuvering room or more room to cloud the very data you present with rhetorical wizardry. Would you consider this to be the very sign of the power of infographics or a reflection of their shortcomings?



VP: It is true that infographics are the source of pared down information, but they aren't necessarily less believable for it. You can convey a flood of information with a few dots and lines. We go to great pains to carefully source every bit of data we include, so that in the case of a viewer left needing more context, s/he would know exactly where to find it. In a sense, that is precisely VP's vision: to be a starting point for people worldwide to delve into and re-educate themselves on the situation in Palestine and Israel.

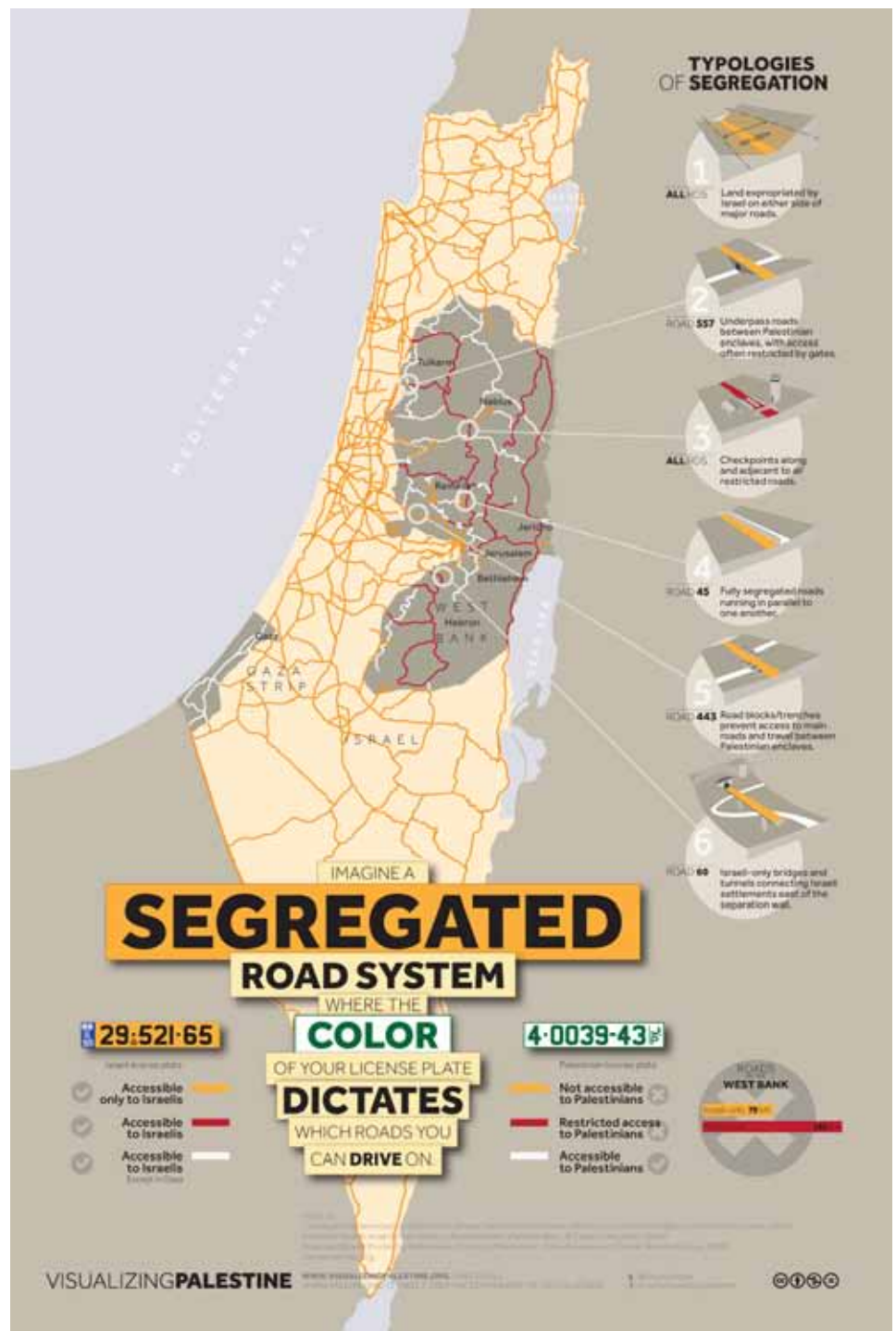
While each infographic is a stand alone story, by building up a multiplicity of stories, we eventually hope to relay a more comprehensive narrative. This will occur over time, as the visuals we produce start covering a larger scope of topics. We've already touched on mobility, water, the wall, demolition, violence and prisoners. It is important to note that VP doesn't work in a void; we're part of an environment and network pushing to convey an accurate and complete narrative about social injustices. It would be

impossible to independently deliver a comprehensive picture of the facts on the ground. It is equally the responsibility of the viewer to build up knowledge from the various sources available to them.

While working on TEDx Ramallah, Ramzi Jaber was told by an audience member that Palestinians should get better lawyers, because they had ‘the best case in the world’. We believe that what Palestine actually needs isn’t better lawyers, it’s better *storytellers*, given that the case of Palestine constitutes – in our opinion – the best story in the world. Data is actually incredibly discursive and tells stories in powerful, compelling and visually comprehensible ways. Our approach is based on two pillars: a collection of factual, reliable and verifiable data backed by recognised institutions (WHO, B’tselem, Amnesty, etc.) and presenting this data within a universalist framework of equality. This is not the equality which people like the readers you are mentioning believe in: for us there is no room for exceptions within this equality. By that we mean equality per se, not the separate-but-equal logic that has characterised civil rights struggles throughout recent history.

HA: I am interested in this idea of an accumulation of narratives to complete a larger story: that a collection of drawings and maps and numbers can become discursive on another level, like compiling evidence to argue a case. Malkit Shoshan’s *Atlas of the Conflict* functions this way primarily using maps, through which settlement logics become apparent, as do various agricultural, proprietary and segregational truths (quite literally) on the ground. What specifically about the Israeli occupation becomes self-evident through its own productions? What is it about the logic of occupation that you are hoping to bring to the surface with VP’s activities?

VP: The logic of the occupation is couched in a debate about statehood: ‘which is the more viable solution—one state or two?’ Our goal is to shift the narrative from statehood to social justice. When you line up one area of injustice after another, from home demolitions to restricted access to roads, you begin to see the occupation’s pervasiveness, the extent to which it imposes itself on every aspect of life for Palestinians. We certainly aren’t the only ones pointing this out. Palestinians have been in pursuit of social justice and equality since 1948. Our work is simply about highlighting those pursuits. We are accumulating stories on a communal level, as they affect people on the ground. We want to tell humanising stories, with data. In doing so, we look to works like Howard Zinn’s *A People’s History of the United States*, a rigorous, historical account of American history told through the eyes of the average American, not political leaders or business tycoons. Funnily enough, Zinn’s work was actually turned into an excellent visual years after being published. The history and context we are dealing with is complicated and incredibly multi-faceted. These complexities are the absolute necessary backdrop of our research; they help guide us in choosing stories and pairing them down to a simple, precise and clear story.



HA: This further addresses what I was trying to get at with my question about the comments section: that there are narrative and rhetorical diversions that infographics disable, or short circuit. Can you talk more about the clear distinction that you make between the nationalist notion of statehood(s) and the notion of social justice? Why do you think shifting the narrative from one to the other is important?

VP: It is true that our focus is on Palestinians, but we are happiest when our tactics are adopted by other struggles, other ethnicities and other contexts. Top to bottom actions on the political level have failed Palestinians for the last 64 years, which is why we believe in mobilising communities. The only way to do that is by telling their stories and the way that we do that is via infographics.

HA: And what of the Palestinian Authority in the Palestinian quest for social justice?

VP: We are in the process of working on graphics with a focus on the Palestinian Authority. Let's table a conversation about the PA until after we release those graphics.

HA: Some of your graphics—such as the maps of public transportation, or of segregated road networks, or the systemic destruction of homes in Gaza – make palpable a truth via the visualisation of data in compelling ways. In other words, the mere visualising of the data is enough to make an injustice blatantly clear. Then there are graphics that are not in direct relation to data per se, even if they are often accompanied by statistics. *Born at Qalandia Checkpoint* (2013) is good example of this. These seem more about assigning a certain affect to a given truth. Can you talk about these different strategies? Do you see them as distinct?

Visualizing Palestine, *Timeline of Violence*, 2013. Licensed Creative Commons.



VP: Each aspect of the occupation is multi-faceted; there are myriad complex stories that need to be told about each aspect. Take movement or mobility for example. We've done five visuals on the topic already, including the *Qalandia* graphic you mention. The other four were, from oldest to most recent: *Segregated Roads*, *Across the Wall*, *Greater Israel Bus Map*, and *Bus Segregation*.

You could look at *Qalandia* and *Bus Segregation* and argue that these are about eliciting some emotional reaction more than innovative data visualisations. But this isn't how we would describe the difference. *Qalandia* and *Bus Segregation* convey single facts in a few lines of text and lean more heavily on illustration. We call these '24-hour graphics' in house; they are faster graphics to produce, but the difference is quantitative, not qualitative. Both types of graphics attempt to change the narrative on Palestine and Israel by offering visual stories drawn from facts. We hope both will be useful tools for change makers.

HA: Can you talk about the *End Aid to Israel* (2013) graphics? The audience for this series seems specifically targeted. Perhaps this is also a good time to get a banal but important question out of the way: who is VP's audience in general?

VP: There has been a discrepancy between VP's actual audience thus far, and our target audience. Our following has been predominantly British and American, about a fifth of whom are between the ages of 25 and 34. Our objective is to reach a much more diverse constituency across the globe, which is why we have been so active about translating our content. We're working on tailoring our visuals to a regional, Arabic-speaking audience as well. We're also actively pushing to get our online content offline, into magazines and newspapers, presentations at activist meetings as well as in university classrooms.

The *End Aid to Israel* campaign developed from an active partnership between VP and the US Campaign to End the Israeli Occupation (US Campaign), which is based in Washington, D.C. The US Campaign came to us with the idea for a campaign and a history of posting billboards around the United States calling for America to stop funding Israel's military. Their stated goal from the beginning was to produce visuals that could appear in D.C. metro stations concurrently with the annual AIPAC (American Israel Public Affairs Committee) meeting. We worked closely with them to produce the visuals and they implemented them on the ground.

HA: It is interesting you say that you are exerting efforts to go offline and into hard copy. You are a relatively young, dynamic, tech-savvy and politicised group of individuals, with views that do not fit into nationalist narratives. Much has been said about the role of collectives like yourselves in the context of Tunisia and Egypt (though the romanticisation of that moment is fizzling out.) What is your take on the role of social media in social justice?

VP: We agree that there is much romanticisation of the role, as useful as it may be, of social media. The basic fact is that Facebook, Twitter and the like are for-profit companies who will advance agendas that are compatible with their own. Certainly the Arab revolutions have been talked about as quasi ad-campaigns and have literally been branded by Facebook. Having said that, we use social media quite extensively and we have had success in reaching large amounts of people this way. This sort of more accessible, more democratic media is empowering: on the one hand it enables you to bypass the editorial biases of mainstream media, though on the other hand, you don't benefit from the same volume of circulation. In addition to all of this, one should not forget that there have been instances of censorship on both Facebook and Twitter. Their roles are certainly more complicated than the media have uncritically made them out to be.

www.visualizingpalestine.org

About the author

Haig Aivazian is an artist, writer and curator, currently based in New York. He works with text, sculpture, video, performance and drawing in order to weave in and out of personal and geo-political, micro and macro narratives in the search for ideological loopholes and short circuits. Aivazian was associate curator of the tenth edition of the Sharjah Biennial in 2011 and his writings have appeared in a number of publications, including *Bidoun*, *AdBusters*, *FUSE*, *AMCA* and *The Arab Studies Journal*.