

Erasing Palestine from Digital Maps: A Conversation with Iyad Al-Rifai



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In the digital age, maps and smart applications have evolved from simple navigation tools into powerful platforms capable of reshaping geography and imposing political narratives. Nowhere is this more evident than in Palestine, where Israeli settlements are displayed with striking clarity clearly delineated borders and precise labels while Palestinian villages and areas are marginalized or omitted entirely. The result is a misleading global perception of their existence and significance.

This is not merely a theoretical concern. There are tangible examples of Palestinians being digitally erased. Google sparked widespread controversy after the labels for the West Bank and Gaza Strip disappeared from its maps, creating the impression that the name “Palestine” no longer appeared at all.

The company attributed the incident to a “technical glitch.” Yet more recent updates show that Area C in the West Bank is not clearly represented, while Israeli settlements appear with distinct names and defined boundaries.

Such cases underscore that digital erasure is not simply a technical malfunction;

it carries real political and epistemological dimensions that shape the world's understanding of Palestinian reality.

Noon Post spoke with Iyad Al-Rifai, founder of the Sada Social Center for the Defense of Palestinian Digital Rights, about the impact of this digital marginalization on Palestinians' daily lives, the challenges posed by bias in maps and smart applications, and the prospects for achieving fair and accurate digital representation of Palestine.

Why do some Palestinian villages and areas particularly those classified as Area C under the Oslo Accords, as well as parts of East Jerusalem not appear on Google Maps and other smart applications?

The classification of Area C under the Oslo Accords was recently removed from Google Maps following a decision by the Israeli government to designate these areas as under Israeli governmental custodianship and to alter their legal classification moves that, according to this view, contravene previous agreements signed between the Palestinian Authority and the Israeli government.

Who decides which names and borders appear on these maps? Who holds the authority to control them?

This issue sits at the intersection of politics and technology. In the digital era, it is no longer possible to separate the two. Those who control technological tools possess the power to shape narratives, influence public consciousness, and impose particular legal and epistemic frameworks.

The Israeli government provides extensive incentives to major technology companies including Google, Meta, and Intel offering tax benefits and facilitating the establishment of branches, service centers, and regional headquarters within Israel.

There is also discussion of pro-Israel lobbying influence within some of these companies, granting the Israeli government indirect leverage over technology firms and social media platforms.

Following recent legal and administrative changes introduced by the current Israeli government regarding Area C, the political decision was, in this view, translated into a technical action through Google Maps. This may have occurred either in response to a formal government request or as a proactive move by the company to align its policies with government decisions.

Is the omission of Area C and parts of East Jerusalem purely technical, or does it reflect a political decision?

In practice, it is difficult to disentangle the two. The technical dimension does not

exist in isolation; it is shaped by and intertwined with political context. As for the clear display of Israeli settlements alongside the deletion or marginalization of established Palestinian areas, this is interpreted as a lack of neutrality and objectivity on the part of certain companies, foremost among them Google.

The company has faced accusations of providing technologies used in military and security contexts, reinforcing the perception that it does not approach this issue from an independent ethical or technical standpoint, but rather serves Israeli policies directly or indirectly.

What are the practical consequences of this erasure for Palestinians' daily lives, particularly in mobility and emergencies?

Palestinians generally do not rely on Google Maps, because the reality on the ground is far more complex than any digital map can capture. Nonetheless, Google is a global technology giant, and its software underpins numerous other applications. Operating in this way in Palestinian areas is therefore extremely dangerous, as it can affect people's lives.

In the past, Google has intervened in how settlements, settlement roads, and access routes are displayed, while Palestinian villages and areas cannot be relied upon for clear representation. The situation on the ground checkpoints, shifting road closures, newly created streets is far more complex. Despite this, sustained pressure is necessary to ensure fairness and prevent bias toward the Israeli side, enabling Palestinians to use technology on equal footing with users worldwide.

Can the removal of Palestinian village and area names be considered a form of erasing identity and collective memory?

The issue is not directly about identity or social memory. It is a procedural technical measure. Yet it has broader implications for the confiscation of space and time. Maps, roads, and mobility are not merely spatial representations; they are also about time.

A journey between two villages that would normally take 20 minutes may now take an hour or more, as people are forced onto alternative routes. Most of these improvised dirt roads do not appear on Google Maps because they are unofficial, created out of necessity to circumvent closures and movement restrictions between Palestinian areas.

What are the implications of digitally separating East Jerusalem from its Palestinian surroundings?

This carries clear political connotations. From a digital rights perspective, Palestinians have the right to use these applications safely, smoothly, and without bias. Such platforms should be neutral, providing services regardless of

nationality, affiliation, or other factors. Even where roads are shared with or linked to settlements and may be unsafe for Palestinians, users should still receive equitable service without discrimination.

How does Google respond to requests to correct Palestinian names and boundaries?

This raises technical and professional questions about Google's role in setting standards for displaying borders and geographic layers. The reality suggests that these standards are neither transparent nor professional, and that there is a clear bias in favor of Israel. This bias plays a pivotal role in shaping how users perceive their geographic boundaries and mobility options.

Put simply, Google Maps can no longer be considered a reliable reference for movement, research, or education in Palestine due to this bias and the lack of professional and transparent geographic standards.

How does the disappearance of a village or area from the map alter the way the world perceives it?

The political and epistemological implications are numerous. Fundamentally, what does not appear online seems not to exist at all whether people, institutions, or places. If an area is not listed on the map, it is treated as though it does not exist.

This brings us back to a basic point: Google Maps cannot be relied upon as an authoritative reference for Palestinian geography because the company is not neutral in its handling of the Palestinian file.

What are the future risks of continued digital erasure of large parts of the West Bank?

The continued omission of these areas could exacerbate access problems, posing risks to users who depend on these applications for navigation. There are also epistemic and cultural risks related to the recognition of these places, their history, and their heritage.

While the purely technical risk may be relatively limited, the political and epistemological consequences are far more dangerous, shaping how the land and the Palestinian population are perceived globally.

What can Sada Social do to confront the digital erasure of Palestinian areas?

We engage directly with Google, advocating for dedicated space for the Palestinian file equivalent to that afforded to Israelis, and calling for professional and neutral handling of the issue.

Google Maps is not neutral and cannot be relied upon for navigation within

Palestine or as a geographic knowledge source. Nevertheless, we remain hopeful that Palestinian digital reality will be treated fairly and professionally, just like any other digital content worldwide.

To what extent can international accountability mechanisms hold mapping platforms responsible for bias or complicity with occupation policies?

This is a complex and multifaceted issue. We have previously attempted to address similar concerns regarding Facebook. Meaningful accountability requires significant efforts from governments, civil society organizations, and international human rights institutions.

Unfortunately, these major corporations possess substantial legal fortification, broad influence, and strong governmental ties, making accountability exceedingly difficult.

The erasure of Palestinian villages and areas from digital maps represents more than a technical flaw. It is a mechanism for reproducing political and epistemic power in the digital sphere. This bias affects freedom of movement, shapes global perceptions of Palestinian reality, and limits access to accurate information about Palestinian geography and culture.

For this reason, the rights-based advocacy of institutions such as the Sada Social Center remains essential in pressuring major technology companies to ensure neutrality, professionalism, and digital justice. Confronting this challenge requires coordination among civil society, digital experts, and international human rights bodies to guarantee that Palestinian reality is reflected accurately and objectively across global digital platforms.