YILLIK

Annual of Istanbul Studies

2025

7

İSTANBUL
RESEARCH
INSTITUTE

YILLIK: Annual of Istanbul Studies 7 (2025): 229–236. https://doi.org/10.53979/yillik.1844515

A Surveilled Land with a People: Palestine

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In the fall of 2024, as viewers were already becoming inured to images of the genocide taking place in Gaza, I was struggling with questions of how Palestine's tragic history had reached this point, why Turkey's intellectual community remained so silent, and what we might collectively do to make more of an impact. Around the same time, a series of interesting developments unfolded at ANAMED, Koç University's Research Center for Anatolian Civilizations. An international project we had been working on for several years had just been canceled, and we at ANAMED were searching for ideas to fill the resulting gap in the center's program. Unaware of our situation, Zeynep Çelik fortuitously reached out to ask about the possibility of having ANAMED host an exhibition on Palestine: *Palestine from Above*. We began preparations immediately, and the exhibition opened four months later.[1]

Preparing exhibitions within a research center can be both demanding and enriching, and those involved often learn a great deal in the process. Among the many insights I gained while working on *Palestine from Above*, one left a particularly deep mark on me: Everything in the region, from settlement planning to archaeology, from sources of water to the landscape itself, has been systematically and deliberately transformed into an instrument of control directed at Palestine. The more I learned as I delved into the exhibition, the more questions I began to ask myself regarding the history of colonialism in the Middle East: Where did the perception of Palestine as a desolate land come from? Why did so many Christians support the idea of a Jewish reclaiming of Palestine despite a potential conflict of interest with Christian beliefs? What made Mark Twain travel all the way from America to the Holy Land? The exhibition included footage of Jerusalem taken from the German airship *Graf Zeppelin*; its distinguished passengers would have looked down on the city and seen its landmarks, but what lives and histories remained invisible from that height? These initial questions directly inform the focus of this essay, particularly the recurring colonial idea of Palestine as a terra nullius, an empty no-man's-land.[2]

These themes, especially that of the colonial gaze which renders local lives and non-Christian heritage invisible, are central to the exhibition *Palestine from Above*. One of the main issues the exhibition addresses is how various colonial powers perceived the Holy Land and the methods by which colonial imaginaries have shaped Palestine's geography, demography, and natural environment from the 1850s to the present. The exhibition juxtaposes layers of historical material, exposing samples of the colonialist gaze on Palestine as a terra nullius while also presenting artworks that transform the same material into counternarratives asserting Palestinian sovereignty. By contrasting historical materials with contemporary art, the exhibition invites us to question the ways in which archives, illustrations, aerial photography, films, and maps can serve as instruments of both erasure and reclaiming. In this essay, I will focus on the terra nullius perspective, which not only permeates all six sections of the exhibition but was also one of the inspirations for its name. I examine how deeply rooted the narrative of Palestine as a desolate and uninhabited land is in European and American thought, with a

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1 Current exhibition: *Palestine from Above* at ANAMED, Koç University Research Center for Anatolian Civilizations, Istanbul, March 19, 2025–January 25, 2026. The exhibition is curated by Yazid Anani, Zeinab Azarbadegan, Zeynep Çelik, and Salim Tamari. The author worked as ANAMED Manager between 2011 and 2025.

2 Terra nullius, a legal concept rooted in Roman law, was employed under European colonialism to justify land seizure. It asserted that inhabited lands were legally "nobody's land" because indigenous sovereignty and property systems were unrecognized, resulting in the legal dispossession of ancestral lands. This discourse implied that territory was acquired via discovery and/or occupation rather than by war or conquest. Though present in colonial justifications from the sixteenth century, its most notorious application was by the British in the colonization of Australia starting in 1788. See Merete Borch, "Rethinking the Origins of Terra Nullius," *Australian Historical Studies* 32, no. 117 (2001): 222–39, https://doi.org/10.1080/10314610108596162.

 glimpse at historical literature and arts. I also scrutinize a few artworks in different sections of the exhibition that investigate and subvert hegemonic discourse.

Long before the establishment of the state of Israel, the precursors to Jewish settlers in the Holy Land were Protestant Christians. In the early nineteenth century, leaders of Protestant settlement movements were inspired by millenarian beliefs in the Second Coming and the Return to Zion. The London Society for Promoting Christianity Amongst the Jews, founded in 1809, believed that the "restoration of the Jews" to Palestine would help pave the way for the Second Coming. The Jews were believed to have been condemned to centuries of exile, while the land's desolation was interpreted as divine punishment for their rejection of Jesus. The society's intention was to convert Jews to Christianity and to establish a British presence in Palestine. British Evangelicals, American millenarians, German Templers, Reformationists, and other Protestant groups pioneered the establishment of several colonies in Palestine during the nineteenth century. All these Protestant movements and their missionaries acted out of a similar religious motivation, believing that the Jewish people must be restored to the land of Palestine to bring about the reign of Christ on Earth and the future conversion of the Jews to Christianity.[3]

Although their success in converting Jews was limited, these efforts planted the seeds of later Jewish settler colonialism. The forerunners of the Zionists, driven by a religious belief that the time was favorable for the coming of the Messiah and for Jewish settlement in Israel, started as a marginal movement. Early Jewish settlers, seeking refuge from anti-Semitism in Europe, gained momentum when the First Zionist Congress in 1897 formally launched the Zionist movement and Jewish immigration to Palestine. Beyond the central idea of returning to the Holy Land, these settlers adopted the very principles and practices of European settler colonialism: land dispossession, territorial partition, the replacement of native populations, the reshaping of agriculture, the exploitation of land and resources, systematic record keeping, and the appropriation of antiquities. The Israelis were neither the first settler colonialists in the Holy Land nor the first to claim that the Holy Land was an empty territory. Their main distinction from other settler colonizers was their claim that the land had once belonged to them. Jewish settlement in Palestine was constructed and legitimized through the belief that the Jewish nation was returning to its homeland.

This narrative of reclaiming the land finds a visual expression in a postcard commemorating the Fifth Zionist Congress, which inspired Faris Shomali and Zaina Zarour's video work *Negation of the Exile* in the exhibition. Their video delves into the iconography of the postcard, a direct manifestation of Zionist ideology. The postcard, designed by Ephraim Moses Lilien, depicts the land of Palestine in the midground as a desolate wasteland, while in the background, a farmer—embodying the "new settler" who reclaims the Jews' ancestral land—tills the earth under radiant sunlight. The barren landscape is thus visually transformed into a fertile field, a metaphorical act of rebirth.

Through their video, Shomali and Zarour trace how such imagery constructs a narrative of transformation that erases Palestinian presence. Palestinians are excluded from both geography and history, a symbolic negation that mirrors the material dispossession that followed. The design reflects a technique common in early Zionist visual culture: dual layers of representation assigned to different times and places, with a depiction of Jerusalem as desolate and a temporal leap to a brighter future that erases millennia of history. The first settler is thus portrayed as the first farmer, arriving in an untouched land and imprinting his presence upon it, an aesthetic enactment of the colonial claim to "make the desert bloom."

The notion of barren lands waiting to be populated was a deeply rooted idea of colonial projects in general. Palestine was no exception—America, Australia, Canada, and other col-

3 Yaakov Ariel, "Messianism, the Holy Land, and the Jews: The Roots and Development of Christian Zionism in Its First Generations," *Religion, State & Society* 53, no. 4 (2025): 339–55, https://doi.org/10.1080/09637494.2025.2493466; Moshe Sharon, ed., *The Holy Land in History and Thought: Papers Submitted to the International Conference on the Relations Between the Holy Land and the World Outside It, Johannesburg, 1986* (Brill, 1988).

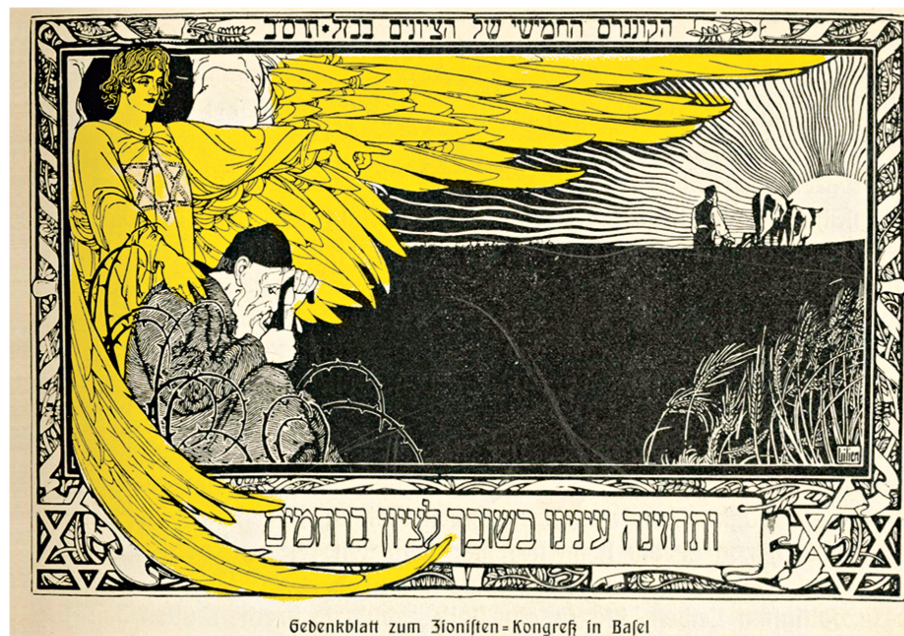


Figure 1: Faris Shomali and Zaina Zarour, *Negation of the Exile: A Postcard for the 5th Zionist Congress* (2021). Postcard illustration: Ephraim Moses Lilien, ca. 1901.

onized territories were all "lands without people." Invented by Evangelists and appropriated by Zionist founders like Israel Zangwill and political leaders like Golda Meir, the notion of an uninhabited, vacant land awaiting Jews in Palestine became a core part of the discourse of the new settlers.

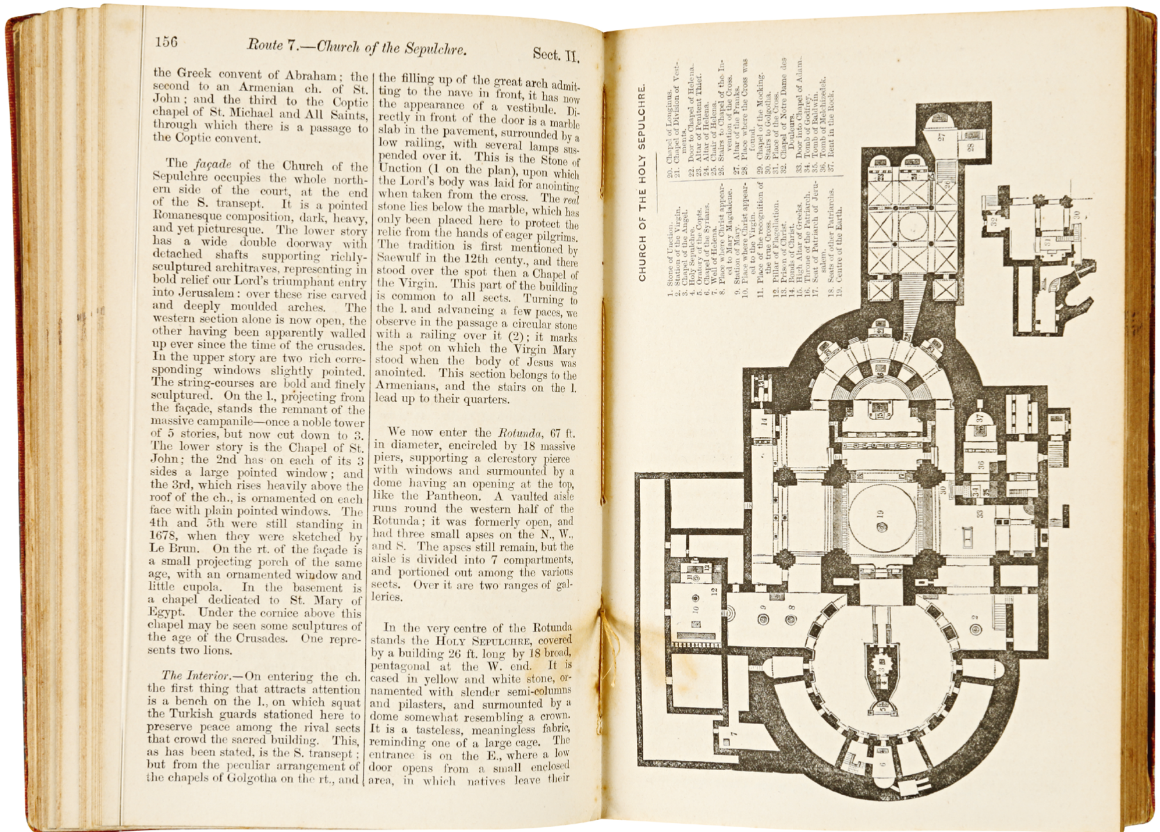
After the last Crusades, European contact with the Levant had largely faded; maritime traders confined themselves to port cities such as Acre and Haifa. Yet in the nineteenth century, with the rise of steamship travel and expanding imperial interests, tourism to the Holy Land began to grow. From the early 1800s onward, European and American Protestant travelers, followed in the 1830s and beyond by photographers, scholars, and archaeologists, arrived in growing numbers, seeking to locate sites mentioned in the Bible. The Bible itself became a travel guide, effectively narrowing Palestine to Jerusalem and its immediate surroundings. Publishers quickly responded to this interest with guidebooks that circulated widely among missionaries, diplomats, and tourists. The guidebooks of the time reflect a shared narrative of the Holy Land with Jerusalem as its focus, appearing less as a living provincial Ottoman city than as sacred space shaped by centuries of inherited imagery. These early visitors, instead of exploring Palestine's diverse population and urban and rural landscapes, portrayed it as a barren land where the time was frozen, awaiting rediscovery or restoration.

The exhibition takes us on a journey through a sampling of this early ideology using a variety of materials. John Murray's *Handbook for Travellers in Syria and Palestine* (1859) was the first modern travel guide to the region, profoundly shaping perceptions of it for decades.[4] Written primarily by the Presbyterian missionary Josias Leslie Porter, it presented Palestine as a stage for biblical history rather than as a living society. Murray's format, later adopted by the prominent guidebook publisher Baedeker and others, combined maps, itineraries, and practical information while continuing to frame the land through a biblical lens.

As travel to the Holy Land grew, accounts of journeys to the region became a popular genre among European and American readers. One of the most famous nineteenth-century visitors, Mark Twain, echoed this sentiment in *The Innocents Abroad* (1869), quoting the already

4 John Murray and John Luch Porter, *A Handbook for Travellers in Syria and Palestine: Including an Account of the Geography, History, Antiquities, and Inhabitants of These Countries, the Peninsula of Sinai, Edom, and the Syrian Desert; with Detailed Descriptions of Jerusalem, Petra, Damascus, and Palmyra*, vol. 2, new and rev. ed. (London, 1868).

Figure 2. Installation view, left (photograph: Koray Şentürk), and detail of John Murray and John Luch Porter, *A Handbook for Travellers in Syria and Palestine: Including an Account of the Geography, History, Antiquities, and Inhabitants of These Countries, the Peninsula of Sinai, Edom, and the Syrian Desert; with Detailed Descriptions of Jerusalem, Petra, Damascus, and Palmyra*, vol. 2, new and rev. ed. (London, 1868). Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality Directorate of Libraries and Museums, Atatürk Library.



156 *Route 7.—Church of the Sepulchre.* Sect. II.

the Greek convent of Abraham; the second to an Armenian ch. of St. John; and the third to the Coptic chapel of St. Michael and All Saints, through which there is a passage to the Coptic convent.

The *façade* of the Church of the Sepulchre occupies the whole northern side of the court, at the end of the S. transept. It is a pointed Romanesque composition, dark, heavy, and yet picturesque. The lower story has a wide double doorway with detached shafts supporting richly-sculptured architraves, representing in bold relief our Lord's triumphant entry into Jerusalem: over these rise carved and deeply moulded arches. The western section alone is now open, the other having been apparently walled up ever since the time of the crusades. In the upper story are two rich corresponding windows slightly pointed. The string-courses are bold and finely sculptured. On the l., projecting from the façade, stands the remnant of the massive campanile—once a noble tower of 5 stories, but now cut down to 3. The lower story is the Chapel of St. John; the 2nd has on each of its 3 sides a large pointed window; and the 3rd, which rises heavily above the roof of the ch., is ornamented on each face with plain pointed windows. The 4th and 5th were still standing in 1678, when they were sketched by Le Brun. On the rt. of the façade is a small projecting porch of the same age, with an ornamented window and little cupola. In the basement is a chapel dedicated to St. Mary of Egypt. Under the cornice above this chapel may be seen some sculptures of the age of the Crusades. One represents two lions.

The Interior.—On entering the ch. the first thing that attracts attention is a bench on the l., on which squat the Turkish guards stationed here to preserve peace among the rival sects that crowd the sacred building. This, as has been stated, is the S. transept; but from the peculiar arrangement of the chapels of Golgotha on the rt., and the filling up of the great arch admitting to the nave in front, it has now the appearance of a vestibule. Directly in front of the door is a marble slab in the pavement, surrounded by a low railing, with several lamps suspended over it. This is the Stone of Unction (1 on the plan), upon which the Lord's body was laid for anointing when taken from the cross. The *real* stone lies below the marble, which has only been placed here to protect the relic from the hands of eager pilgrims. The tradition is first mentioned by Saewulf in the 12th centy., and there stood over the spot then a Chapel of the Virgin. This part of the building is common to all sects. Turning to the l. and advancing a few paces, we observe in the passage a circular stone with a railing over it (2); it marks the spot on which the Virgin Mary stood when the body of Jesus was anointed. This section belongs to the Armenians, and the stairs on the l. lead up to their quarters.

We now enter the *Rotunda*, 67 ft. in diameter, encircled by 18 massive piers, supporting a clerestory pierce with windows and surmounted by a dome having an opening at the top, like the Pantheon. A vaulted aisle runs round the western half of the Rotunda; it was formerly open, and had three small apses on the N., W., and S. The apses still remain, but the aisle is divided into 7 compartments, and portioned out among the various sects. Over it are two ranges of galleries.

In the very centre of the Rotunda stands the Holy Sepulchre, covered by a building 26 ft. long by 18 broad, pentagonal at the W. end. It is cased in yellow and white stone, ornamented with slender semi-columns and pilasters, and surmounted by a dome somewhat resembling a crown. It is a tasteless, meaningless fabric, reminding one of a large cage. The entrance is on the E., where a low door opens from a small enclosed area, in which natives leave their

Figure 3. David Roberts, Jerusalem, 1839. Ömer M. Koç Collection. Oil on canvas, 32 × 48 cm.

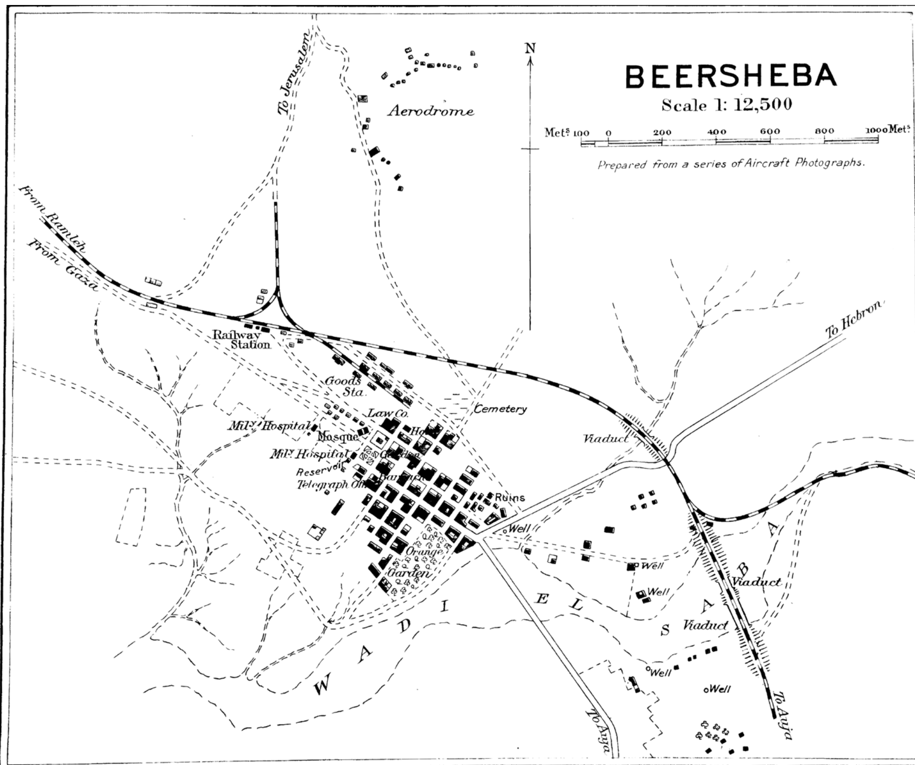
popular description of Palestine as "a land without a people for a people without a land"—his use of the phrase embodying how deeply this colonial imagination had taken hold.

Paintings, illustrations, and, later on, photography were central to this process of imaginative reconstruction. Artists' encounter with Jerusalem often replaced the authentic nineteenth-century urban scenery with images more suited to the biblical imagination. Painters like William Bartlett produced widely circulated illustrations of Jerusalem from the Mount of Olives, the Dome of the Rock, the Pool of Bethesda, Rachel's Tomb, and the Church of the Holy Sepulcher that were later reproduced in religious books and travelogues. These images displaced contemporary life by presenting the city as though it belonged to the first century. In this sense, the textual and visual narrative constructed an invisible population, echoing the Orientalist claim that Palestine was "a desolate and devastated land." David Roberts, a famous Orientalist who stayed in Jerusalem for a time, stood out among his contemporaries for depicting Jerusalem as a living environment and preserving the Islamic aspects of its identity. Roberts's illustrations were very popular among travelers, and were used in books on Palestine and illustrated editions of the Bible. In some of his compositions, Roberts also included Islamic structures and figures. In his illustrations, locals engaged in daily life around major sites; he offered an image that was visually more vibrant and complex than the empty scenes favored by his contemporaries. However, his work, too, ultimately served an Orientalist purpose, this time of adding local color and romantic authenticity for a European audience.

Early photography, celebrated for its supposed objectivity, reinforced these perspectives on Palestine. Alexander Keith, one of the first photographers to visit the region, argued that photographs were evidence, showing the land as the prophets had once seen it. Francis Frith and other early photographers produced thousands of images of local sites. Yet their photographs were strikingly empty: Local people, if present, appeared only as indistinct figures within barren landscapes. These choices did not reflect reality but catered to a market eager for confirmation of biblical timelessness.

The Holy Land served as one of the historically significant regions where photography was first used and popularized, especially from the 1840s onward. It was also one of the first major subjects of aerial photography. During World War I, military planes equipped with photographic cameras were employed to gather data in the region, mapping and documenting the colonized land and its people to gain control over them. Aerial photography was a powerful tool for proving that Palestine was an empty and uninhabited land awaiting colonial settlers. The bird's-eye view provided by aerial photography offered a perfect perspective that flattened the lived environment. Beyond the practical use of these images for military operations on the ground, they further contributed to the perception of Palestine as a pristine and lifeless territory.

Figure 4. Beersheba, ca. 1917. Aerial photograph, Australian War Memorial, B02020.



GRAPHICAL SEC., GEN. STAFF
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Figure 5. British map of Beersheba, 1917, compiled from aerial photographs, showing the layout of the Ottoman planned town. British National Archives, Kew, WO 303/496.

Figure 6. Amer Shomali and Dia' Azzeh, *The Orient Flight of the LZ 127* Graf Zeppelin (2021). Still from the video (27:08) courtesy of the artists.

The exhibition features archival materials, such as photographs, films, graphics, and maps, to demonstrate how documentation served as a tool of colonial subjugation, while simultaneously exploring how documentary-based art resists colonial discourse using the very same materials. One such striking artwork in the exhibition is the video installation *The Orient Flight of the LZ 127* Graf Zeppelin, by Amer Shomali and Dia' Azzeh. The pride of Germany, the *Graf Zeppelin* (D-LZ 127) flew over Jerusalem twice, on 26 March 1929 and 11 April 1931. Among the passengers of the airship were Dr. Wolfgang von Weisl, one of the founders of the Revisionist Zionist movement and a leading advocate for establishing a Jewish state; German ministers and high ministerial officials; members of the Reichstag; a countess and ladies of the Prussian aristocracy; and newspaper representatives. In their video installation, Shomali and Azzeh show the God's-eye-view of the footage taken during the second of these flights. Landmarks are clearly visible. The airship reportedly hovered for some time, with its engines stopped, about one hundred meters above the Church of the Holy Sepulcher; the Dome of the Rock can be seen in the back, and in the background are the Mount of Olives and Jerusalem's Christian quarter. That date–April 11, 1931—being Holy Saturday in the Eastern calendar, the airship's passengers were almost certainly viewing the colorful spectacle of the annual Holy Fire ceremony being played out in the streets below. Without touching down in Palestine, the *Graf Zeppelin* returned to Egypt and landed in Cairo at 4 p.m. the same day.[5]

As Yazid Anani describes it,

> The Orient Flight of the *Graf Zeppelin* to Egypt via Palestine in 1929 is a journey that portrays two different yet complementary gazes on the biblical landscape from above. On the one hand, the Jewish Zionist guests viewed the "Promised Land" with a biblical imagination that asserts the Zionist claim and the ongoing *aliyah* (immigration) to Palestine. On the other hand, the German evangelical guests were overwhelmed with Oriental curiosity and romanticization of Palestine in a mission to connect the biblical and historical past of the land with the landscape today.[6]

Scenes captured from above, from a plane or a zeppelin, cannot be understood without examining them in terms of the realities on the ground. In the exhibition, a section adjacent to the video installation features a photograph, again from above but with a closer lens, tak-

5 Source: website of the German Embassy in Cairo, www.kairo.diplo.de.

6 Yazid Anani, "Introduction: Accounts of Palestine from Above," in "Palestine from Above: Surveillance, Cartography and Control (Part I)," ed. Yazid Anani, special issue, *Jerusalem Quarterly*, no. 81 (2020): 13, https://doi.org/10.70190/jq.I81.p8.

Figure 7. Nabi Salih procession near Ramla, 1943. Library of Congress, LC-M33- 12803 [P&P], https://lccn.loc.gov/2019712501.

en of the annual ceremonial procession from Nabi Salih to Jerusalem in 1943. In this photograph, exhibition visitors can view what passengers of the airship could not see from the sky back in 1931. From the archives it is known that the *Graf Zeppelin* flight over Jerusalem took place in April 1931 during the Holy Fire ceremony at the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. The ceremony brings together members of the Christian Orthodox community from across the world around Easter. It also long coincided with a ceremonial procession from Nabi Salih to Jerusalem that also took place the week of Easter. That procession had a long history, going back to the Ayyubid dynasty. It was intended to curtail Crusader ambitions during Easter by gathering the Muslim population around Jerusalem. By the late nineteenth century, it had turned into a full festival attended by civic and religious leaders, as well as large numbers of Palestinians. The celebration came to an end with the Second Intifada (2000–2005), when the village of Nabi Salih became a center of Palestinian resistance.

The exhibition *Palestine from Above* enables visitors to see a crucial dimension of the West's continued preoccupation with the Holy Land. The visual and literary tools of colonial discourse—guidebooks, travel accounts, photographs, films, maps—that inscribed the terra nullius myth upon the Holy Land were all in conformity with a centuries-long colonial agenda of propagating the image of a desolate land waiting to be settled and civilized. By exposing and transforming the same tools through artworks, the exhibition shifts the vantage point of colonial interpretation. Through their artworks, contemporary artists demonstrate that the land must be reclaimed and reconceived from the ground up.

Opened at a time when the genocide in Gaza was still ongoing, the exhibition is one of the few on this subject presented both in Turkey and around the world. It also holds a distinct place in my own exhibition-making experience, because trying to tell a living history that includes the moment we are in now makes it difficult to keep one's personal feelings and opinions in the background. The exhibition differs from earlier ANAMED projects in some respects. To begin with, it is the first time ANAMED has adapted an exhibition that has already been displayed elsewhere. Together with the curatorial team, we considered how the exhibition's context could be reinterpreted, and we felt a strong responsibility to address the current situation in Gaza by connecting themes explored historically with the present day. Since the second iteration of the exhibition would take place in Istanbul, we also aimed to integrate a deeper account of Ottoman Palestine into the narrative. Although it aligns with the standards of a research center exhibition, *Palestine from Above* occupies a distinctive place among ANAMED's projects because it engages with contemporary history. The emotional strain of working with colleagues, some of whom were in Ramallah while the genocide continued, was intense. Another defining feature is the extensive use of contemporary artworks alongside historical sources. All of this makes *Palestine from Above* not only a historical exhibition but also a present-day record of history in the making. It is also a call for our city, Istanbul, to reexplore its links to the layered history of making Palestine, from both above and below.