An Expert Testimony

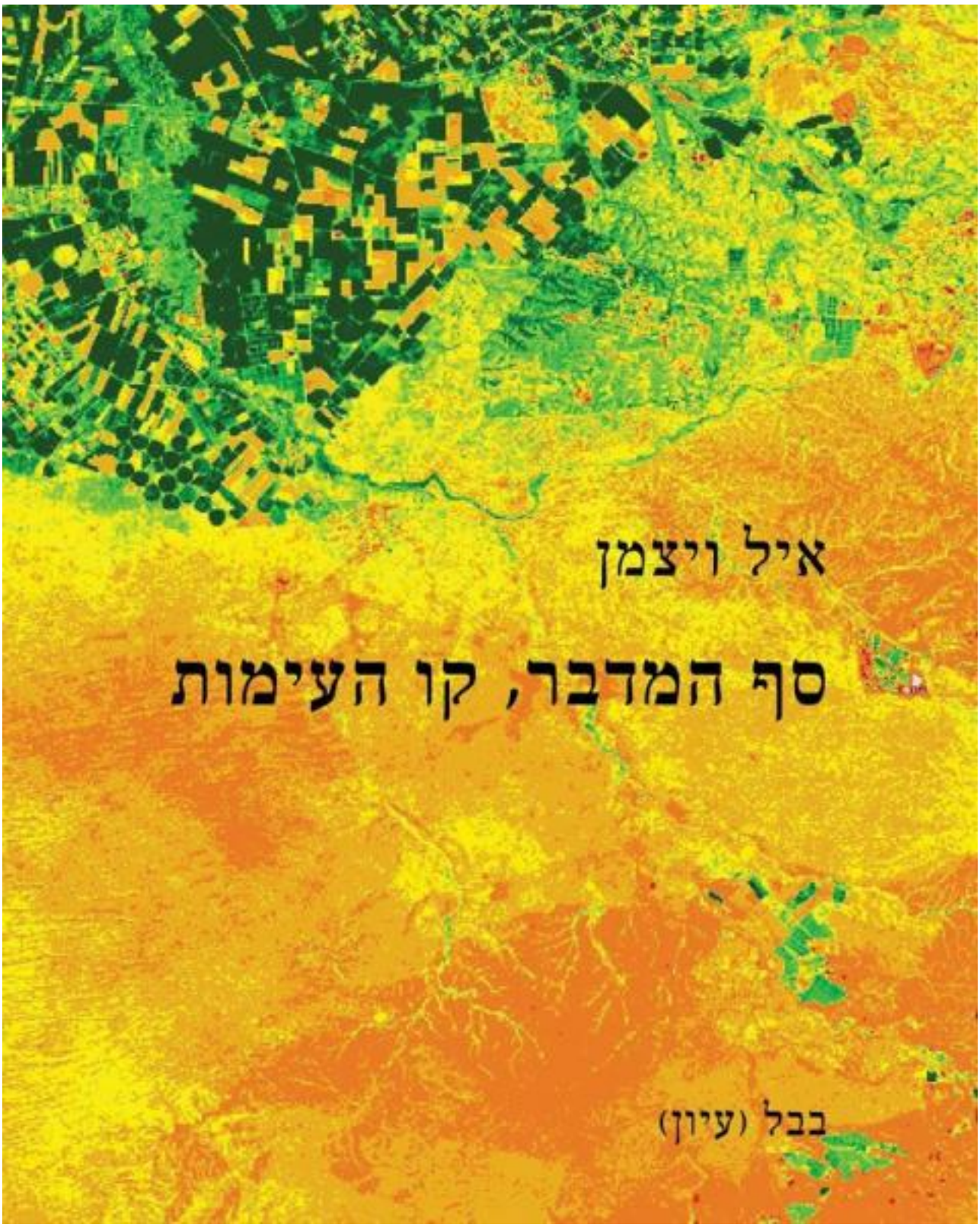
In Eyal Weizman’s new book, the reader joins the author as he hovers over contested territories in the Middle East, follows him as he traces the histories, ideologies, slippery borders, technologies, and narratives involved in the State-inflicted marginalization and displacement of the Bedouin inhabitants of the Negev desert, in Southern Israel. Rotem Rozental reviews “The Conflict Shoreline,” as well as Weizman’s methodology of forensic visual culture research.

Review / Rotem Rozental April 14, 2016

Eyal Weizman. The Conflict Shoreline: Colonization as Climate Change in the Negev Desert. Tel Aviv: Zochrot and Babel Publishing, 2015. 115 pages (Hebrew)1

Eyal Weizman’s most recent book *“The Conflict Shoreline: Colonization as Climate Change in the Negev Desert”* outlines an aerial view of a land, rapidly traversing climate and geopolitical transmutations throughout the Middle East, only to descend knee-deep into the Negev desert, the Israeli court system, shattered homes, and displaced families. The shift from the bird’s-eye perspective to the harsh realities at ground level - two seemingly parallel plains that the book converges - is riveting. Weizman’s book is a rare exploration of the mechanisms used by governmental agencies to dislocate populations, and furthermore, of the systems put in place in order to transform the landscape according to political ideologies. Significantly, through an exploration of different visual representations (maps, photographs, aerial photographs), Weizman uncovers the elusive character of seemingly fixed border lines and meteorological conditions, suggesting their interrelations reflect political conflicts in Israel and beyond.

דימוי עבור קאבר לפייסבוק.jpg



[1]Eyal Weizman. The Conflict Shoreline: Colonization as Climate Change in the Negev Desert. (Hebrew)
Tel Aviv: Zochrot and Babel Publishing, 2015

The image of a line Weizman is conjuring is indistinct, ungraspable, and nonlinear, defining an indistinct, ungraspable image of a territory, located on the edges of the Negev desert in the south of

Israel. This threshold, or “shoreline,” Weizman notes, is an elusive border, difficult to trace. To be present in this desert, and, more specifically, to observe the delineation of its slippery borders, is to be in a contested territory, characterized by absent borders and marginalized communities.

“The Conflict Shoreline” was originally compiled as expert testimony for the concluding session of the Truth Commission *[2]* on the Responsibility of Israeli Society for the Events of 1948-1960 in the south, organized by the Israeli NGO Zochrot *[3]*. Weizman, an architect and a professor at Goldsmiths College in London, has also founded and now directs the Forensic Architecture *[4]* research agency, which integrates spatial analysis for legal and political forums. The research techniques developed by this initiative also emerge here, in the excavation and scrutiny of WWI aerial photographs, maps from Israeli atlases, archival documents, historical accounts from the Ottoman period, these are confronted with geological findings, court testimonies, and on-site interviews from present-day Israel/Palestine. All these are used to demonstrate the systemic violence targeted at displaced Bedouin in the Negev and its historical origins. This multi-layered expert account also tells a larger story, of course, of human intervention in the landscape and its devastating results; of colonialist impact on the region; of juridical injustice, and, lastly, of the methodologies and strategies that define Weizman’s practice.

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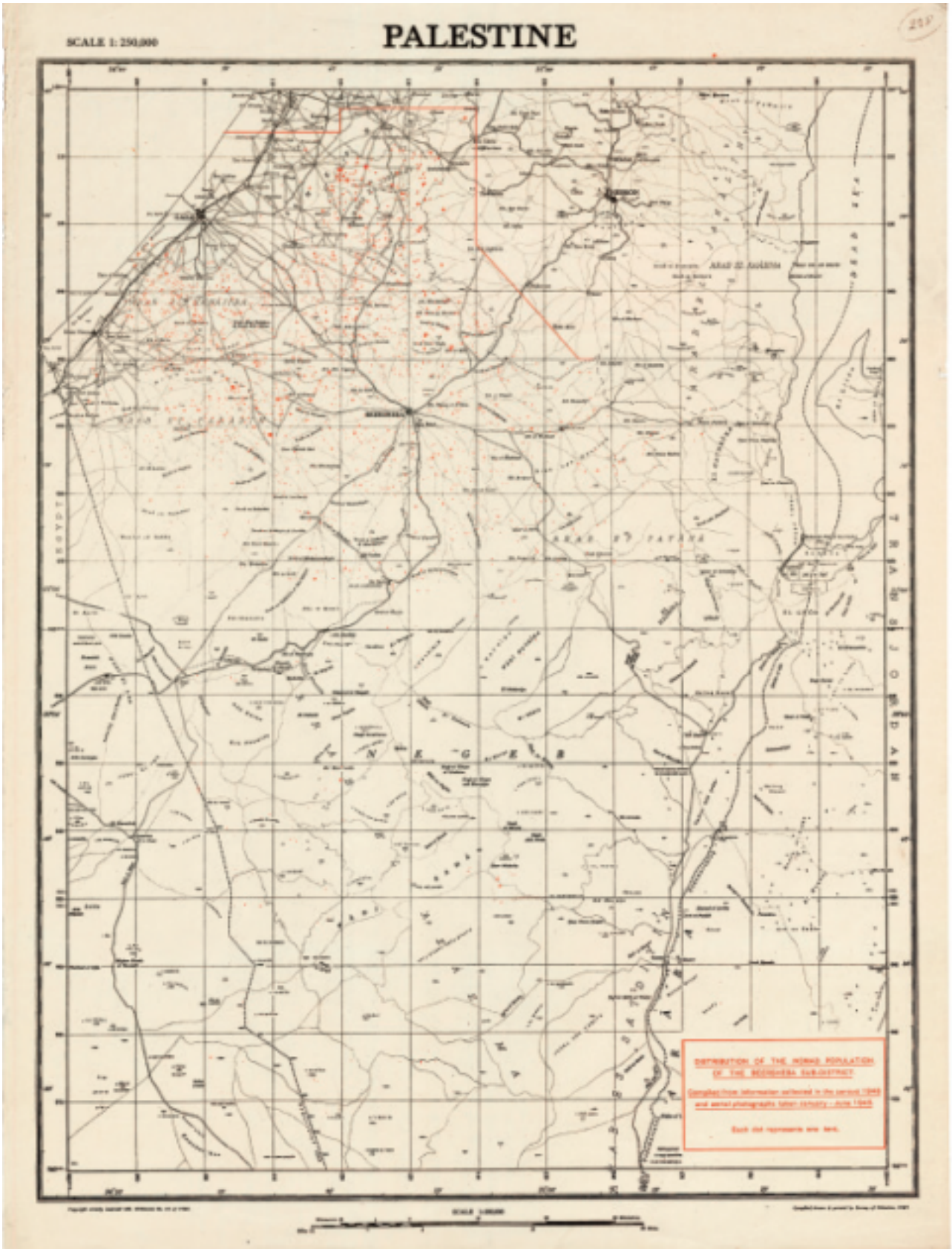
[6]Destruction of Al-Araqib.
2014-15. photo: Saleem Al-Araqib. courtesy of Zochrot and Babel Publishing

The book begins on the ground, at ground level, with a scene of destruction: on June 12, 2014, Israeli police officers demolished homes and other structures in *Al-Araqib*, not far from the southern town of Beersheba, erected in close proximity to an enclosed cemetery. This was the 65th time (out of at

least 92) the State of Israel destroyed this Bedouin settlement since 2002, when the displaced families returned to the area from which they have been first forcefully expelled five decades earlier. The history of the Bedouin settlement of *Al-Araqib* and its desperate fate are intermingled with the lines Weizman follows: aridity lines, isohyet lines, borderlines, shorelines, and meteorological lines, expanding towards east and west. Weizman unravels the lines' conflicted relations with agencies, authorities, and governments that control their manifestations and interpretation. These lines are the constant in an ever-changing tumultuous borderless' terrain: appropriated, controlled, and consumed by authorities that supersede its inhabitants, climates and geographical conditions according to political and financial needs.

Tracking the path of a meteorological line, Weizman points to the displaced Bedouin, as well as the emergent Jewish settler society, which has taken their place. He then observes Israel's rulings regarding these communities, and the outcomes of these decisions in the landscape. As he reaches Hebron's soft and hard limestone, Weizman identifies the stone blocks that make up the separation wall. The aerial lines that lead him toward the Dead Sea glide over the *Nokdim* settlement, where former Israeli Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman has his home, as well as settlements outside Jerusalem, such as *Maale Adumim*, one of the largest in the West Bank, founded on the lands of the Bedouin *Jahalin*. This is just one example of what Weizman uncovers as he follows the geopolitical lines of local and regional conflicts.

page 34 in the book.png **[7]**



[8]A british survey of Palestine map from 1947 marking the distribution of bedouin tents (each tent is a red dot) in the Negev
Courtesy of Zochrot and Babel Publishing

Weizman’s critique of Zionism challenges the historical mechanisms and viewpoints used to form these sights. The lines’ paths unravel the relations between Zionism and the desert; the former

views the latter as the embodiment of its primary ethos: a vast barren land, to be redeemed and brought to its former Jewish glory by the technological advancements and capabilities of Zionism (the ethos of making the desert bloom, *hafrachat hashmama*). The desert reflects what man cannot overcome: an immense and uncontrollable region, a site of countless fantasies and few victories, a land of extreme conditions, in which all humans are subjected to the same physical forces, regardless of their nationality or civil status. This report, however, suggests that even the topography of the region is a governmental construct: shaped by specific means of representation and interpretation, which reflect political perspectives and shifting views, ranging from biblical depictions to nineteenth-century colonial accounts and the Israeli government's approach toward the land and its inhabitants.

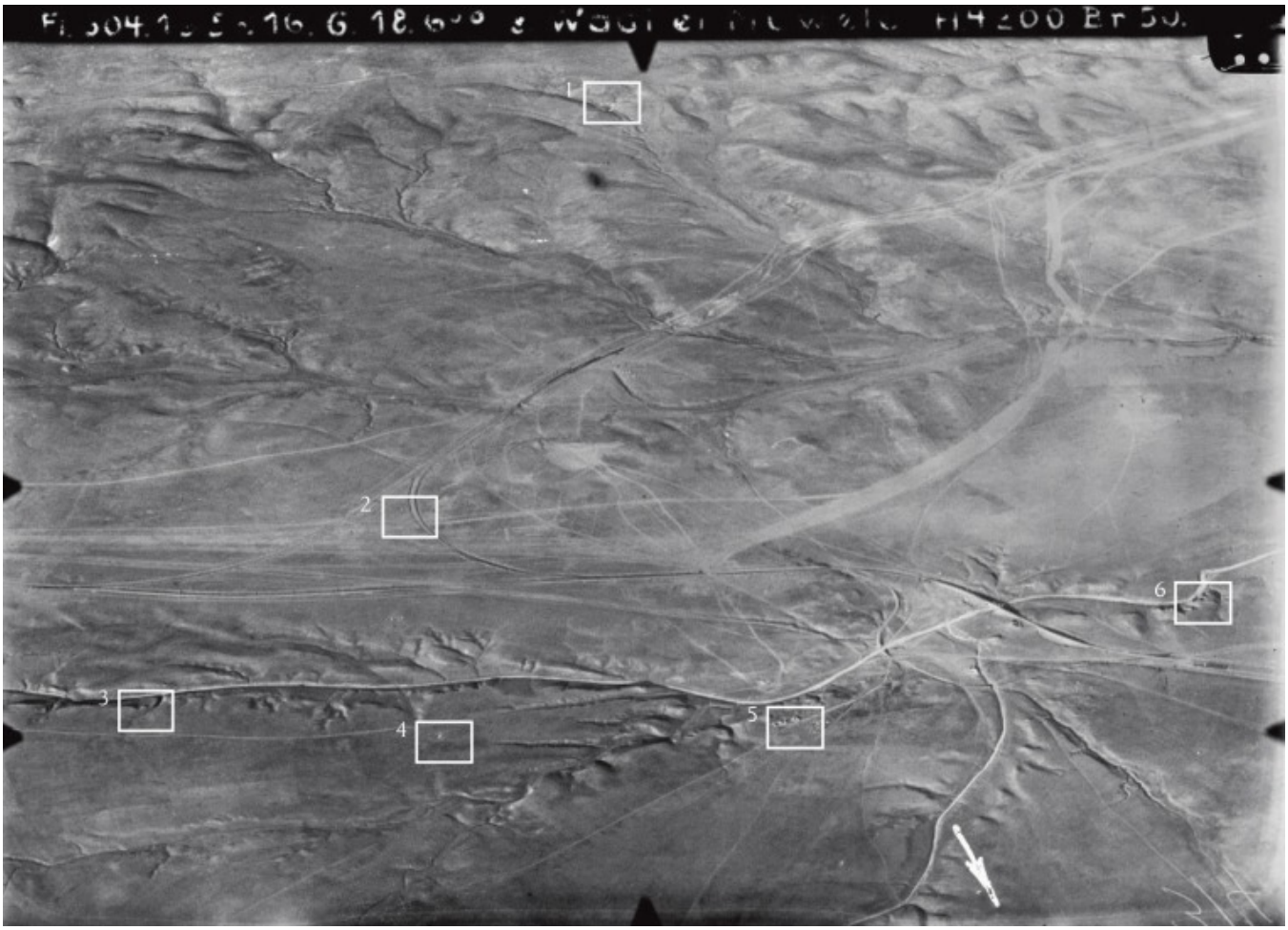
Page 50 in the english book.jpg **[9]**



[10]A crop-duster spraying herbicides on the land of Abu Kaff, next to Hura, March 10, 2004
Photo: Ali Abu Shkheta. Courtesy of Zochrot and Babel Publishing

To justify the destruction of *Al-Araqib* Israel has relied upon environmental and legal arguments. During the Ottoman period, lands left uncultivated for three years were classified as *mawat* (dead) and appropriated by the sovereign. When Israel needed, in 1948, and in a different context in 1967, to demonstrate that there was no Bedouin - or Arab-owned land in the recently occupied territories, its juridical experts reinstated that classification and used it to confiscate recently occupied lands. Bringing these questions into the field of visual culture and artistic practice, these dead lands can be seen as a category under which to conceive broader questions of identity and its formation, an ex-territory positioned on the edges of the civic space, appropriated yet disconnected, redefining this space by its presence.2

The_Conflict_Shoreline_Final for translation 29.3.2015-33.jpg **[11]**



[12]Tall al-Sharia, Bavarian Squadron 304, August 24, 1918
Courtesy of Zochrot and Babel Publishing

Weizman's visual and contextual turn to geographical, climatic, and geological shifts is therefore read as an attempt to undo the State's main argument against the dislocated inhabitants. While Israel has argued that those lands were not cultivated, Weizman, through the work of different members of Forensic Architecture, traces testimonies and visual evidence that clearly suggest that these lands have been cultivated for centuries. "It's an area where, allegedly, agriculture cannot exist, and therefore there are no permanent settlements and no one can claim ownership," Weizman told Shai Zamir, in an interview published recently in Yediot Ahronot *[13]* (Hebrew), "therefore the desert belongs to the State, which can deposit its junk there – nuclear reactors, refugees, prisoners, polluting factories. […] It's a well-oiled machine of courts and police and administration, all working together to eject people who have lived on their land for centuries, and dispose of them in towns that offer no jobs and function like refugee camps. The Bedouin *Nakba* is happening now. It is not a historical process that has ended and requires commemoration days. 1948 is happening now and people need to get down there and protect these people."

Weizman's investigations also allow him to detail the history of the technologies used to obtain the materials, which have been central to the Israeli court rulings. For instance, he outlines the early

beginnings of aerial photographic surveillance in the region, captured by Bavarian pilots and later by the British RAF, which also defined this method as “aerial colonization.” (p. 86) As early as 1920, Weizman writes, Churchill promoted the use of aircraft for documenting, surveying, and regulating the deserts, the edges of the empire. The borders of the desert therefore mark the transition between different scopic imperial regimes; the conflict areas, now being monitored by drones, have colonial ancestries. Beyond visual surveillance, Weizman’s analysis of aerial photographs points to what he terms “the threshold of visibility”: in this condition, the objects represented in the image and the negative itself must be examined simultaneously, since both have their own “material topography.” (92-93) Both the objects viewed and the negatives held up by the viewer have their history, they are both captured, read, and consumed by particular ideological perspectives. Also of importance here is the viewer/reader herself, navigating the text and the maps, attempting to make sense of the landscape and its histories. Photographs are therefore not conceived as depictions of the real, but as objects that reflect affinities to other physical objects. Later on Weizman remarks that the photographs in the book are snippets of prolonged processes of dispossession: “with every ebb and flow of the tide at the desert’s edge, a new photograph is created on the ground.” (104)

mick.jpg **[14]**



[15]Al-Araqib
2010. photo: Miki Kratsman. Courtesy of Zochrot and Babel Publishing

Although Weizman gives faces and names to the dispossessed landed estates of the desert, highlighting the al-Turi and the al-Uqbi families and their struggle to regain ownership over their land, individual faces appear only in the book's last pages, in photographic portraits of some of the protagonists, captured by the Israeli artist-photographer Miki Kratsman. Up to that point, we visually encounter the maps that determined their fate, as well as the military perspective of aerial photographs at times of war and conflict. We hover over the land throughout the book, maintaining a bird's-eye view along with the writer, following him as he traces technologies, narratives, and administrative procedures used to define institutional violence and marginalized, excluded communities. Only near the end do we finally shift our perspective, moving from line into territory, to meet its sidelined people. The portraits begin to appear when we return to where we have begun: as Sheikh Siah al-Turi elaborates the community's burial rituals, we find ourselves back in the cemetery, surrounded by a land of the dead, by a dead land that helplessly absorbs collective suffering, failed national aspirations, and personal tragedies.

- 1. The book was first published in English by Steidl [16] in association with Cabinet Books [17] (New York, 2015), accompanied by photographs by Fazal Sheikh.
- 2. For more on the classification of Karkaot Mawat, see Raanan Alexandrovich's 2011 documentary, "The Law in These Parts" [18] (2011, 81 min.) See more in The New York

Times [19]. Considering this issue further, the exhibition Dead Lands: Karkaot Mawat [20], curated by the author of this review, reflecting on issues of land, identity and artistic practice, will be on view at NURTUREart [21] Gallery (Brooklyn, NYC) from April 15 to May 15, 2016.

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