The lawless line

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The various historical plans for partitioning Palestine—from the Peel Commission Report 1937 to the Oslo Accords 1993—not only divided the land into non-contiguous territories, they also gave rise to a new spatial condition. Between the various territories another space emerged, whose expanse was the very width of the lines separating them. Each partition line reflected the particular cartographic technologies and political conditions of the time, its size a function of the scale of the map on which it was drawn.

Meron Benvenisti famously asked: ‘Who owns the “width of the line?”’ He was referring to the 1948 cease-fire lines between Israel and Jordan. The lines were drawn on a 1:20 000 scale map by the two military commanders—Moshe Dayan and Abdullah al-Tal. They met in an abandoned house in the Musrara district of Jerusalem and laid out the map on the floor. Each drew a line using a different coloured chinagraph pencil: Dayan, green, and al-Tal, red. The thickness and softness of the chinagraphs resulted in lines that were, generally, 3–4 mm wide. But whether because the floor under the map was uneven or Dayan and al-Tal were unskilled, in some areas of Jerusalem the width of the line became irregular and indeterminate.

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This ambiguous legal space—a few millimetres wide on the drawing and 60–80 m wide in real space—was thus a consequence of the materialisation of the drawing—the materialisation of a jurisgenerative drawing process. In the most densely built-up area of Jerusalem, the lines were so wide they covered buildings, roads and military outposts. In the following years, the exact position of the lines became the subject not only of debate and disputation, but also of military skirmishes and infiltrations.

Several decades later, the cartographic work undertaken during the Oslo peace negotiations was conducted digitally—on computer screens—but the maps, signed by Yitzak Rabin and Yasser Arafat, were prepared in hard copy. A one-dimensional line (in Euclidian space a line has no width) again became a two-dimensional surface. Much less than a millimetre wide when printed on a cartographic annex, in real space the line acquired a width of 5.5 m.

This line is ubiquitous in the West Bank. A sliver of extraterritorial space, it runs at the margins of almost every town and village. The Oslo negotiations collapsed before reaching a settled definition of space, and so the line remains an open legal question, paradoxically challenging the very partition it enacts. We followed it around, across and through villages and towns, olive groves and orchards, fields, roads, gardens, kindergartens, fences, terraces, houses, public buildings, a football stadium, a mosque and even a large, recently built castle.

![Map No 2](image_url)

DAAR, Agreement on the Gaza Strip and the Jericho Area, May 4, 1994, Map No 2 (the map is scaled up), 2010.


In July 2010, we approached a lawyer, Ghiath Nasser, and asked him to file a petition in the Israeli courts, arguing that the line is an extraterritorial zone—a site for a new ‘borderline state’.
At first he laughed, but finally he said:

Actually, I’m dealing every day with cases against the construction of the Wall. In these circumstances the only thing that I can do is to push the line more here or more there, but I can never challenge the lines themselves . . .

I want to show you an interesting case located on the street that connects Jerusalem to Ramallah. There is a [woman’s] house, which the municipality of Jerusalem argues is outside the municipal borders of Jerusalem. Her house is cut in two by the line . . . The Jerusalem municipality claims that, since most of the house is built outside the line, she does not have the right to live in Jerusalem. So look: the bedrooms are outside Jerusalem, but the kitchen and the entrance are in Jerusalem.

It might seem ridiculous, but the implications for her life are dramatic: she will lose her Jerusalem identity card and her access to medical treatment; her kids will no longer be able to attend Jerusalem schools; and she won’t be able to visit her parents . . . So what I’m arguing in court is that, since the entrance of the house is inside the line, they have to consider her centre of life as in Jerusalem . . . In fact, I ask them: ‘How can she go in and out of her house without going in and out of Jerusalem?’
DAAR, The Red Castle and the Lawless Line, steirischer herbst, Graz, 2011.