

THEMED INTERVENTION

Mapping and countermapping dispossession in Palestine

Hashem Abushama 

School of Geography and the Environment, University of Oxford, Oxford, UK

Correspondence

Hashem Abushama, School of Geography and the Environment, University of Oxford, Oxford, UK.
Email: hashem.abushama@ouce.ox.ac.uk

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Abstract

In their claim to distance from reality, maps seek power from representation. Maps are constituted by a particular set of practices that are enmeshed within wider social relations. Maps, then, are a powerful vantage point for understanding the geometries of power. Under settler colonialism, geography is constantly reshaped and reconfigured by expansionist and eliminatory logics. Such is the case in Palestine, where Israeli settler colonialism has fragmented the map of historic Palestine into messily separated archipelagos. As Palestinian geographies are constantly being reconfigured under Israeli settler colonialism, can maps catch up? How do we locate Palestine on the map? I take up these questions by focusing on the 1948 and 1967 Palestinian territories as two spatio-temporally differentiated locations of settler colonial spatial reconfiguration. Using a counter-map designed by Palestinian artist Haya Zaatry, I highlight the importance of counter-mapping in bringing into sharp relief the conjunctural layering of dispossession in Palestine. If dominant colonial maps are about the neat packaging of lived realities into dominant spatio-temporal demarcations, counter-maps are about highlighting the ghostly stories and embodied spatial practices and processes of living within and beyond such demarcations.

KEYWORDS

counter-mapping, Palestine, relational comparison, settler colonialism, Wadi Salib

1 | INTRODUCTION

In a short story titled ‘On Exactitude in Science’, Jorge Luis [Borges](#) writes through the voice of a certain Suarez Miranda from the year 1658. Miranda tells us the story of an Empire in which the art of cartography had attained such perfection that the ‘Cartographers Guilds struck a Map of the Empire whose size was that of the Empire, and which coincided point for point with it’ (Borges, ‘On Exactitude in Science’). This ‘unconscionable map’ was perfect to scale: it covered the entire surface of Empire, thereby collapsing the distance between *reality* and *representation*. The future generations who stumbled on this map—the only relic remaining from ‘the disciplines of geography’—found it useless. For a map that perfectly matches what it is supposed to represent loses its claim to representation and, therefore, its utility and power. Maps seek much of their power from their claim to representation—their attempt to reify contingent spatial relations

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into a seemingly fixed visual or pictorial projection. But representation is not the only way through which maps reify the nexus of knowledge and power; maps are produced through situated practices of production, circulation, and utilisation enmeshed within wider social relations.

Maps, then, are entangled with power through spatial practices of representation, production, use, and circulation. As Kitchin and Dodge (2007, p. 335) argue, maps 'are of-the-moment, brought into being through practices (embodied, social, technical), *always* remade every time they are engaged with'. I find Kitchin's and Dodge's (2007, p. 335) arguments about maps being 'spatial practices enacted to solve relational problems' convincing. However, it is equally important to stress how such practices unfold within relations of domination and subordination (see Hall, 2021), whereby certain cartographic practices are more prone to institutional reification and translatability than others. Seen this way, cartography, as geographer Sparke (2005, p. 12) notes, 'is part of a reciprocal or, better, a recursive social process in which maps shape a world that in turn shapes its maps'. Although maps are artificial, visual constructs, 'the passage of time gave them weight' (Craib, 2017, p. 18). But not all maps gain weight with the passage of time. There is a hierarchy in what counts as maps and what does not. For example, Google Maps in Palestine neither takes into account the settler colonial realities that fragment Palestinian geographies, nor names the layers of dispossession atop which settlements are built (see Quiquix, 2014; Sánchez, 2018). If you were to consult Google Maps as a Palestinian in the West Bank, you are mostly likely to end up on a settler road – a road that would get you in trouble. Your embodied maps of living despite and around such ever-shifting colonial demarcations will be a much better guide. No one has drawn or digitised such embodied maps yet. This is, perhaps, partially the function of such embodied maps: to be lived while remaining porous and unintelligible.

And they are ever-shifting colonial demarcations. Settler colonialism is about the elimination of the natives and the increased control of native lands; it is a frontiering project (see Wolfe, 2006, 2016). The border is a frontier, it always threatens expansion. In this context, how do you map Palestine under Israeli settler colonialism? Where is Palestine? Is it the Occupied Territories (the West Bank, East Jerusalem, and the Gaza Strip)? But there are roughly 146 Israeli settlements and another 144 settler outposts within those territories, where more than 465,400 Israeli settlers live ('Peace Now', 2024). Palestinians live on territorial archipelagos, neatly separated from one another by walls, checkpoints, settler highways, military outposts, and settlements. There is no native geographic contiguity under settler colonialism. Where is the border? Is it the 1949 Armistice Line (the Green Line) that roughly separates the Occupied Territories from those Israel had occupied in 1948? Some refer to the 1948 territories (those engulfed within the Green Line) as Israel proper. Are the Occupied Territories Israel improper, then, and is Palestine to be collapsed under the whim of this distinction? Rifkin (2017, p. 43) argues that reducing Israeli settler colonialism (the paradigm) to the military occupation of the 1967 territories (the modality) risks internalising the latter as an 'ontological category distinct from the larger structures of Israeli settler colonialism'. What settler colonial logics does the designation 'proper' hide from view?

These are the questions that brought me to counter-mapping, which refers to the practices and processes of producing maps that challenge systems of oppression and exploitation. Counter-mapping starts from the premise that every representation is limited by its own conditions of possibility. It refutes claims to 'exactitude in science', as Borges might put it. It brings into question that distance between reality and representation where power lies. A counter-map is still a representation and is therefore vulnerable to systems of power. As geographer Iralu (2021, p. 1487) suggests, counter-mapping 'refers to cartographic work created in opposition to colonial cartography, but by working within the terms and framing of colonial cartography, it is always at risk of cooptation'. Counter-mapping is a material practice of weaving together neglected and unintelligible histories, visuals, ideas, faces, alleyways, and embodied spatial practices. It may contest certain claims to power while reinforcing others.

In the following sections, I think about the different Palestinian geographies to reflect on the difficulties of mapping a reality of settler colonial fragmentation and segregation. I zoom in on a particular counter-map produced by Palestinian artist Haya Zaatry to name and visualise the layering of dispossession in Palestine. I make the claim that the counter-map challenges understandings of space and time as fixed and linear. A counter-map already starts from a position of refuting representation and its intimate relations to power. In the context of Palestine, counter-mapping may help us bring into focus the contingent and differentiated nature of settler colonial dispossession and fragmentation as well as the embodied, spatial practices and processes of the Palestinians (see Quiquix, 2014).

2 | COUNTER-MAPPING ARCHIPELAGOS

The counter-map starts with a black building marked with the year 2015 with a sign to the left that reads as 'Masrah Khashabi' (Khashabi Theatre) (see Figure 1). A triangular prism extends backwards to the depth of the map to draw our

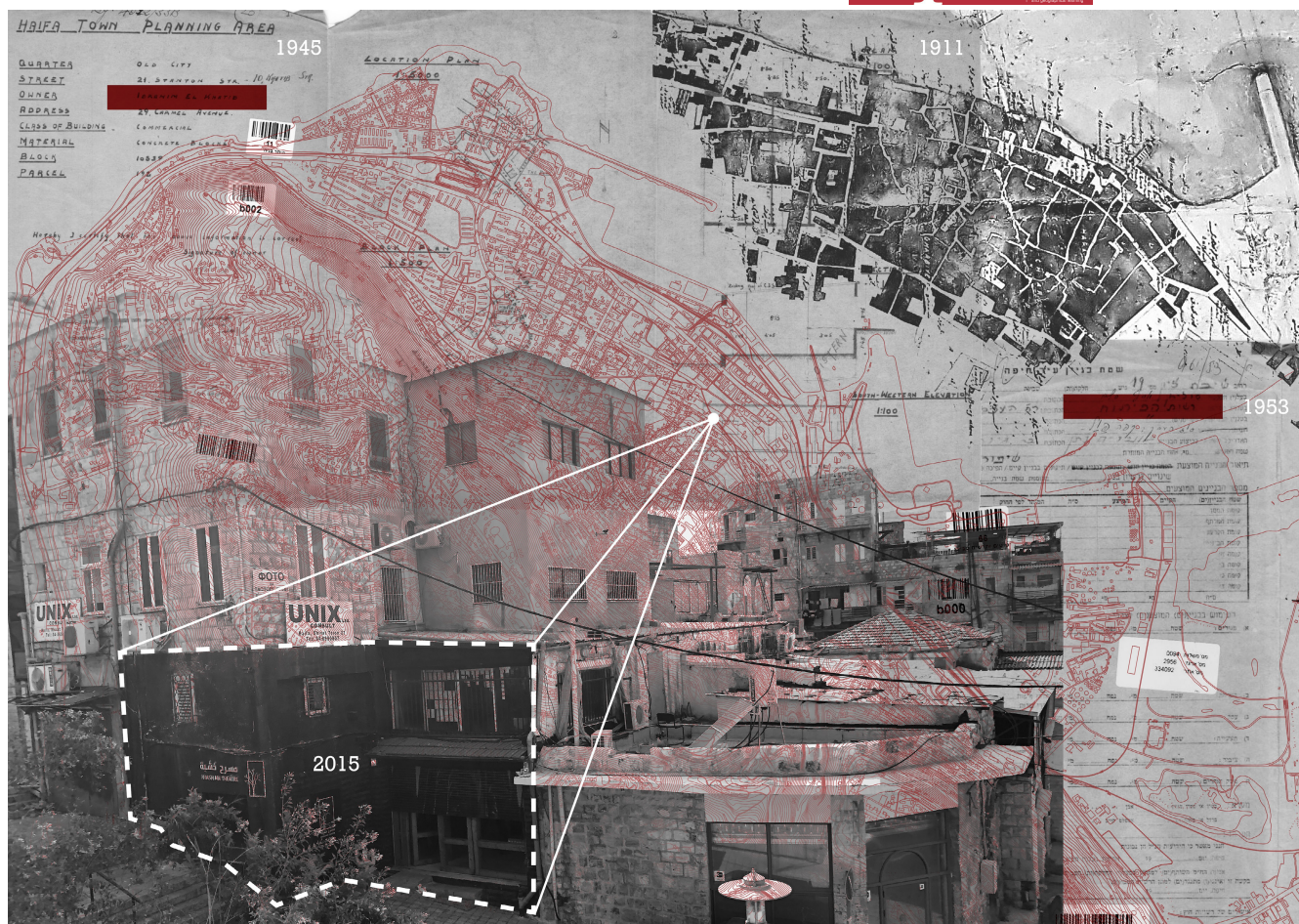


FIGURE 1 Counter-map of the al Khatib family's building in Wadi Salib. Designed by artist and architect Haya Zaatry, 2020.

attention to a layering of history, as if to urgently tell us that the building has ghostly stories. To the top right corner of the map, there is a 1911 aerial map of the city of Haifa. Then, to the top left, there is a 1945 communique between the al Khatib family and British colonial authorities, which ruled Palestine at the time. To the bottom right corner, a 1953 Israeli document classifies the building as 'abandoned property', which effectively meant its codified and seemingly legal transfer into the hands of the Israeli settler state. This is a non-linear and visual telling of urban history and dispossession. It is designed by Palestinian artist and architect Haya Zaatry as a 'self-critique' for the complex entanglement between Palestinian arts, neoliberal urban renewal projects, and the built afterlives of the dispossessed. Zaatry herself is a Haifa-based artist who is directly involved in the city's Palestinian cultural scene. The counter-map insists on a triangular prism through which the layers of dispossession are refracted once the light of critical inquiry passes through—the light that sees and recognises the stories of the dispossessed while clinging to a rigorous analysis of the systems of oppression and exploitation that enable and perpetuate dispossession. By being designed by an artist embedded in the same cultural scene, the counter-map works to bring into sharp relief the very conditions of its own possibility.

The al Khatib family home is in the Wadi Salib neighbourhood in Haifa. Before 1948, the building had belonged to the Palestinian al Khatib family, who were then forcibly displaced in 1948. Shortly after the establishment of the Israeli state, arriving Arab Jews were relocated to the forcibly depopulated Palestinian homes and neighbourhoods. Wadi Salib shared this fate, though in 1959 a significant Arab Jewish rebellion took place in the neighbourhood, which resulted in its complete evacuation (see Shohat, 2017; Weiss, 2011). The neighbourhood had since remained mostly vacant and abandoned. Such ghostly buildings name a history of colonial dispossession, which neoliberal capital now wants to repackage into commodified aesthetics of authenticity (see Sa'di-Ibraheem, 2021, p. 694). With the neoliberalisation of Israel's economy in 1985, publicly owned buildings and lands, which are stolen Palestinian properties and lands (see Fischbach, 2003), are increasingly privatised and sold to local and international real estate companies. In Wadi Salib in particular, international and local real estate companies have bought most of the buildings, turning them into rental units, architecture and law firms, and arts studios and collectives.

The Israeli Registry's records show that the Development Authority (an Israeli public agency founded in 1950) still owns the al Khatib family's building. However, a sale agreement dated 2021 for the space adjacent to the building shows that it had been sold by two private owners to the Eitan Investments Base Ltd Company (see Abushama, 2024a). The agreement also includes an appendix from Amidar Company (the nationally owned public housing company) that shows that the building's different parts, including the al Khatib family's home, have been sold to real estate companies and private owners. Today, a Palestinian theatre collective named 'Masrah Khashabi' has rented the same building to open an independent, Palestinian cultural space. This significant Palestinian urban intervention in a tightly controlled settler colonial space is enabled by mechanisms of neoliberal urban renewal and gentrification that, in turn, rest on a history of dispossession. Such is the conundrum of living under late capitalism in a settler colonial context: your possibilities for emancipatory cultural expression and experimentation are in continuous friction with a wider social reality designed to dispossess you from the land. 'Masrah Khashabi' continues to remember the al Khatib family and have placed a placard with the family's name at the building's entrance.

Neoliberalism aims to lower the barriers of trade and smooth the pathways for capital circulation while entrenching political, economic, and social inequalities. It is a general global phenomenon, but it *actually exists* as a historically determined phenomenon. Neoliberal capital shows up in a particular way in Haifa, feeding into a history and present of dispossession while completely denying it. In fact, it works in tandem with colonial relations to hide the pathways of colonial dispossession. Haifa is considered an Israeli city where the municipality is directly run by the Israeli state and Palestinians are engulfed as citizens within the racialised and ethnonationalist tectonics of Israeli settler citizenship. Neoliberal capitalism feeds into these contradictions to propagate its stronghold over already stolen Palestinian properties. It is a story specific to Haifa and to the Palestinian territories that Israel had occupied in 1948; the theft that had originated in 1948 is being re-elaborated through a relinking between capital and colonial relations. While the reshaping of Haifa's built environment is spatio-temporally differentiated by its relations vis-à-vis the settler state, it is relationally connected to other Palestinian geographies.

There exist multiple Palestinian geographies. There are the territories that Israel had occupied and accumulated by dispossession in 1948 to coercively establish its geographic nucleus as a state (such as Haifa, Yafa, 'Akka, and Safad), which are often referred to as 'Israel proper'. Then, there are the Occupied Palestinian Territories (including the West Bank, the Gaza Strip, and East Jerusalem), which Israel had occupied in 1967. There are the Palestinian refugee camps, too—in Lebanon, Syria, and Jordan, where a promise of and a demand for return persists but continues to come in material and ideological friction with the Israeli settler state and the different host states. All of these geographies are entangled with and directly and indirectly shaped by settler colonial logics of elimination, fragmentation, segregation, and corporeal violence. But the ways in which such settler colonial logics unfold are determined by the particular spatio-temporal dynamics in each location. How capitalist and settler colonial logics come together and are then eclipsed by the axes of difference of gender, race, class, and nationality differs in each geography (see Figure 2).

There is already a counter-map at play here. It is a map that recognises such differences as both *relational* to one another and to other locations around the world as well as *constitutive* of both colonialism and global capitalism. The neoliberalisation of Israel's economy through the Economic Stabilisation Plan of 1985 has unleashed mechanisms of erasure, control, and management that are specific to this historical conjuncture. As Lloyd and Wolfe (2015, p. 112) note, 'settler colonialism's inventory of local strategies is becoming increasingly congenial to neoliberalism's emergent world order'. But the opposite is also true—that neoliberal strategies are becoming increasingly central to the settler colonial orders. My wider research project has been concerned with relationally substantiating such conjunctural differences between the 1948 territories and the 1967 territories by methodologically crossing the colonial demarcation of the 'Green Line' (see Salamanca et al., 2012). Using Hart's (2018, p. 389) method of 'relational comparison', I approach the two cities of Haifa in the 1948 territories and Ramallah in central West Bank as 'two vantage points from which to try to begin to grasp the coming together and interconnections' of the relatively autonomous yet co-constitutive processes of colonial dispossession and global, neoliberal capitalist accumulation (see Abushama, 2024a, 2024b).

Both cities, I argue, have been significantly reshaped by the introduction of the neoliberalisation of the Israeli economy in 1985 and the signing of the Oslo Accords in 1993. However, the ways in which neoliberal capitalism 'adapts itself to the imperatives of colonial domination' (Bhandar, 2018, p. 2; see also Clarno, 2017) in each location is differentiated and contingent on its spatio-temporally specific and patterned relations of colonial control and erasure. On the one hand, Haifa is now considered an Israeli city where the municipality is directly run by the Israeli state and Palestinians are engulfed as citizens within the racialised and ethnonationalist tectonics of Israeli settler citizenship. Ramallah, on the other, is a Palestinian city under Israeli military occupation where a neoliberal Palestinian state-building project persists. In Ramallah, neoliberal capital adapts itself to the military occupation by working through and alongside its patterned

1948 Territories (marked on map as Israel) and 1967 Territories (marked as West Bank and Gaza)

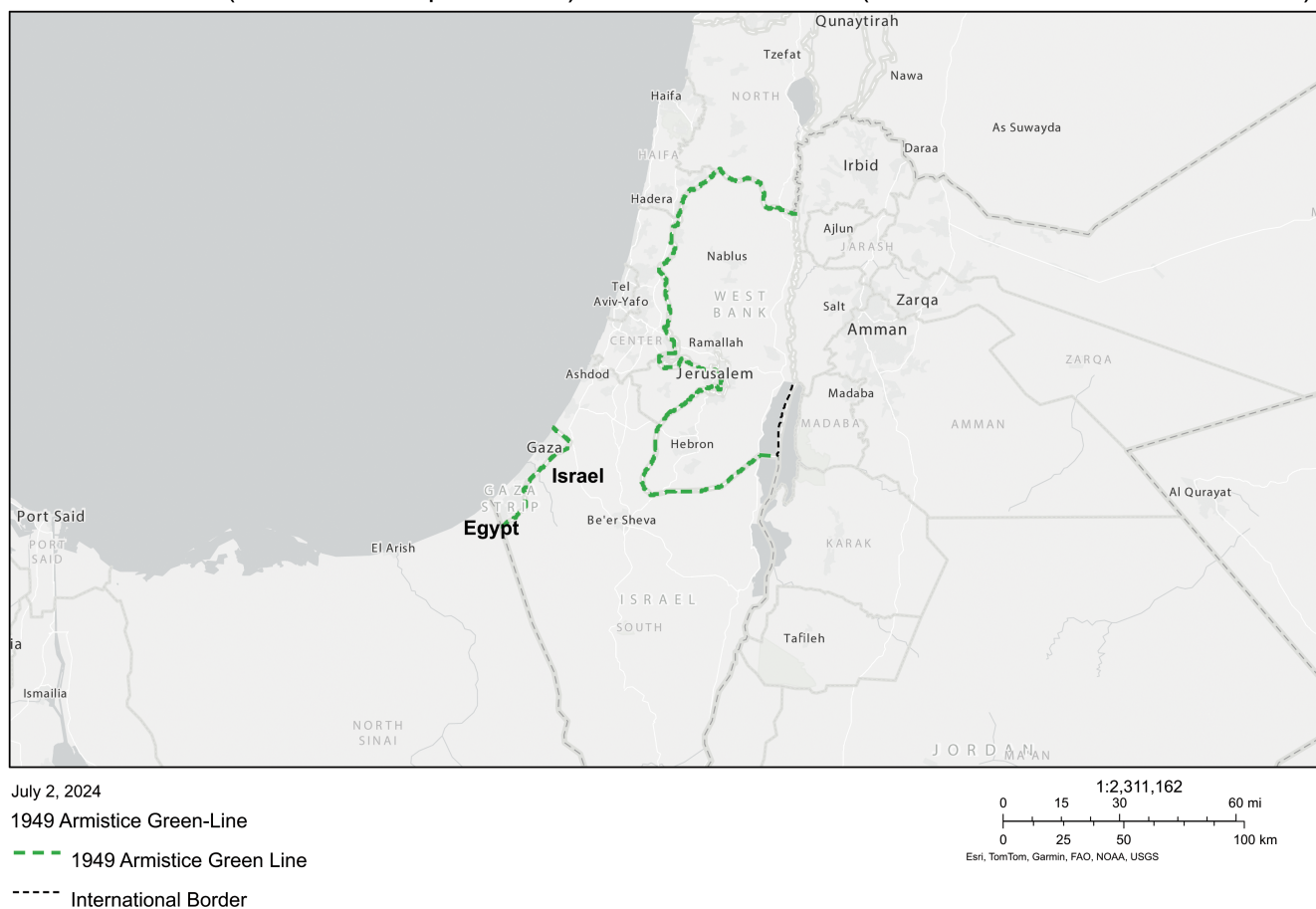


FIGURE 2 Map showing the 1948 and 1967 territories. *Source:* The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA).

relations of coercion and dispossession (see Rabie, 2021). The neoliberal Palestinian state-building project serves as a material conduit for the translation of this coupling of colonial and capitalist logics into a somewhat sustainable formation. It is a peculiar state-building project: it does not have sovereignty over the land, though it has already perfected the mechanisms of coercion that protect this unsustainable arrangement between capital and colonialism by arresting and assassinating its opponents (see Amnesty International, 2022) and financially disciplining the Palestinian population into circuits of privatisation and indebtedness (see Harker, 2020).

Colonial demarcations such as the Green Line give the illusion of two separate realities in the 1948 and 1967 territories, though it is the same settler colonial order unfolding in both locations. By treating the settlement in the Occupied Territories as the exception, not the rule, we risk neglecting the continuous dispossession in the 1948 territories. Both locations are materially connected yet distinctly different sites in the production of both global capitalism and Israeli settler colonialism. A counter-map insists on seeing and visualising this constitutive relationality.

3 | CONCLUSION

In a context of continuous settler colonial expansion, frontiering, and dispossession, maps simply cannot catch up. The borders are constantly being reconfigured not only by the settler state and settlers, but also the native/indigenous communities that devise spatial practices and processes of living above and below such colonial demarcations. When maps do catch up, they revert to simplified representations of propriety that collapse relational and constitutive differences: between the 1948 city-settlement and the 1967 settlement, the civil law in the 1948 territories and the military and administrative law in the 1967 territories, and so on. The impossibility of Borges' invitation to us to imagine a map that

constantly and perfectly matches reality is an eloquent reminder that maps seek power from a claim to representation, one that collapses as soon as we demand the map to be perfect.

In a poem titled ‘The Cartographer tries to map a way to Zion’, Jamaican poet Miller (2014) questions the authority of the cartographer and his map:

The rastaman thinks, draw me a map of what you see
 then I will draw a map of what you never see
 and guess me whose map will be bigger than whose?
 Guess me whose map will tell the larger truth?

The *rastaman* addresses the cartographer, whose map-making is considered ‘science without bias’. The *rastaman* suggests that his map of what the cartographer never sees is bigger, for it includes the embodied maps which may never be collapsed into the neat boundaries of the cartographer. By excluding things, stories, and pathways from its purview and its insistence on an exact science, the cartographer’s map authoritatively fragments, ghettoises, and imposes oppressive geographies. The *rastaman*’s map starts from the question of ‘what you never see’: the questions, thoughts, stories, and alleyways that cannot be neatly packaged in cartographic formulas. Such is the task of countermapping in a context of dispossession: to bring into sharp relief both the complex systems of oppression and exploitation that dispossess communities as well as the spatial practices and processes of living within and at the limits of such systems.

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ORCID

Hashem Abushama  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8232-6474>

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