

Imagining Return: Countless Palestinian Futures

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Imagining Return

How is return imagined, and in what ways is return conceptualized in a landscape dominated by the materiality of territory, home, and nationhood? We see return practiced in a multiplicity of ways: the Great March of Return, the Intifadas, the images and videos showing Palestinians running toward Palestine from Jordan and Lebanon chanting, “We will return” cutting through barbed-wire fences that make a border. We see it reflected in literature in a linear singular conceptualization through Ghada Karmi’s *Return*,¹ Salman Abu Sitta’s *Mapping my Return*,² while stories such as “Returning to Haifa” by Ghassan Kanafani pose the point:

I always imagined that the Mandelbaum Gate would be opened some day, but I never imagined, never imagined that it would be opened from that other side [...] maybe I’d be crazy if I told you that door should always open from one side only, and that if they opened from the other side they must still be considered closed.³

We are moved to expand collectively the conversation surrounding return. Return is often seen only as “we go back” and the conversation stops. But what happens afterward? What would return look like? Is going back to Palestine a return if we are re-subjugating ourselves and perpetuating the oppressive systematic practices (such as racial capitalism) that we experience in exile? Return should not be about reproducing debt, racism, neoliberalism, and patriarchy under a different flag. These modes of domination already exist and are part and parcel of systematic practices—they will not cease to exist when Palestinians return to live in that space. These are modes of domination we need to destabilize.

How can we talk about Palestine without involving ourselves in heated arguments, or having to go to a lecture or read a dense book or to be an expert? How can Palestine become a quotidian conversation? What if we took Palestine out of exclusive spaces and enabled people to talk about ideas in a safe space? Grappling with, thinking through, and reckoning with the different ways of returning is an invitation to explore what Arturo Escobar describes as “the politics of the possible ... our notions of what

is real and what is possible determine both our political practice, from the personal to the collective, and our sense of hope ... what he calls 'sentipensar' (what is possible)."⁴ Conversations around Palestine are often framed either in historical or present terms. But what and where are the tools that help us think through what a return to Palestine could be?

This case looks at the process of developing and playing *Countless Palestinian Futures* (CPF), a discussion-based game we developed that attempts to answer this question. The aim of CPF is to stimulate the imagination by helping people develop tangible outcomes and ideas around Palestinian futures—to empower players to not limit themselves by the political imagination of others. We wanted to develop a tool that did not frame Palestinians as victims but rather as people who take ownership over their own narratives. This does not mean to replicate the past—return is often seen as a backward motion, a going back to something/somewhere—but to create discussions that materially look forward—world(s)-building—not imaginary worlds but situations in our own world. Our goal is educational and to elicit debate.

In this case, we discuss the process of creating CPF, featuring photographic documentation, reflections, and analysis of the process and the pilot event in October 2021 at the Mosaic Rooms in London, where Palestinian and Arab cultural producers, policy makers, activists, and academics were invited to participate. We discuss the multiple understandings and ideas brought forward by participants through the questions that were played and the feedback they shared which challenged them to orient their ideas toward the future and emphasizing the role of imagination, demonstrating the necessity of unpacking what return would materially look like. In other words, what and who are we—as Palestinians—after the struggle?

Gamification and Iteration

While thinking through what a tool could be, we realized how the questions we posed ourselves drew us to gamification. Gamification is a strategy used in education and training to help make learning more motivating and engaging. The process can help a person retain knowledge and promote problem-based learning. Games are often open-ended rather than fixed; they have the possibility of creating connections, and are an easy way to start a conversation, particularly around Palestine. The game is centered on imagination: using imagination as a tool to build ideas of liberation, to cultivate alliances and material developments between the very people who are systematically denied their return. CPF humbly offers possible ways of orienting liberation not as a given practice or discourse but as something that should be explored beyond the limits presented in resolutions set out by hegemonic global governance institutions such as the United Nations.

The title was influenced by Umberto Eco's idea of the open work, because it can be read in an infinite number of ways depending on what the user brings, enabling more audience/user participation into the process.⁵ Therefore, we do not see this game as a fixed entity but as something open to interpretation and iteration, and why the name itself emphasizes futures rather than a singular future—to demonstrate a space not

of singular solutions but of multiple possibilities. For example, it can be Countless Afghan Futures or Countless Lebanese Futures or Countless Arab Futures.

In developing the questions, we first established six broad themes: culture and media, economy, governance and policy, infrastructure, geography, and people and society. We then contacted prominent Palestinians working in these areas to contribute questions and developed our own. Questions are framed around near

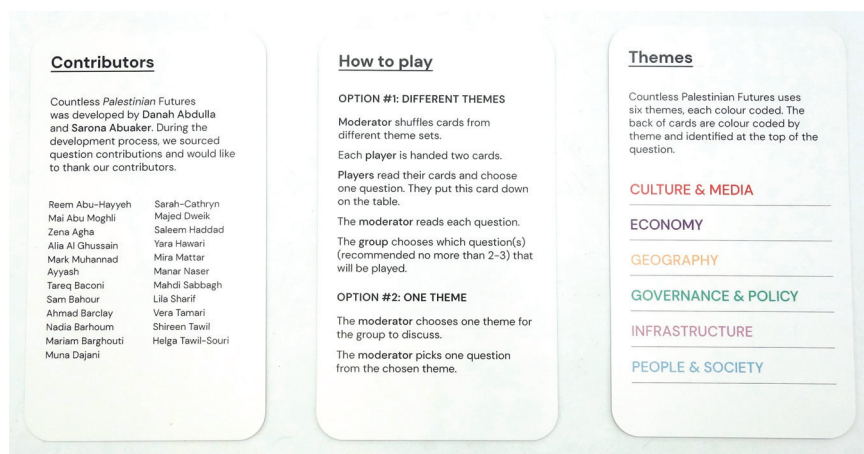


Figure 2.1 Countless Palestinian Futures game. Image by Danah Abdulla.

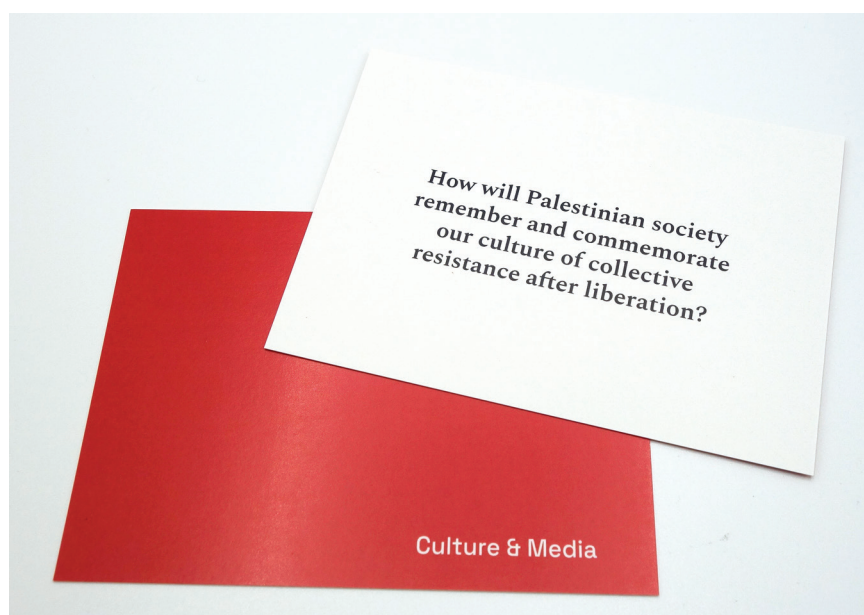


Figure 2.2 Countless Palestinian Futures game. Image by Danah Abdulla.

medium- and long-term futures that spark conversations, and challenges players to consider Palestinian futures. The game features over sixty different questions and is designed to be played in different formats with three to six players or as a conversation prompt between two people. Players can choose questions drawing on either different themes or within one theme. One player acts as a moderator, whose responsibility it is to decide how different voices/perspectives are to be heard, while other players are asked the questions (Figure 2.1 and 2.2).

In the spirit of iteration—of an open work—we invite players to rephrase the questions. Players can document the discussion as they please and establish goals for the conversation at the start. CPF is meant to be a shared learning space where everyone should contribute to the conversation. The game does not have a specified end: people can keep playing the same statement until they are satisfied.

Imagining with Others

We first trialed CPF at the Mosaic Rooms in London in October 2021. With twelve participants from a range of expertise and backgrounds, we divided the room into two groups of six, and played three different questions per group for twenty-five minutes each. We documented the session with a large roll of paper, divided equally between the two groups, with one group writing on half of the sheet and the other group taking the other half. Participants who were speaking were not asked to write their thoughts with the markers but those next to them had to document some key comments. In this section, we present the responses from participants in both groups to the questions played.

Would Liberation Include a Palestinian Ruling Class?

In addressing this question, participants debated between working with the ruling class, reforming the working class, redistribution of wealth and wealth being taken back. Themes that were touched on included abolition, forms of governance and participation, accountability, and gender. The discussion led to further questions, such as: How do we encounter and confront the ruling class if we are concerned with democracy and democratic practices? What do we do with the people who do not want to change? Who governs the government? Who is held accountable? Participants referred to current political parties such as Hamas and the Palestinian Authority. For example, one participant wrote: “If Hamas were to [form a] government, would Palestinians want to live under their regime?” In another instance, participants identified how much influence the current Palestinian ruling class has on what happens on the ground.

What Radically Transformative Policies and Ideas Could Palestine Implement?

The questions introduced themes such as composting, policing, restorative justice, passports and borders, bureaucracy, the role of technology, resource distribution,

surveillance, gender, and patriarchy. The themes led to ideas around each of these, including curfew for men (which was challenged by participants), and then evolved into a conversation around abolishing the patriarchy and notions of masculinity and femininity, with interesting points a future Palestine could develop including a society that does not center gender identity or the adult. From this conversation, there were ideas proposed, including nonbinary bathrooms, sex education, all genders and expression, an inclusive healthcare and therapy system for all, the abolition of marriage, and questioning what happens to the nuclear family.

The theme of policing and borders revolved around challenging the police, methods of restorative justice, which led to exploring passports, and the role of bureaucracy. Participants asked if Palestine would be borderless and what the distribution of land and resources to everyone could look like, or the introduction of farming plots for neighborhoods, and if Palestine would have a military. The conversation then moved toward the sustainable design of cities with ideas proposed such as bike-friendly cities, free public transportation, a frequent flyer levy, bullet trains, cities with no cars, and zero-waste policies. Other discussions arose around freedom of speech in the press, mandatory civil service, and free education.

What Strategies Could a Liberated Palestine Put in Place to Address the Climate Emergency?

The participants discussed ideas of decolonization and decarbonization, connecting themes like control of resources, reparations, migrants, and refugees. The logistics of taking in refugees was discussed, specifically questions around health, personhood, and rights, but also if Palestine would send ships to bring refugees, and what materials they would bring to greet them upon arrival. There was a balance between participants thinking of solutions from a logical and material level and others from a decarbonization level. How can we ensure migrants are allowed in and live sustainably, and will Palestine become uninhabitable?, participants asked. Helping the land was a recurring idea with questions being debated like: Do we endow the land with personhood rights and what are the policy implications of doing so? Do we provide all living things in Palestine with personhood and legal protection?

The participants agreed that a future Palestine would draw on ideas from decolonial studies and decarbonization, where Palestine can become a leader in climate policies and technology. They discussed Israel's planting of non-native species (which are harmful and destructive), desalination, the use of technology (renewable and solar energy), the destruction of colonizing architecture, weapons, and the removal of trash (such as the debris of the apartheid wall and settlements). Militarism, as one participant highlighted, is responsible for 70 percent of global emissions and is a root cause of the global climate emergency.

Future thinking, however, quickly returned to a present context where participants discussed the role of BDS (Boycott, Divest, Sanctions), specifically if BDS can become a frontrunner of action against climate change and be an effective campaign in calling for the boycott of companies and corporations culpable for the most emissions. The conversation returned to the future with the recurring debate around Palestine's role as a destination for climate refugees: What if Palestine became a route for climate refugees

to access the Mediterranean? How can Palestine be an example for other countries—as a place to settle refugees making their way to Europe? This was followed by another participant asking if Palestine can become a plausible destination for people and provide them with access to a better life.

How Will Palestinian Society Remember and Commemorate Our Culture of Collective Resistance after Liberation?

This question induced participants to think through collectivity, the language(s) created to memorialize resistance, and how the historical role of resistance will function in everyday life “after liberation.” The big concepts held within the question are unpacked as the first step by participants: highlighting the word “collective” and putting “individual” as a way of re-addressing the question, picking apart and attempting to identify what will society be liberated from—capitalism? The themes of discourse and discourse formation, with group members deliberating if there should be an “official narrative” to the role of resistance, were weaved continuously throughout the conversation while considering the structures of narrative-building such as education, materiality, and how return could build a story “to tell our histories to build a nation for all.”

The question of space, and how space can be used to commemorate resistance, was prominent. Namely, the distinction between public and private spaces, and the ways in which they would hold space for remembering the resistance it took to return: Is it a commemoration to be held in both private and public spaces? Participants focused on materials and forms of remembering that are often absent and/or were



Figure 2.3 Countless Palestinian Futures game. Image by Danah Abdulla.

erased such as textbooks, memorials, and oral testimonies from older generations. Questions participants debated included: What do we teach in school that goes beyond the mainstream narrative? How do we get the older generation(s) to talk about the past? How do we include the diaspora as a relic of remembrance? Will there be a day dedicated to commemorating resistance? (Figure 2.3)

Not only were the materials of remembrance considered but participants unpacked the methodologies that will enable remembering to take place as participants navigated between thinking through non-extractive ways of remembering resistance and thinking through methods of commemorating resistance that would avoid replicating neoliberal state-building practices. In other words, the character, texture, and language of the space of a future return – and how what is remembered – will be agreed on collectively: Will a truth and reconciliation commission be institutionalized that collectively agrees on a discourse of resistance? Do we include the bad stories? What kind of language do we use to commemorate without perpetuating oppression? How do we avoid fetishizing resistance?

This was followed by questions that point to what happens to a society when it no longer has to resist and struggle: How and what do younger generations look forward to? In reclaiming history what sort of regime will exist after liberation? How do we show we have culture and destiny beyond the narrative of resistance? When we are no longer resisting, what will our identities be? How do we support the struggles that supported us?

How Would Palestine's Foreign Policy Enable and Advance the Freedom of Other Oppressed and Colonized Peoples?

Participants approached this question by exploring themes relating to governance, the functionality of foreign policy, the shape and form of sovereignty beyond the nation-state, and looking back at how foreign policy was historically created through Palestinian leadership.

Considering the future of foreign policy, participants first looked to the use of it: foreign policy as a form of making connections. Following this, the conversation moved toward the body from which foreign policy will be created and implemented and questioned potential ways of self-governing: Is it assumed that return will entail a state? If a state is not the agreed upon form of self-governing and exercising sovereignty, then how can foreign policy come out of grassroots organizing? What kind of movements form? What would making these connections look like without the nation-state?

Participants began thinking through how to build power within a nation without falling into the trap of a nation-state, and the civic actors that do not need formal institutions to implement foreign policy such as students. This thread of thinking brought into the conversation decentralized forms of making connections, namely how foreign policy in return should not entrench existing power models such as the Palestinian Authority. It also brought into account and cautionary thinking around forming connections with the IMF and World Bank, with participants noting self-governance should be sustainable and not rely on these institutions.

Establishing the necessity of sustainability implemented through foreign policy, participants moved toward thinking through how foreign policy as connection-making could help build that very sustainability and stability, such as methods to cultivating the land, environment and farming strategies, creating a trade system, economic resistance, looking at protection of minorities in a liberated Palestine, cultivation and protection of indigenous rights, and climate policy to safeguard Global South.

Foreign policy was discussed and thought through as a generative form of making transnational links where nation-state governance has failed, and by moving away from the state as the producer and embodiment of foreign policy creation. Participants then reoriented foreign policy as coming out of Global South links—making references to the non-aligned movement and how the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) crafted its foreign policy through links developed with the non-aligned movement—and connecting ideologies from a different world. The group repurposes the role of civic society within this framework as creators and generators of these foreign policy connections, moving Palestinians as co-producers and building stability in their connections rather than foreign policy being a top-down consolidated approach. This led to a few ideas of student exchange groups from allies such as Ireland to Palestine and supporting Palestinians who choose to remain in the diaspora.

What Would Be Done with the Apartheid Wall?

Participants addressed this question very directly at first by noting down “demolition party.” There was a playful aspect presented with suggestions to transform it into a maze, which weaved into more practical solutions around land ownership, who has a right to say what to do with the wall, public spaces, and transforming its uses toward care or tourism (e.g., rehabilitation or community centers, museum, public art). Participants moved between building structures and institutions that would stand as testimony to the Apartheid Wall’s history and what it accomplished and wanting to completely upheave the structure to create something that is new without forgetting the struggle. Suggestions included engraving names and stories, audio archives of crossing checkpoints, and creating a statue of liberty.

Once the moderator discovered that the responses were direct, participants were invited to think about the usage of material itself. This then developed into further ideas of what can be done with the material: using concrete to build education centers (such as a center for dismantling borders worldwide), building houses and community and art centers, theaters, or street furniture (which led to a discussion on the gendered nature of public spaces in Palestine), rebuilding homes for displaced Palestinians and those Palestinians who were originally from destroyed villages—where participants acknowledged the unintended consequences of mass housing—re-affirming roots (e.g., planting an olive tree grove orchard), and donating material to other countries. The conclusion of the session centered on the necessity of reimagining the apartheid wall without forgetting or denying the struggle that came before.

The responses had a series of recurring themes and ideas, but most noticeably, they demonstrated tensions and hesitation with participants imagining other possible worlds. Many responses were grounded in present-day realities, and only when

prompted did discussions move toward more radical forward-thinking propositions. For example, when discussing the question *would liberation include a Palestinian ruling class*, participants referred to the Palestinian Authority and Hamas, which signaled an inability to think of future political parties/alternative governance that could come into existence, where the thinking in addressing this question was grounded in the present. This was a big tension throughout the second group's responses and discussion during the session.

Similarly, in responding to *what radically transformative policies and ideas could Palestine implement*, participants debated the present role of the BDS movement, and when they moved to debate the role of Palestine in hosting climate refugees, they imagined Palestine as a route toward settling in Europe, where Europe was viewed as the space for a better way of life. Finally, in addressing *how would Palestine's foreign policy enable and advance the freedom of other oppressed and colonized peoples*, the responses demonstrated clear gaps in engaging the imagination. What is interesting is there is no mention of leadership, but instead they stressed the indigenous connection made through grassroots organizing and solidarity. It looked back historically at what had been done but what is absent is envisioning forward. The questions themselves produce more questions, and multiple relationships between the questions, which is a feature by design. This exercise shows that one of the goals of our game is to generate alternative questions that help drive and develop actions and different ways of thinking. As one participant put it, "It only just hit me how invigorating it was to imagine the complex and mundane aftermath of a liberated Palestine with other Palestinians."

Toward Imagined Return(s)

Palestine-Israel is often referred to as "complicated," or a wicked problem (problems with many interdependent factors making them seem impossible to solve). We believe that what solutions to Palestine lack is imagination. What we—as Palestinians—have is an inability to imagine beyond what is in front of us, beyond the damaging ideas and decisions set out by state governance institutions. Instead, we legitimize these institutions. Israel's constant settlement building and ethnic cleansing is not only destructive to Palestine's physical appearance but a politicide that fixes the Palestinian imagination. How can Palestinians utilize the ultimate human resource—imagination—to get what they want, to see real change, and take it back into their own hands?

Instead of using the power of imagination to confront situations in our own world and frame them in reality—real possibilities, real imagined futures—we tackle imaginary worlds. But even science fiction, as Fredric Jameson states, becomes a testament to our incapacity to imagine the future and to the limits placed on our political imagination.⁶ One only needs to look at the metaverse to understand how empty or innovative these images of the future are.

Projects such as Udna by Baladna (whose aim is to educate the youth about the Nakba and use 3D modeling to create actual models for return) and BADIL's "Putting the Right of Return into Practice" are important for visualizing return.⁷ However, they

remain within specific concepts of return—returning to something that was once, in a modern form, rather than what could be.

The effect of global governance organizations and the concept of international law in particular have shaped the Palestinian imaginary; it has hijacked the Palestinian imagination to think only within these strict definitions and ideas. In reflecting on action,⁸ trialing CPF illustrated how little people discussed practical questions about return, and seeing them on a card where the goal was not to produce a resolution but working through the question was a rare occurrence because Palestine is often confined to certain contexts and reserved for experts. Moreover, it demonstrated the power in presenting return differently—as something that you can create with other people—not as a solution to a problem but a realm of possibilities—possibilities that could materialize in the future. The concept of CPF is not to force people to be imaginative; rather it is an invitation to think about Palestine differently and in a way that considers return seriously. What happens beyond the statement of “Palestine will be free”? How will Palestine be free? We start to reckon with return as world-building through these questions, which then hopefully encourage us to learn more about things we did not know, incorporate new things into our works, and to possibly build networks that may then enact change. We hope CPF is a minor gesture in starting to think beyond what we already know, and to imagine changes that develop our thinking around return and the multiplicity of everyday life.⁹

The strengths of CPF are its open-endedness: it is different from the usual forms of engagement—not an awareness campaign, nor about collecting signatures, or attending a protest and posting on social media. It invites people to approach Palestine in a new way by bringing them together in dialogue and exchange. The groups themselves represent little microcosms of society—in the sense of seeing how people’s professional and life experience informs how they approach the questions differently. Another strength is how the questions present a lot of nuance and connections, leading to further questions that start to stimulate people’s imaginations and how they begin to draw off others. But CPF is also challenging because it is not designed to be outcome based. Our idea around the duration, or outcome or continuity of the game, is that the CPF session will end, but with this there is some sort of ongoing conversation. In many ways that solidifies the idea of imagination.

Why do we play games? What do we get out of them? What is produced? In a way, CPF is something to enjoy with friends by engaging in a good discussion. While some participants suggested providing a reward at the end of each iteration to entice people, we think the reward is in playing a game that opens your mind to new possibilities. And in many ways, this goes back to that question: What does it look like to produce Palestine? As a place that is not only under erasure but also as people who are not there.

Notes

- 1 Ghadi Karmi, *Return: A Palestinian Memoir* (London: Verso, 2015).
- 2 Salman Abu Sitta, *Mapping My Return: A Palestinian Memoir* (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2017).

- 3 Ghassan Kanafani, *Palestine's Children: Returning to Haifa and Other Stories*, trans. Barbara Harlow and Karen E. Riley (London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2000), 150.
- 4 Arturo Escobar, *Designs for the Pluriverse: Radical Interdependence, Autonomy, and the Making of Worlds* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018), 2.
- 5 Umberto Eco, *The Open Work* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989).
- 6 F. Jameson, "Progress versus Utopia; Or, Can We Imagine the Future? (Progrès contre Utopie, ou: Pouvons-nous imaginer l'avenir)," *Science Fiction Studies* 9, no. 2 (1982): 147–58.
- 7 BADIL, "Papers of Palestinian Youth Conference Right of Return: Towards a Practical Approach," in Papers of Palestinian Youth Conference Right of Return: Towards a Practical Approach (Palestine: BADIL, 2019). <https://www.badil.org/phocadownloadpap/badil-new/publications/research/in-focus/RoR-Conf-Papers-2019-en.pdf>.
- 8 Donald Schön, *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action* (London: Routledge, 2017).
- 9 Danah Abdulla and Pedro Vieira Di Oliviera, "The Case for Minor Gestures," *Diseña* 22 (2023).