

Walk 2: Kajbar, 3 March 2017

Georeference: 19°56'52.9" N 30°32'33.2" E ([geo:19.948033,30.542550](https://www.geoapi.com/geo/19.948033,30.542550))

E – Enrico Ille



I had left the house of Fāris and descended with Yāsir and Fāris's brother Abd al-Şamad to the agricultural area between the settlement and the Nile. The interview had left me ponderous and I lagged behind the other two, took photos and reflected on what had been said. The following is a reflection on this reflection, triggered by photos and the memories they elicit.

1. 17:32:00, N19° 56.882' E30° 32.553'



From the first images, an impression crept up on me that there was something regained and something confirmed here. The blossoming ‘ushar (*Calotropis procera*), for instance, had become for me a symbol of abandoned land, a sign how I had adopted the farmers’ notion of ‘uncultivated’ as ‘uncleaned’, ‘dirty’, a notion that rubbed against the plant’s beauty – or rather beautifully arranged blossoms sitting on jumbled branches – but also against the breach of dichotomies – nature/culture, for instance – that I nurtured. The ‘wild’ tomato, growing opportunistically rather than planted next to it, seemed to correspond. And finally, the dry, uncut leaves hanging over the slight signs of burns at the date palm’s trunk behind both gave the arrangement an almost programmatic, pre-arranged character: a result of humans’ ‘negligence’, fuel to the fires.

2. 17:32:16, N19° 56.881' E30° 32.551'



There was a profound question at hand here: whatever the specific cause of the fires, what was actually lost? As we had dealt with circumstantial arguments, there was interpretative room on both ends of the chain of causality: if there was a political intention behind it, was it in any way ‘useful’ in the sense of the damage it was purported to cause? I was fixed on the issue of numbers already then: the statistical arguments were all about absolute numbers, with date palms as binary unit – damaged/undamaged. But I found date palms in numerous different states, some slightly burnt, some halfly burnt, some burnt along the whole trunk but regrowing their leaves, some carrying new dates already in the season after the fires.

[see next walk for more details on these variations]

3. 17:33:06, N19° 56.873' E30° 32.537



But not just that, there was a lively though slightly bent landscape here, fresh green sprouting next to the ribbed rods.

4. 17:33:32, N19° 56.869' E30° 32.531'



New palms had been planted inside walled-off basins that channeled water in their direction.

5. 17:36:36, N19° 56.844' E30° 32.516'



Others grew stubbornly out of seeds where they had fallen, unconcerned by human intentions of placement and displacement.

6. 17:38:12, N19° 56.832' E30° 32.501'



Was this co-presence of the intended and the unintended, the deceased and the growing, the arranged and the opportune, was it the mark of a scarred landscape or a natural state or an instance of both in tension?

7. 17:41:26, N19° 56.806' E30° 32.465'



What meandered through the grass was, after all, an instrument of continuing diversion of water from the Nile to the fields. But Fâris had pointed out that the dams had interrupted a natural rhythm of seasonal flooding by permanent flooding, turning easiness of watering plants into a constant effort of pumping.

8. 17:42:50, N19° 56.777' E30° 32.443'



And weren't the empty spaces between the palms – on plantations a sign of proper spacing – here also a reminder of what wasn't there anymore?

9. 17:46:02, N19° 56.738' E30° 32.403'



What kind of socializing had thus remained on this coastal strip – where old trunks were still converted into ashes by fire to heat food and water, to make and drink tea.

10. 17:47:18, N19° 56.713' E30° 32.377'



Overall, my relativism was soothed: there were so many different responses to what had happened, some turning to rebirth and recreation, ...

11. 17:50:50, N19° 56.659' E30° 32.309'



... others leaving the empty holes of uprooted palms like a battlefield *lieu de mémoire*, a desperate reminder where destruction had struck. In a sense, the phases of a phoenix' life were inscribed here across different spaces.

12. 17:54:24, N19° 56.624' E30° 32.238'



So traces of disappearance – especially from other forms of destruction, as termite damage here
– also implicitly invite to ask what had sustained that which then appeared to have been lost.

13. 18:01:28, N19° 56.529' E30° 32.121'



And whose presence sustained – or ceased to do so?

14. 18:14:20, N19° 56.362' E30° 31.861'



Moving away from the heart of the firestorm, the landscape thickens, drawing life and death, the standing and the fallen, ever closer together.

15. 18:15:46, N19° 56.353' E30° 31.843'



The fire thinned something out, whether fuelling or causing, contradicting or following an ongoing process. In any case, it laid bare a line, or actually the blurriness of a line, between the coastal strip's identity as (ultimately man-co- constructed) forest and its agri-/horticultural function. It can easily be felt how this corresponds to other lines, many of which are existential: the protruding line of the desert, the receding line of the river, the offensive line of resource exploitation. A constriction of the fate of both, the forest and the dweller, becomes conceivable.