

By Elias  
Tannira

## TAREK BAKRI

**I**T engineer and researcher Tarek Bakri is most famous for his project *We Were and Still Are ... Here* that documents Palestine and disproves the Israeli narrative that Palestine was formerly an empty land without a people. Initiated eight years ago, the project compares photos of old Palestinian homes sent by families who lived in these houses prior to 1948, with current photos of these buildings from the same angle taken by Tarek. Some of these houses are now occupied by Israelis. Since then, the project has grown from a one-man show into a group effort that, beyond photographs, produces mini-documentaries in which Tarek brings Palestinians who live in the diaspora back to historical Palestine to show them their villages of origin. In addition, Sawsan Quaod, with a production team from *Al Jazeera Documentary*, created the film *Guardian of Memory* that explores Tarek's initiative. In the film, he brings back generations of Palestinians who live in the diaspora to see the houses and villages that their ancestors had lived in.



The idea for this project occurred to him by coincidence. Studying computer engineering at Al-Ahliyya Amman University in Jordan, he met many Palestinians who live abroad and have never visited Palestine, many of them not being allowed to enter the country. Being a Jerusalemite gives Tarek access to visit historical Palestine. So he would send his friends pictures to connect them with their homeland. After he graduated, such visits became more regular, some of them to villages that were ethnically cleansed during the *Nakba*. If Tarek knew someone from these villages, he would video-call that person from the location and send pictures.

Many of these villages are mere ruins today, some of them barely showing any traces of their former habitation. To find them, Tarek depends on history books and recordings by historians as well

as stories from members of the older generation. He explains that by relying on such sources, one can locate any village and adds: "Certain marks, such as stone chains and cactus, generally indicate that an old Palestinian village once stood there."

Tarek feels a responsibility to continue with this project to create a bridge that connects Palestinians of all ages and places with their homeland. He also considers it a way to preserve Palestinian identity and raise awareness. "By holding on to what we have, we tell the whole world that we were and still are here."

Tarek is the recipient of the 2018 Jerusalem Award for Culture and Creativity and has held several exhibitions and seminars in Palestine, the Arab World, and Europe.

*To learn more about Tarek's project and/or to get involved, contact him at [tarek@youad.org](mailto:tarek@youad.org).*

