

Hashtag Palestine: Palestinian Social Media Activity during 2015

7amleh – Arab Center for Social
Media Advancement

Editors' Note: In March 2016, 7amleh – Arab Center for Social Media Advancement issued the report “#Palestine: Palestinian Social Media Activity during 2015,” written by Hanadi Qawasmī and Dalia Othman. What appears here is a lightly edited excerpt from the report, including its introduction and the third chapter, reproduced here with permission. The full report is available online at www.7amleh.org/en/article/62 (in English) or www.7amleh.org/ar/article/61 (in Arabic).

In the “Hashtag Palestine” report, 7amleh¹ presents Palestinian social media activity during 2015. In the first chapter, we present statistics on internet and social media usage by Palestinians in both the ‘48 and ‘67 areas. In the second chapter, the report outlines the most prominent Palestinian social media activities and campaigns, highlighting their topics and the influence of political events on them. In the third and final chapter, the report deals with the concept of digital rights and the right to internet access, as well as the arrests of Palestinians on the grounds of their Facebook posts.

When speaking of the ‘48 and ‘67 areas, we acknowledge different areas of Palestinian residence and their particular statuses vis-à-vis Israel. In other words, this report deals with two groups of Palestinians that live under Israel’s direct rule, thus excluding the majority of Palestinians worldwide, namely the Palestinian refugees. Palestinian citizens of Israel live in the areas occupied in 1948: present day Israel. Palestinians living in the territory occupied in 1967 (the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, and the Gaza Strip) live under military rule (with the exception of the Jerusalemites who have residency status). These divisions are the product of a process of dispersal and fragmentation since the Nakba of 1948. Today, social media has made it possible for Palestinians, wherever they may reside, to defy these divisions by connecting with one another, and sharing each other’s struggles. For this reason, it was important for 7amleh to cover these regions as a single unit (historic Palestine), despite difficulties in data collection. Palestinian refugees are not covered in this report, due to their geographic dispersion

and the lack of sufficient data on their communications and social media usage.

Palestinians of the '48 areas hold Israeli citizenship, and receive all communication services from Israeli service providers. Palestinians in the '67 areas are further divided into three groups – those living in the West Bank, those living in the Gaza Strip, and those living in East Jerusalem. The first group holds Palestinian Authority identification cards and receives most communication services from Palestinian telecommunication companies. Some, however, receive services from Israeli companies, as a result of the West Bank's economic dependency on the Israel's economy. Palestinians in the Gaza Strip also hold Palestinian Authority identification cards and receive their communication services from different Palestinian companies. However, Palestinians in the Gaza Strip live under the jurisdiction of the Hamas government and are therefore restricted by its regulations in regards to communications. Palestinians in East Jerusalem receive all communication services from Israeli companies, since the city was annexed to Israel in 1981 and they were given Israeli residency. Nevertheless, according to international law, East Jerusalem is an occupied territory and should be under Palestinian control.

The significance of this report lies in its attempt to survey the most prominent issues in Palestinian social media activity during 2015. Moreover, the report deals with the digital rights violations of Palestinian social media users, especially in relation to the right to internet access. It also provides additional information on the arrests of Palestinian internet users during 2015 for their digital activity.

This report is part of a wider vision, which values the significance of ensuring the right to access information, freedom of expression, and the right to internet access. In accordance with this vision, this report looks at Palestinian electronic and social media campaigns (on Facebook, for example) as an expression of the need to publicize opinions across these platforms – a need which is usually amplified when people feel that their voices are being silenced and their stories are being told by others.

Digital Violations in Palestine

This chapter [chapter three in the original report] addresses digital rights violations committed against Palestinians throughout historic Palestine. These violations are highlighted by the arrest of Palestinians for their activity on social media. The chapter will also address notable stories and events that occurred throughout 2015, significant to violations on digital rights.

Digital rights – guaranteeing the right to internet access, the right to safe and open networks, and the right to create content and publish it on social media – are recognized as consistent with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Digital rights also guarantee the right to privacy and freedom from surveillance, as well as freedom of expression on digital platforms. These rights are the foundation of digital connectivity and communication.²

Arrests Because of Social Media Activity

The year 2015 witnessed a surge in arrests based on social media activity throughout historic Palestine. The arrests include those committed by Israelis, the Palestinian Authority, and Hamas. It is worth noting that since October and the start of the popular uprising, the number of arrests conducted by Israel based on social media activity has more than doubled. Between October 2015 and January 2016, the number of Palestinians arrested by Israel on the basis of “incitement through social media” reached 150.³ The Jerusalem Committee for the Families of Prisoners has recorded at least 45 arrests of residents of Jerusalem based on posts on Facebook in 2015 alone. Most of those who have been arrested and charged with “incitement through social media” have received sentences of 11 to 12 months.⁴ One example of the longer sentences is that of the prisoner ‘Uday al-Bayumi from Jerusalem, who was arrested in 2014 and sentenced to 12 months in 2015 for the content of Facebook posts.

Those detained also include administrative detainees who are held for months at a time without trial. To this day, there is no legislation detailing any legal actions that can be taken against an individual under the pretense of incitement through social media. The fact that there is no legal framework becomes even more obvious when one studies the cases and realizes how arbitrary they are. Some Palestinians were held under administrative detention without any evidence being released, though it was indicated to them during the interrogation that the arrest was linked to social media. In other cases, Palestinians are charged based on the number of shares and likes and the prominence of their Facebook posts.⁵ It is thus becoming clear that, in many cases, the Israeli government is stretching the definition of “incitement” with the mere goal of suppressing activist voices and political opponents.

The absence of a legal framework regarding social media activity is cause for significant concern. As more Palestinians rely on social media to report and communicate with other Palestinians, their actions may be deemed dangerous by Israel simply based on their nationality.⁶ It is worth noting that Palestinians living in the West Bank are tried under military rule, whereas Palestinians who carry Israeli citizenships are tried under Israeli criminal law.

The following is a survey of the most notable arrest cases during 2015.

Arrests by Israel

Name: Tamara Abu Laban

Age: 15

Gender: Female

City: Jerusalem

Date of Arrest: 5 November 2015

Circumstances: In November, the Israeli military arrested fifteen-year-old Tamara Abu Laban based on a one-word post on her Facebook profile. Abu Laban posted the word “forgive me” and was arrested under the pretense of incitement on Facebook. Tamara was held for a few hours before being released, as her post was personally driven and not political.

Name: Asma' Hamdan

Age: 19

Gender: Female

City: Nazareth

Date of Arrest: 5 October 2015

Circumstances: Asma' Hamdan was requested to present herself to the Israeli intelligence headquarters in Nazareth. Once present, Asma' was interrogated for five hours, then held for ten days, and eventually transferred to three months of administrative detention. Her interrogation centered around poetry she had posted on her Facebook profile.

Name: Darin Tatur

Age: 33

Gender: Female

City: al-Rayna

Date of Arrest: 10 October 2015

Circumstances: On 2 November 2015, the poet Darin Tatur was charged with a list of charges that include "incitement of violence, and supporting terrorist groups through Facebook." Evidence showed that Tatur had posted images of martyrs on her Facebook page and videos of the martyrs with her voice in the background reading her poetry.⁷

Name: Dunya Muslih

Age: 19

Gender: Female

City: Bethlehem

Date of Arrest: 15 November 2015

Circumstances: Dunya Muslih, a university student, was arrested from her house in the late hours of 15 November and charged with incitement using social media. The Israeli courts charged her with three different counts: (1) Posting images of martyrs, (2) posting an image of a protester accompanied with a poem, and (3) posting an image of a martyr accompanied with text.

Name: Tariq Barghuti

Age: 40

Gender: Male

City: Jerusalem

Date of Arrest: 1 December 2015

Circumstances: The lawyer Tariq Barghuti who works as a legal advisor for a number of Palestinian detainees was requested to present himself to the Israeli intelligence headquarters. He was held and interrogated for hours and then held for 24 hours until his court hearing. He was held based on "incitement on social media," his bail was set at 5,000 shekels (\$1,400) and was denied the use of his Facebook page for three days.

The arrests listed above occurred after the start of the popular uprising in October; however, there were a number of arrests conducted prior to the uprising, which indicates an increased pattern by Israeli authorities. Other notable arrests that happened prior to October include:

Name: 'Umar Shalabi

Age: 44

Gender: Male

City: al-'Ayzariyya, Jerusalem,

Date of Arrest: May 2015

Circumstances: On 12 May 2015, an Israeli court sentenced 'Umar Shalabi to nine months for "incitement on social media."⁸ This was the first instance where a Palestinian was charged by an Israeli court based on social media activity, and particularly posts on Facebook.⁹ It must be noted, however, that there is no legal framework according to Israeli law or in the military rule implemented in the West Bank and Gaza that addresses the issue of incitement via social media.

Arrests by the Palestinian Authority

In addition to Israel, the Palestinian Authority and Hamas also arrested multiple people for their activities on social media. One notable case was that of Bara' al-Qadi,¹⁰ a media student at Birzeit University who was held in January after a number of previous arrests.

Name: Bara' al-Qadi

Age: 23

Gender: Male

City: Ramallah

Date of Arrest: 23 January 2015

Circumstances: Bara' al-Qadi, a media student at Birzeit University and the head of its media club, was requested to present himself to the police headquarters in Ramallah on 23 January.¹¹ He was held and interrogated for over 48 hours regarding a sarcastic post about the Palestinian Authority he had posted on Facebook. The post itself mocked both the head of intelligence and senior Fatah official Jibril Rajub. This was not the first time al-Qadi was arrested; he was previously arrested in 2014 and charged with defamation of the Palestinian Authority on social media.

Name: Ahmad al-Dik

Age: 23

Gender: Male

City: Kafr al-Dik

Date of Arrest: 3 July 2015

Circumstances: Palestinian university student Ahmad al-Dik was summoned to the authorities on 5 July after posting a critical

statement about local authorities on his Facebook page.¹² Al-Dik was detained for five days. He is currently suing the Palestinian Authority for torture conducted throughout his detention, and the two officers that beat him are being put on trial.

Arrests by Hamas

There is little public information about arrests conducted by Hamas in Gaza over social media, however, it is estimated that at least five people were arrested based on their social media posts. One of the notable cases was the arrest of journalist Mushira al-Hajj.

Name: Mushira al-Hajj

Age: 28

Gender: Female

City: Gaza

Date of Arrest: 5 August 2016

Circumstances: The journalist Mushira al-Hajj, who works for a number of local media outlets in the Gaza Strip, had published a damning report against the ministry of health in Gaza and had posted the story on Facebook. Months later, the Hamas police arrested and held al-Hajj for at least 48 hours, interrogating her on the report and the Facebook posts.¹³

Notable Stories of 2015

The year 2015 also saw an aggressive campaign by Israel to censor online content. During the final months of the year, the Israeli government on a number of occasions contacted large online platforms such as Facebook and Google to remove content it claims to incite violence.¹⁴ In one occasion, Hamas declared that its YouTube video channel was taken down based upon the request of the Israeli foreign ministry.¹⁵

In November, the Israeli foreign ministry issued a press release declaring that they met with the CEO of YouTube and had agreed to collaborate together and develop a mechanism that would monitor content posted on YouTube.¹⁶ However, Google denied these reports a few days after the press release was published.¹⁷

In August 2015, Mada Palestinian Center for Development and Media Freedom conducted an awareness campaign with aim to raise awareness about digital rights in Palestine and the importance of freedom of expression and Palestinians' right to access the internet.¹⁸ The campaign also launched the hashtag #لازم يطير, meaning "it must fly."

Finally, on a positive note, after years of blocking Palestinian access to 3G wireless networks, the Israeli government announced in the fall that they would allow Palestine to have access to 3G.¹⁹ Palestine is one of the last countries to have access to 3G technology after years of Israeli restrictions. It is unclear why Israel is now allowing Palestinians to evolve beyond 2G, especially since it is easier to keep track of users

via 2G technology;²⁰ however, it is assumed that this change is related to the popular uprising that erupted in September.

Summary

In this report, we have presented the most notable events related to internet and social media usage throughout historic Palestine during the year 2015, whether they are related to the arrest of Palestinians on grounds of their Facebook posts, or to the media campaigns launched on social media.

It is clear that since the eruption of the popular uprising in September of 2015, there has been a rise in the number of those arrested by the Israeli security forces, on grounds of their Facebook posts. This meant accusing those whose posts carry political opinions that can be interpreted according to the Israeli security outlook, of “incitement” on Facebook, even if these posts were phrases or general statements, without a clear and precise meaning. It seems that the Israeli authorities have resorted to these widespread arrests in an attempt to repress the popular uprising, prevent Palestinians from expressing their opinions, and spread a culture of fear and worry over any post shared with friends on Facebook, even if it has an informative message.

On the other hand, as indicated in the second chapter, the Palestinians’ activity in expressing their opinions and highlighting the details of their lives under the occupation through social media, is apparent and widespread compared to previous years. This is apparent through the large numbers of electronic campaigns on these social media networks, which usually relate to the occupation authorities’ policies and the Palestinian national cause. This activity naturally increases with the increase of Israeli attacks against Palestinians and their sacred locations, which was the case during 2015, in which social media platforms became a space for the exchange of videos and photos documenting the arrest, injuring, or killing of many Palestinians.

At the end of this report, we emphasize the importance of seriously working to guarantee the right to internet access amongst the different sectors of Palestinian society, including providing third generation (3G) services, and lowering the cost of connecting to the internet in the ‘67 areas. Additionally, legal organizations need to follow up on the cases of Palestinians arrested on the grounds of “incitement” on social media, as per Israeli terminology, as well as raise awareness on the safe ways to use the internet, especially in light of the Israeli intelligence social media campaigns, which rose after the eruption of the most recent popular uprising. Furthermore, we demand the termination of these policies of silencing and oppressing of the right to freedom of expression, as well as the termination of the political security prosecutions of Palestinian activists, journalists, or other users of social media, throughout historic Palestine.

Endnotes

- 1 ʿamleh is pronounced *hamleh*, which means “campaign” in Arabic.
- 2 Association for Progressive Communications, “Internet Rights Charter,” November 2006, online at www.apc.org/node/5677 (accessed 14 October 2016).
- 3 Interview with Addameer, Prisoner Support and Human Rights Association, 28 January 2016.
- 4 Interview with Amjad Abu Assab, director of Jerusalem Committee for the Family of Prisoners, 29 February 2016.
- 5 Interview with Addameer, 28 January 2016
- 6 John Brown and Noam Rotem, “Imprisoned for Incitement on Facebook? Only if You’re Arab,” *+972 Blog*, 10 July 2015, online at 972mag.com/imprisoned-for-incitement-on-facebook-only-if-youre-arab/108720/ (accessed 14 October 2016).
- 7 Qasim Bakri, “al-Rayna: ittiham al-sha‘ira Darin Tatur bi-l-tahridh ‘ala al-‘unf” [al-Rayna: Poet Darin Tatur Accused of Incitement to Violence], *Arab48*, 2 November 2015, online at bit.ly/1KN0F0A (accessed 14 October 2016).
- 8 Patrick Strickland, “Israel Jails Palestinians for Facebook Comments,” *al-Jazeera*, 23 May 2015, online at www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/05/israel-jails-palestinians-facebook-comments-150521082135363.html (accessed 14 October 2016).
- 9 Marissa Newman, “In First, Palestinian Official Jailed for Facebook Posts,” *Times of Israel*, 12 May 2015, online at www.timesofisrael.com/in-first-palestinian-official-jailed-for-facebook-posts/ (accessed 14 October 2016).
- 10 Patrick Strickland, “Palestinian Authority Arrests Student for Lampooning Sports Official on Facebook,” *Electronic Intifada*, 29 January 2015, online at electronicintifada.net/blogs/patrick-strickland/palestinian-authority-arrests-student-lampooning-sports-official-facebook (accessed 14 October 2016).
- 11 Alex Kane, “The Palestinian Authority’s War on Facebook Dissent,” *al-Jazeera*, 15 November 2015, online at www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/11/palestinian-authority-war-facebook-dissent-151114105846783.html (accessed 14 October 2016); Strickland, “Palestinian Authority.”
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- 14 Maayan Lubell, “Israel Says Facebook, YouTube Videos Encouraging Palestinian Attacks,” *Reuters*, 8 October 2015, online at www.reuters.com/article/uk-israel-palestinians-socialmedia-idUKKCN0S21JW20151008?irpc=932 (accessed 14 October 2016).
- 15 “ Hamas Says YouTube Shuts Down Channel upon Israeli Foreign Ministry Request,” *Jerusalem Post*, 10 November 2015, online at www.jpost.com/Arab-Israeli-Conflict/Hamas-says-YouTube-shuts-down-channel-upon-Israeli-Foreign-Ministry-request-422598 (accessed 14 October 2016).
- 16 “ Israel Meets with Google and YouTube to Discuss Censoring Palestinian Videos,” *Middle East Monitor*, 25 November 2015, online at www.middleeastmonitor.com/news/middle-east/22471-israel-meets-with-google-and-youtube-to-discuss-censoring-palestinian-videos (accessed 14 October 2016).
- 17 Agence France-Presse, “Google Denies Agreement to Monitor Anti-Israel Videos,” *Times of Israel*, 1 December 2015, online at www.timesofisrael.com/google-denies-agreement-to-monitor-anti-israel-videos/ (accessed 14 October 2016).
- 18 Mada Palestinian Center for Development and Media Freedoms, *MADA Center Launched a Digital Rights Campaign in Palestine*, 27 August 2015, online at www.madacenter.org/news.php?lang=1&id=209 (accessed 14 October 2016).
- 19 Gideon Lichfield, “Israel Is Finally Allowing Palestine to Have 3G,” *Quartz*, 19 November 2015, online at qz.com/554746/israel-is-finally-allowing-palestine-to-have-3g/ (accessed 14 October 2016).
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