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Cyber Intifada and Palestinian Identity

MIRIYAM AOURAGH

The forced displacement in 1948 and the occupation of the West Bank and Gaza in 1967 resulted in one of the most complex and largest refugee problems. Over 50 per cent of the approximately eight million Palestinians live in exile and 70 per cent of the total comprises refugees. After 9/11, while all attention focused on Kabul and Baghdad, the Israeli government seized the opportunity to break the second Intifada and marginalize the Palestinian National Authority (PNA).

Violence, closures, and curfews aim to undermine the desire for a 'Palestinian National community'. Yet, through 'virtual' interactions, a transnational virtual Palestinian community – and thereby identity – is now in the process of (re)construction. What it means to be a Palestinian is addressed and produced through online practices. Palestinians around the world communicate directly with each other, something not imaginable during the first Intifada (1987–1993), or before the so-called Oslo peace process when Israel even controlled the postal services. Today, family members commemorate martyrs by Internet distribution and create their own sites to find lost relatives or display their community/family history. But what are the possibilities and limitations of the Net in facilitating the imagination of a transnational Palestinian nation, while also functioning as a tool for political mobilization?

Internet is a relatively new phenomenon in anthropological research. Basically labelled as 'cyberspaces', 'online worlds', 'Internet communities', perhaps the best way to conceptualize these groupings is to think of the Internet as a communication medium whereby 'space' is a social construct, evaluated through the meanings conferred to it, yet constantly referring to a particular territorial 'place'. In a globalized 'information age' we find a greater diversification of alternative voices in the public media. One assumption in current debates is that the nation-state no longer features as the privileged space for the imagination of identity. Palestine offers exciting examples of Computer Mediated Community (CMC) styles. Even though the nation-state concept is weakening, the particular situation of Palestinians evokes precisely the strong drive for an independent state and self-identification with a na-

The imposition of often extreme restrictions and the daily use of violence have severely affected Palestinian society. Numerous curfews and roadblocks prevent people from visiting relatives and friends, and from travelling for work or education. As a result of the 'real' disruption of their lives, an increasing number of Palestinians compensate their loss of freedom by 'virtual' mobility on the Internet. In doing so, they reconstruct the notion of a transnational Palestinian community and identity.

tion – especially since their identity is consistently contested. Here public symbols representing national independence are, for example, the Palestine Broadcast Corporation (PBC), the transmission mast (dating from the Mandate period), the headquarters of the Palestinian National Authority, and the main Internet provider (PalNet). In January 2002, the IDF blew up the newly built and operating offices of Palestinian television/PBC. In April 2002, as part of Operation Defensive

Shield, troops destroyed Palestinian radio stations and bombed the transmission mast. With the shutdown of PalNet's power source in July 2002, Palestinians were temporarily unable to go online. However, according to ISP (Internet Service Providers) the number of users of PalNet registered a growth from 3 per cent in 2000 to a current 8 per cent.

Stories collected amongst refugees in Lebanon and Palestine clearly express a sense of isolation and suffering. All interviews, drawings, posters, discussions, and songs depict an agonizing spirit, and hopes of returning to the homeland abound. One way of dealing with this is through strengthening personal ties via the Internet. Though music, lifestyle, and romance are favourite topics, current politics are dominating the style and discourse on the Net more than anything else.

Alternative images

Analysing the impact on Palestinian lives of the current political situation, two words will certainly come up: closure and curfew. They have given space, place, and time different meanings. Internet access became an alternative for a society being crippled figuratively and literally. Chat rooms, websites, and mailing lists provide the infrastructure for a Palestine represented in a cyber world, reaching even Palestinians in the diaspora who do not have access to Internet since appeals, communiqués, and images can be printed from the Net, reproduced, and circulated on university, mosque, or café walls. For example, historical pictures from before 1948, those of the 1948 and 1967 exoduses, and pictures of the second Intifada are amongst the most downloaded and forwarded images. The first two sources articulate a certain nostalgia and mourning, while the latter express resistance, and hope.

Interwoven in all the texts and images produced on the Net are re-articulations of meanings about Palestinian culture, history, and identity. One immediately notices that self and group identity of Palestinians (inside and outside) is a very important subject. This is especially seen on refugee camp websites that were set up to find a solution to the physical return of the Palestinian diaspora to the homeland. By recognizing the impossibility of movement from the diaspora to the Palestinian territories, mailing lists also constitute important means of opening up discussions between individuals from distant places in a cost-effective manner. The discussions range from scientific to social, political, and cultural issues, like the eventual return to the homeland or mismanagement of the PNA. A good example of Internet projects is the Across Borders Project, which links different refugee camps with each other. Interaction between Palestinians from Dheisha refugee camp in Bethlehem with Sabra/Shatila refugee camp in Lebanon, and Jalazone refugee camp in Ramallah with Palestinians in Sydney, Australia, are revolutionary examples.

Muslim activists actively use the Internet in many ways. Islamic groups never officially discouraged using the Internet. Palestine-info, hosting Islamic-related Palestinian political movements like Hamas, is one of the most important examples of eagerness amongst religious parties to push their info through the Net. Yet these popular groups

Electronic Intifada website, May2003.



HTTP://ELECTRONICINTIFADA.NET/THEMEDIA/INDEX.SHTML

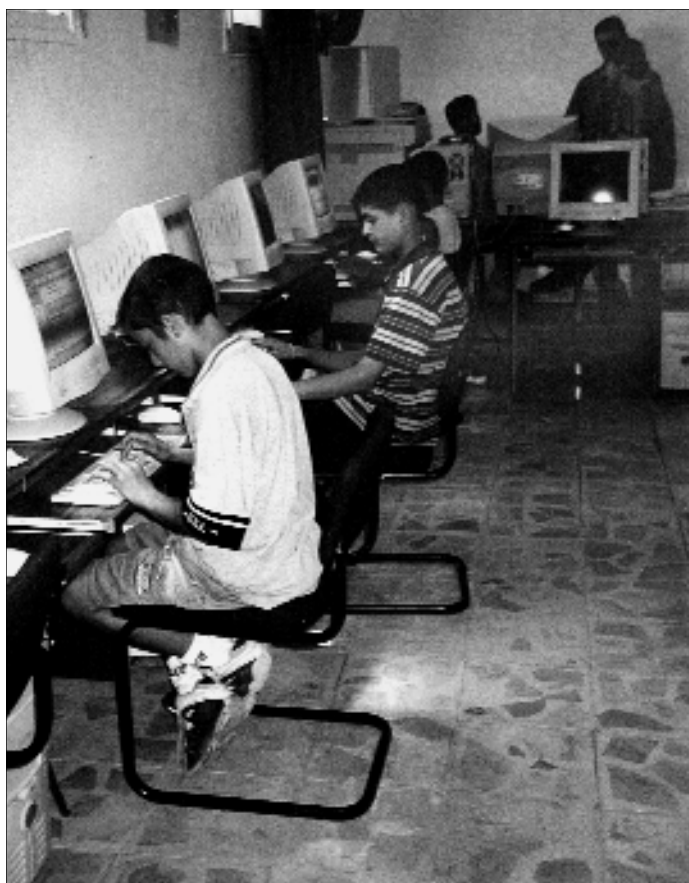


PHOTO: MIRIYAM AOURAGH

Youths in a Palestinian camp corresponding via Internet with youths in a Lebanese camp.

may find themselves isolated in a cyber public sphere. It is striking to find that Hamas and Hezbollah, or even the Marxist PFLP and DFLP, are rarely mentioned or linked on (pro-)Palestinian websites. The reason is not always political disagreement with these 'radical movements'. Often it is the fear of losing (potential) credibility and resources when associated with these 'unwanted' groups.

But religious motivations and preferences also influence the use and development of Internet. Some perceive it as a 'new' phenomenon to be controlled and channelled. At the only Internet café in a South Lebanese camp near Saida (a stronghold of Islamic parties) all computers had mirrors on the wall behind the users so the owner could see what was being viewed online, and a curtain fully separated female from male costumers. For some critics this was an example of religiously motivated censorship; for others it actually created practical opportunities, in particular for women and girls to (be allowed to) participate in a public sphere.

Grassroots capacity of the Net

Political messages and other aims expressed through the Internet take place on local and global levels. Apart from the 'global'-based sites like Electronic Intifada,¹ the number of Palestinian 'diasporic' and locally based sites, discussion lists, and projects are strikingly active. At the same time it is important to note that the PNA does not even have the technical/political ability to control Palestinians' Internet usage. Internet proves that control cannot be absolute, making it a blessing and a curse. In other words, the grassroots capacity of the Net endows it with a political significance; it injects democratic participation into otherwise oppressive societies. The fact is also that cyber space is not an occupied territory and cannot be sealed by Israeli tanks and checkpoints (as yet). Al-Jazeera's live shots of the killing of the Palestinian child Muhamed al-Dura were immediately spread on Internet and became a symbol of the Intifada; the BBC's footage of the Jenin market killings of Palestinian children by Israeli tanks in June travelled faster than imaginable through news groups, hyperlinks, and listserves.

Apart from all the online e-mailing, chatting, printing, downloading, writing, mobilizing, surfing, and even Net phoning, the Internet café became also an offline place where people meet, exchange news, receive messages, drink coffee, or just wait and look around. It is actually a smart, or rather 'safe', public place because it is not really a 'café' (in the negative sense it has in Arab society). For most parents it is acceptable to let sons and daughters spend hours in an Internet café for study

purposes – although of course the other social activities are part of such outings. The Internet café provides secrecy, anonymity, and even a space that can be a meeting point for political factions to motivate their ideology or ideas through specific sites or computer software.

It cannot be overstated how important the social impact of Internet is when physical contact is impossible. When the Across Borders Project started in 1999 it was with the aim of providing the Palestinian community 'access to a worldwide audience where their views can be expressed, and assist the refugee community in the process of family reunification' by linking the approximately 50 refugee camps scattered throughout the Middle East.² It became obvious that the Palestine-Israeli-American conflict was not just a military war; it was also a media war. Organizations and activists were forced to regroup and rethink their tactics. Web design companies were even offering free services in order to increase Palestinian presence on the web. Local and international Palestinian Internet projects, presenting features and eyewitness reports mushroomed and became serious alternatives to mainstream media. These activist groups and projects have in common that they approach and mainly target the international world/Western audience and almost solely work online. The website statistics report of the *Palestine Monitor* in August 2002 showed that the site had been visited more than one million times. In September the most active day of the month was 20 September, right after the attack on Arafat's headquarters.

Escaping their depressive state of isolation, travelling to friends or family in Palestine or in other countries via the Internet gives a sense of freedom. At the same time it empowers the people to participate in the political fight and Intifada by live confrontations with (pro-)Israelis on the Net, or by playing cyber games. In this 'cyber Intifada' pro-Israel and pro-Palestinian groups attack and sabotage each other with viruses and hackings. As one Palestinian web-user in Lebanon said: 'When I watch the news on television I feel I can't do anything. But on Internet I feel I am facing an Israeli myself.'

The impact of the Net is sometimes idealized, however: uneven distribution of and access to the Internet and a bias towards Anglo-American language and culture do pose a threat. Nonetheless, positive changes are currently seen as well. Many more Arab-language sites and chat rooms, with Arabic transliterated in Latin script, using symbols to express specific tones or letters, are also good examples.³ From a historic materialist perspective, it is obvious that innovations in digital technology are impressive, without thinking that technology in itself is the determinant of change: 'Internet is not meant to be the solution, though it is an important tool. ... [T]here is the danger that after spending hours on the Internet you think you've done the fight for the Palestinian cause that day. And so you might not go out to participate in a demonstration, which can be more effective. Internet is not going to save Palestine, but it is going to contribute to [its] liberation' (coordinator of the *Palestine Monitor*).

Internet remains an important 'facilitator'. Instead of focusing on individual access, efficiency, and outcomes, it is therefore beneficial to explore broader-based access like community centres, public libraries, Internet café's, and universities. Since it circumvents traditional forms of censorship and provides news and opinions to which the US-Israeli pact and Arab regimes would rather not allow public access, individuals, groups, and movements can use new technologies to combat 'ruling' entities. This reminds us of the continual tactical inventiveness of ordinary people in their everyday practices. Research on these issues has the important task of trying to find answers to how these political meanings and practices can be reformulated for post-colonial times, relating them to the digital age and to identity-formation in a diasporic context.

Notes

1. 'The Revolution will not be televised – but it will be Web-based' said the initiators of the site. See Laura King-Irani (March 2001), 'The Electronic Intifada: The Revolution Will Be Web-based'. Published in *as-Safir* (Beirut), *Daily Star* (Beirut), and *al-Hayat* (London).
2. The curfews made it difficult to carry out the project's basic work; realizing a network of Across Borders Project centres in camps across the Middle East is put on hold.
3. Several letters in Arabic do not exist in the Latin alphabet: 7 is thus the soft g; 3 is the deep gh' etc.: 'Ahleen 7abiby, 3andek waqet 3asaan...' = 'Hello dear/love, do you have time because...'

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Israeli authorities have denied Miriyam Aouragh entry twice this May. First she was deported back to the Netherlands from Tel Aviv Airport. Her second attempt to enter Palestine via the Jordan Bridge failed as well. Her Ph.D. research project is now in jeopardy.