

Othering the Self: Palestinians Narrating the War on Gaza in the Social Media

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“Athens airport disperses us to other airports. Where can I fight? Asks the fighter.

Where can I deliver my child? A pregnant woman shout back (...)

Where did you come from? Asks the customs’ officer.

And we answer: from the sea!

Where are you going?

To the sea, we answer.

What is your address?

A woman of our group says: My village is the bundle on my back.”

Mahmoud Darwish 1986

Introduction

The goal of this research is to examine how the Palestinian identity has been articulated by many of the Palestinians and other Arabs on the social media outlets, such as Facebook (FB) and YouTube (YT). It also studies the opportunities created by the social media to liberate the examination and discussions of this identity, especially, concerning who is entitled to undertake this task. The paper includes an analysis of the messages and videos that were posted, shared, and downloaded on both Facebook and YouTube during the War on Gaza throughout December 2009 and January 2010. In conducting this study, it was necessary to be registered with many of the Facebook groups and observe many of the videos on YouTube.

Furthermore, two focus groups, each consisting of eight participants, were conducted, in October 17 & 18 2010, to examine the reasons why these young people took part in the social media during and after the war. The participants were Palestinians and other Arabs, who are heavy users of the social media and who were especially active during the War on Gaza in 2009-2010. They are students from different concentrations at the American University of Sharjah. The focus groups’ participants used both English and Arabic on the social media networks.

Many of the focus group participants in this study expressed the common argument regarding the Israeli hegemony over the English-speaking international news outlets’ coverage of the Palestinian–Israeli conflict. In fact,

this argument is not foreign to the usual discourse surrounding the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Many scholars noted that this conflict is poorly reported in Europe and the United States (Ghareeb 1983; Ward 2009; Pintak 2009). In addition to that, they argue that Israel and the pro-Israeli groups in the US (Mearsheimer & Walt, 2006; Piner, 2007) and Britain are controlling the way in which the conflict is reported, and, hence, they manipulate the representation of both the Palestinians and the Israelis (Philo, 2001; Najjar, 2009 a)

The Social Media and the Palestinian-Israeli Conflict

Ever since the beginning of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, Israel has had the upper hand in reporting the events; an achievement due partially to the country's sophisticated technological infrastructure and its highly qualified media personnel and strategists. The Israeli officials' expertise, readiness to deal with reporters, understanding of media routines and their proactive attitudes were among many of the factors leading to Israel's success in positively managing its image and influencing international news outlets in its coverage of events relating to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict (Najjar, 2009a). Piner (2007) argues that the prestigious American press, including *Washington Post* and *New York Times* fell short of appropriately covering Camp David Summit II, July 2000.

The 2008–2009 War on Gaza was no exception to the mainstream international media coverage. Many media analysts were reported in the Lebanese flagship newspaper, the *Daily Star*, to assert that the US media coverage of this conflict “failed to tell both sides of the story.” Although the conflict was a “top story” on all major American news channels, such as ABC, CBS, and NBC, for more than two weeks, the coverage was viewed as ‘one-sided’. The intensive coverage of the War on Gaza was seen to be “rare” in the American media for a foreign story, according to Andrew Tyndall of the Tyndall Report, which monitors the week nightly newscasts from the three major US broadcasting networks (*Daily Star*, 2009). As few days after the war

broke out, Lucy Bannerman (2008) wrote from the Gaza border for *TimesOnline*: “Within hours of Israel launching its offensive against Gaza, lobbyists, spin-doctors and public relations experts were mobili[z]ed to head off critical reaction around the globe.”

During this war, Israel and its supporters were utilizing social media as much as other media. From the first day of its offense on Gaza “Cast Land” the Israeli military had a YouTube channel with various messages on the war, its causes and aims, to the international English-speaking audience (*Jerusalem Post*, 2009). The Israeli channel uploaded many videos emphasizing their message to the international audiences. In these videos, the Israeli government’s and army’s officials expressed their claims on the reasons for the operation; hence, many of these videos were about Hamas rockets hitting Israeli settlements.¹ Other videos were more “localized”. One of these videos shows New York, London and Paris being targeted by rockets with the following question, how about rockets hitting your cities day and night. Major Avital Leibovich, an army spokesperson, was quoted as saying: “The blogosphere and new media are another war zone” (Bannerman, 2008). This points toward the integration of social media outlets in the Israeli official campaign that preceded, accompanied and followed the war as the Israeli media reported (*Jerusalem Post*, 2009; *Ha’artz*, 2009)

This domination of the Israeli narrative on both the mainstream media and social media was pointed out by our focus group participants. It is obvious, now, that one of the main aims of social media participation and the activism the Palestinians embark on, in regard to the Palestinian–Israeli conflict, is an attempt for resisting the mainstream hegemony of the Israeli narrative over that of their own, especially, in the international English language media outlets.² Khalili stresses that young Palestinians in Lebanese refugee camps use the cyberspace “as another mode of addressing their non-virtual concerns, desires and ideas” (2005, p. 127). The Berkman Center for Internet & Society conducted a study of the Arab Blogosphere, in which the

content and links of more than 35,000 blogs were analyzed. In the identification of the major themes discussed in the blogs, it was found that the most important political topic was the Palestinian–Israeli conflict and, in particular, the Israeli war waged on Gaza in 2008–2009 (Etling, Kelly, Faris, & Palfrey, 2009).

The social media present various opportunities for people across the globe. In both business and political spheres, there is a growing hope that the social media can achieve change and prosperity, especially among the populations of the third world countries. Empowering citizens, breaking state censorship (Aouragh, 2008), providing platforms for the voiceless and marginalized groups and individuals, and other roles are ascribed to the social media as an outlet for the User-Generated Content (UGC), and also as an arena for social and political activism. Many scholars have praised various social media attributes, for instance, their easy access and friendly atmosphere, suggesting that this “encourages unconventional adversaries” to speak out. One of the most important voiceless groups marginalized by the mainstream media is the Palestinians. Aouragh (2008) argues that in the Palestinian context:

Internet activism is not a surrogate for offline and everyday resistance. The political internet use meanwhile matured with the creation of discussion forums by popular political movements like Hamas and Fatah. Thus (despite Israeli monitoring), the grass-roots internet capacity got more political significance in relation to political mobilization and censorship. In sum, the internet technology authorized a space to narrate the experience of suffering and struggle; but also to mobilize local and transnational activism and help structure political agency from below. (p. 127)

There is strong interest in the opportunities brought to the Palestinians by the new media technologies and applications including the social media (Aouragh, 2003 & 2008). Moaz & Ellis (2006 & 2007), in their examination of the online communication between the Palestinians and the Israelis, value the advantages of the cyberspace in facilitating dialogue between the two

parties. In the researchers' view, "Israeli Jews and Palestinians are trapped in an intractable conflict that makes face-to-face (FtF) [communication] very difficult and sometimes dangerous." Hence, online communication becomes an attractive option for both parties (2007, p. 293). The Palestinians are repeatedly viewed as voiceless and marginalized when it comes to the international news media and their coverage of their conflict with Israel (Said, 1997; Najjar, 2009a). In the examination of a thirty-year British Press news coverage of the Palestinian–Israeli conflict over the city of Jerusalem, Najjar (2009) argues that this coverage was transmitted through the Israeli filters to the British public:

The Israeli government still filters news about the conflict by censorship, which is exercised via the permission and registration systems created for foreign journalists. Even after the great development of media technologies, foreign journalists' movement is affected by curfews and bans imposed by the Israeli government, ostensibly to secure the journalists' safety. In the aftermath of the War on Gaza December 2008/January 2009, none of the foreign journalists was given access to or permission to report from Gaza. They were all outside the Gaza Strip, sending their dispatches and news items from the Egyptian border or the Israeli stations on the borders with the West Bank. (p.197)

The Internet enables individual Palestinians in the diaspora to participate in narrating their stories while competing with other narratives on their land and their people. It has empowered many Palestinians and many of their advocates and provided them with the new means necessary to reclaim their right in telling their own side of the story. During the Second Intifada, Ali Abunimah launched the Electronic Intifada (EI) website, which describes itself as dedicated to the question of Palestine and the dissemination of news on the Palestinian–Israeli conflict (EI, 2010). The site sends a daily news digest and frequent newsletters to thousands of subscribers. EI is based in Chicago in the United States, where a few of its staff reside. Solidarity Design (SD) was established with the same aim. SD is a consultancy and web design company

that offers technical support for non-profit online outlets concentrating on the Palestinian question (SD, 2010).

The multiple formats of the content produced, viewed, and reused by the social media, in addition to its multi-use and functionality are valued by many sociologists and political scientists. The social media also have the virtue of “multi-modality”, which means that “content can be repackaged and reproduced” (Caldwell, Murphy, & Meaning, 2009, p.2) several times in multiple formats and from several platforms.

Globally, on many occasions, the social media has challenged the very role of the traditional news outlets, including newspapers, news networks, and websites, as the main source of news on high-profile events. In doing so, social media is taking over the political and social functions solely attributed to the news media. This role of the social media became clear during the events following the Iranian presidential elections of June 2009 (Carafano, 2009). There was a growth in the literature in this area investigating the social media’s possible influence on social movements and political communication. A new set of academic terminology was produced, including “participatory culture” (Carter, 2005, p. 148), and “mediated communities” (Goodings, Locke, & Brown, 2007, p. 465), among others. In particular, there is a strong interest in how the social media has become a “space” that cultivates individual (Larsen, 2007, p. 1) and collective identities.

Furthermore, the power of the social media – that is its potential for mobilizing a large number of people around an idea, event, action, or opinion – was realized to some extent on many occasions including the April 8, 2008 strike in Egypt (Saleh, 2008) and the post Iranian Presidential elections protests in June 2009. This is perceived as an important development for Middle Eastern and Arab users in particular:

Greater amounts of real time information and decreasing costs are severely challenging state censors and changing the ways governments interact with their citizens. Arabs in the region and in Arab Diasporas throughout the world increasingly see and read the

same information with consequences for Arab self-identity. Although Internet use in the Middle East is the lowest in the world, this digital divide is narrowing, and cyberspace is an arena for both conflict and conflict resolution in the region. These new Arab media are creating the frames within which people understand and misunderstand events. (Report of the Defense Science Board Task Force on Strategic Communication, 2004, pp.18–19)

The Social Media on the Gaza War

The Israeli war waged on Gaza from December 2008 to January 2009 was an emotional climax for many Arabs. During this war, the Israeli military killed about 1,300 Palestinians in the Gaza Strip (Al-Jazeera English, 2009). On the first day of the war only, almost 150 Palestinians were killed and many others were wounded. Protests against the war were voiced in cities around the world, including Amman, Cairo, London, Athens, Tokyo and others. The graphic images and the high level of emotion were translated in many countries into demonstrations, candle-lit vigils, and other actions showing sympathy for the Palestinians. The large number of victims attracted widespread media attention. Nevertheless, Israeli forces prohibited journalists from entering the Gaza Strip. Local Palestinian journalists and correspondents employed by the Arab news media, including Al-Jazeera Arabic, Al-Jazeera International, Al-Arabiya, LBC, Future, and others were the main sources of news.

From the early hours of its attack on the Gaza Strip and the imposition of a siege, Israel was waging a campaign to win international support; this time online as much as on television and with press conferences. The Israeli right-wing daily newspaper, the *Jerusalem Post*, reported on the efforts made by the Israeli military to domesticate the news about Israel and manage international public opinion. Twitter, YouTube, and Facebook were few outlets used during this war. Hence, messages on the social media were not solely created by users user-generated media (UGM), but created by the Israeli military units or government bodies such as the Foreign Ministry and

the 'Israeli Defense Force', as much by pro-Israel lobbyists and activists, as well as Hamas and Fatah supporters (Nicole, 2008).

Meanwhile, the Palestinians in Gaza had very little access to the Internet owing to the continual shortage of electricity throughout the war. This was a lost opportunity for them to tell their story and to compete with the official Israeli story of their operations in Gaza. This was yet another obstacle in addition to the Israeli ban on international journalists entering the Gaza Strip.

The New Palestinian Space

Although many of the Palestinians in Gaza were unable to use the social media to compete with the dominant Israeli narrative in reporting the war to the world, many other Arabs and Muslims of various nationalities felt, somehow, responsible to tell their side of the story. Albeit Arab and Muslim users had a limited access to the developments in the field in Gaza when they had to look throughout the various digital media sources, whether news channels, news agencies, newspapers or websites and social media. Therefore, these supporters used cyberspace as a site where they could contest the Israeli narrative of the Palestinian–Israeli conflict in general and the Gaza War in particular. As Carter (2005) points out, cyberspace has advantages that are especially helpful in similar circumstances:

[G]eographically distant individuals are coming together on the Internet to inhabit new kinds of social spaces or virtual communities. People “live in” and “construct” these new spaces in such a way as to suggest that the Internet is not placeless cyberspace that is distinct and separate from the real world. (p.148)

The physical Palestinian place is contested, occupied, scattered, and closed off and denied to many of the Palestinians. Hence, the normal venues for meeting and communicating, which are available to other peoples and communities as physical locations, are not available to the Palestinians, who reside in many places, of which very few are permanent and fewer still are recognized by them as “home.” In the view of many Palestinians, the only “home” that they

recognize is Palestine, which has always existed for them as a geographical fact, if not as a political entity. The Palestinians never had a legitimate and externally recognized state. Even in the post-Oslo era, although they had some sort of representation by the Palestinian Authority (PA), their place was more fragmented and closed. Furthermore, since those days, the PA was always “subordinate” to the Israeli Civil Administration, and even more so after the Second Palestinian Intifada in September 2001. (Parsons, 2005, p. 298)

The fragmentation and absence of the Palestinian place, in addition to dispossession, frequent humiliation at checkpoints and Arab and international airports (Khalidi, 1997), and the various wars and attacks on their locations and refugee camps, especially in Lebanon, have brought intense suffering to the Palestinian people. It is a collective pain that is an important aspect of their story, since suffering is an internally recognized element of being a Palestinian. (Khalidi, 1997) However, their unhappy experience has not increased their legitimacy as a narrator of their own story.

The fragmentation of place adds to the absence of full sovereignty over the space, which accompanies the Palestinians’ lack of full control over state institutions and functions including the media. This fragmentation of place and ‘dispersion’ caused “the Palestinian people [to] have ceased to possess any real authority to guide, direct and sustain a national life. They [had] no control over their cultural, social and economic institutions” (Said, Abu-Lughod, Abu-Lughod, Hallaj, & Zureik, 1988, p. 247). Khalidi believes that when it comes to the Palestinian question, national media, especially radio and television, are “essential for disseminating and imposing uniform ‘national’ criteria of identity” (1997, p.10). The Palestinians had been deprived not only of the means of telling their story, but also the moral authority to do so. Both the national and the ‘territorial’ identity of the Palestinians are systematically denied by Israel (Elhanan, 2008). The Palestinian identity was, partially, realized during the 1960s due to the rise of the Palestinian revolution and Fatah movement. Schulz (1999) postulates that:

Thus Fateh's achievement was a major one, virtually forming a new content of the ruptured and disconnected Palestinian identity out of disasters and resistance. Palestinian nationalism on the late 1960s found a base in a mass movement for the first time. Disasters played a significant role in the production of meaning. (p. 44)

Before the establishment of Fatah, the Palestinians' experience was confined to suffering caused by war, dispossession and denial of their very existence. The Palestinians were collectively the victims whose identity and location was not recognized even by other Arab states (Said, Abu-Lughod, Abu-Lughod, Hallaj, & Zureik, 1988). This was especially true before the 1967 War and Israel's occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip, which were under Jordanian and Egyptian control respectively, when the Palestinian-Israeli conflict was framed as the Arab-Israeli conflict. After engaging in the Oslo peace process, the Palestinians enjoyed some international recognition and political representation. Nevertheless, it was not long before their political representation was – to some extent – delegitimized both internally due to political failure and corruption and externally, because of their alleged 'support of terrorism' and their 'unwillingness to engage in peaceful peace process' and 'refusal' of the 'Israeli offers' made to them in Camp David II, July 2000. Although Hamas does not enjoy much international legitimacy, since it is classified as a "terrorist organization" by the United States and Europe, it was recognized and voted into power by the majority of the Palestinian people in January 2006. Then Hamas began playing important political and social roles in the Palestinian communities of the West Bank and Gaza. Even before it came to power, the organization had its own flag, leadership, terminology, and rhetoric that gave the organization a distinctive sense of identity especially in the ways in which they are seen by the many Palestinians in the West Bank, Gaza and even outside the Palestinian territories.

Therefore, the Palestinians have experienced fragmentation not only in their location but also in their politics and leadership. They have no sovereign state, yet they have had two governments one in the West Bank and another in Gaza since January 2006. Political battles between the parties are fought in the arena of the international and Arab media and social media where both Hamas and Fatah accuse each other of the lack of legitimacy and of working against the interest of the Palestinian people. Violence by means of arrests, beatings, torture, and even killings on some occasions, were inflicted on the Palestinians not only by the occupier (Israel) but also by Palestinian political factions.

During the weeks leading up to the War on Gaza, the Palestinian communities of the West Bank and Gaza were separated not only by the physical closure of Gaza, which was under siege, but also because they had different governments, flags, police departments, institutions, and media etc., besides being exposed to various rhetoric and political agendas. This situation has given them many reasons to view their counterparts across the checkpoints as the “other”, especially after Hamas took over the Gaza Strip in 2007. Since then, disputing who is doing the right thing, one of the important concerns of Facebook and YouTube activists was to identify who was and was not a Palestinian, and who were the enemies of the Palestinians. Hence, cyberspace has multiple functions in the contestation of the Palestinian cause, on the one hand it is the arena where the dominant Israeli narrative is contested and on the other, it is the platform in which the users’ expressed their views on the ongoing Palestinian clash and political positions articulated by the Hamas and Fatah leaders.

Cyberspace: A Site for Contesting Palestinian Identity

The Palestinians’ political and national identity “functions as [an] integrative transnational force” that consolidate the sameness and identification among the various Palestinian communities (Khalili, 2005, p. 127). Identities “are dynamic, that they are produced through narratives, that such narrative identities link self and other, and past and present, and that processes of

identification are increasingly important in terms of how people produce their identities” (Lawler, 2008, p. 22). The Palestinian identity has always been contested due to both conflict with the other, the Israeli who does not endorse it, and the lack of the national place or the fragmentation of the homeland. The typical participants in the conversation on and contestation of this identity were mainly political leaders and organizations. Intellectuals, such as Edward Said and Mahmoud Darwish, also contributed to the conversation. Nowadays, the social media enable every single individual connected to the Internet, whether s/he is a Palestinian, other Arab or of other nationality to participate in the formation and articulation of this identity in its sub-identities and the continuous categorization of the in-out-groups.

In the dynamism of identification and dis-identification of “us” and “them” or the “self” and the “other”, space unity and division are essential determinants.

The distinctiveness of societies, nations and cultures is based upon a seemingly unproblematic division of space, on the fact that they occupy “naturally” discontinuous spaces. The premise of discontinuity forms the starting point from which to theorize contact, conflict and contradiction between cultures and societies. (Gupta & Ferguson, 1992, p. 6)

It is important to examine the criteria applied by the Palestinians to distinguish between “friends” and “enemies”, the “self” and the “other,” “us” and “them” (social identity)? When tackling the issue of identity and difference, “[b]oth [terms] play a role in explaining questions such as “who with whom” and “who against whom?” (Schlee, 2008, p.13). According to Schlee (2008), in any asymmetrical war, in which non-state actors are usually involved as agents of other states, the question of “who is with whom” becomes very relevant, as it was during the violent conflict of the 1990s in Ethiopia. The same questions are very relevant to the War on Gaza as an asymmetrical war, especially since Hamas, as a non-state actor, is regarded by many as very closely connected to Syria and Iran. Meanwhile, Hamas is labeled as an agent of Syria and Iran,

Fatah was seen by many of the social media activists and focus group participants as an ally of Israel and the United States against the Palestinians. In both cases, both Hamas and Fatah were viewed as out-group of the Palestinians, as the “other”. When telling their story during the Gaza War, the Palestinians and their supporters on the social media sites were very active in practicing various forms of identification and social grouping. Identities are constantly “interpreted and reinterpreted by narrative” (Lawler, 2008). In giving their narrative, many on the social media were attempting to reassure themselves about who they were and about the principles for which they stood. On the social media, the boundaries between the narrator and the audience are blurred. Moreover, any “narrative then is only completed (if it ever is) in the interaction between teller and audience.” Hence, the interpretation of the War on Gaza and the attribution of guilt and heroism were never completed or agreed upon amongst social media participants. Many of these participants were involved in aggressive conversations, mutual accusation and blame. The narrative is never completed by connecting various events without interpretation or answering the “so what” question (Lawler, 2008, p. 17). Whereas the War on Gaza was viewed as an episode of the Palestinian resistance and a way of defending the people, and breaking the siege on the Gaza Strip for Hamas supporters, the same war was mere cruelty by the Israelis that is triggered by Hamas maneuvers in its pursue of legitimacy by Fatah supporters. For the later side, this war was fought on behalf of Iran and Syria, as many commentators in the Arab press suggested. Hamas enjoys good relations with both countries. Iran is habitually accused by the Israeli sources in the international media to provide weapons to Hamas. Syria is the host country of Hamas’ political office and many of their key leaders including Khalid Mishaal and Mousa Abu Marzouk. (Hroub, 2006)

Identity and Names, Mobility, and Space

Naming is one of the main elements of identity. It confers the much needed sense of stability. The particularity of the identity of any group that makes them different from others cannot be achieved without naming. The Palestinian-Israeli novelist, Anton Shammas (1995), stresses that naming is “a privilege given to those who have power”. In the Palestinian context, the name of the territory is even contested, there is no country named “Palestine” (Hammak, 2006), other names are used like the ‘West Bank’, ‘Gaza Strip’ and the ‘occupied territories’ representing incoherence and fragmentation of the historical place ‘Palestine’. Ever since the Palestinians lost their land, their preoccupation with names started. Palestine, Bissan, Yafa and Haifa and other town names are commonly used for calling baby girls in the Palestinian territories and in the diaspora. The names of places, especially those of streets, have always been important to the Palestinians, who have lost control over the physical space.

Now, new names for distinct sub-collective identities are being forged. The ability to define and communicate those names repeatedly will bring recognition of these sub-identities, which represent political ideologies associated with and reinforced by geography and particular hardship. Communicating these identities on the cyberspace invites various sources of interpretation to the conversation. Although very little is known about the possible lifespan of these sub-identities after the conditions that produced them have disappeared; nevertheless, according to the social media, these sites of user-generated content (UGC) have established these sub-categories, which were less clear before the Gaza War and the Internet. Cyberspace has helped these identities to flourish and popularized them. Hence, I would argue that a new identity is being forged for Gaza and Gazans, both internally and externally.

Many of the Facebook user’s added Gaza as their profile picture. The picture has a black background, on which the name “Gaza” is written in red.

Red is the color of blood, indicating the Palestinians' sacrifices in their national struggle and one of the colors of the Palestinian flag while other users preferred green and white. These four colors comprise the Palestinian flag. Other Facebook users called themselves Gaza or added an attribute to it, such as Gaza al-Sumūd, Gaza Sun, Gaza Son, Freedom Gaza, or Majd Gaza. Many added the word "Gaza" before or after their personal names, for instance, Gaza 'Ali, Hishām Gaza, Muna Gaza, Hiba Gaza and others. The choice of names is taken very seriously by the Palestinians since many of their places were renamed by Israel. Laleh Khalili (2005) found that after the Second Palestinian Intifada in 2000, and the introduction of internet cafés to many of the Palestinian youth in the refugee camps in Lebanon, these names were used in the Palestinians' personal emails. In her field work, Khalili (2005) observes that:

The political sentiment of the Palestinian cyberculture is also apparent in young people cyber handlers, which always incorporate Palestinian place-names or refer to nationalist symbols. The descendant of those who left those who left their villages in Palestine in 1948 chose email monikers named for these lost villages; for example SAFFURIEH 2001@aaa.com, commemorate the village of Saffuria in Galilee; WALID_FARA@aaa.com refers to Fara, Walid's grandfather's village in the Safad province. ..The names also incorporate certain nationalist tropes." (pp.130-131)

The inclusion of the word "Gaza" in their names and profile pictures seems to indicate the longing of many of the Facebook users to associate themselves with that part of Palestine. It might be interpreted as a means of challenging the authorities in their attempt to separate the Palestinians in exile from where they "ought to be." Palestinians should be with their fellow Palestinians in Gaza. For the purpose of identification of these participants with Gazans, they feel the urge to be there, go through the suffering and feel and demonstrate and appreciation for, if not carry out, resistance.

Social Media and the Hamas–Fatah Conflict

Throughout the War on Gaza, the Palestinians in the diaspora were emotionally charged and felt the moral obligation to identify with their fellow Palestinians in Gaza and hence share, if not the suffering, the cause and resistance. Being physically away from the Palestinians in Gaza, makes those in the diaspora feel as members of out-group. The Palestinians in the West Bank were seen as out-of group too. Both groups in the diaspora and in the West Bank had to do something to get back in the group, the Palestinians. Why did all the Palestinians not feel the same in the face of the occupier? Was it because the siege was aimed only at the Palestinians in Gaza and only they were affected by the bombs and the shelling? How can this difference in the wave of suffering that followed the intra -Palestinian conflict affect how people in Gaza and the West Bank or those who support Hamas and Fatah view each other and themselves on the social media? Did the Gazans feel that the West Bankers of the supporters of Fatah and the Palestinian Authority were not as interested as they were in the resistance to the Israelis and the liberation of the country? In the opinion of many Palestinians and other Arabs, the Palestinian Authority was part of the conspiracy against Gaza. Cordesman (2009) observes that:

The Palestinian Authority seemed weak and corrupt before the fighting. The war could do nothing to change this, and gave Hamas the opportunity to attack Fatah fighters and personnel in Gaza the moment the IDF attacked. (p. 67)

During the war and its aftermath, Hamas had a positive image among Arab populations. The movement survived the war “stronger and with an enhanced legitimacy among the Palestinians and within the region.” (Hroub, 2009, p.1) Even the “moderate Arab countries,” including Jordan, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia, were not ready to criticize it. In his criticism of the ‘bias of the Arab media against Israel’, Cordesman (2009) states:

The end result [of the War on Gaza] was to mobilize Arab popular opinion even more than the fight against Hezbollah in 2006, and to

polarize and divide Arab regimes over support of Hamas. Even moderate Arab regimes – which regarded Hamas largely as a terrorist organization and barrier to peace and any real future for the Palestinians – showed serious anger at Israel. (p. 71)

It seems that Israel's war on Gaza strengthened Hamas within the Palestinian population and across the Arab world. Hroub adds that the Hamas victory in the 2006 elections was "in part the reward for Hamas's long-term effort to create this [broad-based social] network, which is a continuing political reality that cannot be eliminated by military means" (2009).

After the war, it appears that Hamas was stronger partly because it was playing the role of the defender of the Palestinians in Gaza, and it was the political body to resist the Israeli occupation and attacks. The organization looked as if it was adhering to its "principles" and undertaking "the responsibility of the Palestinian question." Moreover, Hamas began playing the patriotic resistant/victim role, accusing the Palestinian Authority and Fatah of standing by Israel in its war on the Gazans.³ However, in doing so, the organization was taking advantage of the Gazans' suffering and losses to strengthen its political position and damaged legitimacy. It stated that its "resistance" was the only way to stand up to the Israeli siege and attacks and to "defend the Palestinians," although, clearly, in this case they were not exactly defended. The war was even waged against the *muqawamah* (resistance) to facilitate the confiscation of the Palestinian land, as Khalid Mish'al, president of the political wing of Hamas, pointed out at the Arab Summit in Doha (Bin Jeddo 2008).

The resistant/victim frame as a source of political agency is very significant from the Palestinian perspective. Hroub states: "In the Palestinian context, popularity and legitimacy have been normally endowed to parties according to their 'patriotic stance and practice' against the Israeli occupation." (Hroub 2009, p. 224) This was made very clear by Khalid Mish'al, on the first day of war, in Doha, when he asserted that the (*muqāwimīn* – resistants) in Gaza made it clear to the Arab leaders that they

could rely on the Palestinian people and their resistance. (Bin Jeddo, 2008 December 28) Mish'al took it upon himself to narrate the story of Gaza, his authority being based on his political affiliation and the suffering of the people in Gaza, for which his political movement, Hamas, was responsible. In other words, the source of his legitimacy was the basis for his narrative.

Hamas also immediately began taking advantage of the conflict by attempting to portray itself as a victim and appealing to the international community for support. A Hamas spokesperson said that the decision to declare a unilateral cease-fire showed that the war was also a unilateral move on the part of Israel against the Palestinians. He added: "This war had nothing to do with the rockets or the presence of Hamas in the Gaza Strip.... This war against children, women, and the elderly was part of the upcoming Israeli election campaign" (*Jerusalem Post*, 2009)

The victim/resistant frame suggests the aggressor, and the victim who is both suffering and steadfastly resisting aggression by defending the people against the aggressors and, in this context, the traitor. The War on Gaza was portrayed by many of Hamas's supporters as Israel's way of putting the Palestinian Authority back into the Gaza Strip and delegitimizing the Hamas government. Ten days after the Israeli attack, Khalid Amayreh wrote: "Israel did try to decapitate Hamas, destroy its legitimate government and give the Gaza Strip back to PA leader Mahmoud Abbas on a silver platter" (Amayreh, 2009).

The Palestinians living in exile were extremely frustrated because, being far away, they could not share the suffering of the Gazans, nor make any difference to their lives. Many of the young people from various parts of the Arab world, Europe, and the United States were very active on Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. They were engaged in writing, downloading, emailing, listing, gathering, and disseminating news pictures and videos. Most of their efforts concerned the victims in Gaza.

An example of that activism by Palestinians in exile, that was rooted in a desire for belonging, can be read in what one of the focus group participants who indicated: “We started calling people and they responded in different ways. It is a very strange mix of ‘I am but I am not there with you.’ It is very demoralizing [for us]” (Focus group, 2009 October 17). Many Arabs share the same emotion, for it expresses the sameness projected on the self by the whole group. This group was experiencing suffering, which is a Palestinian characteristic, as Rashid Khalidi (2007) indicates. Attaching one’s name to Gaza emphasizes the desire to be seen as an “in-group” person.⁴ Occasionally, the Palestinians in Gaza were identified as “Gazans.” If the “Gazans” under Hamas were “the group” that was adhering to the Palestinian “principles,” *resisting* the occupier and *suffering* siege, death, and destruction, it could be asked how the “out-group” was identified.

Since the Palestinian Authority was not attacked, it did not take a firm stance against the War on Gaza and, hence, was neither resisting nor suffering. Consequently, it was seen as the “out-group.” The frustration of the social media activists and participants was expressed more strongly against the Palestinian Authority and many Arab countries than against Israel. It was articulated on Facebook as well as by many of the focus group participants. One of the focus group participants stated:

At the outbreak of the Gaza War, I began reading [about the Palestinian question]. Personally, I began hating the Palestinian Authority one hundred percent because of the Gaza War. I felt that all the Palestinian Authority people were traitors. What made me angrier was that Gaza became divorced from Palestine انفصلت (*infasalat*), for even people abroad would refer to Gaza and the West Bank. When I was asked about my political affiliation, I would say that I was not with any political party though I was absolutely not *Fathawī* [affiliated to Fatah]. (Focus group, 2009 October 18)

The strong emotion provoked by the War on Gaza and its human loss has made young Palestinians question themselves and people around them,

even their closest friends. The following comment by a young man makes this clear:

What was painful for me personally during the war was not the Israeli attack. Since Israel is our enemy, I would not expect anything else. What was painful was what I heard from people in Palestine – that this is better, and they were discussing ... rather than how we should face our enemy and the parties blaming one another as well as the position of the neighboring countries. (Focus group, 2009, October 18)

A third participant said that he began praying against the President of the Palestinian Authority, Abu Māzan, the Palestinian Authority itself, Muhammad Dahlan, and “the gang out there every day.’ He thought they had “the right to be angry with them” and then he went on to blame the Arab leaders (Focus group, 2009, October 17).

Many of the YouTube videos referred to well-known high-level Palestinian Authority personalities, including ‘Abbas, Dahlan, and others. The first two were the subject of the majority of the attached videos, which frequently called them traitors, collaborators, Israelis, and *kuffar* (unbelievers) and attacked their moral grounds or religious beliefs. Most of the descriptions and reasons given for the attacks related to the religious morality, patriotism, or corruption of these public figures (Hamas killing civilians in Gaza, 2009 January 20; Abbas Qaki (Fathawi) admits drinking Whisky, 2009 January 10; Appalling family, 2008, December 14 2008).

In one of the YouTube videos, the Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud ‘Abbas, King Abdullah of Jordan, King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia, the Egyptian President Husni Mubarak, and the Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert were portrayed wearing the white and blue flag of Israel. King Abdullah of Jordan and Mahmoud Abbas were pictured carrying Ehud Olmert on a chair and cheering for him. All the Arab leaders were shown taking part in a race, in which they carried the Israeli flag in front of a panel consisting of the former American President George W. Bush, his Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, and the Israeli Foreign Secretary Levi Tzipni, who were on

the grandstand cheering on the participants and clapping enthusiastically. The opening scene of the video showed a swimming pool, in which someone was swimming. Ehud Olmert was pictured leaving and carrying the Israeli flag. The flag was dripping blood; the swimming pool was called Gaza and was full of red liquid, that is, blood. A man was shown stretched out on a camp bed with his back to the pool and engrossed in his book, his head featuring the map of the world (Arab leaders, Israel and the War on Gaza, 2009 January 6)

Another participant was laughing as he listened to the other participants' comments about 'Abbas. He said, "I remember a quote by Abu Māzan a week after the beginning of the war: 'If Israel does not stop the war, it will be responsible for it.'" He laughingly commented that it was as if Israel were not responsible so far for the bloodshed.

A young man from Gaza said:

From the very beginning, I felt that there was a plan to divide Palestine into two parts, one enjoying a very luxurious life and the other in need **على الحد يد** (*'alā hadīdah*) [in other words, not possessing a nickel]. There was a plan and the tools used by the colonizer have not changed. The Palestinian Authority and Fatah became corrupt after they were given money. I would pray against the Arab leaders or anyone else, but what strikes me is the extent to which we are lost and people are asleep. We always blame the leaders, but where are the people? The people are doing nothing! (Focus group, 2009, October 17)

Another participant said that Gaza was attacked by Israel, and the West Bank by the Palestinian Authority, with those on the wanted list being harassed and imprisoned by the Palestinian police. Demonstrators protesting against the events in Gaza were beaten and humiliated by the Palestinian Authority.

Conclusion

Cyberspace is a new site offering the means of accessing a platform where the Palestinian cause can be advocated and the story of the Palestinians told. It provides the opportunity for all the Palestinians in the diaspora, other

Arabs, Muslims, and international supporters to reach various audiences interested in the other version of the story or curious to see events, images, and comments that do not appear in the international mainstream media. Of course, this portrayal does not go unchallenged by Israel and its supporters. As described in this paper, during the War on Gaza from December 2008 to January 2009, the cyberspace in general and the social media in particular were the arena for heated debates and bitter rivalries between the various interested parties.

The social media with their multi-functions and vast potential for creation, transmission, and sharing of material in various formats and with multiple applications provide – as many of the focus group participants argued – excellent opportunities for “telling the truth.” Facebook and YouTube have not only helped the Palestinians and their supporters to increase public awareness of their cause, but they have also been partly responsible for the political polarization of and enmity between the supporters of Fatah and the Palestinian Authority on the one hand and Hamas on the other. Moreover, during the War on Gaza, these social media turned into sites for not only contesting the Palestinian narrative with many of the Israelis and their supporters on the one hand and many of the Palestinians and their supporters on the other, but also for identifying who is a Palestinian or the meaning of Palestinian identity.

With the recognition of the role played by the social media to challenge the common portrayals in the mainstream media by diversifying the sources of news, images, and media content concerning the Palestinian question, more attention will have to be directed to investigating the possible implications of the exchange of ideas and opinions in the discussion of other aspects, which could lead to the rupture and fragmentation of the Palestinian political scene and Palestinian identity itself. It is also worth considering the diversity of political opinions expressed on the social media in this regard, since they can be very close to what is argued in the mainstream media.

¹ Examples of these videos can be found on the following sites <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8sznMP3dnCg&feature=related>; <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rfTr609whl8&feature=related> and <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8sznMP3dnCg&feature=related>

² It is important to note that this resistance comes not only from the Palestinians but also from many other Arab and Muslim supporters.

³ The purpose of this paper is not to investigate or elaborate on these accusations, but to examine their role in the new grouping and categorization of the Palestinians.

⁴ A year later, the word “mourning” appeared in both Arabic (*hidād*) and English as the profile picture for many users as in Figure 2. It was commemorating the first anniversary of the war.

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