Chapter 5

From Jeni to Johannesburg: The Digital Intifada and Transnational Advocacy for Palestine

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ABSTRACT

Social media has given Palestinians around the world a voice with which to confront flawed media coverage of the Israeli occupation. This chapter will explore the use and rise of internet-based information and communication technologies (ICTs) and social media to expose Israel’s colonial project in the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT) and advance pro-Palestine advocacy. The success and limitations of social media-based activism are examined, as well as the Israeli government’s repressive response to these advocacy efforts. While social media has successfully challenged some deeply-entrenched media stereotypes about the Israeli occupation, it is a crucial tool for advancing Palestine activism globally. The chapter concludes that social media campaigns must be integrated with traditional advocacy, lobbying and grass-roots activism to end the Israeli occupation of Palestine and achieve a just peace for Palestinians and Israelis.

INTRODUCTION

While social media is currently playing a significant role, and becoming an important space for transnational and global activism for Palestine, Palestinians have been able to successfully mobilise citizen-enabled protests and mass actions, decades before the advent of internet-based information and communication technologies (ICTs).

The most sustained and effective non-violent protest movement and mobilisation that occurred in the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT) of the West Bank, Gaza
Strip and East Jerusalem was the pre-internet-era First Intifada. Grassroots Palestinian organisations primarily used leaflets and mosques to direct and co-ordinate a six-year mass civil disobedience campaign of boycotts, strikes, stone-throwing and demonstrations against the Israeli military occupation of Palestine.

Pioneering forms of internet activism by Palestinians within the OPT and in the diaspora in the late 1990s and during the Second Intifada in 2000 focused on countering stereotypes in mainstream media about Palestinian resistance to the occupation. This was achieved by providing first-hand accounts of the humanitarian and political realities of life under occupation in the OPT. Jenin, a city in the occupied West Bank, was an important site of resistance during the Second Intifada, and is referred to in the title of this chapter.

A political and legal background to the Israeli occupation of Palestine is provided. A brief examination of mainstream media coverage of the Israeli occupation and the portrayal of Palestinians as ‘terrorists’ then follows. The author then explains how early ICT-enabled activism challenged this flawed narrative. Focus is then placed on how the internet and social media transcend Israeli checkpoints and barriers to free movement to create an online, global, borderless community, thus allowing Palestinians trapped in the OPT to connect with activists around the world.

Significant transnational social media campaigns exposing the brutality of the Israeli occupation, and advocating for a free Palestine, are examined in this chapter, together with the way they have reached and challenged traditional media outlets, and the public at large. There is an emphasis on South African actions, as the author is the social media coordinator for the National Coalition for Palestine (NC4P), an umbrella body representing over 40 South African civil society structures, dedicated to ending the Israeli occupation of Palestine and achieving a just peace for Palestinians and Israelis.

POLITICAL AND LEGAL CONTEXT

On November 29, 1947 the United Nations (UN) - without the consent of the indigenous population - voted in favour of dividing Palestine into two states: a Palestinian state and a Jewish state (with Jerusalem to be administered by the UN). Although the leadership of the indigenous Palestinian population rejected the UN Partition Plan, the leaders of the Zionist Movement in Palestine unilaterally declared the independence of the state of Israel on May 14, 1948. The borders of this state were never specified.

On that same day, fighting broke out with several Arab states. To Israelis, this was a War of Independence, and to Palestinians this was the Nakba (catastrophe). The Arab-Israeli War followed, and lasted until 1949. There were over 860 000
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