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Palestine online : cyber Intifada and the construction of a virtual community 2001-2005

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Citation for published version (APA):

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Chapter 3: Palestinian Mobility Offline/Online

Golda Meir once demanded: ‘The Palestinians? Who are they? They don’t exist!’ But that was us streaming into Lebanon, Syria and Jordan, with tales of horror, persecution and fear, walking around in a daze, confronting one another with a set of baffling facts, but willing to wait for a few weeks, even months to return to our towns, homes, offices, and businesses.


3.1 Introduction

The importance of online mediation and internet communication for Palestinians will be understood if related to the great discrepancy between their (national) aspirations and lived realities. One of the major problems facing Palestinians is the inability to move freely to-and-from geographic places, a direct consequence of a history of displacement. The Palestinian reality can be summarized as forced mobility that has left the majority of Palestinians homeless, colonized, or displaced without a right of return. The number of Palestinians that were forced to leave and became stateless is often a subject of debate, but the most general data are collected by UNRWA, and through further research and analysis by academics such as Elia Zureik (1994) and Lex Takkenberg (1998).

The Palestinians’ sense of injustice is deepened by a prolonged rejection from the right of self-determination over the course of 60 years, and sharpened by the denial of the Palestinian 1948 exodus. The denial is enforced by the lack of acknowledgement of this part of history in favour of a focus on Israel’s sudden new geographic existence, while overlooking the fact that the land in question was not empty but inhabited by people ‘cleansed’ of three-fourths of their population.81 In the opening quote, Palestinian novelist Fewas Turki recounts the 1948 catastrophe (al-Nakba) with personal tales that bear historical evidence refuting Golda Meir’s famous denial. Longing for a state and asserting their national identity have therefore become important symbols in the Palestinian’s struggle for political justice, liberation, and everyday survival.

Nation-state, territory, and identity are thus inevitably related to free mobility. However, redefinitions of national identity contributed to a denial of the importance of state and territory, a hollow conclusion in the face of everyday (offline) contexts.82 Everyday experiences of mobility explain the value of online mobility and

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81 The position of Palestinian refugees is characterized as the most difficult in terms of civil rights and freedom of movement. For a historical framework, see Chapter One and comprehensive studies by Salam Abu Sita, Avi Shlaim or Ian Pappe.

82 Disregarding the importance of nation-state and territory and collective national identity as outdated is especially comfortable if we already have a piece of land to live on, constitutional rights that protect us, legal
access to alternative communication. In other words, the immobility of Palestinians and multi faceted consequences of Palestinian historical experience have greatly impacted the production and utilization of the internet. Retrospectively, it was an offline context in which I myself was confronted with the lack of movement and territorial autonomy and that made me value (free) mobility. During fieldwork in Palestine in 2002, Israeli soldiers drove by our houses in their tanks when curfew was imposed and shouted in broken Arabic: Mamnu' at-tajawwul [wander/walking outside prohibited], You are hereby prohibited to leave your house or walk around. If you do not follow these rules, measures will be taken. This curfew is imposed until further notice; anyone on the street will be shot at.” This warning was sometimes mixed with insulting jokes and laughter, and eventually these pre-curfew patrols by Israeli soldiers had become a part of daily life. On another occasion, when I was at Ben Gurion Airport on my way to the West Bank for a second fieldwork period in 2003, the words “You are not welcome in Israel. You will be deported back to Amsterdam”, was one of the defining moments in my understanding the reality of occupation and immobility.

Many of these experiences were also common to most Palestinians. But, while they share a collective history or everyday commonalities, there are also internal differences within the Palestinian community. Collective national identity does not do away with internal (class, legal, gender) differences. Moreover, Palestinians were forced to settle in different places and dealt with specific complications. As the political, economic, and social contexts of Occupied Palestine, Jordan, and Lebanon differ, the experiences of Palestinians also differ according to local histories and traditions. For instance, internet usage among Palestinian expatriates in the US or Britain developed differently compared to stateless Palestinians in refugee camps in Lebanon. Thus the status of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) and internet infrastructures in each of these settings, and the absent freedom of movement, determine whether and how internet access offers Palestinians new possibilities.

In Chapter Two I discussed the underlying conceptual notions that relate to mobility and nation-state. I have argued that in a Palestinian context transnational mobility mostly refers to forced mobility. And, I stated that diaspora experiences have little to do with voluntarism through open borders or with an evolution of network societies and free flows of spaces/places through ICT processes. I therefore found Smith and Guarnizo’s (1998) understanding important; their analyses on processes of transnationalism are seen through local, national, and global perspectives and thus offer us a view from below. This view shows how “free mobility” is segregated; some have more and others have less mobility (Eagleton 2004). In this chapter I will continue to investigate the underlying notions of mobility with regards to the Palestinian diaspora, and the status of Palestinian refugees in particular. I wish to
documents to move around with, or some of the basic means to resist injustice. See Callinicos, Eagleton, and Kellner for an excellent critique of the so-called evaporation of the nation-state.
uncover the contradictions I came across between immobility and mobility on and off-line—the first tension as presented in the preceding two chapters.

The start of this chapter will give a short historical explanation of the Palestinian diaspora, with specific attention to Palestinian refugees in Jordan and Lebanon where the largest Palestinian refugee communities live. Virtual mobility offers a social outlet, and an alternative way for refugees to meet with others, particularly other Palestinians. These cyber practices symbolize the birth of a new Palestinian virtual community. I will therefore discuss how alternative mobility through the internet overcomes separations and offline immobility, and how local initiatives capitalized on these opportunities. Furthermore, I will explain how this occurs through local and transnational communication. As technological possibilities grew they contributed to the survival of higher education in Palestine, and chatting became the most important grassroots form of internet communication. Finally, this chapter will conclude with an analysis of experiences of escapism and alienation, consequences of a technology embedded in a context of exile and isolation.

3.2 Diasporic Mobility: Forced Migration

Concepts of space and place offer interesting ways to contemplate the internet. The concept of place also helps to understand the construction of real and virtual places and differentiates between the local and global nature of internet interaction. Internet space challenges the classic definition of place as a bounded physical location of human activity, and encourages new theoretical constructs that account for unbounded spaces such as the internet (Zook 2006:56). In fact, the main dominant discourses about community also provide the frameworks for understanding online community. I understand (online) community as an ideal that constructs and maintains social bonds, but it is relevant to ask in which circumstances (why) Palestinians turn to online traversals. Virtual groups may fall short of being communities because the notion of community implies more than mere interaction. Moreover, online spaces or hybrid/network societies can’t be understood without reference to offline place—and the general ideal notion of community—because different kinds of community bonds can exist concurrently. Hence, new technological developments should be seen as a continuation of, rather than as a break from, older types of social interactions. Dawson asserts that online activities are only likely to generate a sense of community when the online interaction is anchored in a shared offline context; the significance of the internet lies not in where it competes with other sections of life but where it extends them (2003:8).

The diasporic version of mobility can be translated as mobility resulting from forced migration and exile. This is most clear in refugee camps in host countries. With ‘Palestinian diaspora’ I refer to a community living in exile, sharing the idea of a national home from which displacement occurred and was followed by more traumatic journeys. Additionally, ambiguous definitions of the term ‘Palestinian
refugee’ constrained the position of Palestinians in international law and propagated different human rights norms concerning Palestinian refugees (Takkenberg 1998:50). Besides being treated as pawns or serving as examples in political speeches, stateless Palestinians were sometimes randomly expelled from their host countries. Along with the expulsion of PLO cadres during political upheavals in Jordan and Lebanon, ordinary Palestinians were also (internally) expelled. For Palestinians, ‘diaspora space’ evolves where boundaries of belonging/otherness and inside/outside are contested.

Diasporans have a strong desire for a home while at the same time carrying different local and national identities. The geographic element reveals important differences between Jordan and Lebanon as Palestinian host states. Jordan is closely geographically connected to Palestine via the East and West Bank. Apart from location, time (duration) is also significant. In Jordan, many of the Palestinian refugees are present since the 1967 exodus, while in Lebanon the majority of refugees are settled since the 1948 exodus when they fled from their people and land. These territorial and temporal elements partly explain the closer ties between (Palestinians in) Jordan and Palestine compared to (Palestinians in) Lebanon and Palestine. The way Palestinians network with each other is partly defined by geographic location (Hanafi 2005). According to FAFO (2002), approximately 60% of Palestinians in Jordanian refugee camps still have strong links with Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza. In order to understand these refugee realities, I will start with a general overview of the Palestinian situation in Jordan and Lebanon.

Palestinian refugees: Exile

For diasporic Palestinians, the charged term Return evokes nostalgia for the homeland they were forced to flee in 1948 and a reversal of the traumatic dispersion that sundered families, ruined livelihoods, and thrust Palestinians into humiliating refugee camps or individual adventures to rebuild lives armed with little more than birth certificates, keys to the homes left behind, and the stigma of having somehow lost their country to an alien people. The political insistence on the right of return is a demand for righting a moral wrong (Lila Abu Lughod, 2004:35).

The plight of the Palestinian refugees has become one of the most enduring. The main problem is Israel’s refusal to acknowledge responsibility, but US/EU compliance made matters much more difficult (Talhami 2003). Abunimah (2001) points to the political double standards in a comparison with Balkan circumstances: “The same American officials and media pundits who thundered them about the inviolability of

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83 See Takkenberg (1998:133-170) for a discussion on the status of Palestinian refugees in the Arab world, and the historical analyses here in Chapter Two.

84 The ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ are common classifications in everyday Palestinian discourse and refer to Palestinians residing in the homeland (whether the occupied territories or Mandate Palestine/Israel), and the diaspora in exile.
refugee rights and the immorality of dispossession and forced exile, demanded that Palestinians drop their ‘unrealistic demands’ about refugee rights”. The right of return (baq wa-‘awda) of refugees is bound with the demand for justice and desire to narrate their experiences. And as Abu-Lughod clearly confirms in the opening quote, the roots lie in 1948.

Between 1947 and 1948 there were many outbreaks of guerrilla warfare between armed militias and Palestinian/Arab resistance, but when the British left Palestine, full-scale war broke out. This lasted almost a year and concluded in Jewish control of the majority of Palestinian territory (more than the share of land granted by UN resolution 181 in 1947). Apart from the colonization and further expropriation of land, the most important outcome was the birth of the refugee problem (Morris 1987). Palestinians fled to temporary camps in Gaza, the West Bank, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria where they stayed in extreme conditions. The militias, and what became the new Israeli army, destroyed over 400 Palestinian villages. Meanwhile, the influx of World War 2 survivors, and later the ‘Oriental Jews’ from the Middle East and North Africa, increased; they took over the farms and homes that were left behind. The entry of one people marked the exodus of another. Such narratives use to be controversial in academia, but since the 1980s (and particularly with contributions from ‘new historians’ in Israel), this critical view on what caused the Palestinian exodus is now broadly accepted.

After the adoption of General Assembly resolution 181 in 1947 upper/middle class families from Haifa and Jaffa were already leaving the country and the Palestinian Arab resistance was destabilized with a bloody culmination in April/May 1948 when the militarily superior Jewish militias of Hagana and Irgun conquered most of the Palestinian villages and towns. Most Palestinians were left to fend for themselves (Morris 1987). Between August and the end of 1948 the majority of Palestinians left and became exiles when their attempts to return were prevented. People from the north of Palestine fled northwards to Syria and Lebanon, those from Jaffa and Beersheba fled southward into the Gaza Strip, and those from Jaffa, Ramleh and Jerusalem fled towards the West Bank and Jordan (Takkenberg 1998:14). Palestinians were simply banned from returning to their homes. Apart from administrative resolutions granting Palestinians the right to self-determination and return to their homeland, neither the UN nor any other international institution really pressured Israel to bare responsibility and abide to the conventions that offered Palestinian justice. This continued until the Palestinian refugee drama became a de facto reality it was too late to be reversed by the fait accompli politics, i.e. of establishing irreversible facts on the grounds. Thus, a majority of Palestinians had to flee for the

85 In The concept of transfer in Zionist political thought 1882-1948, Nur Masalha (1992) shows that long before 1948 Zionists developed strategies to transfer Arab Palestinians and that these same Transfer Committees also played a role in 1947/48. Palestinians were successfully dehumanized to the extent that in the West it didn’t even matter what the historical context of the Palestinian diaspora was; Arabs have the whole Middle East to live in.
foundation of a new nation-state that was based on the superiority of one ethnicity/religion (instead of citizenship) over another.

The UN were then required to step in and guarantee basic care for refugee Palestinians; the United Nation Relief and Work Agency (UNRWA) was created by UN General Assembly Resolution 302 of 8 December 1949. Its founding target was to prevent starvation and conditions of distress (mainly in order to maintain political stability in the region). For most camps (in Palestine and outside), the presence of the UNRWA symbolized the difference between survival and collapse. The UNRWA is now poorly resourced and barely able to help overcome the current realities in Palestinian refugee camps. According to many of the organizers in the Palestinian refugee camps in Palestine, Jordan, and Lebanon, UNRWA decreased its required services contrary to the growing needs in the camps. Furthermore, the United Nations (the financial backbone of UNRWA) has increasingly lost its independence. Economic stability and political independence (of Palestinians and UNRWA) in the camps is hardly possible; it is therefore certainly more difficult to be a refugee in a host country than in Palestine. In Palestine, the towns surrounding the camps were at least accessible for refugees, so aside from internal class differences and prejudices between camps, there was less segregation between Palestinians from camps and cities/towns I encountered in Palestine, than in Lebanon and Jordan.

Though this research focuses on Palestine, Jordan, and Lebanon, life certainly differs according to the country of residence. The wars of 1948, 1967, and the Gulf Wars made Jordan host to one of the largest refugee communities in the Middle East. The first stream of Palestinian refugees, with higher levels of educational and labor skills, benefited Jordan. The refugees were able to gain access to social capital with high-wage occupations and particularly developing the commercial industry. Many of the better-off urban classes managed to continue to live their middle/upper class lifestyles in Jordan and, to a lesser extent, Lebanon. Later when the 1967 refugees arrived from the West Bank and Gaza, political and social stratification had advanced. Of the 13 official refugee camps in Jordan, only four (Irbid, Wihdat, Zarqa and Hussain camp) date back to 1948. Despite the fact that most Palestinians have a similar legal status to Jordanians, and certainly better legal status than in other host countries, Palestinian refugees in camps are worse off than non-camp Palestinians. Moreover, there is less interactivity between Jordanian camps and nearby Jordanian cities (in terms of employment, education, or social visits). This effects the movements to and from the camps and also impacts visits to internet cafes outside the camp.

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86 The US is the major power in the UN and especially under the Bush government it treats the Palestinian case in its own interests and when it pleases. See for example the report by UN Middle East commissioner Alvaro de Soto.
Jordan: Between assimilation and segregation

Despite the similarities in language and culture between refugees and non-refugees in the host countries, and better legal status of Palestinians in Jordan compared to elsewhere in the Arab diaspora, there is a clear concentration of poverty and deprivation amongst camp refugees both in Jordan and Lebanon. Different community leaders and researchers in the camps in Jordan told me that the challenge and responsibility for Palestinian refugees increased enormously. And comparative research on the living conditions of Palestinian camp populations in Jordan (Marwan Khawaja and Age A. Tiltnes (Eds) FAFO 2002) shows that a Palestinian refugee lacks much basic care. Palestinians are not one fixed entity in the host countries, but reflect different class and exile trajectories.

The status of Palestinians in Jordan is rather confusing because the majority of the population in this host country is Palestinian by origin. The different context is particularly shaped by the country’s history as a (new) neighbouring nation-state of Palestine/Israel. The West Bank (and its inhabitants) was part of Jordan’s East Bank after the founding of Israel, until Israel occupied the remaining territories in 1967. This means that Jordan hosts different categories of Palestinian refugees: those from 1948; those displaced in 1967, those from 1948 that were again displaced in 1967, and Palestinians displaced from Gaza in 1967. After the second massive influx of refugees into Jordan during the 1967 war the increasing number of Palestinians strengthened the political position of Palestinian organizations and led to tensions with the Jordanian ruling class.87

Since the establishment of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan after WW II, Palestinians from the West Bank and East Bank were considered Jordanian citizens. The unification of both banks doubled the Jordanian population at once (Takkenberg 1998:158). Palestinians enjoyed the same rights and obligations as other Jordanian nationals, including positions in the military service. Palestinians soon gained the highest positions in society such as Prime Minister and owner of the Arab Bank. However, Palestinians were later accorded a different status. Refugees from 1967 and refugees from Gaza were inferior to earlier Palestinian Jordanians. These were also the groups that resided mostly in camps under difficult conditions.88 The director of Refugees, Displaced persons and Forced Migration Centre (RDFSC) agreed that life in the camps is very difficult: “Children are sometimes forced to study in the street because they don’t have electricity at home, or they go to the mosque because it is

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87 This exploded into direct confrontations in September 1970 (also commonly referred to as Ailul al-Aswad, Black September, Black September). After this experience the centre of Palestinian politics shifted to Lebanon.

88 The citizenship status of West Bank and East Bank Palestinians was defined until the First Intifada (1987). In 1988 King Hussain renounced his claim over the WB acknowledging Palestinian (PLO) sovereignty, with the effect that WB Palestinians lost citizenship. In practice most Palestinians could keep their Jordanian passports until replaced by a passport from the Palestinian state. However, since 1988 these Jordanian passports were only temporarily valid, WB Palestinians with Jordanian passports could only reside in Jordan for a maximum of 30 days. More on Palestinian-Jordanian history in Takkenberg, 1998:158-16.
overcrowded and noisy at home”. There is also little to no political activity in the Jordanian camps, contrary to the situation in Lebanon as I will explain in the next section.

A special permission from the Department of Palestinian Affairs (DPA) is required for journalists and researchers who want to enter the camp to talk to the people themselves. The Governor of the area where the camp is located, the Camp Committee, and the UNRWA are the three channels through which Palestinians must manoeuvre. One of the camps I got to know was al-Bekkaa, Jordan’s biggest camp with nearly 200,000 refugees. According to several Palestinian NGOs, the DPA is sometimes involved in the work and decisions of the al-Bekaa Camp Committee; and the governing body is present during the Committee’s main meetings. When local activist Rabia from the camp was elected as a representative in the Camp Committee, the DPA intervened and blocked the procedures. According to some people I spoke with this was because she is outspoken and enjoys a lot of support in the camp.

After four to six decades of exile in camps in Jordan, many Palestinians (particularly from the camps) still live under difficult circumstances. Their households are even larger than in Lebanese camps; the average household size in West Amman refugee camp is even higher than in Gaza, but this is also related to the lower mortality rate in Jordan. The ability to finally move out of the camps is much smaller than people’s desire to do so, and those who actually do manage to safely leave, built their houses near the camp in order to be near their social networks and family (FAFO 2002).

With Palestinians making up the majority of the population in Jordan (and Palestine located practically on the other side of the mountain), the political developments are still a threat to Jordan. RDFSC director: “The political experience in Jordan is still recent. Since the conflict of the 1970s, many people turned away from political involvement.” Especially after Black September 1971, many Palestinian activists left Jordan, some becoming NGO organizers. An interview with one of the successful Palestinians illustrates how different life is for an upper-class Palestinian compared to a refugee in a camp:

I never lived in a camp. In 1973 I visited Palestine with my parents for the first time, I went back in 1996 after Jordan's peace treaty with Israel. I have two Jordanian passports now, one with an Israeli visa that always enables me to go to Palestine. That is not strange, there are even rich Saudi Palestinians that are granted entry to Israel... though I very much identify as a Jerusalemite Palestinian, in a casual conversation I say I'm from Jordan. The new term is 'a Jordanian of Palestinian origin'.

With so many Palestinian Jordanians it seems odd that refugees remain in camps, but in reality just a small minority in the camps has a chance to move out. And enough do try, because for many it is hard to live in the isolated camps, as Riba in al-

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89 Permission is difficult to receive, and during one experience I was asked to stop in the middle of an interview with the camp representative.
Bekaa camp said: “We know that we have the mukhabarat (secret service) everywhere, it is part of our daily lives.” The experiences very much portray the complexity of the Palestinian refugee issue in Jordan. On top of the general frustration amongst camp dwellers, the situation has worsened since the Intifada.

Interviews with refugees in the camps and with Palestinian students in Amman confirmed the repression during protests against Jordanian/Israeli politics. Outbursts of anger and grief about what happened in Palestine often turn into demonstrations. I was told that people were shot at with paint bullets by riot squads (to easily identify the protesters in the crowd), arrested, and abused; at demonstrations in a refugee camp teargas bombs were thrown inside the homes. Medical NGOs reported that a number of women later suffered miscarriages. One of the volunteers at a Women’s Centre in the camp related dismay at what happened: “Riots broke out after the Intifada, two refugees, of which one child, were killed when people tried to get out and demonstrate in support of Palestine.” She explained that the painful difference for Palestinians I interviewed in Jordan was that in Palestine the Israeli occupation forces were responsible, while in Jordan they suffered at the hands of Arab authorities. Some of the stories were indeed similar to the scenes I saw in Palestine during fieldwork in 2001/2002.

A clear difference between Jordan and Lebanon is that Palestinians in Jordan are still connected through relatives and kinship with those in Palestine. One therefore finds condolences in local Jordanian newspapers and biyut al-‘aza’ (condolence/mourning ceremonies) in the camp, for relatives killed in Palestine. Intifada victims with acute injuries that are given permission to get medical treatment in Jordan can make use of family or village networks. Interaction between Palestinians and Jordanians is relatively normalized, and many Palestinians in the West Bank are permitted to visit their relatives in Jordan. This type of relation with Palestine is impossible for refugees in Lebanon. One person I interviewed in Jordan wondered what was worse, the deteriorating situation of Lebanon or that of Jordan. Murad formulated it as coming down to the choice: “Do I want political integrity and freedom of speech, but be treated as a dog like in the camps of Lebanon?”

**Lebanon: “Two Mothers”**

As early as 1972 Israel started attacking Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon, invading and occupying South Lebanon in 1978. As the Lebanese civil war broke out in 1976, and Israel invaded Lebanon again in 1982, the consequences were even more dramatic (Takkenberg 1998:18). Lebanon never really had a serious policy to integrate Palestinian refugees in Lebanese society. In fact, the state actively tried to segregate Palestinians. As Lebanon was constructed by colonial powers in a precariously sectarian way (power access according to competing ruling communities based on
religious affiliation), the influx of thousands of Palestinian Sunni Muslims and far less Palestinian Christians immediately became an issue of political interests.90

From their arrival as refugees in 1948, Palestinians had been subject to repressive practices by the Deuxieme Bureau (the security service known al-maktab al-thani) in the late 1960s (known as ayam al-thawra, revolutionary days) when the PLO played a major role in liberating the camps from this repression. The stories I collected amongst refugees in the camps of Lebanon expressed the Palestinian isolation and suffering very well. With the Tel al-Zaatar massacre in 1976, Sharon’s 1982 massacres in Sabra and Shatila, and the ‘war of the camps’ between 1984-87, Lebanon is the site of a painful Palestinian history: 12 refugee camps with nearly half million refugees still bear witness.

The year 1982 is one of the defining moments in contemporary Palestinian narratives in poetry and songs. After a two-month Israeli siege of Beirut, the PLO agreed to withdraw Lebanon. Residents of the camps were vulnerable to attack and it was in this context that the massacres at the camps took place. The atrocities by then Minister of Defense (and later Prime Minister) Ariel Sharon with on-the-ground assistance by Lebanese (Phalange) fascist militias in Sabra and Shatila, shocked the world. Sabra and Shatila, and other massacres, became part of the collective memory of most people I met and interviewed. For example, 36-year-old Ahmed who lives in Shatila:

The second time after they entered our house and started shooting I hid with my 7-year old brother Ismael in the bathroom, we came out when the Phalanges left after they shot my family. Suad received about 16 shots and was paralysed. My brother and I couldn’t carry her, so we left the house and saw many bodies lying in the alleys, dead people. But we weren’t the only ones who had been attacked and shot in the house. Killing was everywhere; the killers were still in the camp. Everybody in the camp had expected the Israelis would come and do as they did in Saida: arrest the wanted people, put them in the Ansar concentration camp and leave most of the people. This is why we stayed at home in Shatila. We only found out that a massacre was taking place in the evening... Shadi, Shadia, Fareed, Bassam and Hajar – five children – plus my father were killed.

Ahmad’s family was split in half, his five siblings plus their father were killed, and five of the children plus their mother survived.

The treatment of Palestinians in Lebanon is fused by discrimination as they enjoy very few rights. Growing fears of demographic changes because a large majority of the Palestinians was Muslim (Sunni/Muslims becoming a majority in the sectarian based Lebanese constitution) had initially led Christian leaders and feudal lords to stir up public opinion against refugees (Mirhi Nasser 2002). The already severe conditions

90 Status of Palestinians was also an issue of class: the upper class and wealthy Palestinians that left Palestine before the great exodus and settled in Lebanon were given Lebanese nationality. Probably even more immoral and unethical was the special exception in the 1950s; Palestinian Christians could receive Lebanese citizenship in order to outnumber the Lebanese Muslims.
arising from the lack of basic services were aggravated by the policies of the Lebanese government who, worried of the so-called Tawtin (permanent settlement), imposed more restrictions. Housing development was prohibited, limitations were enforced on the employment of Palestinians, and martial law was imposed on the camps (idem). In Lebanon, Palestinian students in UN refugee schools are not free to choose their higher education curriculum; attendance to medical and law school are not allowed, no matter how talented the refugee is. Palestinians are banned from many professions, due to this law and the high rate of unemployment; many university graduates end up selling vegetables on the market or work as taxi drivers.

The Palestinian status is worse than that of any other foreigner in Lebanon and they are denied basic government services. Examples of institutional discrimination are denial of access to legal employment or travel documents. Many Palestinians are not even entitled to services by UNRWA, the only safety net left for the refugees, due to bureaucratic classifications of the refugee law. Palestinian refugees in Lebanon consist of the poorest sector in society, and the poorest grouping of Palestinian refugees in the Arab World. Due to the high population density and the civil war, Lebanon hosts an additional 42,000 unregistered refugees in approximately 20 (non-UNRWA recognized) ‘population collectives’. The internal sectarian sensitivity and the human suffering of Palestinians were more affected by the military conflicts and Israeli sieges against the camps. Palestinian refugees suffered after the PLO leadership (till then functioning as a shadow state and main shield for Palestinians) withdrew from Lebanon. Most services that were provided by the various PLO institutions were eventually aborted. The internal conflicts that occurred between the remaining Palestinian factions, and between various Lebanese groups, further aggravated the situation. In the aftermath of the 1982 Israeli massacres, the camps were again under attack.

Syria had a vested interest in gaining influence over the PLO. These interests, Israel’s aim to crush the PLO resistance, and the growing political relations of Shiite factions in the South fused. The Syrian-supported Lebanese Amal militia attacked Palestinian refugees during the 1985 battle of the camps. The bombing of refugee camps in Beirut lasted for four weeks. This internal war led to enormous destructions of the refugee camps infrastructures, and thousands of Palestinian losses (Hagopian 1985). 91 Combined with the aforementioned problems of UNRWA, and the complete lack of political relevance to Western interests, Lebanese camps represent among the worst living conditions.

The camp houses are very cold and damp in winter, and when the rain causes floods because sewage pipes get clogged, it is even more difficult to manage. In some camps, water pipes are above the ground and not protected, thus vulnerable to damage by carriages, pedestrians, or waste and as a result the water supply is

91 While camps were under siege, Palestinians joined with the Lebanese resistance front against Israeli occupation and Israel’s client South Lebanese Army. See more in Elaine C. Hagopian (ed 1985).
sometimes contaminated. During an interview with political representative Abu Basel in Bourj Shamali he described the conditions:

In 1974 four schools were build in this camp, now in 2004 we have the same four schools and they were never developed or improved. Meanwhile the population increased from 11,000 to 17,000, 40 to 45 children are jammed into one classroom. In this winter 19 houses are in urgent need for reconstruction. A few days ago pieces of a ceiling fell down on a person that was sleeping.

Working and participating in the camps meant that one had to face the reality of these facts. During the course of research, several interviews were cancelled because it was difficult to move around the camp due to overflowed alleys and power cuts. There is not always a sense of misery as one would expect. Samar and Maher from Shatila express the love/hate relationship people have towards Lebanon:

Lebanon and Palestine are like two mothers, one gave us the soul and the other raised us. Our main mother is Palestine for we are not from Lebanon’s blood. Life in a camp is full of contradictions, its beautiful and at same time miserable. If you want to see people suffer, come to the camp where we face so many problems. But when I have been away for a few days I feel the need to go back to our camp where it’s warm and I feel safe. Samar

We didn’t sell our land or abandon our homeland, we didn’t pretend to be different, or twist our tongues to look and sound Lebanese, and we are still living as Palestinians. Maher

As depicted in Samar’s narrative, a history of collective Palestinian and Lebanese resistance against Israel is an important factor in the refugee’s sentiments towards Lebanon. The heroic stories, songs, plays, and poems about the revolutionary years in Lebanon still inspire Palestinians in the diaspora and Occupied Territories. The folk references also still fuel a recurring aspiration: a return to Palestine. But the right of return, although affirmed in international UN Resolution 194, was not even mentioned in the 1993 Oslo Agreement because as Chomsky (2001) argued, Oslo was a total victory, on every point.

Based on the findings discussed in the previous section, it was not surprising to find that the internet’s primary value is defined in terms of an alternative Palestinian public sphere. Increasing divisions of Palestinian communities along regional lines (resulting from displacement) also became present internally (inside Palestine) resulting from the wall cutting the West Bank and checkpoints paralysing mobility between the West Bank and Gaza. Internet facilitates in reconnecting Palestinian society (and refugees in particular) by offering a virtual space that is accessible. Interactive (between countries) and intra-active (in the camp/country) internet communication led to ground-breaking changes; with this tool the diaspora is given the possibility to talk and see each other (with voice chat and web cam). The interviews I conducted, the drawings and posters or discussions and songs that I saw and encountered, expressed an agonizing spirit and proved to me that the hope of
return remains an important premise. One of the ways to realize part of the diasporas’
dream is the strengthening of personal ties with historic Palestine. Because for the
refugees ‘outside’, people who live inside (historic Palestine and OT) personify the
‘lost’ and ‘future’ Palestinian state. The examples provided within the context of the
refugee camps in Jordan and Lebanon, illustrate the importance of internet usage as a
social outlet, especially virtual mobility.

3.3 Virtual (alternative) Mobility

If I didn't have the internet during the Ramallah sieges, I would have been
insane by now. Rama, Ramallah, 2002.

The internet can transcend different forms of spaces by, for example, linking people
from offline diasporic territories. The internet gives people a sense of empowerment
and at the same time motivates them to reach out beyond their own territorial places.
Online spaces are vehicles that assert and visualize the dream of a territorial Palestinian
space. However, the existing objective conditions, such as the required capital to
obtain a PC, infrastructure for cable connection, or mediocre connectivity, can still
limit internet users. But, the internet ‘glue’ got stickier when possibilities for
interactive/participatory usage became easier. Access to (and consumption of), the
internet requires a basic computer and telephone connection. Similarly, managing
production of internet content only requires training that can be obtained in
community-camp centres, schools, from friends, or even learned autodidactic. As a
result, different alternative online communities are being set-up, often framed
according to national and political aspirations.

The section before clarified that the assumed disappearance of (the value)
state and national community is not the main problem but that direct disappearance
of villages, olive trees, houses, and a violent abortion of part of Palestinian history are.
The strong nostalgia towards a Palestinian national community online and offline is a
reminder of what is lost. As long as injustice from loss of land, autonomy, and exile
exist, the wish for Palestinian independence/national identity (Chapter Four) and
activism (Chapter Seven) most probably also will. Understanding the relative meaning
of the concept of virtual mobility was a personal experience when I lived in the
occupied territories. Being bored or lonely during curfew, or upset and angry because
the entrance to a town was closed by checkpoints had a profound impact on me.
Fieldwork realities made me also value the relevance of the internet. Thus rather than
replace or substitute the offline or everyday, I my online interactions to contribute to
and strengthen them. Online community is therefore embedded in real life.

92 It is important to acknowledge the problems of digital divide and ‘virtual imperialism’, a term coined by
Rheingold (1993).
93 Immobility and isolation as viewed from my own experience is certainly unparalleled with those of
Palestinians without alternatives. Ultimately, as a foreign researcher it was a matter of choice whether to
stay. Most Palestinians were not free to choose.
After having viewed forced mobility, I now take a closer look at how virtual mobility can be an outlet, allowing an escape into virtual reality through online encounters with comrades, other peer groups, or newly found family members. Zen, who lived her whole life in the West Bank and was a student at Birzeit University, told me about her experience finding a family member on the internet:

I got in touch with an aunt in Australia through the internet. I email her and we have more contact now. She motivates me to visit her. It was difficult for me to decide whether to call her, how to introduce myself, what to say. I was afraid that if you meet a person you have never seen in real life before, it will be so different. I also met family in Austria and Canada through the internet. I started to know people I never even knew existed. Zen, Ramallah 2002

The new encounters between refugees through the internet also meant a transformation of the idealized imagined community. The many NGO projects and grassroots initiatives I got acquainted with (run by people from the camp or volunteers) formed the backbone of institutionalized online communities.

Several on-the-ground initiatives brought internet advantages to a higher level. Some projects were set up within existing community programs, which was an important strategy because they could build on community support that they already had. The new initiatives in the camps symbolized the upheaval of Palestinian professional internet practices. The role of the internet proved crucial to helping save the academic education in Palestine during the Intifada. All these enterprises might be viewed as a revolutionary leap in the evolution of Palestinian communication. Palestinians soon engaged in many of the internet-mediated public spheres. What evolved from spontaneous and incidental initiatives, continued to grow and professionalize. In this section I wish to go deeper into how the local context and online traversals of the diaspora developed through the introduction of mailing lists, local internet initiatives, and grassroots chat participation.

**Evolution of a grassroots tool**

The development of direct online interaction via the internet already started in the 1990s with Palestinian intellectuals. Hanafi (2001) discussed one of the first Palestinian projects of internet-based networks—Palestinian Scientists and Technologists Abroad (Palesta). The Palesta network functioned as a discussion group as well as a database of professional Palestinians in the (West) diaspora and aimed to find a solution to the sense of isolation many felt as a result of inaccessibility to Palestinian territory. Recognizing the impossibility of returning to Palestine and the reality of immobility, Palesta’s mailing list constituted an important cost-effective means of communication. The project was set-up in order to “harness the scientific

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84 Here 'embeddedness' is not a question of choice, political-economy are also determining factors, like the lack of access to infrastructure and cables, prohibition of sending letters to and from Palestine, impossibility of visiting a relative across the border, difficulty of obtaining permission for opening an IC in a camp, etc.
and technological knowledge of expatriate professionals for the benefit of
development efforts in Palestine” (Hanafi 2001:4). The online discussions covered a
variety of issues, like the eventual return to the homeland, or the mismanagement of
the PLO leadership. Palesta was the first to create a relation between the off- and on-
line worlds and formed a unique online public sphere. However, as it may be typical
of any public sphere, this online network did not include of social strata.

Hanafi’s study was an important introduction to the new communication
styles. The virtual interactions via Palesta were a new way of returning to Palestine.
This networking through the internet does not suggest the end of geography but a
reshaping of geography by connecting the different dispersed communities. Palesta
privileged middle class Palestinians because the academic community in countries
such as Britain or the US was the main group involved in these internet-mediated
communications, and thus, the dominant language of communication was English
(Hanafi 2001:15). Palesta was the predecessor of a technique that became one of the
most important communication tools: emailing comments or contributions to a list
of subscribers. When the internet made its mass appearance, auspiciously coinciding
with the Intifada, an explosion of similar initiatives appeared online. What began as an
elite communication style became an infrastructure used by non-elite mass audiences
and grassroots organizations.

The Netscape Usenet groups like soc.culture.palestine and soc.culture.arab
were the first, and Yahoo E-Groups such as IAPinfo or FreePalestine! soon followed
in the virtual scene. At the time of my fieldwork, statistics of these groups showed
that March and April 2002 were the peak months: these were the months that the
Jenin massacres and attack on Arafat’s compound took place. The FreePalestine!
mailing list started in November 2001 and called itself “A secular voice in the
electronic wilderness” and aimed at connecting Palestinians and sympathizers. The
mailing lists were successful in linking the online and offline networks. Internet helped
evolve new social bonds between individuals and organizations by transcending
borders and government regulations People were able to get in touch in ways not
possible before. This type of internet communication changed the dynamics of
relationships, whether person to person or person to institutions.

The new internet media proved to be a very important tool in connecting
communities to one another. Post-Oslo returnees and expatriates played a crucial role
in the development of Palestinian based information sources as they started their own
mailings and websites to share their experiences. Sam Bahour explained how the need
for closer internal contact and alternative information came together:

When a lot of us IT-oriented Palestinians returned from different
countries in the world, we were like orphans. In a country that was not
particularly on the brink of an IT revolution either, so we created the
ITSIG mailing list as a group of friends. We started with ten guys from
abroad related to IT. It now has 600 members of IT-focused people in
Palestine. It moved from friendly discussions and ‘lets go out for coffee
tonight’, to discussing and criticizing policy issues, bringing up new ideas,
and providing a soundboard for IT issues.  

Sam Bahour had returned to Palestine from the US just two years before the Intifada in 2000. He also began sending personal stories from his own email address to friends and family. But the emails then grew out into a mailing list of more than 1000 subscribers, who would in return forward the stories to others. This was the experience of different initiatives.

Karma Abu Sharif, who lived in Palestine when I interviewed her, is a 28-year-old Palestinian/Lebanese woman who had also returned with her father after Oslo. She was trained as a journalist in Britain and had some journalistic experience in Beirut. We met for several long talks in 2001 and 2002 when she explained how her internet involvement started:

I followed the mainstream media and heard nothing about what was happening on the ground, something that really gave me a panic. 10 people were killed daily with live ammunition to the head. We would hear “10 Palestinians are killed in clashes”. But what are these ‘clashes’? In fact, they are children demonstrating—throwing stones that couldn’t even reach a tank, that are being shot in the head. I call that ‘targeted killings’. So I would send emails to anyone who I thought could make a difference. About what was actually going on, with the names of the killed children, how they were killed…I started mailing 5 or 6 friends, and began doing it almost every day.

Karma and Sam illustrate two different examples of the birth of a new strategic tool used to confront the biased news. In fact, nearly all Palestinian mailing lists started with the Intifada and out of a great sense of frustration about the media. The emails were widely forwarded and eventually the messages created a snowball effect. In due course, the initiatives became more structured, frequent, and professional. Karma recalls her new internet enterprise, a contribution that helped establish a grassroots archive of events in Palestine during the Intifada years:

…I discovered that there is local and alternative news but that it is not being exported. I spoke the language [English] well, could relate to the [American/European] people, and knew how to get through to them. I sometimes have to downplay my stories because the truth is so astonishing that people just won’t believe you. Although I also got hate mail many people encouraged me to continue. The point is; it went up from my own 5 friends, to a few thousand subscribers. People started addressing me as ‘staff’, not knowing just one person was behind it. Now that I look back at the archive, I see that I have a full record of the Intifada because I did it on a daily basis, non-stop, for three years.

Understanding the world of Western journalism very well as a freelance journalist, Karma Abu Sharif diverted her frustration and anger with Hear Palestine (see Picture 15) into what she could do best. News from Hear Palestine’s mailing list made a

95 Interview Ramallah, 13/11/02
difference for independent journalists and activists who couldn't find such local sources for themselves. Israel distributed piles of well-written, Western style ready-made information for journalists. Organizers complained to me that journalists were very lazy; the cut and paste technique seemed the most used method, and most were not even based in the Occupied Territories.

Karma’s *Hear Palestine* briefings and journalism were a creative and unique response to fill this gap. Middle East journalists of British and American papers, but also several Israeli journalists were on her mailing list. The briefings developed and improved throughout the different phases of the Intifada. From the hurriedly written and angry personal accounts, they became newsletters widely circulating online. The newsletters started with a small introduction, then a section detailing what had happened in the different cities; it often continued with a her own feature story, and ended with news on international solidarity events. According to Karma, people needed and wanted this kind of information badly: “I can’t believe people are interested in Britney Spear’s virginity while these atrocities are taking place” was one of the solidarity responses she received to her briefings.

Mailing lists and website organizers told me that frequency, tone, language, and content were the crucial elements determining successful Palestinian Public Relations. Similar to *Free Palestine!*’s attempt to focus mainly on political work, the *Palestine Monitor* (Picture 12) mailing list targeted specific audiences with specific approaches. They had the Dutch, British, French, German, and American members of parliament and congress as well as various solidarity groups on their list. The British parliament members did not receive the mailings everyday for tactical reasons:

> Internet is an unbelievable tool for us. Only a few can come to Palestine but we still want people to see the situation. When we first started we had about 50 people on the mailing list. In two years we build it up to 13,000 people. It is important they get something innocuous, not ‘the horrible Israeli army attacked innocent Palestinians’ messages, but some 20 readable lines of what basically happened. We also have other subscribers who want regular things, like media people that work in Israel and Palestine. Eventually, it’s not a matter of numbers, but what could actually be done.

The international reports on *Hear Palestine* and *Palestine Monitor* also offered news of demonstrations in Italy and Britain in order to bridge the international solidarity groups with Palestinians.

In July 2001, *Hear Palestine* subscribers received a simple email saying, “We apologize for recent delays, *Hear Palestine* has been sabotaged”. It was obvious that everybody did not appreciate Karma’s work: she was hacked by pro-Israeli hacktivists. Nevertheless, in a technological/cyber way, Karma continued to play her part in political activism equipped with a computer, radio, newspapers and mobile phone as her weapons. At the time of our meetings, *Hear Palestine* had become a full time job, almost an obsession:
I start my day very early, read the local newspapers and then listen to Palestinian radio Sawt Falastin [the voice of Palestine], which gives daily detailed local news. I then switch off my mobile, take a pen and paper, concentrate, and just write and write, putting it all down in my own style. Every hour I try to listen to Israeli Arab radio stations, BBC Arabic, or check the official Palestinian press agency Wafa to complete my stories. I know the staff at Wafa by now so I phone them and sometimes get the news before it’s published.96

The acceleration of violence and the dramatic events in 2002 were also part of the work on mailing lists, like Karma said:

What I see and hear is insane, we Palestinians seem to stop realizing ourselves how drastic it actually is. Hear Palestine became an obsession. I even stopped seeing people. I would feel guilty just sitting and talking to friends. I almost fell into a depression and had to take a break from everything.

Anger about the media bias was turned into something useful by the work of Karma. As outlined before, in this sense the second Intifada showed to be different compared to the first Intifada in 1987-1991. More than ever, information from Palestinian sources manages to go out and travel over time and space. But this doesn’t offer the end of occupation; Patricia at Palestine Monitor offered an important insight: “We don’t know how much better it could have been, but we also don’t know how worse the situation would be if we didn’t have this availability to news and information thanks to the internet.”

The Palestine Monitor mailing list continued working during the sieges of Palestinian cities and even the siege of its office in March 2002. When the Webmaster had to escape to Jerusalem, they managed to bring out the urgent appeals and local news that were clearly barred from mainstream media. The appeal to take action in a report titled ‘Attacks on Medical Services’ is a good example. It described in detail the people (doctors, ambulance drivers, nurses) that were killed. It showed that the Israeli attacks deliberately prevented health care from reaching the injured civilians. The Palestine Monitor reminded its receivers how this was a severe violation of international law and the 4th Geneva Convention in which it is agreed to protect medical services. These laws were ignored when Israeli soldiers attacked marked cars, and after the Red Cross had coordinated their arrival prior to the local army staff. Some of these inside stories were taken over by other media sources.

Alternative mobility progressed beyond the level of mailing lists. It also meant the creation of a virtual gate for intellectual survival - one of the most important priorities for Palestinian society.

96 Interview Ramallah Palestine, 2001
The Great Portal

Education is a major priority in Palestinian life. Universities managed to hold classes and students graduated throughout many years of crisis. To add additional complexities, the policy of destruction and curfews are accompanied by closures, putting Israeli military roadblocks and checkpoints between students and their school or university. In short, it is now common knowledge that Sharon is sentencing young generations to illiteracy, or at best, ignorance. Sam Bahour, Ramallah, 2002.

Sometimes something extremely negative like a military occupation, can lead to something exceptionally progressive as Karma showed above. A new programme for E-learning was also born out of a great necessity. This “combined and uneven development” symbolized that everyday conditions are not determined only by linear historical developments. Apart from a strong sense of necessity due to the practical fact of occupation related to the Second Intifada, the empowering connection between IT and education also ties with Palestinian history.

Social mobility in Palestinian society is mainly achieved through education. All other significant arenas, political or economic were inaccessible by occupation; but intellectual space was relatively independent in the occupied territories. Computers and IT are linked to education and have a flavour of development. These considerations therefore offered internet use an important legitimacy. I would often hear examples of a Palestinian father that certainly wishes to buy a computer for his daughter because he hopes it will be an investment for her education and thus her future.

One of the most exciting examples I encountered of the revolutionary effects of the internet relates directly to the Intifada and occupation. ‘Ritaj’ at Birzeit University in Palestine, is an internet Portal for students and faculty originally initiated to improve administrative efficiency. The aims were more efficient procedures for admission, registration, course selection, and to improve communication between faculty and students. But the project was stalled by the constant disruptions of occupation and checkpoints between Ramallah and Birzeit. In March 2002, when the Israeli Occupation Forces entered Ramallah and imposed a curfew, physical access to the University was very limited. Unless something was done to address the situation immediately, it would cause catastrophic implications for the students and the University. At that moment the Computer Centre at Birzeit realized that the internet based portal that they envisioned before the Intifada, could be adapted as an effective tool in combating the extreme situation. The initial system was restructured and became an on-line educational support tool for students and staff. The IT team worked day and night for two months to develop and implement the system. It was impressive how they designed and tested the first ever On-Line Learning System of Palestine. The house of one of the IT coordinators was turned into the primary workstation to enable the programmers to work round the clock and avoid further delay by curfew. They decided to name it “Ritaj”, meaning ‘the great portal’ in Arabic.
Almost 30% of the students at the time of the launch were computer illiterate and as such would not be able to use the system. In response, the IT department decided to set up computer literacy courses that could at least provide students with the basics. The high acceptance rate by the university community surprised the staff at the Computer Centre. The faculties soon realized that, in effect, Ritaj would not only solve the curfew and closure crises at the time, but could entail a revolution in the general learning process of Palestine. Despite occupation, closures, curfews, and other disruptions, Birzeit University managed to complete two out of three semesters of the 2001/2002 academic year in August 2002. It also enabled over 3,300 students to register for the first semester of the 2002/2003 academic year online, saving them the trouble and humiliation of crossing or bypassing the checkpoints and making the dangerous trip to Birzeit University for this purpose. Though Ritaj was still a new service, the results for using it as a tool to confront the challenges created by the occupation and curfews were astonishing. It provided Birzeit University with the capability to participate in the information technology era - despite and because of Palestine’s many political and economic disadvantages. Professional initiatives like Ritaj and Palestine Monitor were not the only ones to go online; everyday Palestinian internet engagement was also very inspiring.

Refugee Encounters: Local initiatives

One of the most important effects of ‘virtual’ technology is its transnational virtue and ability to locate and localize. 21-year-old Nuhad from Shatila camp is one of the people I spoke with showing great interest in local Palestinian culture and history. Through the internet she found a new way to gain further knowledge about, among other topics, traditional Palestinian costume:

We knew songs and stories about Palestine before, but only the basics. Now, every time I am at the internet café I surf websites about Palestine. It helps to understand more about Palestinian culture, music, etc., things that I didn’t know before. I didn’t know which traditional costumes and dresses belonged to which city for example. Was it from Ramallah or Nablus? We didn’t even know where that city was located exactly. On the internet there are photos and explanations about what these things are, and where they come from.

This quote clarifies the way in which the internet, and specifically, chat rooms, websites, and mailing lists, provide the infrastructure for a Palestine in cyber space. ‘Cyber’ and ‘offline’ Palestine mirrors people’s dreams, and reflects their desperate desire for a country. The wide variety of Palestinian websites and internet forums epitomize the different Palestinian cities and communities. And while the flow of emails and increases in interactive mailing lists have given insight into Palestinian opinions, cultures, and ideologies, the voice-chat and web-cams have became the ears, eyes, and voice of Palestinians. Online newsgroups and digital newspapers indicate a
critical Palestinian public sphere and media. In addition, many Palestinians are also engaging in private internet projects like family web logs and mailing lists.

When symbols of Palestinian national identity are represented, promoted, and shared, Palestinians inside and outside come together. As national identity inside the occupied territories changed over the last 4-6 decades, the ‘outside’ diaspora sometimes found what they heard or saw strange. For them, national Palestinian identity is mostly based on how Palestinian life, culture, and society was when grand/parents left the country; what is being recalled is an idealized Palestinian homeland.

Besides visiting various types of Palestinian websites, Palestinians engage in online chats that cover a variety of subjects such as romances, lifestyle, or sports. Examples like Arab Idols Star Academy contest and the World Cup matches were prominent at the time of fieldwork between 2002 and 2004. People are communicating on different scales; besides the virtual ‘global’, there are many commonalities between Palestinian and non-Palestinian internet users. The internet as a global network still very much relates to local realities and spaces. Websites with a predominantly local relevance have a focal point through its users and producers. As Kellner argued, global forces influence or structure local situations (2002:295), while local/real time (language/mobility/economic) constraints also impact internet use.

Sanaa, a 16-year-old Palestinian who returned from Italy only two years prior to our interview, was facing problems when surfing the internet. Some of the popular and interactive websites she wanted to view were in Arabic, but as a Palestinian refugee who was raised in Europe she didn’t read or write Arabic. The language disability was actually one of the less difficult problems she faced. Sanaa’s reflections illustrate how a range of issues fuses when talking about internet use in a country that was just recovering from Israeli siege, civil war, and sectarian politics. She explained that she actually didn’t know much about Lebanon before she came to live in the camps. Except from the nice things her grandparents told her over the phone of course. If Italian friends asked about ‘their country’, she and her sisters would describe how beautiful Lebanon and how exciting Beirut was. When the family was unable to stay in Italy due to tough migration laws and had to return to Bourj al-Barajne camp in Beirut, everything turned out to be different. Life in a camp did not have much to do with the nice descriptions she gave of Lebanon:

I remember that the first day we returned to Bourj there was no electricity in the camp. It was dark and they kept saying that ‘it will come back’. We were surprised and asked our parents ‘from where will ‘it’ come?’ Now we are used to it. Sometimes when there is no electricity and TV, I go to the internet café because at least they have the extra [UPS, unlimited power supply] electricity.

Sometimes the internet participation of refugees is an extra challenge in other ways. An innovative example of new opportunities to include Palestinian refugees in the larger political developments was the ‘refugee poll’. While they are the
key to a just solution for the conflict, refugees have always been neglected in the decision-making process concerning Palestinian rights. When the Palestinian National Authority (PNA) prepared for new elections in 2002, it was essentially undemocratic because the largest group of its population (refugees and diaspora) were not represented. The idea behind the ‘refugee poll’ was to present an election poll amongst Palestinian refugees in Lebanon, done by the people themselves, through a survey. Through the internet, election ballots were distributed, and after these were collected from the organizations in the refugee camps, they were to be sent to representatives in the PNA and the UN.

This example also sheds light on general inequalities and internal Palestinian diversity. It is a challenge to include different segments in society, not just the politically active or experienced. Sassen shows that the internet is not autonomous from (state) power in terms of sovereignty and democracy; therefore we must ask critical questions about which actors are gaining influence and whose claims are gaining legitimacy (2005:376). Regardless of the fact that this initiative did not have direct political effect, the refugee’s opinion towards the right of return, possible compensation agreement, and general political arguments were at least documented. But as more such local initiatives were developed to use the internet and document their history, there were more challenges to face.

Robert Fisk wrote about one project called *Eye-to-Eye* that had an effect on the Palestinian refugee children of Lebanon.97

There are 32 children in the class, all Palestinian, all new experts on the internet. (...) where do they all come from, I ask? And the answer is, of course, not Lebanon—even though they were born there. “Safad,” says one. “Hitin”. “Tabaria”. “Nimerin.” “Sminya,” says a little girl wearing a scarf. All are a town that are —or were- in what is present-day Israel.

Though they live in Ein al-Hilwe (Sidon), the largest camp in Lebanon, these children got their own website through which they talk to other children in the world. More such initiatives were taken, either in cooperation with established projects and beneficiaries, or through self-made efforts.

Capturing the history of the Nakba (1948 ‘catastrophe’) and making sure witness accounts and facts will be recorded and remembered is a great concern and motivation for using the internet in these initiatives in the camps in Lebanon, as well as for historians who set up projects with this goal. Smaller projects are also part of the bigger programmes, and while looking more closely I noticed many similar activities in different places. The Beirut based Palestinian NGO Arcpa98 was involved in a project collecting personal stories related to the Nakba and exile to Lebanon. Subsequently the narratives are digitalized in order to have an accessible and preserved

97 The Independent, December 31, 2003. *Web lets Palestinian children find world beyond refugee camp.* There are many more examples, these are some of the one’s I encountered that show the role of internet in relation to the questions I raise.

98 This NGO was involved with a larger Oral History project with researchers Rosemary Sayigh and Diana where conducting hundreds of video and interview recordings about the Nakba experiences.
archive via the internet. Palestinian children interviewed the elderly in the camp who fled in 1948, and are thus responsible for collecting material and conducting the interviews. At the small Arcpa office, the children can use the internet and computer for additional work, and sometimes just for fun. According to Mu'taz Dajani: “This way history will stay alive while Palestinian diasporas share experiences.”

The Palestinian organization for children and youth, Nabe’, in Nahr al-Bared refugee camp organized the first *Eye-To-Eye* project that Robert Fisk later observed in Ein al-Hilwe. In Nahr al-Bared too, Palestinian children were connected to the world for the first time. Children on the *Save the Children* website give the following message: “We want to tell you what our lives are like as Palestinian refugees using our own photography and stories. We were cut off from young people in other countries, but through *Eye-To-Eye* we can make links worldwide.” Because the project was simultaneously presented in Balata refugee camp (Nablus-Palestine), the people in Nahr al-Bared were connected with Palestine. Besides linking Palestinians in Lebanon to Palestine, children actively portrayed stories and pictures about their daily lives and collected testimonies about their family’s past. All the stories, pictures, and drawings were then put on the website. By discovering new things, talking about their lives, and making photos of the camp, they could express themselves intensely.

The project thus raised awareness and made a deep impact on the participants who received hundreds of responses from all over the world. The success of, and enthusiasm for, the project motivated Nabe’ to set up a computer centre and continue similar internet activities. Yahia explains how one of the indirect results was to alleviate the sense of frustration among refugee children. “A colleague discovered that when the internet is disconnected, the children are more aggressive. When the connection is up, fighting between children goes down.” When we talked about the challenges and new possibilities, he was still amazed by the developments that allowed Palestinian children to be able to use the internet and be independently connected to the world.

Ten minutes from Arcpa is the Beirut-based youth and research centre Ajial, another organisation that took the initiative to share and discuss the past and contemporary history with Palestinians abroad. Abu Rabi’, founder of Ajial, and former PLO representative in Lebanon, held online meetings with youth in other Arab countries. He did this in order to give alternative analyses and raise awareness about the Palestine-Israeli conflict. Abu Rabi’ explained how they worked:

> We used the voice chat and two PCs. We prepared our own youth here, and invited other people for this discussion online. On the other side there were youth from many places in the Arab world – this lecture was about the Right of Return.

In response, Samir, a young Palestinian from the United Arab Emirates who has his own website with a chat room, invited Abu Rabi’ to give an online lecture about the situation of Palestinian refugees for his contacts in the UAE. As internet use became more organized, and thus institutionalized, it also became a tool for creating alternatives to the structural problems of Palestinian occupation and immobility.
Whereas internal differences do exist in Palestinian internet use and development, and notwithstanding that the need to use the internet is born of political realities, the internet became an alternative space for displaced Palestinians. The new developments helped to reorder relations between internet users in the Palestinian diaspora. The Israeli occupation, closures, and non-stop curfews changed the meaning of space, place, and time even more. Counterpublic spaces on the internet revealed that what makes the internet attractive is access to a space that offers both information and contact with other Palestinians. Even more successful was Palestinian grassroots internet communication in the form of chatting.

Chatting

While mailing lists were important to counter the information bias and became an alternative voice in the public sphere, the local initiatives provided a framework for refugees to learn about and participate in the new internet possibilities. Direct communication with Palestinians in the diaspora became one of the central activities Palestinians were engaged with. By means of direct (interactive) chatting, these were new ways to overcoming a more personal/individual sense of immobility by participating in private or anonymous mediums. When access became easier and a user-friendly interface popularized, chat and discussion forums boomed and penetrated everyday life. It is important to note that they differ from the more specialized journalistic mailings in the evolution of internet interactivity. While direct and open communication is a unique quality, it is not always considered the right instrument. During an interview with Joki at the office of the Palestine Monitor in Ramallah, I asked why they did not have a forum on their websites. She explained that the issue of adding interactive tools to the website was in fact discussed, but the team had reservations and decided not to add a forum page because "most of Palestine Monitor's audience are NGO/academic/press, and flashy attributes make our websites seem less serious and informative".

Ramallah Online initiator Maroufski explained during an (online) interview that “the problem of having fully open discussion facilities relates to issues of online flaming and aggression. There are many reasons why forums are a bad idea, and generally most sites do not host them [any more]. Over the years I have had to ban many members for inappropriate behaviour and generally malicious behaviour. (…) The policies currently set in place provide members a sense of security that their opinions will be respected and debated, and not verbally attacked leading to disaster on the website.”

There are more practical ways to have direct one-on-one or group interactivity, through accessible forum sites offering Arab chatting programs. The chatting possibilities are numerous and they can take place through many channels and websites such as: Palvoice, mIRC, Zorono, Al Buraq, Arabia, Maktoob, and 3oyoon. Depending on their capabilities, Palestinians could chat in English or Arabic with Latin alphabet, and when the chat programmes became more advanced, many started
chatting in Arabic as well. Most of the chat forums at the time had separate rooms for Palestinians, although anyone can enter; Arabs eager to meet Palestinians, Israelis arguing with Palestinians, the mukhabarat (secret service) and so on. Some like Buraq and Maktoob had a Palestine focus. This was partly due to the fact that the founders were Palestinian and they were the primary chat meeting point for Palestinians and continued to include diaspora Palestinians as in the case of Al Buraq.

The first thing I would see when entering public internet places in Palestine, Jordan, and Lebanon were the tiny letters and strange looking symbols on the computer screens; I frequently found lots of customers chatting. Much is possible on the internet because anonymity is its primary characteristic. Chatting on programs like MSN or Yahoo tends to be reserved for closer contacts and family.99 Other chat programs were usually used to find new (and temporary) contacts. Palestinians that don’t have direct internet access can also be part of this virtual community. 15-year-old Samah from Bourj al-Barajne camp often brings her family to the internet café to show them the pictures received from friends and family or to connect them via the web-cam to family members living elsewhere. She described the time that she found one of her uncles online:

One of the first times I entered the Palestinian chat room was very special. I said ‘Hi is there anyone from Palestine?’ And I got many reactions. Once I chatted with this man from Nablus and I asked if he happens to know my uncle, who also lives there. And he did. I was so excited and went home to tell my grandmother. The next time I took my whole family with me to the internet café.

The cases I encountered revealed that notions of place and nation are pertinent to Palestinian diasporic communication online. Yet it is relevant to this study to take a closer look at how imagined national identity is configured. A ‘common enemy’, shared suffering, and lack of mobility give collective national sentiments even greater magnitude. But, putting too much emphasis on a virtual equivalent to the offline became problematic. The examples show that direct contact, territorial land, and ‘offline reality’, were some of the most significant motivators for internet use. For many, an alternative ‘transnational’ online public sphere was not satisfactory. 17-year-old Samar from Shatila expressed this ‘longing’ best when she told me:

People really want to but don’t believe they can go back. If you cut the hope of returning to Palestine you are nobody: a person without a homeland is like a tree without roots.

The point of reference here regards participation in the construction and imagination of a Palestinian identity embedded in particular social political-economic offline contexts.

Aside from bringing family along to an internet café, local online communication can sometimes takes place from home settings in the refugee camp. One December evening in 2003, I was wrapped in a blanket, enjoying the stories and

99 Though many of these contacts were made in previous chats.
jokes of my friends’ family where I spent my nights during fieldwork in Nahr al-Bared (Tripoli, North Lebanon). The relationships between brothers, sisters, and cousins were very warm and open. It was clear to me that they missed their family that had managed to leave the country to study or work elsewhere. My friend Sanaa’ used the computer at home for her work as a teacher and two of the brothers worked in the ICT sector. I was wondering how they would respond if they realized they could have direct internet meetings with their loved one’s after only a few technical modifications. Their everyday creativity took me by surprise, because when I suggested the idea to Sanaa’, she laughed and told me:

Oh yes! we already did. I remember one evening we were all sitting like this, with argilah [shisha/waterpipe device for smoking], coffee, etc. We invited Shimal’s [brother in the Emirates] friends, our cousins, my parents and sisters. We put the speakers on and stayed up all night chatting, sharing jokes, and talking about the latest news in the camp.

Next to these special events people mostly use the internet to check their email or chat. This is not because they were not interested in examining websites and surfing the World Wide Web. In fact, contacts often told me they regretted not being able to spend more time surfing sites; email and chat takes most of the time because by the time they finished with that, the hour budget at the Internet Cafe has expired.

Yahoo Messenger and Hotmail MSN services were the most popular instruments for direct chat. Before Hotmail enabled Arabic chat, the Arabic-based chat and email service Maktoob had also recognized these potentials. Their primary aim, as Sameeh Toqan explained during an interview in 2003, was “the spread of Arabic language on the internet and to be the force behind facilitating communication among Arabs”. They continued to design even better alternatives for Arabs to chat: “We cannot go into competition with MSN or Messenger as they are too strong, but we offer a new email edition that can simultaneously include chat communication with Yahoo and Hotmail.” Maktoob was actually the fastest growing Arabic website with the largest membership in the 18-35 age group. The clearest virtue of internet use was the virtual mobility that led to new online encounters and virtual transformations, along with its deeper (unintended) effects on Palestinian refugees.

### 3.4 Living in a Virtual World

I feel that I want to jump into my computer and run in the fields, or play in the snow; I want to enjoy the beauty of my land. Maybe you have seen many beautiful countries. But this is the first time I see how beautiful my land is. All I want to say is, despite what Israel is doing, we will keep these pictures in our mind. Dali, Shatila, 2004.

Dali from Shatila told me about the moment she received a collection of pictures by email. The pictures showed places in Palestine. Her reconnection with Palestinian soil was a virtual experience through a selection of picturesque images that looked like
postcard images. She forwarded them to her friends with the title ‘Here is our past, present, and future’ and the above quote attached. Through the internet these symbols and personal expressions—embedded, shaped, and re-signified in locally specific ways, found their way into a global cyber space. However, rather than idealizing the online, it is important to remember that the virtual is neither a free ‘global village’, nor a ‘substitute’. Instead of assuming computer-mediated relations to be as significant as everyday face-to-face contact, virtual communities and spaces encourage collective strength and support as well as exclusion and restriction - just like in everyday life.

The internet’s importance to diasporic communities lies in the fact that the online has the potential to include those otherwise cut off, absent, or far away. I want to understand what this means for exiled Palestinian diasporas’, those for whom the ‘offline' nation is unavailable and who are left with strong feelings of nostalgia. It is important to remember that online communication styles are sometimes ‘involuntary’ (the only alternative communication available). As Abu Muzahed told me during an interview:

The Intifada gave additional momentum to the impact of the internet in peoples' personal and social life. People felt they deserved to live and dream. They were not able to do so in actual life, so they found a substitute for this on the net.

Palestinian transformations in such spatial ways therefore need to be viewed critically. After having introduced the birth of online mobility and communication, it is also important to present the unintended or dark side of increasing internet mobility and communication. To avoid simplistic conclusions about the disappearance of ‘real’ distance and locality, and to better understand how people are linked to the internet, I use the concept of ‘escapism’. Although I do not necessarily use escapism in its overtly pessimistic sense, this complex concept can be useful in placing online experience in a broader context. First I will look at the new online encounters and zoom into peoples experiences in the camps. The examples of online escapism I encountered particularly seemed to be caused by the need to escape everyday miseries by seeking online pleasures.

**Online Traversals as Social Outlet**

In 2000, Maisoon, a Palestinian volunteer working in Shatila refugee camp, gathered a group of youngsters and tried to connect them with refugees in the West Bank camp of Dheisheh. The children initially communicated with each other through the volunteer’s own email account; she would print out the letters and deliver them to the youth. In 2001, 14 and 13 year old Samer and Shiraz from Shatila described to me how they started a unique relationship with members of Dheisheh camp:

We got to know each other by writing emails and became friends. Now it is more then friendship, we are like brothers and sisters...Everybody in our group has a friend in Dheisheh. We talk about personal things and problems, about what we are doing and our study. And we email each
other on birthdays, Ramadan, and al-Eid.

A week ago we emailed our friends in Dheisheh and told them that we memorialized the Sabra and Shatila massacre that happened exactly 20 years ago and that we had a big demonstration.

Their knowledge developed since they began using the internet. Making their own camp websites was one of Shiraz’s major interests. She helped write stories about their life in the camp, and thought about ways to design the homepage. Besides communicating with their ‘brothers and sisters’ in Palestine, these youngsters use the internet to reach the outside world and express their grievances. When asked about their motivation for having a website, Samer and Shiraz explained:

To let our voice be heard, to let people know how we are living, what our feelings are. It’s important, we already know how they live [in the West], and they must also know how we live. Then maybe they will know more about Palestinian history and our rights.

It is to let people know that we still hope to return to Palestine and that living in the camps is different then living in Palestine. We want to have a positive relation [with the world] and work together in order to return.

At the time it seemed that chatting was one of the most popular activities on the net among camp youth. Pop culture and romance are favourite topics, but the political situation also dominated their style and discourse. Eventually, what most Palestinians want is to be heard and break through the walls that exclude them from political debate or decision-making. When questioned whom in particular they like to chat with, and about what, many interviewees answered that next to Palestinians, Israelis are their favourite. Shiraz from Shatila was explicit about it:

Once I fought with an Israeli woman on mIRC. She said that there is no country called Palestine, and that all Palestinians are terrorists. I said, “Than you do think there are ‘Palestinians’ from a country called Palestine?” She said that Palestinians are terrorists because they bomb themselves. I said it was the only way to make Israel give us our freedom. She said ‘they should kill the soldiers, not the civilians’. I said, “Many Israeli civilians have weapons and kill Palestinians too or take other peoples’ houses and steal the best places in Palestine”. I was a bit rude, but at the end I felt stronger.”

Contact grew even stronger between camps in Lebanon and Palestine, and after having only been in touch by email, the youth were rewarded. After the final Israeli withdrawal from South Lebanon in May 2000, both camps organized to meet at the border. The children that chatted and emailed for a year, now met each other face-to-face. Refugees from both sides shouted their family names, some held up pictures of missing relatives. The refugees from Lebanon tasted olives (and even sand) that the refugees from the West Bank brought them. These random and spontaneous

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100 Some of the stories described here by the children interviewed can also be seen in a documentary by Lebanese filmmaker May Masri, “Frontiers of dreams and Fears” 2001.
meetings were soon replaced by coordinated visits, organized by Palestinian committees and NGOs on both sides of the dividing fence. But it wasn’t long before the Israeli army intervened. According to Muataz, coordinator of one of the projects in a refugee camp, this development should be viewed carefully. He was concerned that the close connections would create a negative impact on the children:

The presents that were given at the [Lebanese-Israeli] borders represented the soil: olives, oil, and bread. Hope of return is revived by the internet and eventually also with physical contacts. But the combination of a confrontation with the land and their unfulfilled hopes is precarious. First there was one fence so people could stand very close, touch, hug, and kiss one another. Then they made another fence, which made it difficult to meet physically, or give each other presents. When the refugees tried to break through anyway, Israeli soldiers reacted with violence. Eventually they even divided the borders with a no-man’s-land in between making it impossible to meet. People from both sides could only shout at each other from a distance. While the Intifada continued, it was prohibited to visit the borders and the soldiers shot anyone who tried.

The territorial relation with Palestine and its history proved to be important for continuing internet activities. Throughout this project, and after the border meetings, the children’s longing for historical Palestine, its land, houses, and trees was stronger than before. The fear expressed by different organizers is that with the increased communication, the desire to return to Palestine will be stronger, while a solution for the refugees is farther away than ever.

Virtual Escapism

Palestinians who connect with family in other parts of the world use the internet as a practical solution for a community that is still divided. Reconnections take place with the land by those who have never been there before but only imagined it. The idea of escapism is of extra importance with regards to immobility because Palestinian conditions strengthen the double-edged characteristic of escapism. Maps, pictures, audio sound, and other references to Palestine and the 1948 Nakba, fused with online imagination of collective Palestinian identity, show the juxtaposition of the virtual and the real. Nevertheless, bypassing colonial occupation where hardcore offline realities are employed to dominate and oppress is not possible. The discovery of online alternatives may for example have unexpected counter effects, leading away from the goal. As Rannia from Jordan told me about her attempts to help Palestine:

There is a danger that after spending two hours emailing you think you’ve done the fight for the Palestinian cause for that day. And so you might not go out and participate in a demonstration, which might have a more direct effect. Alternatives are those who combine these efforts and tools, like Al Awda [international organisation for the Right of Return] who held successful demonstrations because of their mobilizations on the internet. Again, it’s a tool and you need to look at it in that perspective. Internet is not going to save Palestine, but it’s going to contribute to the liberation of
Palestine. Had it not happened, I’m sure it would have been much worse.

Overall, the intensity and frequency of internet communication concerning the Intifada saw a decrease over the past five years. The (worsening) Intifada can have radicalizing as well as demoralizing and alienating effects on internet use. For some Palestinians the developments translated into political participation and eagerness, for others it eventually led to more frustration and sometimes fatalism leading to rejection. Nuhad in Shatila Camp decided she will no longer open/receive emails with images of massacres. She only wanted ‘softer’ pictures such as of stone throwers or Palestinian folklore, or emails with Palestinian songs. I found this change in attitude among other Palestinians I interviewed as well because the priorities of online use are often shaped by the political developments of a particular moment.

Nuhad’s shift in opinion about pictures and images of the Intifada confirmed that the situation was getting hopeless and many people got politically exhausted. It is apparent that the political developments push/pull radicalisation among internet users. Their parallel life in the virtual world allows them to escape their everyday living conditions and, at the same time, confronts them with a world that could have been theirs. Dali once told me that the internet was for her like a glass wall, referring to her internet boyfriend from Gaza: “I only wish to see him for real but I can’t. It’s like I can see him but I cannot touch him. It makes it even worse sometimes”. Escapism is fuelled by isolation, entrapment, boredom, humiliation, and homesickness.

Abu Mujahed, an active organiser at a youth centre in Shatila refugee camp, also explained why a turn to internet has a special meaning for the Palestinians in Lebanon’s’ refugee camps. The Lebanese government provides no significant services for the camps because:

The government treats the camp like a leaf in autumn—they think ‘just leave it and it will fall off by itself’. They know how miserable and inhumane the situation in the camp is—without basic education or healthcare. And that there are criminals and drug addicts hiding in the camps. They know but they just leave it until it will collapse by itself. I think that’s why we find girls and boys going to the Internet so much. They escape to another world. One writes love letters, others discuss politics, or even looking for pornography. They are spending time there [online], to run away from reality here.

Community leaders like Dajani fear that the increased communication and desire to return to Palestine might lead to negative consequences. Disappointment and disillusionment might result in depression and therefore “sometimes it’s better not to know”. Moreover, online escapism can cause feelings of ‘alienation’ because virtual participation often means individual experience, increasing the sense of loneliness or exclusion because of a lack of face-to-face contact.

Some of those who wanted to use internet in the camp faced more difficulties, reminding us, again, that the realities faced by Palestinian refugees cannot
be overcome merely by escaping into the internet. As Samer in Shatila then told me during one of our first meetings:

When I asked for internet at home the company agreed. But when they saw my address and I said ‘in the camp’ they said ‘sorry we can’t connect you’. They are scared of the camps.

The ‘wired’ community still excludes. Moreover, instead of turning virtual reality into computer networked ‘flows’ of minds and emotions, Zizek (1997:154) warned that the overwhelming internet choices may lead to the impossibility of choice. The internet may eventually remove the user from offline public and private spheres.

However, little empirical research, with the exception of Mark Griffiths work (2000, 2006) in which he critically assesses the impact of excessive internet use, is done on internet pathologies such as addiction. Notwithstanding the inability/in access to face-to-face meetings/traveling/visiting as a result of colonial political conditions, virtual escapism may also provide collective solitude through imaginative experiences, or distraction and relief from reality. In Chapters One and Two I proposed a dialectic assessment of the utopian/dystopian impact of the internet and escapism. Escapism can be both negative/unhealthy (commercial escapism), as well as positive/healthy (self-generated escapism) strategies. Escapism can be understood in its passive, active, evasive, or extreme forms including: leisure online activities as virtual breaks from a daily reality that shaped by poverty or occupation; simulating participation in the Intifada through combat games; and creating a reality that is realistically not available.

In fact, not all forms of escape represent escapism. According to Evans “Escapism as a psychological trail or condition is not very conducive to social change and only cements the conditions that caused it in the first place. If no one acts the status quo remains the same.” (2001:67). The concept of ‘transcendence’ is simultaneously analogous to and different from escapism; it does not connote flight from everyday life challenges, but a rising above them. There also exists a valuable goal-oriented escapism (Evans 2001:70), motivated by the aim to overcome unpleasant practices, to replace immobility with virtual mobility, to substitute isolation with internet connectivity, or overcome loneliness with online love.

As illustrated in this, and subsequent chapters, the virtual conveys rather than escapes the real in the diasporic Palestinian context. Combat games, online mobilization, or hacktivism are some of the political examples. From interviews with young Palestinians (mostly boys) involved with combat games, I got the impression that it is at least temporarily satisfying. For some, this political escapism also increased a sense of isolation. The flip side of the coin of internet participation, or the illusion of participation, is the unfulfilling outcome and can cause further disillusionment.

Alienation can be fueled by denial. Evens (2001:80), describes different ways that escapism can turn into denial or might even cause harm. The individual sense of alienation became clear to me in the discussions with Abu Muzahed about the impact of internet on youth in the Palestinian refugee camps of Lebanon. In the preceding quotes he conveyed that overuse of online activities and excessive correspondence
with Palestine can be unhealthy as they may increase depression. Escapism can be seen as anathema to dissent/protest since it negate the need for social change—but in another it can also be a sign of social/intellectual awareness, or another way of coping with reality. The latter, above all, makes sense when escape is not an option. Yet mobility, with all its pros, cons and uncertainties, exists for Palestinians for the first time through the internet. These analyses thus capture the first reactions and experiences with internet and the novelty of online communication.

3.5 Conclusion

In contrast to the ‘official’ debates in public spheres, the local and critical Palestinian voices carried by interactive online communication became more visible and loaded. For communities excluded from national autonomy and geographically divided or exiled, the internet allowed individuals or groups to exercise and display their identity. The Israeli government imposes censorship on information flow into occupied territories, even after Oslo. Both the flow of people and the flow of information are thus controlled. This was partly overcome by the birth of transnational communication and grassroots initiatives and projects such as the creation of online discussions by and for Palestinians.

Though the impact of online traversals might change when the internet becomes a normalized medium, people’s responses, stories, and encounters from Palestine, Lebanon, and Jordan, led me to understand what the internet meant in a socio-political context marked by the Palestinian struggle for self-determination in the early phase of the Intifada. Much of my research belongs to a time when the internet was still a novelty for Palestinians. Nevertheless, the euphoria regarding the impact of the internet is still meaningful because of the political impact that crossing virtual boundaries implies for those still lacking alternatives.

The internet helps to overcome immobility through two related subjects: communication and content. Palestinians can communicate with each other through the internet and they do this from different places and at the same time. This development is a new phenomenon, possible for the first time since 1948 and very significant as communication is often based on the fact that they are part of Palestinian diasporas. The content is also important. Through online discussions and virtual traversals the creation and imagination of national identity is practiced in everyday-life. Meanwhile, the direct and cross-levelled contact also led to clashes. These tensions reflect class and refugee consciousness, re-examining notions of Palestinian unity.

Palestinian publishers, commercial business enterprises, and governments, clearly capitalized on the possibilities of the internet. Additionally, virtual journeys

101 ‘Simulation’ is a concept closely related to escapism, but since the postmodern turn in the social sciences, it often carries a pessimistic connotation and refers to a dystopian, invented, and fake dynamic. Jean Baudrillard’s writing about simulation and fantasy in the post-industrial context are a good example.
across borders have had a tremendous impact in breaking the isolation and subsequent alienation from mainstream Palestinian decision-making of Palestinian refugees. Moreover, it greatly enhanced the confidence of the refugee community as a whole, helping to re-assert the refugee population and independent Palestinian state as a central axis of Palestinian society.

Online traversals and practices have offline repercussions in the reconstruction of existing national identities. Online traversals cannot overcome all obstacles in the occupied territories; important equipment for the development of the Palestinian ICT sector was often withheld at the borders by Israeli military or refused passage through checkpoints. And the diaspora is still scattered over Egypt, Lebanon, Tunis, and Jordan. But many Palestinians regard themselves as belonging to one nation and continue to express their wish for return and this is one of their main topics of discussions on the internet. The internet has strengthened Palestinian national identity and simultaneously revived a political objective for an independent state. This, in due course, confirmed the dialectic between nation and state; an important topic of the next chapter.