Palestine online: cyber Intifada and the construction of a virtual community 2001-2005
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Chapter 4: Virtual space—Territorial place: Imagined Nation and State Making

“Li kull al-nas watanun ya'ishuna fihi, wa lakin nahnu lana watanun ya'ishu fina.” (“All People have a country to live in, but we have a country living inside us.”) – Dali, Shatila Camp, November 2003

4.1 Introduction

Internet technologies offer an alternative to lack of mobility and also construct new styles of connectivity. Such new transnational communication tools, combined with grass-roots Palestinian interactivity, redefine the relation between territorial place and virtual space. This relation is very complex in the Palestinian context, especially because it is a constant reminder of the absence of a shared common territorial place. These new innovations thus impact the Palestinian self-identification while representing a collective imagined nation.

When we met in Shatila refugee camp (Beirut) in 2003, 19-year-old Dali shared with me what having a nation and country means to her. During many talks with her and her friends, we discussed issues varying from life in the camp to their personal experiences on the internet. Contact between us increased; we became friends, exchanged our personal email addresses, and added each other to our Hotmail MSN lists. The first time we met online, when I was back in Amsterdam, we enthusiastically greeted one another and started chatting. I was intrigued by the long and poetic nickname she chose to identify herself with on MSN, translated in the opening quote above. I asked what she meant by ‘her country living inside her’; she explained that it represented an Arabic expression related to the Nakba and Palestinian diaspora. Dali used it as her online nickname, her chat identity: “Many people don’t realize what it means because they are used to having a country; we do not have this luxury. But, even though we don’t have a country, it lives very strongly inside of us.”

Dali’s example makes concrete how electronic media becomes a tool for identifying, representing, and connecting people and communities. Being denied civil rights and citizenship, then claiming and disseminating a national identity via an ‘electronic passport’ through the internet, signifies the fusion of politics and (mass-mediated) practices in concrete ways. The juxtaposition of transnational virtual spaces and local territorial places through internet practices challenged important empirical notions regarding the ‘tension’ between state, nation, and (imagined) community. On the one hand, the internet allows communication between Palestinians that was not possible before, connecting politics and media, or the virtual and the real. On the other hand, the often celebrated free-flow of information and mobility in ‘new’ networked and transnational societies are heavily contrasted by everyday reality.
Chapter Three outlined the first tension of this analysis: mobility in the context of diaspora and exile. This chapter questions concrete problems of an occupied and exiled community in terms of place and space - the second tension. Dali and her friends in Shatila illustrate that national consciousness is not determined by a sovereign state or territorial custody. Despite this, several examples in this chapter demonstrate that the nation-state is nonetheless a potent frame of reference in the analyses of new media and society. The nation-state is clearly a prime actor in the creation and regulation of media networks (Abu-Lughod 2002:11). 'Classic' media production (television, newspapers) in particular, functions within the context of the nation and is guarded by state hegemony.

The notion of the nation-state is a compelling element of media and Palestinian political identity, especially because of its relation to media infrastructure and access. With regards to the formation of modern nation-states in the colonial past, Benedict Anderson (1991) shows how developments in print and mass media profoundly influence internal social relations and collective identity (Chapter Two). Khalidi (1997) studied local Arab Palestinian press and showed that the Palestinian identity of the educated elite was well grounded during the Mandate period, contrary to the belief that Palestinian identity only arose as a response to Zionism. But this analysis can also be extended to 'new' media productions such as the internet.

Castells (1997/2001) outlines a shift in social structures motivated by new technological globalization and suggests a different development. Unlike the classic, hierarchically organized, media schemes via national/state lines, technological developments seem to have a different and decentralized impact on, and may even engineer, society. Despite these different perspectives, and the fact that neither Castells nor Anderson address the Palestinian diaspora specifically, they do provide resources to question how ideas or spaces can ‘flow’ in the Palestinian context. These somewhat conflicting frameworks also trigger new empirical questions when, for instance, referring generally to nation-state concepts.

In dispersed, diasporic, or occupied contexts, we are confronted with different levels of a dilemma. What state is there for Palestinian media production? A related question is: what exactly is framed as the national point of reference for a community so fragmented and dispersed after 60 years of exile? Colonialism and apartheid are prime references regarding the relation between electronic media and Palestinian society. It was not until 1988 that Israelis were barred from running ‘Jews Only’ job ads. Israeli economy could survive this, usually through the Israeli policy of importing large numbers of East European Jews, Asian migrant workers, and allowing guest workers from Latin America to function as cheap labour. See Christian Aliens in the Jewish State by Barak Kalir (2006). This is important when compared to the other main example of racialised occupation, South Africa, where the blacks outnumbered the whites and their role as a working class segment offered more potential means of protest. Whereas occupation is an acceptable reference, colonial occupation is often regarded as something of the past. But see for instance Derek

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102 Although Zionism was the primary ‘other’ that strengthened Palestinian national consciousness, at the same time people in the Middle East imagined themselves as part of a sovereign entity and identified with the new states created by the imperial partitions of WWI.

103 It was not until 1988 that Israelis were barred from running ‘Jews Only’ job ads. Israeli economy could survive this, usually through the Israeli policy of importing large numbers of East European Jews, Asian migrant workers, and allowing guest workers from Latin America to function as cheap labour. See Christian Aliens in the Jewish State by Barak Kalir (2006). This is important when compared to the other main example of racialised occupation, South Africa, where the blacks outnumbered the whites and their role as a working class segment offered more potential means of protest. Whereas occupation is an acceptable reference, colonial occupation is often regarded as something of the past. But see for instance Derek
occupation, their historic presence is also denied in the propagated myth that Palestine is ‘a land without a people for a people without a land.’ (Chapter Two) The rise of resistance movements, shared feelings of uprooted-ness, and collective solidarity strengthened Palestinian community networks and national identity, sometimes rendering regional or class differences secondary. The everyday experiences of diaspora communities, and the weak position of stateless people, are significant to the formation of Palestinian identity. I am not referring to identity in the existential but in the collective sense, about coming together, sharing a platform, and discussing the Right of Return, or exchanging everyday life experiences. Thus, rather than dismissing the notion of national identity, I argue that an anti-colonial nationalism is more appropriate for framing occupation and the diasporic condition.

The (online) constructed views about Palestinian collective identity and belonging were greatly impacted by the political upsurge since 2000. While technological instruments strengthened the imagined community, they were fused with experiences on the ground. The Intifada boosted and framed much of the online interactions. In this chapter I describe the kinds of Palestinian “imagination” and political identifications that the internet facilitates, especially in connection with the Intifada. After a short outline of Palestinian identity and its effect on the imagined nation without a state, I will examine what ‘kind’ of imagined national community was promulgated. This ‘online public sphere’ managed to go beyond the borders that strictly divide Palestinians from one another. I will illustrate how the Palestinian nation is imagined through the new online encounters and show how these new and increasing interactions alter people’s ideals vis-à-vis the nation.

4.2 Counter Narratives

Do we exist? What proof do we have? The further we get from the Palestine of our past, the more precarious our status, the more disrupted our being, the more intermittent our presence. When did we become a people? When did we stop being one? Or are we in the process of becoming one? (...) Are there really such things as Palestinian embraces, or are they simply intimacy and embraces - experiences common to everyone, neither politically significant nor particular to a nation or a people? - Edward Said (After the last sky, 1986).

Through the query about the meaning of “Palestinianess” by Edward Said, I wish to illustrate the process of ‘becoming’ while at the same time ‘preserving’ a nation. Said sees identity, or the making of identity, as a dynamic process and evokes questions about how people’s dreams about the land are imagined, constructed, and, contested. My intention is to trace how “Palestinianess” is referred to in cyber space by treating internet technology as one of the structures of the (diasporic) nation-building process.

It became instantaneously clear to me that online-mediated communications were shaped by intense political developments. On the 29th of September the Second (al-Aqsa) Intifada broke out, one way or another affecting Palestinians wherever they were. A historical reference helps us understand how structural forces impact local developments as national identities are linked to constantly changing processes.

I will start this section by returning to the importance of national identity as a basic premise and unravel some of the contextual difficulties in this study. I will then show how Palestinian identity is formed around anti-colonial nationalism, as a nation without a state with an imagined nation/community facilitated by the internet. In this context I will shed light on the potentially paradoxical online Palestinian identity.

**Imagined Community (without a State)**

Internet use is shaped by the opportunities that it offers for direct communication and online mobility. Such communication is, in turn, a key element in the virtual community that has arisen in Palestine because the internet has provided a medium in which direct participation is possible and allowed. Thus, before we are able to study collective (imagined) identity in relation to electronic media, it is important to realize that Palestinian national identity is shaped by exile and statelessness.

Palestine was fragmented and rendered a nation of displaced refugees; it is crucial to keep in mind the uniqueness of the settler/colonial project in Palestine. Shohat (1989) explains how Palestinians are systematically excluded from all facets of society. It is therefore important to distinguish between colonial oppression - mainly based on exploitation and racist claims of superiority, and Zionist oppression - linked to a particular type of exclusion and colonial occupation. This is clear in the Palestinian persistence vis-à-vis the forming and maintenance of Palestinian identity, language, religion, and resistance movements. Both the colonial and revolutionary histories are important components of the collective self-identity. According to Khalidi (1997), Palestinian identifies him/herself in a different way:

The Frenchwoman would refer her identity in some measure to a powerful, generations-old 'historical' narrative of 'Frenchness'. In contrast, given the lack of such a state or unified educational system, the Palestinian would be more likely to refer identity to a number of 'historical' narratives, each carrying a different valence and a somewhat different message' (1997:146).

Khalidi furthermore explains how Palestinians do not form a group with an independent history, but exist in relation to 'the other’s’ history. Self-definition takes place in relation to 'the other' because Palestinians have to fight for recognition vis-à-vis 'the other’ by which they are contested as a people. The remark made by the Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir—that there are no Palestinians— influenced public discourse and self-identity. Moreover, this logic displays an attitude towards Palestinians that has over time become commonplace in the Western world (Khalidi
The ‘Palestinian nation’ is ‘nation-less’ since a territorial or judiciary framework is absent. Eriksen (1993:14) calls Palestinians a ‘non-state’ people, like the Kurds and Sikhs. Through colonial subjugation, the expression of national identity becomes a form of political expression. As Shulz (1999) and Y. Sayigh (1997) have noted, Palestinian collective identity, nationalism, and struggle are interrelated. And the combination of colonialism and occupation mean that Palestinians cannot exercise potential economic power, especially as they are cut off from the labour force.

But it is also important to note that Palestinians are not just passive subjects (Kimmerling 2000:71). The strong Palestinian national identity is connected with a Palestinian popular resistance. The arguments of Eriksen, Kimmerling, or Khalidi do not imply that Palestinian identity is a unique category. Palestinian identity means different things for different people in different contexts. National identity does not assume a collective experience or vision regarding nation-building, but includes internal differences. Hammami (1997) pictured how Palestinian women experienced this in the course of the First Intifada when gender liberation and national liberation clashed around the issue of the hidjab (headscarf).

It is crucial to look at Palestinians’ self-definition in the context of stigmatized or internally contradicting views. Kimmerling analyzed expressions of Palestinian collective identity (1993/2000) by examining degrees of loyalty expressed towards the Arab nation, Islamic nation, Palestinian nation, or their local/family bonds. Political identity was clearly prompted by a al-qawmiyya al-’arabiyya (pan-Arab nationalism) al-qawmiyya al-wataniyya (Palestinian). Palestinian identity changed according to regional conflicts and events on the ground, and is then reshaped by external events. For example, the defeat of Pan-Arabism and the general collapse of the secular left after the Cold War channelled Palestinian resistance and identity from a secular nationalist, to a more Islamist, framework. Actually, this religious/Islamic presence represents a specific national political identity.

Islamic parties and movements have also become more popular as a result of their political consistency or explicit discourse and activism, sometimes more than for their ideological content: it could be said that national politics became more Islamized. The public perception is that these Political/Islamist parties and activists continued to resist occupation by rejecting the failing peace process, and daring to revenge Israeli attacks. The fact that Hamas provided basic healthcare and education in the poor refugee camps, while Fatah was increasingly associated with political impotence and corruption, made Hamas the strongest political and ideological alternative over the years (Hroub 2000, 2006).

Critical analyses are even more needed because the concept of identity is often used in researching internal differences within communities. The academic and popular fixation with ethnic identity in the European context may lead to stereotypes;

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104 Al qawmi al arabiya (Pan-Arab nationhood) was very popular during the 50’s and 60’s when the Egyptian president Jamal Abdel Nasser mobilized for anti-imperialist/unified Arab coexistence. Both Qawmi (Arab-nationalist) and Watani (Palestinian-nationalist) translate into English as “nationalist” but the first is connected to pan-Arabism while the second to nation-states (patriotism).
in fact, abstract use of the concept of identity will hardly lead to valuable deconstruction (Essed and Nikamo 2005). Stuart Hall clearly argued for a non-essentialist analysis in academia. He points to a social reality wherein identities and cultures are not essentially located in this ethnicity or that culture, but are the effect of history and culture, forged through collective memory and narrative. In this understanding, identities are not straightforwardly preserved (or lost). From a similar critical understanding I also underline that identity has multiple characteristics and is part of a constantly developing process. During an interview in November 2002, Sam Bahour said that Palestinians are “not just about politics” and he took the initiative to set up a website with the acronym PEBBLES: politics, economy, business, bizarre, lifestyle, entertainment, sports; “While we have all of this as Palestinians, the last suicide attack is the only thing people in the West seem to associate with Palestine.”

Yet, when the legitimacy of nation and identity is put in question it is clear that ‘the other’ is important; the ‘other’ unites people in the face of a threat to existence and self-determination. The history of forced exile and uprisings illustrate that anti-colonial frameworks and nationalist discourses matter greatly to a multiple Palestinian identity. Therefore, besides the necessary critique regarding essentialist claims of (ethnic) identity (cf. Baumann 1999:136) we should note that nationally-motivated identity prevails in contexts where it is contested, denied, and deprived of an independent territory/nation-state. That is why non-state communities maintain a strong degree of independence (Eriksen 1993:125), both despite and because of injustice and forced displacement. The aforementioned myth of ‘a land without a people’ is the greatest denial, and the strongest element shaping a common/collective national identity.

Nakba denial—Nakba remembrance

Academic use of historical archives on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict strengthened the myth about the birth of the Israeli state. This is one of the most striking examples of how national imagination and political identity can be manipulated by states. Yet the release of previously unavailable documents could tarnish the authoritative nationalist narratives of Israel's foundation. Tania Forte eloquently reveals a “fluid relation between the security apparatus and many members of the faculty department” at Israeli universities (2003:223). The Israeli pretext for land expropriation and forced exile shaped an ‘us vs. them’ dichotomy in constructing a national ‘other’. This is particularly true because the notion of state security is strongly linked to the notion of national identity (Forte 2003:216). However, patriotic

105 Problems of Western/"autochtone" youth are commonly related to socio-economic issues or the dominant community considered as diverse and representing many social classes/subcultures. But there are essentialist arguments that start from a culturalist point of view when Muslims or minorities are debate (c.f. critical response on such fixed understandings in the Dutch context Wekker, Essed, Ghorashi, Sunier and Baumann.)
academic practices were partly challenged by ‘New Historians’ like Morris and Pappe, among the first to shed light on the framework that shaped Palestinian national identity.

Sa’di (2002) recalls that identity is conjured through both top-down and bottom-up processes. ‘Belonging’ and a sense of imagined community is (re)produced through (invented) traditions, commemorations, national canons, and museums. Similarly, a ‘nationalization’ of communities is also generated through localized experiences, practices, and sentiments. Sa’di even questions the commonly used (abstract) analyses of national identity; for him the social and spatial/local context are the constitutive dimensions because these will finally give meaning to concepts like national identity and nationalism. This dynamic is relevant with reference to one framework in particular: the 1948 al-Nakba. Even after the defeat of the 1967 war (al-Naksa), “Black September”, Land Day, the massacres of Sabra and Shatila, the First Intifada, etc., al-Nakbah has remained the main site of Palestinian collective memory (:195).

Exiled, occupied, denied, and lacking national institutions and archives, colonized people resort to different manners of identity construction. Identity is ultimately connected with the Nakba, or with remembering the Nakba, as it is the strongest Palestinian icon symbolizing the “tragic fate of men and women whose lives had been shattered, and about their descendents who continue to suffer its consequences.” (Sa’di:176). A sense of homelessness connects the Palestinians’ collective consciousness. Sa’di sees the Nakba as an anticlimax, a promise of independence that turned into a nightmare (:186). Palestine is not like the ‘classic’, colonized countries that experienced struggle and independence as part of a general decolonization process.

Palestinians began to use Nakba as a temporal reference, as both a beginning and an end of something. The Nakba has thus become a constitutive element of Palestinian identity. According to Sa’di it is “a Palestinian event and a site of Palestinian collective memory; it connects all Palestinians to a specific point in time that has become for them an “eternal present” (:177). There are different ways to study Palestinian (imagined) community/identity through the prism of al-Nakba. This subject can be found in Palestinian literature in the luminous works of Ghassan Khanafani, Mahmoud Darwish, or Edward Said. Sa’di looked at a number of photographic books attempting to picture or conjure the feeling of how Palestine was before the Nakba and Ihab Saloul’s unique research work deals with the cultural memory of al-Nakba in present Palestinian exilic consciousness through an analysis of literary, filmic, and oral narratives of different generations.106 These stories and recollections of everyday individual and community life co-produce the national collective narrative.

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In conjunction with Sa’di’s call for a bottom-up approach, the construction of national identity ‘from below’ is an important perspective due to political shifts ‘from above’.107 Palestinian politics during the transformation of the PLO between 1982 and 1993 witnessed a shift from ‘resistance’ to ‘appeasement’. While Palestinians in the Occupied Territories organized a massive uprising in the First Intifada, the officials in exile in Tunis ultimately decided the political course of action, thereby contributing to a weakening of collective political unity (Chapter One). Shifts in political discourse impact the (political) content of literature as an important contributor in the process of imagined community; literary projects represent a particular moment (Hassan 2003). For instance, Hassan connects Jayyusi’s important work *Anthology of Modern Palestinian Literature* to the ‘politics of appeasement’ as it came out in 1992 coinciding with Oslo. (22).108 The reflection of political realities in various media styles and technologies is especially apparent when we consider the internet.

Where sovereignty is lacking offline, it is perceived in cyber space. Online interactivity provided new spaces for solidarity between Palestinian diasporas. Through the Iranian online ethnography of www.iranian.com, Khosravi (2001) discussed how the internet reshaped the landscape of the Iranian diaspora. This relationship between diaspora and homeland led to the creation of a transnational public sphere and offered Iranians online anonymity. It is an alternative to the traditional public sphere, a space marked by social segregation, political tensions, and state control, especially in host countries where the exiled are constantly treated as immigrants and not full participants in the public sphere. The internet is not a *tabula rasa*, but fuelled by shared histories such as al-Nakba. This alternative space is neither completely new, nor a strict replica of the imagined Palestinian nation, but it assumes the re-structuring, re-imagining, and re-constructing of a nation in flux between contemporary and historical memories and symbols.

An interesting element in Khosravi’s narrative is how people remember pre-revolution Iran. Palestinians also express a strong online nostalgia for the past. An important difference however, is that Iranians are not confronted with a colonial context, thus for more than 60 years Palestinians cannot return even if they wanted to; they are not exiled by their political stance as in Iran, but by their ethnicity. This difference seems to make an alternative (virtual) return to the homeland more important for Palestinians. The expression of national identity through online encounters seems more poignant in the context of actual land loss and a colonizing

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107 The books Sa’di analyzes are, for example, Jaffa, the Perfume of a City with personal testimonies like that of Shafiq Al Hout and Yousef Haikel by Hisham Sharabi (1991), and Walid Khalidi’s (1991) Before their diaspora: a photographic history of the Palestinians 1876-1948. In fact, these books also serve as sites of collective memory and reconstruction of the past. However, as Moors (2001) argued, Walid Khalidi discusses a selective visual representation of the past and Palestinian identity because he mainly refers to sources and images of the Palestinian upper-class.

108 He sees the (involuntary) repositioning of Palestinian literature in terms of modernist aesthetics as opposed to resistance. This seems to support a (false) polarity between politics and aesthetics by explaining the under-representation of writers from ‘inside’ not in terms of the political conditions but through a judgment of quality and aesthetics (21).
‘other’. For Palestinians in the occupied homeland, the internet very strongly meant a new way to talk about what was occurring on the ground, and for Palestinians in the diaspora the internet presented a new medium to increase communication with other Palestinians and knowledge about the homeland.

The uprooting of Palestinians in 1948 that led to disperse the Palestinian diaspora meant the loss of security that states could provide their citizens. A refugee status for Palestinians meant being treated as second-class citizens without many basic rights, and being exposed to numerous social, political, and economic problems like unemployment and inadequate educational and medical services (Ajial 2001). A just solution for the refugees is a central issue leading to repeated political deadlocks during negotiations and massive uprisings. This is clearly indicated by the Second Intifada coinciding with a massive turn to the internet.

**Intifada Boost**

That day [29/09/2000] I didn’t feel like seeing anyone. I went home, my father was there. He has been through these things before – war, revolution, invasions. But for me, this was all new, so shocking. Seeing those scenes of killings and bombings in Palestine made me so angry. Anyway, I had beaten up my brother because I was so angry, and then my father hit me. So I ran away, for the first time. I went to my grandfather’s house where I slept on the roof, I was so angry.


As everyday-life has its own (historic) logic, the outbreak of the Second Intifada represented (and activated) the urge among Palestinians to resist the status quo. The Intifada eventually mobilized worldwide support, and was the impetus for Palestinian internet use. In Lebanon, a similar political push towards the internet had already taken place after the liberation of South-Lebanon in May 2000, five months before the Intifada. Disseminating information and images about the Israeli retreat from Lebanon was a demarcation point (Gonzales 2001). In Palestine, the need for internet was enhanced by closures and curfews. As Karma from Ramallah explained to me, “The curfews without the internet would have been a real nightmare for me. And if I didn’t have my *Hear Palestine* to work on, I would probably have gone mad, or perhaps become like those suicide activists.” 16-year-old Shaker in Beirut told me that, “Watching news was like breakfast, lunch, and dinner, checking the internet and Palestinian websites was as necessary as having your three meals.” The Intifada provided a reorientation towards the Palestinian territories among Palestinians in the diaspora.

Talks with Palestinians in the refugee camps taught me how important it is to distinguish between Palestinians that were present in the territorial ‘centre’ of the

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109 According to Gonzales the May 2000 Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon increased internet usage by 60 %. This coincided with the rebuilding of infrastructure in post-war Lebanon and the maturation of basic ICT.
conflict and those left to deal with it in the diasporic peripheries. As Dali in Shatila recalls:

> When the Intifada started I wanted to be in touch with my people so I entered the Palestinian room in mIRC. I hadn’t know anyone directly from Palestine before. I was happy each time I entered the internet and discussed with Palestinians. When I returned home I would tell my mother I had talked with Palestinians from inside Palestine.

Palestinian internet usage and infrastructure/accessibility was motivated by the political context and the internet revealed confrontations amongst Palestinians. Palestinians sometimes voiced their counter-narrative in different ways. The use of Intifada images from Palestine clearly affected Palestinians in Jordanian and Lebanese refugee camps.

The death of 10 year-old Mohamed al Dura captured by a French cameraman and transmitted over television worldwide became the prominent symbol of Palestine as victim of oppression. Associated Press photographed another child from Gaza, 12-year-old Faris Odeh (see Picture 19), as he stood in front of an Israeli tank attempting to halt it by throwing stones. Although he was killed afterwards, this picture symbolized Palestinian resistance and steadfastness. In the Lebanese refugee camps that I visited, both images were found as murals on buildings and narrow alleys, or as posters and stickers in homes and offices. Some kindergartens, scout groups, and streets were named after them, turning these kids into icons of Palestinian uprising. Even though very bloody and disturbing, the picture of a nine-month-old baby with a bullet hole in her stomach (Iman Hijou from Gaza) was also circulating on the internet and even printed as a postcard. This picture seemed to capture the brutality of the Israeli state and army. All these images were distributed on the net and represented solidarity with Palestine. As the saying goes, ‘a picture is worth a thousand words’; images reinforce textual content about the Intifada. This is especially successful when combining such visual/virtual rhetoric with familiar (tolerable) sayings. The slogan “Give me Liberty or give me Death!” with a waving Palestinian flag flanking the page on Free Palestine resembles the “I Die Therefore I Exist” cartoon also circulating on other websites (see Picture 26).110

But despite these visual rhetoric examples, the overall frequency of internet communication vis-à-vis the intifada showed many up and downs between my starting point in 2001 and the end of my fieldwork research in 2005. I often heard: ‘Life goes on’, despite the social devastation caused by occupation and war. Those that have to earn a living to feed their families have to hold on to some sort of survival and sanity. A sense of frustration can sometimes lead to ‘numbness’. Perhaps these coping strategies will mean a decline in political internet activities and a rise in escapism. Many young people I met were still motivated to direct their efforts online along with an anxious search for direct physical contact. Samar from Shatila:

110 The first slogan is from a speech by Patrick Henry in 1775 on the American War of Independence; the second is a reference to Descartes’ "Cogito ergo sum"—"I think therefore I am."
The Intifada changed me a lot. I wanted to know everything about Palestine, I kept track of how many fighters died and people were killed. When I saw a child on TV that was killed, I would shout. Now when I see this, it seems normal. Something inside of us snapped, is destroyed. I want to fight and do something. But since I’m outside what can I do? I started to enter the internet and speak to guys and girls in Palestine. When I meet Palestinians from Palestine I want to hug and kiss them, something inside me starts to grow, ‘he is from inside, she has the smell of Palestine’.

Karma’s experience when she visited Lebanon after having lived and worked in Ramallah, confirms what Samar tries to express:

I can understand what it means for Palestinians outside to be in touch with Palestine, and how sacred it is to get direct information from inside. It’s almost holy… when I returned to Lebanon and people knew I had been in Palestine they got all excited and emotional, and wanted to hug me. Ramallah 2002

Identifying as a Palestinian is an important political act in itself, especially when this identity is mocked or even contested.

A first online introduction and identification to the outside world is through a personal nickname or email address. Dalí’s long chat nickname in this chapter’s introduction is a telling example. Others include: al-thawra batta al-nasr (Revolution until victory), Happy Birthday Intifada, or emails addresses like Palestine4ever@hotmail.com and hatem115@hotmail.com. Maryam from Shatila also took pride in being identified as a Palestinian, although this sense of pride was not always considered beneficial: “Some Palestinians, especially girls, use to say on the internet ‘I am Lebanese’, especially because they think Arab men like it. But after the Intifada everybody said ‘I am a Palestinian’ or ‘I am from Shatila Camp’”. The politicised identification coincided with the broader internet attitudes/outlets in relation to Palestine. Of course, to explicitly present oneself as belonging to a particular community/political tendency draws immediate attention. Examples of internet identifications I found verify this.

Palestinian and political websites were among the favourite internet sources mentioned to me by Palestinian internet users in Lebanon. There were interesting parallels between the separate fieldwork settings; the examples and motivations in Lebanon did not differ much from the Palestinians I interviewed in the Jordanian refugee camps or in Palestine. Hiba from Bourj al-Baranj internet sources to me. This 16-year-old teenager wanted to go beyond virtual participation to do something for Palestine:

I visited all the sites, PFLP, Fatah, Hamas, Intifada.com… my friends forwarded these or mentioned them. Once I entered the Azzedine al Qassam [military wing of Hamas] website in Palestine. I felt like doing

111 Other interesting Arabic nicknames I encountered are: Wail Lil ‘alam ihba imtalaka al Falastini qararah bu yadhi [Beware world, if the Palestinian will take decision in his own hands]; Al-Musamah fi Al-Wataniya I’damun la ha [Tolerance for nationalism, is its execution]; Lianna Al-Quds lana ‘unwan A’lan tu Al-harb ‘ala Al-Tughian [Because Al-Quds/Jerusalem is our address, I have declared the war on despotism]; Ma buchmuad nari wala bnb jrah ila biru’ek ya falastin; My fire wont be extinguished and my wounds wont heal until you are back Palestine].

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more and wanted to become a member of this party through the internet. But I didn’t do much with it because I had exams and no time to spend on surfing.

*Maktoob,* a pan-Arab site on which each Arab country has its own page, is an example of the internet-based politization. Pro-Palestinianess was definitely at the heart of Maktoob’s activities at the time. This would happen through debates and exchanges in the Palestinian room of the website, but the Intifada also became one of the main topics in the forums of other countries on Maktoob. The website’s statistics show that the Second Intifada in September caused an upshot in its membership. It is also interesting to see that the commercial motivations of such internet projects did not need to obstruct social or political drives.

At the time, this major cyber space host even called its members, spanning the entire Arab world, to explicitly express solidarity with Palestine. *Maktoob* initiated more solidarity by responding to the anti-Israeli sentiment amongst its Arab members. Sameeh Toqan, Palestinian Jordanian and one of the initiators of *Maktoob,* said, “We will use *Maktoob* to its maximum capacity to express our support and dedication to our brothers and sisters in Palestine”. During the high-points of the Intifada (2002) the website’s opening page was temporarily redesigned to express support for the Palestinian people, and they set up an online fund for Palestinians urging its members to donate money for the Palestinian Red Crescent. Accordingly, the Intifada sparked the sympathy of many people inside and outside the Occupied Territories. Professor and activist Ibrahim Aloush in Jordan, explained how it awakened a general sense of rebellion in Arab streets: “Whether in terms of peace with Israel or in succumbing to dictates of the WB and IMF in our countries: the Intifada got back the vitality it missed for 25 years”.

Yet, the Intifada became a ‘normal’ occurrence in Palestine. Violence and suffering were daily phenomena that affected many Palestinians for the rest of their lives. During interviews with web designers, internet project coordinators, and internet café employees in the West Bank and Gaza, discussions about the siege and reoccupation of the cities were some of the most intense moments I experienced during fieldwork. The interviewed were obviously very much affected by experiences that had only happened recently, or as we spoke. While creating a political boost to internet use, the occupation and invasion caused immense destruction. Many organizations and public places were indiscriminately destroyed during the sieges, whether commercial businesses or sites of political activity, everybody paid a price.

Stories I collected after visits to some of the organizations that dealt with this violent state of affairs gave direct insight on the impact of on-the-ground and direct confrontation. In fact, several fieldwork contacts believed their work also made them specific targets. Ma’an Bseiso of Palnet (ISP) explained that different conclusions arise from the military incursions:

112 It started as a website in 2000 and grew to become a complete portal in 2003. It is important to note that Maktoob is not referred to as a Palestinian, but an Arab, website.
At 2.30 a.m. the IDF invaded our building. Soldiers searched the whole building, blew up doors, threatened and abused our employees, eventually entered the room of the main power source, and completely shut down the connection. All Palnet internet lines were cut for at least 24 hours in Ramallah. I wondered why only our company in the building was attacked. If it was not deliberate, why? I think they came for us, they wanted to turn us off. They don’t like what we’re doing on the Net.

During the most severe attacks, while the media and press could not report because the IDF declared the Occupied Territories ‘closed military zones’, or because of reasons Bseiso referred to, on-the-ground witness reports were indispensable. The widely read Palestine Monitor website was a thriving source of information for the outside world and one of the most popular websites about and from Palestine in 2001-2004. But even this non-violent, Western funded NGO was a casualty in the ‘war on terror’. Patricia, coordinator of PM at the time, recalled the distressful experiences that took place six months prior to our meeting. The breathless reminiscences betrayed how shocking the siege was:

The soldiers used our office as their outlook post and stayed here for three weeks. They destroyed absolutely everything, including the hardware. It was so bad when we discovered they stole our computer equipment. We were expecting something to happen though. The day before the invasion we heard rumours. Israeli officials warned British and American foreigners to leave the city. We made backups in a hurry and before the borders were closed we sent our website coordinator to Jerusalem, from where she continued to work as much as possible.

It wasn’t a coincidence. They knew PM was part of HDIP and working very effectively. We know they monitor everything we send out on the internet, even though we don’t threaten Israeli security. The goal of Sharon and his government is to destroy every aspect of Palestinian democratic development. They have destroyed the PA technically by bombing the entire infrastructure, and politically by undermining Arafat’s position. There is no official authority left so civil society, which is also critical to the PA, became a very important threat for Israel.

The experiences Patricia described were documented on the website, including pictures and personal testimonies. According to Joki, webmaster at the time in 2002, the events also forced the staff to be better prepared:

We started taking away our things after earlier sieges. Whenever we hear rumours of a possible invasion or attack, we remove as many documents and files as possible and take them home in boxes. But as an NGO we are not rich, we can’t afford laptops and take home all our work. Yet, we managed to do a lot of work during the sieges and curfews. After the sieges we suffered a lot too, the soldiers really went out of their way. Some colleagues broke down and cried when we returned to our offices. I felt

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113 Palestine Monitor is a joint website project of Palestinian NGOs united in HDIP, see also Chapter Three and Five.

116
‘Big’ websites like *Palestine Monitor* were not the only ones targeted. *Al Carma* Cyber Café and website, not a political website at all but mainly offering music, discussions, and contributions from the local community, had a similar experience at the time in Ramallah. Hisham recalls:

Around the same time that the IDF invaded Ramallah in March 2002 and occupied Al Carma, the site was hacked and replaced with Israeli propaganda. Unfortunately we had kept the website’s back-ups in the IC, which was destroyed completely. So the website and our portal project are completely irreparable.

Upon walking through and leaving the buildings where I conducted these interviews, I saw the evidence and traces of the attacks that had just been described. The demolitions by the military seemed an attempt to destroy the existence of intellectual and civil life in Palestine. These impacts introduced me to the cruel face of war and occupation. At the same time it helped me better understand how the situation stimulated an active online counter-response that would lead to a (re)construction of the imagined Palestinian nation. Internet became more like the ‘classic’ mediums of print capitalism and popular history/novels through which the national community is imagined. The online Palestine helped to transform the imagined nation.

### 4.3 Transforming the Nation

The Palestinians I meet online tell me it is a nice and beautiful place when I say I am from Akka. I keep a diary book about Palestine and Akka and I found many things for it on the internet. Sometimes I ask my friends to help me so they send me emails with pictures of my country.

– Samah, Bourj al-Barajne camp, Lebanon.

The above-illustrated synergy between technological developments, state politics, and transnational identity, led to the growth of an online public sphere. The virtual dimension widened the scope of participation beyond territorial boundaries and deepened it across sections of society. Forums and chat rooms became meeting points for the gathering diaspora. Through virtual interactions, an online Palestinian community started a process of (re)constructing a collective identity, using the internet as a tool to ‘collect’ and ‘transport’ national identity. The experience and expectation of what it means to be a Palestinian or refugee, is constantly represented.

Diasporic elements and *sha’bi* (popular) Palestinian relics entered the online public spheres. Palestinians hooked up with other Palestinians to express, share, debate, listen, view, negotiate, or reject feelings and analyses. Online topics did not relate only to Palestinian politics and identity, but also included romantic experiences, cultural enquiries, business deals, and other aspects of life. Internet mediums offered new spaces to make/share music, stories, culinary recipes, fashion, and images. They form the ingredients of transnational identities and make tangible what is meant by
‘online Palestine’. Transnational (online) communication here doesn’t erode, but re-confirms the meanings of a Palestinian state.

Samah is a refugee in Lebanon and, like many other Palestinians, she managed to partly compensate isolation with virtual mobility. The upshot for those who directly and indirectly managed to join the virtual space is that locally-based identity became part of a transnational Palestine.114 This resulted in what I understand to be an online public sphere, and moreover inspired the commoditization of Palestinian identity on the internet.

Online Public Sphere

One stimulant of virtual networks was a program on Palestinian television called “Online”. Keen to motivate Palestinian internet use in an uncomplicated way, it showed all sorts of internet possibilities. Concrete examples were used by the presenter while he explained how to surf websites or to use search engines such as Google. These examples were clearly framed in a national context. For instance, the presenter showed an example of a children’s website depicting drawings of Mohamed al Dura. Historical websites were also represented. Participants in the studio and viewers at home were shown old and new photos of Jerusalem and Jaffa via a discussion of the Palestine Remembered website and Google ‘image’ search. I did not watch this program in Palestine, but during fieldwork in Lebanon, confirming the importance of other ICTs such as satellite television.115 This type of trans-local access is something that was unattainable before satellite and internet mediums were available. Audiences of such programs now reach beyond the Occupied Territories where the TV broadcast is based. Even though the Palestinian Broadcast Centre (PBC) is not as professional or popular as Al Jazera or Al Manar, many Palestinians in Lebanon watched it, knowing they could see President Arafat or be updated about local Palestinian news and debates.

Research in Jordanian and Lebanese refugee camps offered me a chance to accompany people to their homes and internet cafes. When pictures of Palestinian or pre-1948 images were found and viewed (together) through Palestine Remembered, the reaction was often full of excitement. Akram, one of the first owners of an internet cafe in Bourj al-Barajne, told of the first moments people started surfing Palestinian websites in his internet cafe: “Once a guy whistled and said in a voice of surprise ‘Wooooow this is very nice’. I looked and saw it was just mountains, some sand, and 3 houses, probably just like any picture from a village in Tunis.” Akram continued recalling those very first moments:

114 While referring to Palestinians as transnational in the sense of diaspora community, it is actually a trans-nation-state community that is implied.

115 Many Palestinians in the refugee camps have a satellite dish. When it comes to reaching and influencing a mass audience, the internet is no match for television because satellite television can count on a much wider accessibility, and probably a higher impact of image and sound. But it is not the aim here, nor is it possible, to make comparisons with regards to the potential effects of (cultural) power over transnational communities.
When they just started chatting directly with Palestine you could hear them shouting in the IC, “he is from Palestine! Look I’m talking with Palestine! Later, after they finished, they proudly told people they met that they “talked with Palestine”.

Some internet users in Lebanon responded in surprise when they discovered that the other Palestinian person online lives a comfortable life in Palestine, or worse, is actually uninterested in the political situation in general. When they chat with a Palestinian from Gaza (one of the most deprived, isolated, and destructed places in Palestine) who doesn’t care much about the Intifada, the shock on the Lebanese side of the internet line is evident. One of the interviewed in Bourj al-Barajna camp chatted with a Gazan who defends the soft peace process without concern for the Right of Return. I noticed how little cracks started to emerge in the idealized imagined nation. But some Palestinians do not necessarily view these ‘cracks’ as negative. According to Ali Khalidi sometimes the romanticized visions about the Palestinian identity need to be challenged:¹¹⁶

All kinds of new confrontations create new paradoxes. But sometimes we need to correct the history of, for example, the struggle for self-determination. The liberation movement was far too nationalistic and submerged internal or local differences. If you look at the PLO narratives, you will find so many nationalist myths. We must sometimes admit mistakes, take responsibility, and continue. Repeatedly lifting up morale isn’t always necessary nor the best strategy. Sometimes it’s good to bring some of the fantasies down to reality.

National discourses by (and about) Palestinians in the camps and internet cafes clearly centred on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Though Internet possibilities ‘compensate’ for the absence of the territorial, they do not replace it. Several outcomes arise from this situation: the specific history and realities of the Palestinian refugees have practical implications on representations of national identity and it impacts the way internet functions as a tool to escape isolation, especially in the refugee camps. Khuloud, mother of two teenagers from Bourj al-Barajne camp in Beirut (and one of the few ‘older’ users), talked about the internet as an important outlet she had to have ‘at least once a week’:

The first time was amazing; when I received my first email I even shouted in the internet café (…). Especially when I got one from my uncle in America whom I love so much… We need this more than others. Palestinians in Jordan are closer to the land and some can even go to Palestine, but for us this is impossible.

Many Online discussion forums had topics related to the Middle East; Palestinians debated whether Israeli state-terrorism could be compared with

¹¹⁶ Palestinian sociologist, interviewed at the American University of Beirut in Lebanon 2004.
Palestinian terrorism. On *Indymedia Palestine* Palestinian supporters debated fiercely about what can and cannot be accepted regarding resistance and suicide bombers. It is hardly effective to refer to ‘the’ Palestinian use of ‘the’ internet as it is difficult to unravel who exactly uses what kind of internet and why. Social and economic conditions impact the level/form of internet participation. More and more websites, like that of Hezbollah or the *Palestine Media Centre*, concerned with domestic political affairs or promoting resistance to Israel were entirely Arabic or seemed to address Arab or Muslim audiences in particular.

But many new initiatives also helped increase grass-roots participation because they pulled wider sections of society onto the internet. Especially multi-media websites (with access to radio channels, television stations, and [banned] newspapers) that managed to strengthen online interactivity. The impact may reach beyond the internet café: human rights appeals, political communiqués, and popular images can be printed from the net, and then reproduced or circulated in universities, mosques, or cafés – even in one’s own living room, as I noticed during visits to friends and contacts, reviving interest in the Palestinian heritage even more.

The internet isn’t only a network that puts Palestinians in contact with other Palestinians or communities, it also reconnects them to their history. Palestinians I spoke with in Lebanon and Jordan often pointed to the fragility and decrease of the collective national heritage. While the Palestinian diaspora enters its fourth generation, construction of national Palestinian identity relies on an even weaker internalization of political and cultural roots, especially as those who actually remember Palestine before they left during the Nakba become extinct.

The process of transforming the idealized nation is not without problems and will also mean different kinds of internal confrontations. When discussing Palestinian identity and how the situation affected national consciousness the content depended on whether I sat with someone in ‘Abdoun or Wihdaad refugee camp in Amman, and in al-Hamra or Bourj Barajne in Beirut. Ibrahim Aloush in Amman therefore urged me to not overlook internal difference among Palestinians in Jordan:

> Certain sections of the Palestinian population have assimilated into the system and developed interests not very dissimilar to those of the Jordanian regime. They promote economic normalization by facilitating connections between Arab and Zionist businessmen, or cultural normalization when these intellectual liberals try to foist on people’s minds the idea that Arabs and Zionists should be friends, brothers, cousins, and all that crap. There is not one kind of Palestinian; you find a spectrum of views.

It didn’t take long to discover internal differences. In some refugee camps, people dealt with the Intifada as if it was literally theirs, especially in Jordan since many Palestinians still have close contact with relatives in the Occupied Territories, of

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117 Abdoun is a posh area in Amman, Wihdaad a refugee camp in Amman’s outskirts. Al Hamra is the famous central street of Beirut near the prestigious American University of Beirut, while Mreizhe the working class and sha’bi area of South Beirut.
which some were killed, imprisoned, tortured, or injured. Most Palestinians I interviewed felt connected to the Palestinian cause at least in a spiritual way, and sometimes in a mix of national/commercial/spiritual motives.

“Made in Palestine”: Palestinian identity as commodity

With the Intifada, the national Palestinian identity revived and a hope for the Right of Return for the nearly three million Palestinian refugees returned to the political agenda. In this context, the internet was eagerly used as a way to recollect, negotiate, and transfer part of the Palestinian heritage in reference to Palestine’s geographic territory, narratives, traditional culture, and the Nakba. Pre-1948 pictures, those of the ’48/’67 exodus, and pictures of the new Intifada, were the most popular images downloaded and forwarded on the internet. The first two sources articulate a certain nostalgia and loss, while the latter express resistance and hope.

The Palestinian Kufiya (the national black-red-white-green shawl) was already a political symbol (Swedenburg 1992) but Palestinian solidarity movements lifted it to the point that it has become a standard activist accessory. The protest movements that revived all over the world after the Seattle protests in 1999, and post 9-11 anti-war protests, made Palestinian symbols like the Kufiya part of a new activist urban trend along with other political gadgets. The emphasis on Palestinian national symbolism became more globalized through the internet. The (usually better-off) Palestinian diaspora (and sympathizers) can even purchase Palestinian goods that are usually not available in their country. The ‘commoditization’ of Palestinian internet took place thanks to Palestinian ICT entrepreneurs who engaged themselves in E-commerce projects that involved local Palestinian products like Palestinian olive oil, Dead Sea products, Nablus soap, flags, posters, and shirts (see Picture 21).

Palnet was the first such Palestinian online store to offer ‘typical’ locally produced Palestinian products. Ma’an Bseiso, manager of the project at the time, said that many internet users showed great interest in Palestinian history and culture, “but especially those who have difficulty to access and express themselves in mainstream spaces in the homeland or in the host land”. Maktoob facilitated E-commerce by offering Cash U cards; these prepaid cards were used like internet credit cards and were made to stimulate online shopping. Thus, that which constituted the Palestinian public sphere changed along with the development and connection of culture with technology.

It is interesting that a transnational diaspora gets to be reconfigured through the local. The Palestine Costume Archive, from producer Jenni Allenby in Australia, is an example of how locality, culture, identity, and the internet become (politically) intertwined. As Allenby said during an interview: “We are the only place in the world that Palestinian women can email, prior to their wedding for example, to ask how to acquire a traditional dress, or what type of costume was worn prior to 1948.” This is evidently important in the context of the presently evolving narrative disseminated about rather than by Palestinians. It exemplifies what Anderson means by stating: “This
emerging public sphere is not only one of talking back to power but also one of a wider range of public actors who talk to each other sometimes about power, and often about the power of the new media in their communication” (2001:3).

The internet is ‘superior’ to other forms of mediation in different ways. ICT provides a medium in which direct participation is allowed and functions as a key communication tool. Furthermore, the easy, graphic, mouse-controlled interface on the World Wide Web has clearly popularized the internet even more (Terranova 2004: 41). In other words, internet technology expanded the public sphere by increasing participation and connecting diverse publics. It creates spaces for new interpretations and new interpreters, making a virtual/internet mediated Palestinian nation part of the ‘imagined’ Palestinian community.

Interwoven in the texts and images that are produced and disseminated in cyber space were the re-articulated narratives about Palestinian culture, history, and national identity. Internet offered the political and commercial modes a space to practice these communicative exchanges. Rather than viewing this development as a top-down and static phenomenon, I will highlight its bottom-up dynamic. In Chapter Three I traced the early development of (professional) Palestinian internet manifestations; in the following section I will discuss how grass-roots internet initiatives that I came to know through local contacts and interviews developed even more.

4.4 Palestine Online and Offline

The ‘Palestinian body’ was somehow divided. People in Palestine used to think that the Palestinians outside are cowards, that they gave up, abandoned them and the land. Not everybody knows about the massacres that took place against the ‘48 Palestinians. The idea seemed that we, outside, are detached from the Palestinian ‘body’. As if we had assimilated or melted into the societies where we took refuge—the Lebanese, the Jordanian, Syrian, etc. That they inside are fighting, while we here are simply doing nothing, while in fact we were suffering a lot. The internet is correcting such notions, and showed that we—by our thoughts, struggle, money and everything we have, are devoted to the Palestinian cause, which is their cause as well. The internet was the tool to gather the Palestinian ‘body’ that had been scattered …this way we are creating a new society”. – Mohammed, Nahr al-Bared camp, Lebanon.

Palestinians in Lebanon operate actively as internet consumers and producers. During trips and time I spent in refugee camps, I met many talented refugees who I regard as the first grassroots Palestinian internet producers. Shaker from Beirut played a role through his writings on the Electronic Intifada website and his personal emails about life in Lebanon, while Mohamed Qasqous from Nahr al-Bared set-up Albareek.com with a few friends. Not only does the internet help people in Palestine to be heard and noticed, it is used to reconnect the divided ‘Palestinian body’, as Mohammed Qasqous
points out. But how do the birth of Palestinian cyber space and the success of local initiatives help reconnect the divided ‘Palestinian body’? As a 24-year-old student from Nahr al-Bared refugee camp, Mohammed actively contributed to this virtual interaction/reconnection. Like others I met who made their own websites, Mohammed spent day and night on Al Bareeq. He involved friends from Nahr al-Bared to help out and he also helped others when they need his expertise.

One of the local websites Mohammed helped set up was Nahrelbared.org, the official website of the camp that was set up as part of the Across Borders Project. This project, ‘Raghm al-Hudoud’ in Arabic, epitomized the potential internet revolution at the time. Thanks to professional projects like the Across Borders Project (ABP), Palestinians could cross the borders between the countries and refugee camps dividing them. The Information Technology Unit at Birzeit University launched the ABP in 1999, providing the Palestinian community access to a worldwide audience. The internet projects motivated the refugee community towards Palestinian reunification by linking several refugee camps scattered in the region.

The first ABP centre to open was launched at Ibdaa Cultural Centre in Dheisheh refugee camp in Bethlehem in July 1999. It gave Dheisheh the first internet café in a Palestinian refugee camp. Compared to initial incidental and personal internet experiments, this project was clearly community-based. Expanded from the first website project of Muna Hamzeh, it offered online generally unavailable newspapers and sources to refugees in the camps or the Occupied Territories (Hamzeh 2001). In September 2000, ABP management was handed over to the Centre of Continuing Education (CCE) at Birzeit University in order to professionalize the project.

Crossing Borders

We have a subject on the site called ‘an elder and his village’ where we interview an old person who tells about how Palestine was before and after the Nakba. This is especially important because these people were eyewitnesses in 1948.

– Nahr al-Bared, ABP Website coordinator, Lebanon

The Birzeit team scheduled the opening of additional ABP centres in refugee camps: four in Palestine (2 in the West Bank and 2 in the Gaza Strip), two in Lebanon, and one in Jordan. The aim of the ABP was to have a self-supporting system; users paid a small fee for the internet and the courses. As the Intifada broke out, ABP programs were put on hold, just as everything else in Palestinian society was paralyzed. Yet the ABP managed to announce the opening of its first computer and internet centre in Lebanon. The Bourj al-Shamali refugee camp near Tyre in the South of Lebanon

118 She was also the first to put entries of her personal journal online in which she reflected on how events were lived on the ground during the first weeks of the Intifada.
hosted the third official ABP centre and the first of such initiatives outside of Palestine. The opening of the Lebanese centre was a significant achievement since it marked the first regional online network of Palestinian refugee camps that truly crossed borders. When recalling the official Lebanese launching in Bourj al-Shamali camp, the coordinators’ enthusiasm reflected the centre’s potential social impact. In 2000, via a video screen and internet link-up, the ABP offered refugees in Bourj Shamali live connection with a refugee camp in Palestine as part of the opening celebration.

The stories I later heard in Lebanon during fieldwork in 2003 resembled those I had heard before in Ramallah about the opening celebration in Palestine. When I interviewed ABP coordinator Lubna Hammad in Palestine in 2001, she described the launching of the project in Jalazone refugee camp (West Bank) as an incredible event. During the opening, the camp was connected to refugees in Lebanon. Some refugees managed to connect with relatives for the first time through the internet line-up. The people that were present repeatedly enquired about missing family, cried, and requested the camera to move around in order to show the rest of the village or camp. Thus after hearing the stories in Bourj al-Shamali for a while, I discovered they were talking about the same virtual meeting that Lubna had described to me with regards to the opening of the Jalazone centre in Palestine: I was now meeting the people on the other side of the border.

The first initiators of ABP in Palestine were young and active IT professionals or students at Birzeit University. They knew the meaning of contact with international organizations and activists. They were also in touch with Palestinians in the ‘periphery’ that were cut-off from the ‘centre’: with refugees in camps and the exiled. Alaa’ from Ramallah, one of the first participants, recalls:

The diaspora in the West had the ability to access the internet. But not only politically engaged Palestinians were contacting people like me in Palestine, also those in refugee camps. We felt it had to come down to the people themselves, the most affected people being refugees. Families are torn apart and many have never met their families again because of the closed borders and occupation.

At the opening in 1999, one of the initiators recited a poem by Kamal Nasir about the importance of keeping the memory of Palestinian history alive, linking it to ABP as a way of recording and telling the history of Palestinian dispossession since 1948 through Palestinian eyes.

ABP worked in two phases; the first was ‘the initiation’ of the project. The central management at CCE offered refugees training in web design and financial management and provided computer labs, servers, and internet lines. The camp elected a board to represent the ABP and nominate the hosting organization. The second phase concerned ‘the sustainability’ of the project. A special website was set-up for each refugee camp and offered additional possibilities such as discussion forums in Arabic. During an interview in Palestine 2001, Lubna explained the idea:

An important motivation for founding this website is to let refugees
themselves talk; to allow them to deal with their own issues. The second
reason is to survive and communicate despite the many checkpoints and
controls in the West Bank and the physical obstacles between Palestine
inside and outside, and between the different refugee camps.

ABP thus describes its main challenge as bringing people together and promoting
issues regarding Palestinian refugees. Next to its local and internal (diasporic)
orientation, the project used the online platform to create a Palestinian voice to reach
the outside world. The ABP coordinator, Nur, stated in 2005:

The focus or goal here is ultimately to show an alternative image or the
other side of Palestine and Palestinians. This is, for instance, why the
section on poetry was included. The aim was to show that Palestinian
refugees are not just poor people who have nothing to offer, but are just
like the rest of us. They also write poetry for instance. It shows an element
of the people in a personal way.

The main ABP website has a well-designed and user-friendly appearance. It
gives a brief description on the front page with visible links to the various refugee
camp websites that are linked to the project. It offers three main types: life stories,
photo essays, and selected interviews. The left side of the page offers Arabic and
English links to information about agreements, UN resolutions, interactive maps
locating the refugee camps in Palestine, and significantly, video files in Real Media.
Thus even though the ABP website is largely directed towards Palestinian refugees in
camps, there is an attention to the inclusion of an international audience as well as a
transnational Palestinian community by providing video and sound access to different
refugee settings in the Middle East. It is an initiative with clear grass-roots objectives
directed at refugee camps. The language of the discussion board option on the
website is an indicator. Nur:

The language of communication is mainly Arabic. This is why the forums
are in Arabic, while the homepage is bilingual; English and Arabic. The
Arabic-speaking people are the priority at this time. Another reason for
not having an English discussion board is the capacity and resources that
this would require.

Together with the local communities, ABP also developed camp-focused
websites. By participating in the creation of the site the refugees opened a window
into the history, society, and culture of Palestinians, and a refugee’s everyday life in
particular. The Nahr al-Bared camp had success with their website and showed a
capacity to ascertain the participation of the local community. The website had its
own coordinating team that continued to develop the website with local news,
features, personal contributions, etc.

But the project faced many difficulties after it started in 1999 because of the
outbreak of the Intifada; in fact, between 2000 and 2002 the staff faced serious
technical and financial problems. Amidst the reoccupation of the Occupied
Territories, the focus shifted from development to sustainability of the project. After 2004 ABP teams and volunteers succeeded in refocusing the projects’ aims towards political struggle for refugee rights and inter/intra communication between Palestinians in the diaspora. Setbacks to the general project were unavoidable. The military occupation and lack of finance dominated the ABP problems in Palestine. Since the start of the Intifada much of the infrastructure, like computer centres and software equipment, was wrecked. Before the Intifada it was at least possible for staff and volunteers to travel inside the Occupied Territories; fieldworkers went to the camps to organize training of local staff. Bassem, one of the field coordinators I met in Ramallah in 2002, related that while the need for the project increased with the Intifada, they were forced to downgrade it considerably:

Now it’s not even possible to go from Ramallah to Birzeit, so we can’t give training and special courses in many camps either. The deterioration did not cause donors to understand the situation and be more flexible. In general, their priority changed from structural and sustainable projects [like financial problems] the salaries of the current camp coordinators who depend on us.119

Meanwhile, the organizers continued to receive requests from other camps to join the ABP project. Some offered to cover their own costs, as long as the CCE was prepared to give guidance, training, administration, and allow them to work under its umbrella. Instead of developing the project, the ABP strategy became one of upgrading existing camps and saving the remains of the project in light of financial problems. According to Ivan, general coordinator of ABP in 2002:

We don’t have field officers, camp organizers, or district coordinators anymore. Only two employees are available for the whole project, the webmaster and me, because all the ABP money is gone. There is not even a possibility to pay the salaries of the current camp coordinators who depend on us.119

Many more problems occurred with the siege and reoccupation of the West Bank and Gaza; the imposed curfews made it difficult to carry out even the simplest requirements. Ivan continued:

Due to closure and curfews we couldn’t pay the website provider on time. The cheque probably never even arrived; a lot of post that comes in and out of Palestine is lost. The web-host provider then sold our url name so we had to change every hyper link from acrossborders.org to acrossborder.org.

The most serious consequence, however, was the fact that two new ABP camp centres in the West Bank and Gaza, could not start. Noor Shams camp in the North West Bank and Nussairat in the middle of Gaza were provided with just five

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119 The project recruits, trains, and then hires someone from the camp to coordinate the project. The person will receive 100% salary the first 6 months, then 70% for the next 3 months, and finally 30% for the last three months. The camp needs to complete the rest of the salary through incomes generated by the new camp internet centres. The monthly salary for an ABP coordinator in Gaza is $350.
computers instead of the usual ten and the necessary hardware. Other scheduled launches of international ABP camp centres became more and more difficult.

The Lebanese ABP suffered many financial and technical problems due to the Intifada and closures in Palestine. Simply put: the international process of the project didn't continue as planned, even after ABP decentralized and was taken over by NGO's in Lebanon. Important meetings that were planned in Jordan to discuss the future of ABP-international had to be cancelled because the Palestinian representatives of acrossborders.org were not allowed to cross real borders. Ivan:

In April we had an international conference planned in Amman with all ABP coordinators to finally discuss our international relations, the process in Lebanon, and our plan to extend our project to Jordan and Syria. But when the situation deteriorated in March and April and no travel permissions were given anymore, the meeting had to be cancelled.

With internet communication international meetings should have easily been held through internet conference. But the value of offline, face-to-face, communication in building projects, loyalty, and setting up bottom-up initiatives is important. The bottom-up experience was particularly important for internet development in Lebanese refugee camps.

Across Borders Lebanon

With all its difficulties, the Lebanese Across Borders Project eventually managed to launch ABP in two camps: Nahr al-Bared and Bourj al-Shamali. The hosts of the project were Al Najde Women's Centre in Nahr al-Bared and Beit Atfal Sumoud (youth) Centre in Bourj al-Shamali, were initial participants of ABP. Young and educated people from the camp were recruited to coordinate and manage the project because they were rooted in the local social dynamics. Moreover, they understood the relevance of the internet very well because as a newly educated generation in the camps (at the time, in 2000) they were themselves experimenting with the possibilities of the internet.

Introducing the internet project to people in the camp required broad support and continuous promotion. Financial and social constraints made it even more necessary to prepare the community for the internet projects. Neither Nahr al-Bared nor Bourj Shamali were the 'easiest' places to start internet projects. One of the ABP coordinators in Nahr al-Bared, Ibrahim, explained how local disadvantages, together with troubles in Palestine, made work difficult:

We use to set a date for the internet meeting but they [in Palestine] couldn’t show up due to bombings that hit their centre (...) We also passed through difficult times due to problems with electricity and phone lines. This all resulted in weaker communication and we lost contact with many people. When the situation got better here, it worsened in Palestine.
Specific ‘social’ problems added to the difficult particularities in the local developments as well. Some, especially those who weren’t familiar with or were suspicious of the Internet, did not enthusiastically welcome it. The small and crowded Internet cafes had a bad reputation; an Internet centre inside an NGO had a better reputation than commercial Internet cafes. As the ABP project operates under the umbrella of an established organization, they are generally better respected; girls were therefore often allowed to attend ABP. In both Lebanese ABP camp centres, girls also participated because the host organization employed young women to manage the project; women hanging around the Internet centre and assisting made an important difference; this is why selection of the hosting NGO was an important issue in the camp.

Ties between the ABPs in Palestine and Lebanon broke but eventually the personal efforts and creativity of local coordinators saved parts of the project. Sami, a local ABP coordinator in Bourj Shamali camp, contacted people in Nour al-Shams (West Bank) through the Internet. Through the email addresses that were still available, and subsequently the more regular MSN chats, virtual meetings between the refugee camps in both countries were revived and strengthened. From the beginning ABP was framed in a clearly politicized setting. The project started in Bourj al-Shamali camp on September 30, 2000, coincidentally, one day after the Intifada broke out. The employees were committed to the project; Abu Wassim (director of host NGO Beit Atfal Sumoud) even considered it one of the organizations major projects at the time, but not the highest priority. ABP had Internet competition because Al Karameh youth centre (Fatah related - the most powerful political faction of this camp), offered Internet connection and two other small Internet cafes also had Internet clients. When I visited these places and compared it with the ABP centre, the age and gender demographic was clearly different.

I encountered interesting gender related situations when I attended the computer and Internet trainings in Bourj Ashamali. The group consisted of men and women, from inside and outside the camp. Some female participants were veiled, others not and some men looked like they had just come from construction work with cement still sticking to their shoes. Yet others came dressed as ‘muwazzaf’ (office employees). The atmosphere was very relaxed, so when students, and especially the teacher himself made a mistake, laughter and joking broke out. The coordinator mentioned that several Lebanese students also joined the course. According to Sami, coordinator of Bourj Shamali ABP: “During our training projects some Lebanese corrected their previous ideas about Palestinians and refugee camps because this is the first time they are intensively working with us.” After the final course, students were offered work experience in an ICT company, computer shop, or even at an ABP project in the refugee camp.

Although the online reconnection with Palestine through the ABP launch strengthened the dream of al-Awdla (Return) among a new refugee generation, not all refugees were automatically interested in ABP. The coordinators had to think of special ways to approach people. They used encouraging leaflets like: “Would you like
to talk with your relatives and friends abroad, or even in Palestine? Come to the Najde Centre and you will.” The online meetings between Lebanon and Palestine eventually made a huge impact and formed new virtual communities. Sami described the method of the virtual group meetings as “a group of young Palestinians in one camp in Lebanon meets another group in a camp in Palestine.” Sometimes even three groups met at the same time like the meeting between Nahr al-Bared (North Lebanon), Bour al-Shamali (South Lebanon), and Jalazone (West Bank Palestine). Participants were first introduced to know each other to ‘break the ice’ and then they discussed a certain topic that the coordinators of the different camps agreed upon. One of the topics discussed during my visits there was the role of the Geneva Agreement, and what refugees themselves thought of it or what they thought should be changed.120

After the official part of these virtual meetings, the youth were allowed to chat freely and exchange emails with their counterparts on the other side. The coordinator either went out to smoke a cigarette or sat somewhere with colleagues, but usually he or she had to run from one computer to the other to explain how to add someone to a chat-room, send attachments, or open received files. Sometimes the meetings were organized between girls only in order to allow them to discuss topics they wouldn’t want to in a mixed group. Individual continuation with their online friends and the search for others after they finished these ‘meetings’ were considered part of the project’s success. According to the users and staff I spoke with in Lebanon, participants clearly preferred to have contact with Palestinians inside Palestine.

In contrast to Bourj al-Shamali where Sami continued setting up the project, Nahr al-Bared had problems related to particular social issues. The support of religious authority Sheikh Ahmed Hadj for the project was to some extent crucial. After many negative rumours about internet cafes had already prevailed, people also started to complain about the ABP hosted Najde. Najde was operating a fully equipped internet centre by the time they had become a target of radicals and widespread gossip, some of which wanted to prohibit children and youth going there. The Sheikh decided to see for himself what the suspicions were all about. After his own assessments he publicly referred to Najde as a ‘safe’ and ‘clean’ place, and contributed to the acceptance of the ABP internet centre in the camp.

Participants of the virtual sessions, and those using the ABP internet centres, experienced new online opportunities in different ways. While hanging around the Najde Women’s Centre in Nahr al-Bared, I saw 19-year-old high school student Rami working on the internet at ABP. He was not just chatting like most of the young people I noticed. He quickly surfed many websites through different search engines, copying and saving files and texts on his disc. In a way, he seemed to be creating his own archive. When I approached him and asked how he usually starts his internet voyage, and to explain what he was doing, he said:

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120 ‘Geneva’ was one of the many failed negotiation attempts at the time, promoted by a section of the elite Palestinian representatives; this offer was moderated to the extent that the right of return was abandoned.
I start at 4 p.m., so there is always someone online in some part of the world. Then I open Google. I usually have a specific subject I want to research, and start surfing and reading. Today it's about 'Smoking Hazards'. I found some websites and papers that I will copy. (...) The other time I wanted to know about the philosophical meaning of 'logic'. I had general questions - what is 'logic'? When I was with friends, I asked – 'do you know what logic is all about?' I then write the answers in my notebook, and continue to search for it online.

He clarified that reading everything online takes a long time and would be too expensive at the internet café. Instead of paying another 1.500 Lira (1 US $) per hour in the net café, he saves the documents on a floppy, and using his uncle’s computer, goes through the material and selects what he wants to keep.

During fieldwork in Bourj al-Shamali I talked to a brother and sister in the ABP internet centre. They were chatting with their family abroad: he with Tulkarem (West Bank) on voice chat, she with her cousin in Libya, who had just sent her pictures of her engagement party through MSN. It is important to note that ABP opened a gateway between the camps and the transnational community, but not necessarily between the camps and Lebanese society in their own everyday environment.

Some of the Lebanese activists who were involved with the project regretted that ABP could not overcome the gap between Palestinians and Lebanese. When I met Bassem he said:

Refugees in Lebanon are meant to stick to a dream instead of fighting for change and basic rights. The idea is they should not intervene in the society surrounding them. UNRWA is also representing a contradicting; on one hand helping them [Palestinian refugees] and on the other not changing their situation.

The camps are embedded in the local settings of host countries and this means that the ABP project in the camp is also affected by the reality of racism and lack of infrastructure. Since the problems do not match those in the Occupied Territories, the project must therefore acknowledge these differences explicitly if it wants to improve the position of refugees.121 But as mentioned above, the ABP project struggled to develop in Lebanon and was confronted with (state) structured realities they could not control. And in addition, it was insufficiently funded. The launch of ABP in Lebanon differs from and reminds us of the challenges in Palestine, where the project originated.

121 Later the Digital Solidarity Project was set-up by some of the same activists that were involved with ABP. It was an internet project that evolved to a matured phase after ABP experiments and the technological possibilities improved, especially in terms of overcoming the infrastructural problems. At it can be seen that this project provides online content as well as offline projects for the refugees in the camps, like filmmaking and design. It goes without saying that ABP suffered enormously and the host organization’s building was also destroyed.
Across Borders Palestine

It is a family visit flooded with love and prevention. From inside the one meter separation of both sides, you can hear a flow of names flying through the air, “my name is so and so… I’m looking for such and such a person… do you know him?” [...] Hands and bodies were penetrating the fence, the thorns of the wires were piercing its teeth inside their hands, chest, even faces, tearing their clothes, but they did not mind as long as they could have one touch from an outstretched hand. Letters, addresses, and dates were flying everywhere. Bottles of water were exchanged across the fence, but tears were the masters of the occasion. They couldn’t cut the iron fence for sure, but they made it more flexible. They had been waiting all their lives to exchange such a long look, but how long will they wait to embrace each other? "Al-Safir.122

Following the Israeli withdrawal from South Lebanon, Palestinians on both sides of the border seized the historic opportunity to ‘reunite’ with other Palestinians from whom they had been separated for nearly 6 decades by a border fence. The pictures and stories of the border meetings reiterate the fact that Israel still denies the Right of Return to Palestinian refugees. The initially random meetings at the border became coordinated visits, organized by Palestinian organizations in both countries.123 Children of Ibdaa’ centre in Dheisheh camp took the opportunity to meet face-to-face with the children from Shatila camp (Beirut) they had known via the Across Borders Project.

Prior to the face-to-face reunions at the borders, the reunifications were already ‘assisted’ via internet by Across Borders. After it started in Dheishe, the ABP stretched over the rest of the Palestinian Territories and was to be available in the North (Nablus/Jenin), Centre (Ramallah/Bethlehem), and Southern parts of Palestine (Gaza). At the time of fieldwork in 2001/02 ABP officially finished setting up Khan Younes (Gaza), Jalazone (Ramallah/Birzeit) and Ama’ri (Ramallah) camp centres. They continued to be assisted with lease-lines, web-development, and trainings. According to the original plan, the camps had to finalize the initial phase in July 2002. As mentioned in the above Lebanese experiences, the Israeli military response to the Palestinian Intifada delayed the process a great deal and international funds were withdrawn. According to Raed Mustafa, responsible for ABP at the time in 2002, the practical consequences of the re-occupation of Palestinian territories were very damaging. For instance, the ABP website coordinator now had to get special permission from the Israeli army to go to Gaza. This immobility increased the problem that ABP Gaza was suffering anyway, and led the internet centre and website to a deplorable state.

122 Al-Safir daily newspaper, Beirut, May 31 2000.
123 The Israeli army started to obstruct the Palestinian refugee reunions and eventually completely disallowed them with a shoot-to-kill policy. Between the withdrawal in 2000 and my longer visits in 2003, three Palestinian teenagers attempting to reach the border to see Palestine were killed by Israeli snipers. See Chapter Three for this case.
Jalazone refugee camp had the reputation of being a very active ABP camp. Trainings, courses, and services were offered and the host organization even managed to generate its own capital with which they could sustain the project. The project’s local success relied to a large extent on grass-roots participation and leadership within the society. Jalazone was unlike the Ama’ri ABP. In Ama’ri the problem was not simply lack of efficient political coordination and good leadership, or a low level of local participation. The camp is located on the poor outskirts of Ramallah, right after Qalandia checkpoint, dividing the West Bank centre (Ramallah, Birzeit) from Jerusalem and the rest of Palestine. This makes the camp an attractive place for Palestinian demonstrations and thus vulnerable to Israeli army attacks. The military operations also hampered the refugees’ internet participation, especially of women, as they depended on access inside the camp more often than men. This access was mainly provided in the Women’s Centre - host to the ABP project in the camp. But when soldiers rolled into the camps with their tanks and jeeps their infrastructure was destroyed and access to the internet was prevented for many women and children in the camp; the destructions went beyond the level of infrastructure.124

Despite the problems that would occur during the sieges, ABP was hosted in the Ama’ri Women’s Centre and opened its doors to all refugees in July 2001, in the middle of the Intifada. While the ABP internet centre in al-Amari was open for all, it aimed at women and girls in particular. The team offered special courses for women, many of whom worked as hairdressers, designers, or make-up stylists in the camp. During the courses they learned to find information online that they could use for their work. Therefore, offering separate courses and internet hours proved to be a success that increased the initial attendance and later normalized mixed participation. From 9 till 15.00 the centre was reserved for females, and from 15.00 till 22.00 for males. Many stories were circulating in the Palestinian camps about occurrences at ‘Raghm al-Hudoud’ (ABP): the family that was reconnected to relatives in Bourj al-Shamali in Lebanon, or the woman who met a man on the internet and eventually married him. Lubna Hamad, who coordinated ABP in 2001, told me about one special participant in Ama’ri:

The story of Yasser al-Azaa is exemplary of the chance to develop local involvement. This 70 year old man types his stories and ideas about the camp and the Palestinian issue and has young people post it for him on the website.

And Lubna Hamad describes how ABP helped improve the position of some women,

After the women finished the internet and computer courses offered through ABP some of them took a loan to purchase a computer and started doing administrative work at home. This way they managed to generate extra income without having to leave the children or elderly.

124 In one incident in June 2002 two children were killed and seven others injured in Ama’ri camp by explosive devices that the Israeli soldiers left behind. Some of the children I met in the ABP centre were talking about it and showed the pictures. The Ama’ri ABP website put this news as a popup on its homepage.
The youth in Ama’ri camp greatly enjoyed the availability of the internet; they used it for school assignments, to make new friends online, and to email. Some of the project organizers had mixed feelings, especially about the impact of porn sites on children or chats for young women to meet boys. According to a volunteer at the Women’s Centre who eventually took the reservations of family members seriously, not all complaints were ungrounded:

In the beginning there was a large group of users, it was very full in the internet centre. It was ‘too enthusiastic’ because we didn’t realize that many teenagers were indeed surfing sex sites. We were notified by the technical staff of Birzeit University who could view the online activities, and adapted a security system that blocked these websites.

But regardless of general successes, Refa’, the Women’s centre coordinator, explained that after a while and after many Palestinians from the camp were killed:

the centre just could not continue. This camp was attacked many times by the Israeli army, you must understand the impact. Tanks came all the way to the entrance of our centre and even damaged the telephone networks of the camp. We were disconnected for 23 days and had to stop the internet services for three months. The contract with CCE ended but we were not able to take over the whole responsibility and coordination of the project as was planned.

They still tried to continue and the ABP coordinator of al-Amari considers the awareness and use of internet particularly important for refugees:

Especially for political reasons, refugees feel they must strengthen the relationships between the camps and face the fact that nobody else is concerned about their issues and rights.

Similar to the stories in Ama’ri and Jalazone, the launch of the ABP project in Khan Younes camp (in the very south of Gaza) also occurred with the (re)connection of family in Lebanon. ABP was the first internet project in Khan Younes. Iyad al-Jalous, ABP coordinator in the camp, recalled the launch as they hooked up with other camps in Lebanon and used web-cam to see each other. In the beginning there was some suspicion but eventually people got enthusiastic to join the project. Flyers and ads were used to announce courses and activities in the camp centre. To prepare society for this ‘new’ phenomenon, they also offered ‘separate’ activities and provided two internet rooms for boys and girls.

ABP had to work inside the local/social culture and be a progressive project at the same time. According to Iyad, “Women should not pay the price of the mistakes that guys usually make in these internet centres, but we cannot just neglect the culture and traditions either.” The specific location, extreme entrapment, and isolation of Gaza, also means there is a stronger conservative socio-religious tendency compared to the West Bank. This explains the different attitudes towards gender participation in public life and internet use. There are many difficulties in this camp;

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especially complicated is their separation from the rest of Gaza and West Bank. Iyad explained:

They need to have connections with Palestinians outside, and especially Lebanon, because there is not enough information about their lives. We know they are sad and angry because they don’t live inside Palestine and have no direct role in resisting Israeli occupation and oppression.

The Khan Younes website therefore offered news about the camp as a way to bridge the gap. Iyad motivated his participants by supplying them with a list of email addresses in Lebanon that they could contact. He continues; “We discovered that we are living in similar circumstances: first as Palestinian refugees in a camp and second with very bad economic and social conditions.” The internet connections could overcome the isolation between Gaza and the West Bank, and allow them to communicate directly with Palestinians in the diaspora as well. Iyad:

This is important because Gaza is like an Israeli prison. We are isolated and surrounded by army ships from the seaside, Israeli soldiers from the land, and the Air Force from the air. On top of this separation we are even internally separated because they divided the Gaza strip into three parts with checkpoints.

Two years after the first ABP centre had introduced the internet to the camp for the first time there were more than 22 internet cafes in Khan Younes. People continued to chat about their circumstances and were engaged in many activities online. Many did not escape the offline reality with which they were daily confronted, but projects like ABP, and later initiatives, did provide a gateway to disseminate their opinions and stories about these everyday realities.

4.5 Conclusion

Internet provided communication, and projects were clearly shaped by Palestinian national politics. In this Chapter I focused on the question of how everyday political life stirred Palestinian cyber space, what it consisted of, and how it advanced, and I explored events that contained the creation of transnational Palestinian linkages and imaginations. The outbreak of the Intifada was a significant political boost to mass internet use. The experiences of the 2002 invasions motivated organizations and individuals to instrumentalize the internet by making websites that reported and represented the incidents, using videoconference to continue to conduct business, and designing special software to store data and organize homework assignments and exams for students.

The Across Borders participants in Bourj Shamali and Nahr al-Bared, as well as the stories of ABP in Ramallah and Gaza, picture how Palestinian communities are influenced by the internet. Furthermore, the purposes and motivations for internet use are diverse. For Palestinians in the homeland, the Occupied Territories, the
internet provided an outlet and new way to communicate and express events; for Palestinians in Lebanon the internet provided a new medium for gaining knowledge about the homeland or to strengthen internal communication.

Some of the activists in Lebanon that were involved with these projects said they were missing an organic link with local political matters. For them, ABP gave an important platform for communication but not a body for political change. Nevertheless, the way the project evolved in its specific settings revealed differences between the camps. The Nahr Bared ABP became a good outlet for the community, the site became an archive of the camp, so through people’s involvement in the website, the project had a more community-based characteristic. In Bour Shamali the ABP was becoming more directed at voicing protest and writing statements about the conditions in the camp; it was mostly focused on the outside world. I argued that the internet presents a significant alternative voice and provides a longed-for meeting point but that it does not replace the still strongly present focus on a non-virtual state and desire for face-to-face contact.

The internet profoundly changed the dynamics of internal and external embedded social relations. Chat, emailing, and websites all provide accessible instruments to the Palestinian community. Numerous websites and projects overcame, to some extent, the fragmented Palestinian diaspora. Internet users in refugee camps feel compelled to seek contact with their long-lost brothers and sisters, disseminate on-the-ground facts, and consume information from new global sources. An imagined national identity configured online is clearly framed in the desire to return to a homeland. I observed tactical and strategic internet uses motivated by the aim to correct political representation towards an international Western audience, as well as inside their own Palestinian communities. This re-construction of Palestinian (online) presence reveals how virtual community evolves in practice. Though often romanticized, Palestinian ideals were not always unified, confirming that these meetings and encounters are not always smooth, or to be taken for granted. Direct, online, transnational communication also asserted, contested, and altered the collective “national imagination” of Palestinians.

It is important to note that an available infrastructure for communication is a prerequisite to online (political) content. Internet access and usage provide the structure and motivation for the creation of a transnational virtual community. Palestine Remembered, Maktoob, PalChat, Mirc, MSN, emailing, and projects like Eye-to-Eye and ABP discussed in this chapter, are practical examples of how this virtualization is made operational. As the ABP offered Palestinian refugees a voice and opened a window into the world, it was a repository of virtual Palestinian interactivity. In due course it promoted the development of more Palestinian websites, blogs, and online outlets.

What struck me while doing the interviews and hanging around the ABP and internet cafés, was that some of the most popular websites were those about Palestinian martyrs, like Kataeb al-Aqsa and al-Qassem. I aim to further analyse these virtual representations in their online and offline settings in the next chapter.