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

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Chapter 5: Virtual Palestine—Online Representations

5.1 Introduction

The internet consists of the electronic infrastructures that construct interaction and information systems (Castells, Amoore 2005:364). This global electronic space, or the ‘space of flows’, as Castells coined it, brings people of different diasporic ‘locales’ together, indicating a unique platform for dispersed communities. Websites have become one of the dominant elements of these electronic ‘flows’; websites are the mediating ‘spaces’ through which the Palestinian nation has often been imagined and shaped. Many Palestinians separated by national borders, roadblocks, and other travel restrictions were able to exhibit new modes of connectivity via novel internet projects such as ABP. The alternative virtual space blends with the strong ideal of an independent Palestinian state. While most refugees have never seen their land of origin, virtual traversals to and from Palestinian cities and villages are made via the internet. Meanwhile, internet use motivated the emergence of hundreds of websites about (and in support of) Palestine. The outbreak of the Intifada in 2000 is the background by which to understand the rapid increase of (pro) Palestinian websites. Technological developments, the *Arabization* of website interfaces, and the Public Relation strategies of several high-quality Palestinian websites towards Western audiences, have marked their groundbreaking growth.

Palestinian websites can be interpreted in different ways. Birzeit University’s *Complete Guide to Palestinian Websites* was the first comprehensive index. Besides mapping such online sources, I also asked Palestinians I met in internet cafes and during interviews about their favourite sites (which are not necessarily Palestinian) and added them to my list as well. As the list of websites continued to grow, I shifted from collecting and tracing, to categorizing them. Mapping and studying websites related to Palestine made me question several issues. *Firstly*, I wanted to determine which audiences were being targeted and why. To understand this, I distinguished between the *globalizing* and *localizing* inclinations of Palestinian websites.

The *globalizing* websites are those with a broad or international focus. Born during the Intifada, many of these websites’ most important goals was to counter dominant views and media biases that contribute to the de-humanization of Palestinians. Linked to this important *re-humanization* attempt, the official *.ps* internet country-code and the growing number of Palestinian bloggers amounted to a direct representation of Palestine. Part of the expansion of websites related to Palestinian, these developments also require analysis.

During categorization it became clear that there were also websites that don’t necessarily focus on the international (Western) community. These have a local perspective or are specifically related to Palestinian communities and narratives; they

are the *localizing* Palestinian websites. Earlier websites with a local reference already emerged around 1996 and mainly belonged to professional Palestinians in the media or IT sectors; as the technology became easier, more projects appeared and more people participated. These grass-roots websites can articulate a virtual locality in two ways: by outlining a personal objective (through a family website or later, a personal blog), or by being shaped by a particular geographic location (such as a city, village, or refugee camp). Websites like *Beit Rima* and *Remembering Jenin* from the West Bank or *Rafab Today* from Gaza, are clear examples of this type of localization.

The *second* question emerging from my research of Palestinian websites relates to their *mode of operation*. I was interested to know how websites were grounded, who are the people behind the websites, what motivated them, and how do they consider online projects to be part of the struggle in everyday Palestinian life? I reviewed several websites according to the personal experiences and everyday engagement of the people who make them. From this perspective it is possible to see the offline realities and experiences behind the scenes of online virtual representations. One of the outcomes of this two-fold investigation of websites was that I discovered a discrepancy between the offline popularity and discussions of certain websites, and the way they link/refer to each other.

This triggered a *third* set of questions. *Free* virtual internet spaces also represent systems of *exclusion*. Some of the websites that were popular among Palestinians I interviewed, such as those linked to Hamas or Hezbollah, were not referred to by the leading (*globalizing*) websites. This revealed an online political strategy connected with the targeting of audiences; some websites avoid association to other ‘radical’ ones. The last part of this chapter deals with assumptions about Muslim internet participation vis-à-vis (dominant) views about Islam, modernity, and technology related to the general perception of Islam and the ‘war on terror’ in the West (especially after 9/11).

5.2 Tracing Palestinian Websites

Palestinians in specific should utilize a platform like the internet in order to have a more prominent presence on the net.

– Haithem El Zabri, Director, Solidarity Design, 2003

In order to trace initial Palestinian online representation we need to start in the mid-1990s. The widening gap between the lived realities and available images/news sources of Palestine led to a great disturbance. Despite the 1993 Oslo negotiations, the discrepancy increased between rhetorical “peace” and the reality of land confiscation and occupation. Yet, as a result of the agreements, several ICT infrastructures, like telephone and the internet, finally became available for Palestinians (Chapter Two). Birzeit University launched its website in 1994, the first in

Palestine.¹²⁵ Another first early marker of Palestine's initial internet use was Muna Hamzeh's website for Dheishe refugee camp in the West Bank. She set up this refugee website in 1998 and gave voice to those living in the camp. Her website was probably the first virtual place for Palestinian refugees to share their stories with the outside world. Many more efforts aimed at creating awareness about the Palestinian cause (or helping Palestinians network with each other) were manifested through the possibilities of the internet. As the intro of *I am a Palestinian* website proclaimed: "Palestinians have names and faces. And now they have a voice".¹²⁶

The increase of websites can be studied according to the different targeted audiences. *I am a Palestinian* is a good example of a specific style of website that targeted an international community, with the goal of raising political awareness. El Zabri's comment (opening quote) reflects the great effort to improve and strengthen Palestinian presence online. I will address this phenomenon through an analysis of several groundbreaking developments in connection to its techno-political context: the Arabization of the internet, the .ps URL struggles to attain Palestinian recognition in cyber space, and the rise of blogs. The second part of this section illustrates how different types of websites can be classified according to codes and categories.

Groundbreaking Developments

With *Solidarity Design*, (Picture 11) El Zabri put this theory into practice. The project offered complete development of professional Palestinian websites at no profit. This project resulted in websites like www.alaqsaintifada.org – with news about the Intifada, and www.rachellcorrie.org – in homage to the American ISM activist that was crushed by Israeli bulldozers. Some Palestinian website developments must be viewed in context of technological developments like: investment in proper translation, multilingual sources, easy interfaces, and surf options that broadened the scope and made websites more accessible.

The Palestinian website *Adalah* (Justice), launched in May 2004, works on legal advocacy cases for Palestinians, including filing petitions against Israel's land administration. They are also known for their appeals at the Supreme Court against using Palestinian civilians as Human Shields. Their press release stated: "Disseminating this news and opinion, and bringing it to the public's knowledge is especially important in a state where gross human rights violations against Arab minorities occur." They published the website in English, Hebrew, and Arabic, in order to reach as many people as possible.

¹²⁵ However, after an exciting start for the BZU website as an organic link with student bodies mobilizing grass-roots solidarity and students participation, the site was loosing its capacity to inspire. It is not clear whether this has to do with the departure of particular key figures in the PR and IT departments who played an important role during this period of experimentation. They saw the internet as a tool to organize and mobilize rather than merely to disseminate administrative or academically-related information. One of the changes was the removal of the *Complete Guide to Palestinian Websites* list from the Birzeit University website.

¹²⁶ URL 2002 www.iamapalestinian.org

A trend-setting breakthrough of Arab websites equalled the *Arabization* of internet. In the course of fieldwork many Palestinians mentioned *Maktoob* as an important example; this website was amongst the first to make a major leap by Arabizing its communication services. With three million members in 2003, *Maktoob* played a vital role in assembling Arabs worldwide.¹²⁷ Its primary aim was to facilitate communication among Arabs in Arabic.¹²⁸ They were instantly successful as the first multilingual web-based email service in the Middle East serving as an example to many subsequent initiatives. According to the manager of *Maktoob*, Sameeh, a Palestinian living in Jordan: “It provided a virtual community to Arabs around the world”.

Maktoob offers various styles and several structures like live debates, chat rooms, websites, and email that many of the people I interviewed use. *Maktoob* served the Arab public through various services; it was, for example, the first initiative that assisted its members to find a partner via *mabrook.com*. People can send songs and dedications to each other, or engage in heavy debates. The chat section was one of the most active in the Arab world, and hosts a majority of users between the ages of 18-30. The chat room can reach up to 1000 participants at the same time. The most obvious political online debates were about Palestine (Chapters Three and Four). Some events sparked intense debates, like the live chat session with Souad Srour while she was in Brussels to indict Israeli PM Ariel Sharon for the 1982 massacres of Sabra & Shatila. *Maktoob* also organized a massive fundraising campaign for Palestine. From a review of their chat, email, *Friend*, and *Mabrouk* databases, discussion forums, and online voting, it appeared that the main goal (and effect) was the creation of an online Arab community.

Besides multilingual and technological developments, the Palestinian uprising during the al-Aqsa Intifada is the second main context for the groundbreaking development of Palestinian websites. The development of websites also offered a local/personal focus, especially those that started as homepages and later improved as blogs.

From Homepage to Blogging: Mini Revolutions

Locally based Palestinian websites increased and continued to professionalize. Many aimed to reach international audiences. At first they started as homepages and then progressed into blogs. Academics, physicians, and journalists were the first to create Palestinian homepages. The BZU *Guide To Websites* offered a list of homepages by Palestinians living inside Palestine; it only offered a selected list of personal homepages by Palestinians in the diaspora because by that time there were already too

¹²⁷ In 1999: 100,000 members, in 2001: 1 million, in 2003: 3 million, and in mid 2006: 4,5 million members. Source is Maktoob website. It was still regarded one of the most visited Arab websites by Palestinians according to an Alexa report in May 2006.

¹²⁸ Among others, it received the Best Information Portal Award at the Middle East Economic Forum summit.

many to be listed.¹²⁹ Palestinian homepages also provided lists of local and personal websites with hyperlinks and networks to-and-from them. Mazen Abu Hajleh, born in Libya, raised in Lebanon, and living in Australia, had a website with many links to Arabic sources and a section devoted to his collection of Palestinian homepages. His homepage said: “Sometimes you have to read about Israel to know Palestine, but you always have to read about Palestine to know Israel.”¹³⁰

Daoud Kuttab’s Amin.org was another popular website in 2001, mostly known for its accessible information with both English and Arabic sections of articles related to Palestine.¹³¹ The local homepage made by Hanna Safieh from the West Bank offered a beautiful collection of pictures of historic Palestine between 1920 and 1967. George Nimr Rishmawi offered the biblical history of Beit Sahour on his website as an ode to his hometown. These examples would see a further evolution of Palestinian websites. *Rafab-Today* website, for instance, offered a new type of online representation. It introduced Palestinian websites that were easy to create/maintain and run by people who don’t necessarily work professionally in ICT or media. They became known as *blogs*.

Though not very common at the time of my first fieldwork phase in 2001/02, they were becoming more popular by the time of my second fieldwork phase in 2003/04. A blog is often like a personal diary that additionally offers (local) news coverage. As a new virtual subculture, bloggers were engaged in innovative forms of democratic self-expression, networking, global politics, media critique, and local/alternative journalism. Many blogs are increasingly political and over the last years a wide variety of left-oriented blogs have been created and have organized themselves in solidarity networks (Kahn and Kellner 2004:92). Besides *Rafab-Today*, *Tabula Gaza* became a well-known Palestinian blog; both are from Gaza. By gaining more legitimacy, and sometimes cited by mainstream media, these ‘personal’ sources have become part of the Palestinian information flows.

Such advancing technologies increased the relevance of the internet to political activism even more. Palestinian blogging turned out to be an important innovation; internet use furthered the cause for interaction, information, and construction of political relationships. The techno-political changes over the last 4 years and epitomized by blogs, led to websites undergoing radical transformations. Open source software has been developed to make untraceable blogs in response to the need for anonymity. In fact, this is one of the important reasons that blogs became very important in the Middle East. The combination of Arab interface and the safety of anonymous techniques, meant that blogs became a serious challenge to authoritarianism and oppression. Daring/non-conformist language (sometimes sexual or vulgar), in colloquial Arabic (instead of the usually classic Arabic used by the

¹²⁹ One of the first recommended websites of Palestinians living outside was the one by Khalid Madam-Bey, a software writer who became famous on the internet because he wrote the widely used mIRC, the first multi-user chat system that allowed people to communicate freely by downloading the IRC chat software.

¹³⁰ His site was then found on www.geocities.com/SouthBeach/lagoon/8522 in 2000

¹³¹ www.amin.org/pages/dkuttab

media), increased the popularity of blogs. The growth of such blogs in the Arab/Muslim world exceeded many expectations; the Open Arab Internet search counted approximately 40,000 Arab blogs, of which a majority were created in 2006.

Many were inspired by Egyptian bloggers, some of whom suffered harassment, were prohibited to travel (Hala al-Masry), imprisoned (Kareem Amer), and even tortured (Mohamed al-Sharkawy).¹³² Egyptian bloggers participated in reform/opposition movements like *Kifaya (Enough)* and the large protests at Cairo's Tahrir Square in support of the Egyptian Judges that struggled against Mubarak's attempt to limit juridical independence. The dialectic relationship between online activism via blogs, offline political developments of major protest movements, and political mobilization in the Middle East, have encouraged many others to create blogs and reveal stories and news that would usually be concealed or bypassed by mainstream media.¹³³

The direct link of on-the-ground activism/political upheaval with the increase in online activism, was witnessed in Palestine as well. Extensive research was conducted on Palestinian blogs and 192 Palestinian blogs were traced through quantitative analyses by the Palestinian @ Internet Society Project (P@ISP).¹³⁴ Based on this list, the team coded the sites according to 8 basic qualifiers (Appendix 1) and then made a content analysis of all the retrieved websites. From a comparative study of the blogs based on the different qualifiers, several interesting phenomena were revealed. With Figure 4 Rafal Rohozinski illustrates how the blogs correlated according to category, issue, and alignment. The findings show that blogs in the larger Middle East were generally framed by socio-cultural issues; while blogs from Palestine and the US tended to highlight political topics.

Within Palestine there were also differences; West Bank blogs focused more on issues regarding education and health, and Gaza leaned more towards advocacy and Islam. Furthermore, linguistic differences also appeared to be relevant indicators in our analysis; Arabic blogs more often focused on socio-cultural topics, while blogs in English were dominated by politics.

¹³² 2006 *Arabic Blogs: An Embodiment of Freedom of Expression*. In *Implacable Adversaries: Arab Governments and the Internet*. The initiative Open Arab Internet, at www.openarab.net. One of the examples confirming the potential threat was when blogger Alaa Abdul Fattah posted the picture of an officer that was enjoying oppressing demonstrators during a protest. The officer, notorious among activists for torture in police stations, was uncovered and challenged by the blogger online.

¹³³ See also <http://www.al-bab.com/arab/blogs.htm> for a reference to Arab blogs. Al Bawaba was one of the first services to offer free and Arabic blog hosting, <http://blogs.albawaba.com/>

¹³⁴ Palestine @ Information Society Data Set (2007). A joint project of the Advanced Network Research Group (Cambridge Security Programme) University of Cambridge, GOVCOM.org, and The SecDev Group. Project Principal Investigators: Rafal Rohozinski, Richard Rogers, Deirdre Collings. Core Contributors and Analysts: Wassim Abdullah, Miriyam Aouragh, Sam Bahour, Erik Borra, Michael Dahan, Isabelle Daneels, Anat Ben-David, Reem Fada, Adam Hanieh, Safa' Madi, Koen Martens, Nora Lester Murad, Andrei Mogoutov, Jamil Rabah, Micheal Stevenson, Nart Vileneuve, Mohamed Waked, Marieke van Dijk, Ester Weltevrede.

Websites based in the Occupied Territories were much better available than websites by Palestinians living in Israel. While internet connectivity of Palestinians in Israel is higher, and the Israeli ICT among the best in the world, their web content was still considered much poorer than those in the Occupied Territories.¹³⁵ This difference again indicates that everyday politics shapes internet development. Another factor relating to this difference is the role played by Palestinian experts returning from the diaspora. As indicated in Chapter Two, post-Oslo returnees were important to Palestinian internet development in the OT. A crucial stage in these Palestinian ICT developments was the domain name: adding a new level to the *revolutionary* development of Palestinian websites. While Palestinian experts and investors worked together to put the .ps URL on the worldwide cyber map, the approval of the .ps for the PNA in the OT gave additional legitimacy to Palestinian websites. The internet was therefore regarded as a new gateway for Palestine when the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN) finally delegated their country code, a groundbreaking and exciting techno-political development.

.ps: Re-Territorializing Palestine

It is the gateway for Palestinians, something we have all been waiting for.
It will back the Palestinian IT and internet, and introduce Palestine to a
wider scope of the world; it is the address of Palestine.

– Sabri Saidam, Gaza 2002.

During fieldwork in 2002, the battles against curfews and occupation saw a peak, but another struggle was also taking place: the “DOT-PS”. Five years after having been requested, the country code domain was finally granted by ICANN based on a United Nations verdict for recognized countries and territories. In March 2000 the ICANN delegated the .ps URL as the Top Level Domain for the occupied Palestinian territories.¹³⁶ The ‘dot’ is the initial of a domain that identifies/confirms the territorial/state source of its web pages. It was a symbolic step for Palestine; it seemed to put Palestine back on the map.

The ‘dot’ can be considered as a signifier that helps mark national/territorial boundaries. The country code indicates the ‘nation of origin’ of the connected computers and websites on the internet. The international body ISOC (Internet society) played a major role in developing the constitution, formation, and regulations governing the performance of .ps. According to ISOC-Palestine Chapter, .ps meant the connection of all Palestinians to society and the diaspora. It was assumed that people would express interest in websites with their national initials, and help direct others towards specific Palestinian sources. I noticed during several interviews that

¹³⁵ Palestinians make up 19% of Israel’s citizens. See for example Michael Dahan (2003).

¹³⁶ Cisneros, Oscar S. *DOT-PS Domain without a Country*. Jan 12 2001, Wired News. <http://www.wired.com/politics/law/news/2001/01/41135>

this marker promoted pride and a sense of independence.¹³⁷ .ps offered an alternative for Palestinians who did not want .il: political recognition in cyber space that allows the eradication of the Israeli domain-name when referring to Palestinian sources.

The .ps faced many obstacles on its path. Palnet and other IT companies said this project was very frustrating. The discussion about the .ps created many debates and quarrels on the IRTSIG mailing list. The implementation of the country code was complicated and continuously delayed due to the impact of Israeli policies. The import of equipment was sabotaged by Israeli border control and made difficult by everyday immobility due to curfews, closures, and travel restrictions.

Since .ps did not take-off until 2002, after the internet boom and outbreak of the Intifada, it meant that many websites already existed as .com/org/net. There were expectations that many would switch from these to .ps. Qadah, senior technology advisor to the PNA at the time, stated in an interview with Wired in 2001: "We expect that most Palestinians that are in dot-com or dot-org will move to dot-ps."¹³⁸ This tells us something about the *value* of the .ps for the existing Palestinian websites, and it can explain how the meanings ascribed to .ps allude to different outcomes. The .ps certainly has a *re-location* component; interviews and debates around the online domain suggested that it is the virtual equivalent of a territorial, offline independence. It is necessary to clarify the .ps reference to a national territorial marker.

Palestinian Territory	349
United States	266
Israel	39
Canada	39
France	7
Germany	5
Italy	5
United Kingdom	4
Saudi Arabia	4
Turkey	4
Netherlands	3
Denmark	3
Sweden	1
Switzerland	1
Jordan	1
Norway	1
Malaysia	1
Total	733

Table 5: Total per (country) locality/registration of .PS sites (first sample 2007)

¹³⁷ Of particular concern at the time was the *Jerusalem.ps* domain; they needed to "protect" this url because of its symbolic yet controversial (also claimed by Israel as its capital) implication.

¹³⁸ See note before last.

DOT-PS locality does not necessarily mean that it is ‘stationed’ in Palestine. Of the total 733 .ps websites collected in preliminary analyses in 2006, roughly half were based in “historic Palestine”: as Table 4 shows, 39 websites in Israel and 349 websites in the Occupied Territories.¹³⁹ Of these total .ps websites, 305 were based in the US and Canada, 30 in Europe, and a handful originated in the Middle East or Asia.

Most of the websites were hosted outside of Palestine. The point is that there are different ways to frame our understanding of ‘locality’: location of the website server, location of website registration, location of the website’s host company, or location of the website owner/developer. We qualitatively coded the sites looking at both .ps websites within the Palestinian IP range as well as outside. In addition we studied the “who is” data for all the .ps websites in order to identify the owner and where they (claim to) live. This ‘centre of gravity’ study of the websites hosted in and out of the Palestinian IP range did not show significant non-Palestinian registrants in the .ps domain.¹⁴⁰ After a thorough preparation and selection of the bulk of data, P@ISP was able to discover several important particularities. Figure 6 shows that the majority of .ps websites are registered with addresses within the Palestinian territories and hosted outside of the borders, mainly in the US.

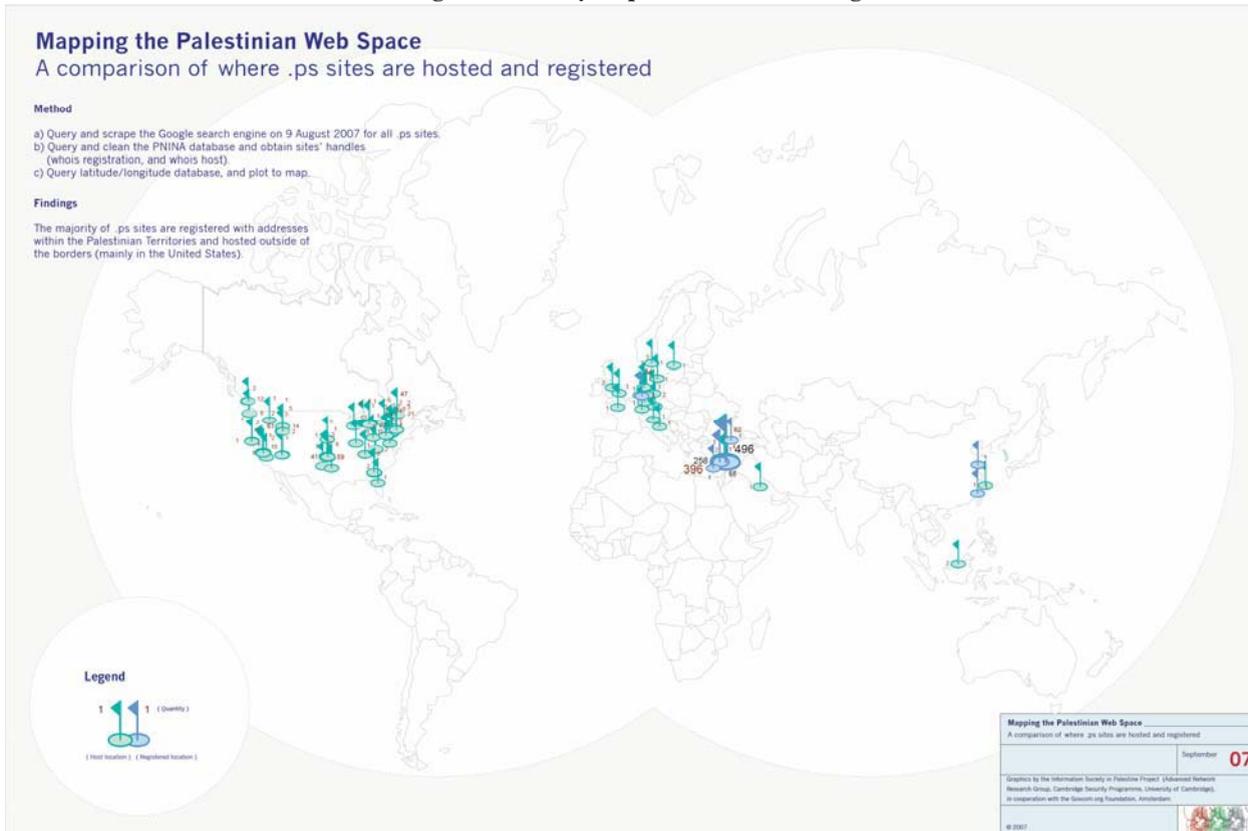
During the intensive P@ISP study regarding Palestinian internet, over 1200 .ps URLs within the Palestinian IP range were collected and coded. The websites were analyzed according to important classification markers, such as content, alignment, location, orientation, audience, and language (see Appendix 1 for the scheme and sub-markers). Our study showed that .ps is predominantly used by political and commercial parties and several important conclusions could be made through the P@ISP. Simply put: .ps was not the main domain of Palestinian cyberspace. The new statistics thus confirmed the preliminary .ps data of Table 4, and the study reveals that the location-ownership-national identity connection does not necessarily prove that .ps is a significant online political marker.

One concrete example that .ps may mirror the everyday importance of the territory/national identity linkage, is the trajectory from pre-.ps (.com, .org, .edu) websites to .ps. By checking the Palestinian websites collected at the beginning of fieldwork and again in 2006, I noticed that, contrary to Qadah’s expectation, many websites did not move to ps. From the selected ethnographically retreated list of websites between 2002 and 2004 in it was shown that only a small number of

¹³⁹ These numbers are based on preliminary data gathered in preparation of the larger P@ISP in 2007, analyzed in the following paragraphs.

¹⁴⁰ Richard Roger’s team also searched the major global registries (RIPE, ARIN, APNIC) to see if there were any administrative, billing, or technical contacts that listed Palestine, West Bank, Gaza, or Occupied Territories as their place of residence. This should have picked up the non-.ps/non-Palestinian IP range registrants that were Palestinian. Moreover, for possible non-.ps diaspora references we looked (through qualitative and quantitative analyses) at possible degrees of “Palestinianess” through links to other Palestinian websites. While we can’t be certain about 100% coverage; we applied a very comprehensive approach and are able to know where there might be gaps.

Figure 5: Locality of .ps websites: Host/Registration



Palestinian websites migrated to .ps. This early conclusion was also confirmed by P@ISP analyses of Birzeit University’s list. This does not assume a fixed conclusion because my list also contained URLs of non-Palestinian websites that Palestinians either visited often (chat/entertainment sites) or regarded as important for Palestinians (political movements in other countries). Nonetheless, Esther Weltevrede’s P@ISP analyses of the old BZU list of website links (by using the Way Back Machine) led to similar results. It appeared that of 172 BZU links from 2002 only five migrated to .ps (one of these kept its domain name but with different content); seven websites duplicated the site and migrated to .ps while keeping the original as well; and five more websites had planned to migrate – they reserved the .ps domain name but have not activated it. Figure 6 shows the migration to .ps and offers a clear visual conversion of the results.

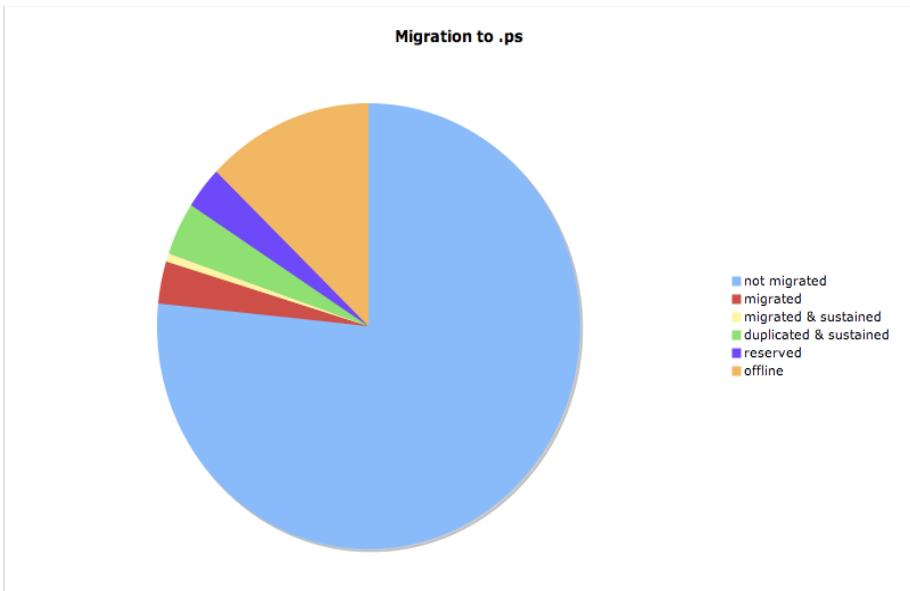


Figure 6: Migration of BZU linked websites to .ps

Surprising was the “Government and Services” sites listed by BZU at the time. We expected that more than other types of websites these would adopt a .ps identity. But of the 35 websites listed, only two duplicated (yet still sustained the original) and just one migrated. However, before jumping to conclusions, it is important to bear in mind that many of the “old/first” websites were inactive anyway. My manual analyses of the 2001-2005 website collection showed that 1/3rd of the websites were either dead (inactive) or stale (inactive for more than 1 year) by 2007. I propose that many did not (plan to) subsist and so did not need to move to .ps.

This discussion about .ps is significant because one of the crucial implications of website relocation concerns the expectation that websites are eventually followed/traced by their networks. By taking the three main Palestinian

university (Birzeit University, Ramallah / Najah University, Nablus / Islamic University, Gaza) websites as indicators during the P@ISP research, Michael Stevenson was able to show that of these three websites with both URLs (with edu and edu.ps), only Islamic University did not have an isolated network. Figure 7 shows the links to the three main universities and clearly illustrates the websites with and without a .ps policy. From the different networks of the three university sites, Islamic University gives higher value to .ps because they automatically redirect website traffic to their .ps site. The .ps seems to be undervalued by Birzeit and Najah University because the map shows only a few links pointed to their .ps websites.

Conclusively, the physical offline location of a website is not chosen on the basis of territory, but rather the degree to which the delivery mechanism makes sense for technical or financial reasons. And the push to adopt .ps has been largely unsuccessful, despite this ccTLD (.ps) being the only internationally recognized marker of Palestinian “sovereignty” and despite a push by the Palestinian community to adopt this domain name for Palestinian websites as a sign of “patriotism”. In order to understand the unexpected results we need to add a qualitative/political layer to our analysis.

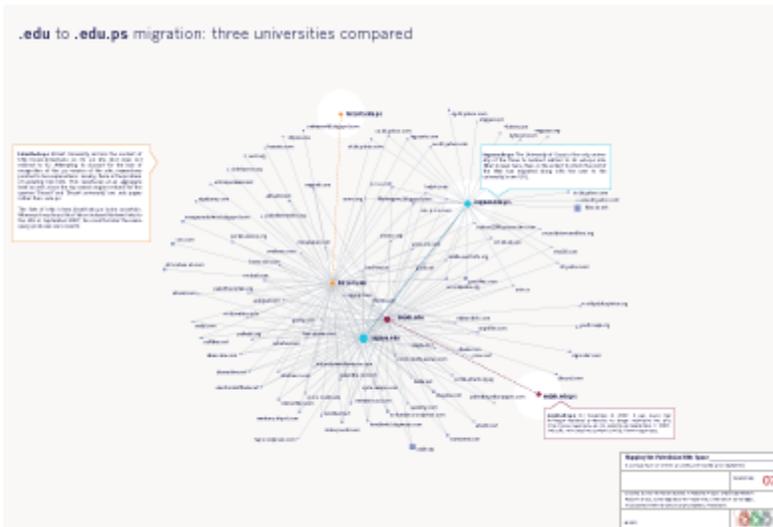


Figure 7: .ps reference of three main Palestinian universities (see Appendix 4)

I argue that the outcome regarding locality and .ps migration is the product of a two-sided context: offline territorial struggles are not necessarily mirrored in an online struggle, and, the great leap from Palestinian absence to Palestinian presence in cyber space happened *before* the .ps was allowed to operate. Thus, the low migration statistics also relates to the historical and political conditions that shaped the websites. Had Qadah been able to make this statement four years earlier—around the time .ps was requested by the PNA and many websites were already being created, and before

the Intifada caused a virtual boom—we would have probably seen a different outcome. The implementation of .ps was repeatedly delayed and equipment necessary for .ps operation was held back at Israeli-controlled borders. Meanwhile, the re-occupation of the Palestinian Territories began to take its toll on the people.

The point I make is that many website hosts/masters did not see it as a priority (anymore) to transform their websites into a .ps. Conclusively, and resembling any offline migration, the virtual trajectory discussed here is characterized by the political conditions the country/context was faced with. In terms of locality, assuming that .ps ownership is indeed a reference to Palestinian national identity, the location of .ps website owners is one indication of the ‘grounded’ characteristic of Palestinian web space. However, considering the highly transnational Palestinian community, and the large number of Palestinians living in exile in the diaspora, the location of a Palestinian website owner cannot fully explain/give value to a possible national-political reference to domain name. Hence, exiled Palestinians do not feel less Palestinian because they are not present on Palestinian soil. Palestinians share an imagined community with other Palestinians inside and outside the territorial centre, while simultaneously considering historical Palestine a very important point of reference (see also Chapter Four). The analyses of the .ps sources bring to mind the classification of the Palestinian websites I was engaged with since 2001. The longer my list of websites during fieldwork became, the more necessary it became to categorize them.

Classifying and Categorizing

A truly public sphere for Palestinian opinion is lacking. I want to create a repository of all Palestinian oriented websites. Many Palestinian websites have tried to dump everything into one thing. It doesn't work, it's as if you walk into a library and find all the books on the floor. If it's not departmentalized and categorized, it won't help anybody.

– Sam Bahour.¹⁴¹

Specific audience are targeted according to certain political goals. Part of the general critique expressed by Palestinian internet producers (and critical consumers) included the capacity to target Western audiences. In an effort to overcome the weakness of many Palestinian websites Bahour stated: “The key is to offer clarity and focus in order to catch the internet surfer’s attention.” This reflected my own motivation for a focused and categorized analysis of Palestinian websites because I had too many different types of website examples. And so I followed Bahour’s advice in my own methodology.

Besides the well-known examples of Palestinian websites mentioned so far, I came across all sorts and sizes of websites in internet cafes and during interviews in Jordan, Palestine, and Lebanon. Apart from these ethnographic and qualitative

¹⁴¹ Interview Ramallah 2002. His target was achieved by setting up the e-Palestine internet portal.

sources, there were also valuable references online. At the time three such comprehensive sources were linked to *Birzeit University*, *Electronic Intifada*, and *Passia*.¹⁴² Many of the websites I came across at the time were related to chatting, news, and politics (including websites about victims of the al-Aqsa Intifada). Although most had a commercial target, ‘politics’ was everywhere on Palestinian websites, therefore it cannot be considered separately. Comments on the Israeli occupation or explicit solidarity with victims and protesters were also present on non-political websites.

Type:	Activism	Religion	Entertainment	Government	Personal/family	Information
Originate from:						
Palestine						
Diaspora						

Table 6: Matrix 1. Palestinian Website: Classification based on issue/alignment

This also meant potential overlaps in website types and categories. Whether activist, governmental, or news related, the dissemination of information has become a dominant objective for websites. Moreover, religiously-inspired manifestations/mobilizations are often part of the national political agenda. An organization like Hamas can be simultaneously activist, religious, and governmental. From viewing and collecting available websites, my aim shifted to an analysis of *how* the content and images of these websites were evaluated by different internet users. Nevertheless, in order to analyze the collected websites, I still identified them based on general content and the goal/alignment. In Matrix 1 (Table 6) I furthermore delineate five general markers: History & Culture, Activism, Entertainment, Government, Religion, Personal & Family, and Information.¹⁴³ The websites represented both local/Palestinian settings (*Palestine Remembered* or *Palestine Monitor*) as diasporic settings (*Jerusalemites* in Jordan or *Al Awda* in the US and UK).

Matrix 2 (Table 7) and Matrix 3 (Table 8) offer an example of how I subdivided the markers “Activism” and “Entertainment” into 4 secondary markers in order to show how websites can be identified/categorized further depending on the prevailing focus/theme. This allows for a simultaneous representation of websites into different (sub-)categories. Furthermore, these typologies should not be seen as “fixed”; the Intifada game *Tabt Ramad (Under-Ash)* can be a good example of Leisure as well as Activism—a merging of politics and fun.

¹⁴² One of the ways I checked how the listed Palestinian websites were rated is Alexa. Palestinian websites are here considered to be websites made by Palestinians and/or clearly addressing Palestinians in Palestine or the diaspora, but also websites that inspire and are used by many Palestinians in the Internet Cafes.

¹⁴³ In Appendix 1 I show how the basic website categorizations were further polished and specified during the P@IP in 2007 resulting in the 7 categories.

Type: Activism	<i>Intifada</i>	<i>Civil Society</i>	<i>Media</i>	<i>Refugees</i>
Originate from:				
Palestine	Hamas ISM Al-Aqsa- Brigade Jihad-Islami Ezzedeem- Qassem	PM Miftah	Rafah- Today ArabyNet Ramallah- Online PMC	Palestine- Remembered
Diaspora	Hezbollah AEL Manshour Arab- Nationalist Taht Ramad Electronic- Intifa PSC	Jerusalemites Solidarity-design Dying2Live	Palestine- Chronicle	Al Awda

Table 7: Matrix 2. Activism Subdivided

Type:Leisure	<i>Communicating (Email/Chat)</i>	<i>Heredity</i>	<i>Games</i>	<i>Music</i>
Originate from:				
Palestine	3oyoon	Hanaa Pls48 Palestine- Remembered		
Diaspora	Hotmail MSN		That Ramad Counterstrike	Star Academy Kazem Saher
	Maktoob Yahoo M-irc			

Table 8: Matrix 3. Leisure Subdivided

Compared to the time of my early research stage, when many websites were produced in the heat of the moment, the boom gradually decreased several years later. When offline activism decreased other online activities seemingly toned down as well. Some websites did not continue at all and disappeared from cyberspace, others became specialized/professional websites, and several were hacked. It is therefore important to note that the categorization and sub-division of the websites are not timeless or static. The way we interpret and classify Palestinian websites relates to

particular points in history. In Palestine this is definitely marked by the developments during the Intifada, with extreme stages between 2001 and 2004, and a peak in 2002.

General classifications based on online material on the one hand and on-the-ground lists on the other, showed a discrepancy in the way the websites were mapped. *Offline* popularity of websites did not correspond with initial observation/collection from my *online* networks where websites refer/link to each other. Some websites that were clearly present offline (mentioned to me in Internet Cafes or during interviews) were rarely or not mentioned on the link pages and reports I retrieved online. These present-yet-absent sources were primarily political websites that had sharper political analyses, or that galvanized resistance. This discrepancy attests to both the latent and manifest politics of representation in the production of Palestinian cyber space. I will return to this debate and further investigate this in the last section. After having studied questions of website localities, the next section regards the impact of *location* as the reference point of a websites' content/target. As I illustrated in the 3 matrixes, the websites can have global as well as local tendencies.

5.3 Globalizing/Localizing

While the quantity of Palestinian websites was impressive, participants I met were not always impressed by their quality. Some Internet Service Providers (ISPs) explained to me that some websites were only viewed by their producers and their direct circles. 'Websites are being created for the sake of being created' was a comment I regularly heard; they were not always adding anything meaningful to a project. The Palestinian community is one of the most politicized. There are many newspapers and other socio-political sources available. But with regards to websites and internet sources, the Palestinian articulated presence was initially considered weak, as stated before by Bahour. Active/critical internet users often directed their complaints at the Palestinian government, where the flow of technology and content was considered the most weak.

The groundbreaking developments I described in the first section had many positive impacts and altered the traditional relation between sender and receiver through the creation of new interactive processes. There are different starting points or groups/styles to trace when studying the evolution of Palestinian websites; I looked at localizing and globalizing (pro) Palestinian websites. If we want to understand the input of the internet users themselves, it is important to understand locally-based communications representing a Palestinian voice. When zooming into this Palestinian perspective, the two general types of 'localizing' websites I discerned were: personal homepages by Palestinian individuals and Palestinian websites predominantly engaged from a local perspective. These websites differentiate themselves in terms of local content but do not necessarily have to be personal. Some local websites specifically address international audiences with the purpose of building solidarity, like *Rafab-*

Today, while other websites overlap these divisions or have developed from one type into another.

Unlike the locally-focused sites, I have come across many global websites that are framed in terms of creating alternative self-representation and reach out to broad audiences. I will start by unravelling this global dimension of the virtual Palestinian representation before discussing the localizing websites.

Globalizing Palestine

For websites to become successful or survive, their producers needed to provide better content, focus, and technological use. Internationally oriented and 'professional' websites that work with (foreign) employees/volunteers understood this. Continuing his general assessment of websites at the time in 2002, Bahour said:

The worst are government websites. The Ministry of Education posted a letter on their website and it was so unacceptable that I wrote them that a Minister of Education should be the last person to write an appeal to the international community in second-grade English. Even worse, the appeal was emailed as a scanned fax. They used internet as a medium without understanding that the audience is looking for flat text, and it took half an hour to download the thing because of the size of the Ministry logo.

According to Bahour, *Electronic Intifada* and *Palestine Chronicle* were premier examples of what could be done internationally. Both have clear-cut profiles and English reporting/commenting of Palestinian life and politics in a way that is accessible to international audiences. This 'American-made' approach is immediately recognizable by the way Western frameworks are copied. The quality of such (pro) Palestinian websites produced in Palestine and the diaspora was excellent. These trans-national websites showed that access to human/material resources is essential.

At some point the Palestinian National Authority (PNA) also realized it was not doing a good job, and the Ministry of Information set up *Palestine Media Centre* (PMC). PMC's overall strategy was to supply professional/up-to-date news and to shape international public opinion vis-à-vis the Palestinian political reality. The targeted audience shapes the style and, accordingly, sets the rules and principles of a website. Web design company InterTech, that set up the initial plan for PMC, stated how important user-friendly browsing/technology was, especially in Palestine. According to Marwan, web-designer at InterTech in Ramallah:

Graphic design has a lot to do with the personal preferences of our clients, but 'simplicity' is our priority. We want accessible websites with the easiest navigation. Since we have to connect through Israeli-controlled telephone lines, heavy images and downloads are not practical for those accessing our websites inside Palestine.

Broad (international) dissemination and effective mobilization/participation, are indications of a successful website. It was therefore considered extremely important to have a simple framework for an 'English' audience. One such example was the

website *Palestine Monitor*; it targeted massive audiences and reached online visitors from all over the world. During an interview with Hanaa, one of the coordinators at *Palestine Monitor*, he described the impact of this unique situation as follows:

I console myself by knowing that all regions are included in our audience now. The monthly registration of the top geographical regions on our site shows West Europe, Australia, North Europe, South America, Sub-Saharan Africa... Of course we have been getting hate mail from Israel and America as well, but we don't respond to it. We basically have the whole world visiting us. This is very important.

The September 2002 statistics report of *Palestine Monitor* demonstrated that it had been visited more than one million times that month, the highest reach ever for *Palestine Monitor* and probably the highest for any website in Palestine. September 20th was the most active online day of that year. When comparing these statistics with news reports and fieldwork notes, it was apparent that the highest number of visitors could be traced immediately after the IDF attacked Arafat in his Headquarters in Ramallah where he was under house arrest.

Further analyses of the website report showed that the countries (outside the region) logged into *Palestine Monitor* were mainly US, GB, Australia, Netherlands, and Canada. The fact that internet visitors from mostly Western countries were interested in these news sources substantiates the observation that mainstream Arab media already provided sufficient references to Palestine. The data/timeline mentioned here points at a direct correlation between extreme political moments and hits, and that the type of sources accessing *Palestine Monitor* varied from media, commercial, academic, and even military.

The most frequently requested pages of *Palestine Monitor* were those with on-the-ground chronicles, recent updates, and pictures. What this shows is that the existing and still dominant information gap was partly overcome by the internet. The websites are rich in content and provide alternative information: the importance of style and framing is not just a matter of personal taste or artistic choice. They convey political motivations or strategic choices.

Re-Humanization

It's their money and their votes that decide what happens to me basically. ... The internet is the first mass tool that provides us with direct access to the end user, without falling victim to pro-Israeli editors, or those with a different political agenda, so we must use it properly, especially to convince the American people. Murad, Amman, 2003

During the interview in Jordan in 2003 with Murad, the initiator of a website that appeals to the West, he explained the story behind *Jerusalemites.org*.¹⁴⁴ Murad hinted at

¹⁴⁴ It is not a surprise that *Jerusalemites* was based in Jordan. There is a high concentration of *Jerusalemites* in Amman because most of the Palestinians that were expelled or escaped from Jerusalem during the '48 and '67 war ended up in Jordan. The Jerusalem Forum adopted *Jerusalemites*, as an Amman-based organization

his own personal inspiration to get involved in the website:

When I went to Jerusalem I walked around with a strange feeling: for the first time in my life I realized that if anyone asked me ‘where are you from?’ I could say ‘I am from here’. I thought, fuck it; these are my people. I never had this feeling before. When I saw the house my family owned before 1948 in Jerusalem, it was the same feeling. The house became an embassy listening post for the Mossad.

And thus he concluded: “The fact that I am still alive as a Palestinian, means I have to contribute even in the smallest manner; first of all for my self-respect, but also for my country.” It took two years before the ‘idea’ became a website; It finally took place after his last visit to Jerusalem in 1999. The outbreak of the Intifada a year later triggered the website’s development. Murad told me their aim was to portray a more ‘civilized’ image of Palestinians. “I deliberately put the image of a synagogue next to one of a church and the al-Aqsa mosque. The site tries to substantiate that Jerusalem is not only for the people who inhabit it at present but for all religions; just like Vatican City is for all Roman Catholics”. His target was to appeal to the West, since he thinks that it does not help to portray the Palestinian voice in the Middle East: “I don’t want to convince those who are already pro-Palestinian.” His goal is to highlight the positive aspects of Palestinian culture. For this to succeed, the first impression is always important: “The opening line on the homepage was by the famous writer Khalil Gibran because I knew people in the West would react to that.”

Formulated as *Let Palestine hug its people*, the website *Jerusalemites* reminded its viewers of the importance of the 3.5 million dispossessed and the stateless Palestinians. By making this point trans-national through internet, it enriched Palestinian unity. In this sense ‘to hug you’ can also mean to let the website/internet reconnect Palestine in a virtual embrace. The websites mainly intended to tell the story of the Palestinian people, while offering additional online material and statistics. Murad told me that he wants: “To make a connection between people inside and outside because we all belong to Palestine and Jerusalem.” The need to represent the Palestinian people and their reality, or as Murad said “to civilize”, can be explained as the desire to represent the Palestinian image.

Many sites seek to *humanize* Palestinians. Exemplary in this regard is a website created in 2002—a time when Palestinians suffered under the military sieges and the birth of curfews, but were often portrayed as being the problem instead of victims. It was called *Dying 2 Live* (Picture 27) and was made through the collective effort of Palestinian advertisers, graphic designers, writers, and art directors. *Dying 2 Live* portrayed Palestinian children in the image of their hero or idol, such as Albert Einstein or Che Guevara. Each of the pictures is associated with a child’s personal story, introduced by the following text: “We are not a statistic. We have faces. We

geared to explaining the human dimension of the Palestinian people and their attachment to their past, present, and land.

have names. We have hopes. We have dreams. JUST LIKE YOU". This phrase and image symbolizes a message directed at a non-Palestinian audience to whom Palestinians need to be framed in a familiar fashion.

Another example that appeared shortly after *Dying 2 Live* was the aforementioned *I am a Palestinian* website which described itself as, "A place for Palestinians to share their stories with the world to learn more about what life is like for Palestinians." The submitters were Palestinians from different places in the US and the Middle East, adding an international component. The stories on this site were sometimes sad but clearly attempted to generate political attention and support.

Rafah Today was successful both in humanizing Palestinians and, at the same time, persistently informing the outside world.¹⁴⁵ This website was dedicated to a town in the South of Gaza and was set up by a young photographer living and working in Rafah. Pictorially rich, exhibiting high quality photographs of everyday tragedies such as home demolitions and homeless families, he succeeded to penetrate the deafening silence about the tragedies unfolding in Gaza. During an interview 20-year-old Mohammed had the following to say about the pictures on his site:

The photographs document what I am saying. I am sad when I cannot document or corroborate a story with a photograph because I feel the picture is proof of the reality...most important is that I report what is happening on the ground in Rafah...The site does not serve any real function for people who live in Palestine because they are already there; they know what goes on here... So I don't target Palestinians at all. Perhaps there are some Palestinian NGOs who refer to it, but the site is directed towards people outside, who do not receive such information.

Mohammed also offered official data that backed up his portraits and on the ground stories. Based on websites statistics he thinks that roughly 80% of his audience is from the United States. 'A picture is worth a thousand words'; this is the general motivation for including photographs of local places or particular events on websites. As real life documents (rather than for aesthetic purposes only), online portraits like these allow viewers to perceive Palestinians as real people. Images and stories testify to the everyday realities experienced in places like Rafah. There are also Palestinian websites that have many characteristics of a global website but actually appear local. For instance *Ramallah Online* website is a good example of the local/global overlap.

Localizing Palestine

Mohammed's talent combined with the fact that he lived in and was part of the war-like events in Gaza show that the grassroots participation from inside Palestine is of great importance. Among localizing websites there will also be differences in ownership and status, such as between institutional and more informal websites. Localizing yet 'official' are the *Al Bireh Municipality* or *Nablus Municipality* websites, for

¹⁴⁵ Which started as www.rafah.vze.com and became rafah.virtualactivism.net

example. They give information about the town's art, culture, and territorial areas through an online photo gallery. *Ramallah Online* is a more informal example of a site with a global look yet offering also information about Ramallah's history, culture, and society, and allows for interactive communication through its forum.

Several websites such as *Palestine-Net*, link to 'local site' in order to promote Palestinian cities and its special cultural qualities such as in Bethlehem. The struggle over the history and memory of Palestine was partly won when Palestinians managed to by-pass the traditionally limited media and founded websites and mailing lists. Much of the effort was devoted to offering alternative information in order to counter the silence about (and neglect of) the Palestinian exodus in 1948. This coincided with an important moment in history; in 1998 the Israeli government set up websites that celebrated the country's 50th anniversary without any reference to the Palestinian sacrifice for the birth of their nation. Technological and political developments motivated the style and structure of Palestinian online representation. For the purpose of commemorating 50 years since the 1948 catastrophe, *alnakba.org* was launched, and the website *deiryassin.org* also went online. Subsequently, websites got more and more professionalized and easier to maintain.

Some Palestinians did use their websites while themselves embedded in everyday colonial reality, like the personal website *Rafah-Today*. The homepage states its objective very clearly: "*On this website I present photos and reports about my hometown. About our life, our community, the home demolitions, homeless families, the children in our camps. About the tragedies that happen here every day.*" As he personally experienced the shocking impact of a house demolition in Gaza, the webmaster continued to photograph house after house being demolished by the Israeli army, counting more than 400 in 2003. Another example is *Remembering Jenin*, a website dedicated to recounting the story of the massacre and destruction following the invasions of 2002. Audio files of eyewitness stories were the testimonies available online together with a timeline of events, photographs, reports, and analyses.

Besides *re-humanizing* Palestinians for Western audiences, websites also helped to maintain a shared memory for the Palestinians inside and update Palestinians dispersed outside. The internet is used to empower the disempowered; the internet functions as a platform where Palestinians from different places in the world meet. Territorial references are an important political component of Palestinian identity: the map of Mandatory (1948) Palestine is a popular shape on necklaces, embroidery, art, and also websites. In fact, as argued in Chapter Four, cultivating the *imagined* Palestinian nation is a unique component of the online traversals by Palestinians. The discovery of Palestinian cities through internet pictures by Dali demonstrated this clearly. The way 15-year-old Shaker from Beirut told me about his online visits to Palestine made it sound magical:

When you're cold you need gloves, when you're sick - medicine... but meeting a Palestinian from Palestine is like meeting your other half, the missing piece of the puzzle.

These online pilgrimages are like an echo of Benedict Anderson's (1993) references to the role that traversal plays in shaping a national imagination (Chapter Four); they parallel the *pilgrimages* that (colonial) civil servants made in the New Americas of the 18th century. The travel experiences of these educated middle class men helped to frame the territorial contours of the nation. Therefore, web surfing to Palestinian places and meeting other Palestinians online is like a *virtual pilgrimage*, as Khalili (2002) articulated with regards to young Palestinian internet users in Bourj al-Barajne. While Anderson's traversals are related to real travel experiences, Palestinians do not enjoy this mobility. It is therefore important to critically analyze physical and virtual mobility. The fact that Palestinians in exile do not have the option to enter their 'centre of gravity', gives more value to the 'inside', pre-Israel Palestine. The additional problem regarding Palestinian *traversals* is the lack of a concrete meeting point, a 'centre' for the exiled, although the point of reference is still historical Palestine.

Palestinians are still suffering from ethnic cleansing, wars, occupation, restricted movement, and institutional racism. There are clearly commonalities and differences between the classic understandings of *imagined communities* and the Palestinian experiment of nation-building (Chapter Four). Yet, new forms of interactivity and accessible sources do provide a creative way to *rediscover* a particular town or place, and constitute the key points in many diasporic traversals. In the words of Shaker from Beirut who finally '*found*' his roots:

I visited Tarsheeha when I found a website with pictures and documents about it. I never saw pictures of my village before. It was different because I had pictured it like my grandfather described it, with the small houses and fields. But now it looks more like part of a city. I had mixed feelings; it shocked me because of the difference with how I imagined it would be. But I directly forwarded it to my friends and family and wrote 'this is the village where my mom comes from'.

Different websites were instrumentalized to locate such Palestinian places and meet with other Palestinians *inside*. These websites are the *localizing* tools for Palestinians in the diaspora, but also for those separated by the Wall and checkpoints.

The *Virtual-Palestine* website earned its name as one of the hosts publishing a comprehensive list of towns, villages, and cities in Palestine. Clicking on a name provides a direct link to information on demographics, photos of land scenery, stories, and memories associated with the town. People accessing the site can also post additional links and information. *Palestine Remembered* grew from a virtual testimony of the history of the Nakba to offering downloadable personal recorded narratives by the 1948 survivors. Mahmoud from Shatila told me about his experiences with *Palestine Remembered*: "Through that website I could see where my family fled from, and found pictures of Balad al-Sheikh, our village near Haifa". By comparing what grandparents had told them and what they found online, Shaker and Mahmoud offer insights into the local utilization of Palestinian websites.

Behind the Scenes

Palestinians in Lebanon and Jordan directed me to websites they regarded as important sources about/from Palestinians, or websites they personally liked very much. They mentioned, for example, websites about Palestinian towns such as *Beit Reema Online*, *Gaza Net*, and *Hebron Home*. Sometimes these were websites about Palestinian towns they were originally expelled from. The *Al Nakba* website was especially unique because of its counter-narratives and multilingual source.

But I also came across locally made websites by refugees in Lebanon like *Al Bareeq*, *N48*, and *Children of Shatila*. The motivations of groups and local organizations in the camps to set up the diasporic websites were very diverse; the youth in Shatila had set up a site to have their reality portrayed (Chapter Three). Apart from disseminating a particular political message, the participants felt it comforting to write 'our own story'. The local and everyday websites made or viewed by people in the camps showed that not only 'big' or fancy websites define the virtual Palestinian nation. Many of the websites offer a mix of content and links but on the local sites, music, politics, traditional culture, Islam, and history were much more fused. The people that set up such local websites themselves had presented a personal interest in a variety of themes, not specifically influenced by a particular type.

This *everyday production* of websites shows an intimate relationship between producers and their websites. 22-year-old Nazih from a refugee camp in South Lebanon found a site about his village in Palestine, *Al Bassab*. Inspired by sites like *Palestine Remembered* and motivated by his own internet hobby, he decided to make a website himself. Much of the content came from other sites and he downloaded online articles and pictures from the net. Mohammed from Nahr al-Bared takes pride in his website *Al Bareeq* and invested a lot of work in it. He made an online forum where people could discuss and link up with other Arabs, not just Palestinians, as was his specific aim.

60% of the visitors log in from outside Lebanon. Mohammed tries to participate in matters that concern him as a Palestinian and stimulate new ways of thinking about the causes that effect his life as a refugee in Lebanon. As the name of the site suggests (*Al Bareeq* means 'shining') his aim is to shine light on matters that concern him. He also wants to convince his visitors about the Palestinian plight in order to mobilize as broadly as possible. In 2004 he continued to develop the site and added Voice Chat to enable visitors to talk with each other. During the course of building this website, he made close friends in several countries; together with two other young men from Syria and UAE he moderated the forum page. He got very enthusiastic when he logged on and saw that new people had been added to the forum or had visited his site. While showing his newest subscribers to me, he said:

I think I achieve something for our cause. If convincing one person is good, how about when the number of people I reached is 126? And how about when they even come from different countries? That is what I call 'change'.

He believed that strong Arab unity is crucial for a solution for Palestine and was very disappointed with mainstream Western mobilization: “Instead of changing the way the West sees us, let us first strengthen and reform ourselves as Arabs.” Apart from the additional costs that were needed to update the website with technological developments, he paid 50 US dollar a year for his web subscription. He managed to rebuild the site despite the fact that he was hacked. Together with the help of his online friends, he got the forum back online and continued hosting debates, mostly about Palestine and the conflict. Whereas the Arab forum was the core of his website, the site also contained an English forum.¹⁴⁶ Mohammed also gave informative links about all the refugee camps in Lebanon and an interactive link to the Quran, a ‘cartoon of the week’, and a poll.

In another Palestinian refugee camp (Bourj al-Barajne, Beirut), Akram could not resist the urge to make his own website either. Akram’s website is mostly about the internet café that he managed in the camp. Unlike many other websites I saw, it was not dominated by national politics. The site was built step by step, each time adding something new, like small textual references and pictures of his activities, the costumers, and interior of the internet café. As his clients chatted, they sometimes passed on the URL of the site so that people online could see the internet café and how the clients use the net there (see also Chapter Six). Akram explained to me that this made his clients an organic part of the website:

Many people check the site to search for pictures of themselves and then send it to their friends. When I sent the site to my friends in Canada and Europe they were surprised that there even was an internet café in the camp.

The site had links to about 50 other websites varying from similar sites of his friends to websites about Palestine, Al Jazeera, and online newspapers.¹⁴⁷

As a response to the out of reach territorial ‘centre of gravity’, 22-year-old Ali from Bourj al-Shamali camp (South Lebanon-Sour) yearned to reinstate the ‘other side’ of Palestine, bringing the periphery closer to the centre by means of internet. In his words:

The camp was a forgotten place for a long time. But with the internet this does not have to be necessary anymore. So I made a website about the camp, its conditions, our life, etc. Now we can reach the media and tell our story. We can exchange information with our people in Palestine and disseminate their photos and letters about the suffering of their people here.

These diasporic cases from Lebanon show the grassroots dimension of early attempts. But plenty of local ‘informal’ Palestinian initiatives in Palestine started with the same incentive.

¹⁴⁶ But it hardly hosted any people, which meant his audience were predominantly Arabs.

¹⁴⁷ Url was www.aoweiti.com but is not active anymore as Akram left the country.

Almost at the same time that the Second Intifada broke out, *alcarma.com* was featured on a regional television program resulting in thousands of hits to the site. Local residents and friends of Hicham participated in the website by contributing news and stories. People from villages and camps emailed their local news about clashes or accidents. In Hisham's words: "If someone from Jenin studying in the US wanted to know what happened in his neighbourhood, he could go to our site and see. We also had an announcement board where people could celebrate birthdays or send their regards." During our meeting in Ramallah, Hisham lucidly represented the significance of this kind of community-based internet (Chapter Six).

Live radio programs broadcasted via the popular radio station *Radio Amwaj* were a driving force of the *Al Carma* website. When *Al Carma* could not continue after being destroyed, others took the lead and some had success and developed into professional initiatives that were visited by many people.¹⁴⁸ However, what also matters in the assessment of Palestinian websites is their everyday evaluation as virtual alternatives. People had different opinions about the websites and experienced the impact of websites in a variety of ways.

Impact

There was a wave of excitement as people were able to move from one place to another online and visit (online) Palestinian places during their virtual travels. Several questions arise from these practices; I am very interested in the everyday-life experiences and motivations of internet users themselves. As I wandered the online and offline spaces in search for Palestinian participation, I also discovered differences in internet traversals. It seemed there was less internet participation by Palestinians in Jordan than in Lebanon and Palestine. One of the overall reasons I given by local internet users/producers was that telephone, post, and border exchange between Jordan and Palestine were relatively normalized. This explains why Palestinians in Lebanon use the internet much more to contact Palestine since this kind of direct communication is unimaginable for them.

The greater need for virtual escapism among refugees in Lebanon, where it became a cyber political outlet in general may have also influenced this difference. Despite the fact that there are obvious differences between an offline and online pilgrimage, the idea of some sort of pilgrimage that strengthens national belonging is interesting in the online context. *Palestine Remembered* was also one of the global reference points for Palestinian history and identity that was mentioned many times by Palestinian refugees who don't have normalized communication with Palestine. This website was mainly used for collecting specific information about their particular family history and village/city. It was often mentioned as the place to simply 'see

¹⁴⁸ The visits to Hisham's internet café where the website started were a reminder of the military impact as well. The military attacks destroyed the internet café and pro Israeli hackers ruined the website, ultimately putting an end to Hisham's internet enterprises. I will discuss this in Chapter Seven.

Palestine', thus satisfying a visual need. The site provides pictures, maps, and profiles of prominent figures and places. In doing so, it preserves the memory and experience of the Palestinians; by allowing Palestinians to attach stories, memories, or pictures on the site, it generated a medium for the presentation and sharing of these personal experiences. The sources are indeed impressive, like the detailed information of the 420 villages that were ethnically cleansed in 1948.

Internet cafes had to deal with increasing demands from eager costumers that asked to be hooked up with Palestine or that requested to be shown a website about their original village (Chapter Six). The announcement of an electronic gallery by a young artist in Palestine made an impact on the interviewees. The young artist, Sami al-Haw from Gaza, presented his online exhibition in February 2004 with a collection of surrealistic paintings that expressed profound personal depths.

Palestinians I interviewed gave me a wide variety of websites, such as *Hamas*, *Ezzedeem*, *Amr Khaled*, *Hanaa*, *3oyoon*, *Arab48*, and *Gaza Press*.¹⁴⁹ The relevance of adopting a local perspective goes beyond the listing of website names and analysing Palestinian internet does not lie only in a localized presentation. *Hanaa* was mentioned to me several times during interviews in Jordan and Lebanon. It combines Palestinian culture and politics, including the section on *100 lives-100 Shabeed* (martyrs). People often used this website for the virtual cards with images of Palestine that the refugees sent to their (online) friends. From the above websites and experiences I conclude that internet and cyberspace development presented new opportunities, but also challenges, for online representations of Palestinian narratives. This verified the discrepancy to me between the offline and online analyses and confirmed that online linking needs to be deconstructed from a political perspective as well.

5.4 The Politics of Online Analyses

Some websites became widely known in a relatively short time because other (successful) websites advertised them on their main page. On the main page of the well-known *Palestine Chronicle* was a banner for *Dying 2 Live*. As pointed out before, I shifted from collecting Palestinian websites to analyzing how they were presented and evaluated by Palestinians offline. Obviously, the answers depended very much on personal interests, style, experience, or financial possibilities (surfing sites and getting to know these sources better assumes enough time and money to access the net). The interviews about the impact of websites and having distinguished different kinds of websites, offered a variety of perspectives. When I divided Palestinian websites based on the presented context and aims, different types appeared that I wished to further classify. Internet users in Lebanon showed me websites related to such classifications with examples like the entertaining *Star Academy* (Arab version of *Idols* and a big television success at the time), *Intifada.com* and *Hanaa.com* (Palestine and Palestinian

¹⁴⁹ www.ezzedeem.net, www.amrkhaled.net, www.arabs48.com, www.gazapress.com are sites in Arabic.

politics), and *Islam Online* and *Amr Khaled* (religion and Muslim lifestyle, famous television Imam, .

The division of websites according to their *localizing* or *globalizing* character gave insight to the type of audience and topic the producers targeted. Moreover, local websites that were made or visited by people in the camps confirmed that big and fancy websites were not the only ones defining the virtual Palestinian nation. Such unravelling of Palestinian online presence and utilizations thus deserves more elaboration. The aforementioned links to other websites are a useful way to determine the *prominence* of a website online. A categorized scheme was developed derived from on-the-ground and online observations (according to which I analyzed the content of the sites). The main categories guiding my analysis were: politics, Palestinian history and culture, religion, entertainment, and news. The divisions were similar to the categorization I made before in the matrix and the way the list of links offered by Palestinian websites are structured. This gives evidence to the fact that the analytical, *ideal*, categories match with those mentioned by individual participants. Some websites show that categories regularly overlap; this is partly because websites tackle different issues at the same time (especially in politicized communities).

In 2002 I started categorizing and visualizing possible networks; in 2005 I further worked these out, and in 2007 I continued with a wide-range analysis of a large bulk of Palestinian websites.¹⁵⁰ While tracing and observing these websites, the online representations of Palestinian identity vis-à-vis offline preferences became intriguing; besides matching with some of our online tracking they also showed some clear discrepancies.

Links and Networks

The combination of quantitative and qualitative network analyses might, perhaps at the expense of some advanced quantitative and mathematical elaborations, make the network approach more attractive for communication research (Van Dijk 2002:19)

It is intriguing to know who refers to whom in the virtual space of the internet; it is in fact essential, in order to better understand the correlation between online and offline networks. Observable linkages usually represent social relations or political affiliations (Scott 1991). This perspective makes online research an important tool in one's general methodological approach. A systematic analysis of patterns and linkages between websites is possible by applying social network methods to the online communities in question. The hyper-links from one site to another convey a kind of (ideological) closeness. Empirical/ethnographic research about the effects/usage of internet in social relations can be improved by quantitative (network) analyses. The Network approach has a good reputation in quantitative research, however, and as

¹⁵⁰ The analyses in 2005 was carried out with research assistant Donya Alinejad. The project in 2007 resulted from a collaboration with the P@IS Project as mentioned before.

Van Dijk articulates in the above quote, empirical attributes are needed for comprehensive social analyses. There are several computer programs that track hyperlinks between websites and that can organize the retrieved data. However, such analyses by themselves can be unreliable when not grounded in qualitative research. The technologies used by P@ISP are up-to-date and the quantitative/qualitative combination one of the major strengths of its comprehensiveness.

The questions of (online) network analyses are also important for anthropologists. The problems that anthropologists deal with vis-à-vis network analyses involve the same kind of principles and realities as everyday-life, especially with regards to aspects of power and access. Discussed in an evocative text by Ulf Hannerz (1980) already three decades ago, it is still relevant to current hyper-modern challenges.¹⁵¹ Thus, when I refer to power relations in network structures I also mean hyper-link structures. For example, it is also the case for the internet networks that a political group/movement may have a finite group of connections. Each of the connections included may have its own online networks, and some of those may also have a website or online mailing list that may eventually link to our source. This snowball effect can lead to an increase of political dissemination.

Van Dijk (1999) also describes a reconstruction of society through electronic networks and new modes of organization. He calls this an evolutionary rather than a revolutionary process. By outlining a multilevel theory of network society he furthermore argues that all-pervading network structures make interdisciplinary and multilevel theory necessary. An interesting example of such a snowball was the *WebRing* of which *Free Palestine* website made good usage. A *webring* forms online communities for/by people that share similar ideas, and was offered as a link on *Free Palestine* to help find other (Palestinian related/friendly) websites. The extensive list of links to other websites then forms a connection point. Thus by becoming part of a certain ring a website can increase its readership. *Free Palestine* describes the ring as “For the friends, and those who wanna be friends of Palestine and all Arabs and Muslims!”

A problem with (online) quantitative analyses is the risk of neglecting new networks by reifying old ones. A related disadvantage might be the difficulty to include shifts that appear - i.e. the transformation of/into new networks. Online and offline communities are embedded in constantly changing political-economic developments. With respect to hyper-links between Iranian WebPages, Van den Bos (2006) argued that processing his data with software tools took nearly as much time as processing them manually. This does not mean that quantitative or qualitative methods exclude one-another. On the contrary, when doing research online the efficiency of quantitative technology and grounded and updated qualitative methods strengthen one-another. This multiple approach is important because it can help us understand the discrepancies between quantitative/internet examples retrieved online and sources recommended by local internet costumers during ethnographic fieldwork.

¹⁵¹ I am specifically referring to the chapter *Thinking with Networks* (:163) in his book *Exploring the City*.

Indeed, several Palestinians in the refugee camps pointed me to websites that were not linked or discussed by many of the websites I collected/researched online. This lack of referring, mainly to Islamic or radical political websites, is partly explained by the objectives of the 'globalizing' websites, namely the targeted audience, the language and style of communication, and a political agenda that is shaped by the *re-humanizing* tactic I discussed before. Political movements such as Hamas were absent in many 'official' networks; even after surfing and tracking down (pro-) Palestinian websites, it did not appear. In other words, relatively popular and 'big' websites like Hamas or Hezbollah, might find themselves isolated by a *cordon sanitaire* in cyber space. The clearest confirmation of online exclusion is when websites are not mentioned as important references or offered as hyper-links on "mainstream" websites. They clearly represented different kinds of websites that didn't fit the anticipated style and visions of the mainstream websites.

These online and quantitative explorations of the politics of online inclusion/exclusion were intriguing when compared to the general discourse about Muslim/Middle East internet. Exploration revealed some references to Hamas, Hezbollah, and Islamic Jihad, but they were often negative/stigmatizing, and the analyses said little about the websites' local and social relevance. For example, this statement in an article about Palestinian political websites: "The websites publish the pictures and history of the terrorists killed in suicide bombings."¹⁵² During several interviews about this topic, internet users/producers told me that the lack of reference to online Muslim sources was also related to prejudices about a presumed disinterest in modern technological developments of Muslims.

Muslim Online Presence

Beside the above mentioned representation of Muslim sources, mass media in general Mass media tend to emphasize Palestinian politics in terms of religious extremism (see Chapter One).¹⁵³ However, I noticed that many of the online Palestinian sources have an activist 'tone' and are reminiscent to a certain political enthusiasm/drive. Visual/textual rhetoric's are essential for public relation strategies, and will be even more characterized in ideological examples. Thus when looking at internet expressions through the prism of Palestinian politics, I detect an 'oppositional' framework promoting struggle (in different degrees) against occupation at its core message.

¹⁵² For example 'Chats with Hamas on the net', Haaretz 11/12/2001 Daniel Sobelman. Also typical is the often reprinted piece *Collecting and analyzing the presence of Terror on the web: A case study of Jihad websites* by Hsinchun Chen, Jialun Qin, Edna Reid, Wingyan Chung, Yilu Zhou, Wei Xi, Guanpi Lai, Alfonso A. Bonillas, and Marc Sageman

¹⁵³ Ascribing of Palestinian political representation seems also reflected by (alternative) news/academic examples vis-à-vis Palestinian online. When viewing for example Wired Magazine articles about Palestinian internet between 2000/2003 to give precedence to coverage of (religious) activism online, and discussing cyber war, 'Electronic Jihad' on particular extremist websites. Bunt (2003), who actually himself coined 'Electronic Jihad', acknowledges that these exposures are problematic and, more importantly, unrepresentative (:46).

Moreover, it is argued that many websites in the Middle East have a religious orientation (Zelaky 2006), thus it is clear that *Islam* does not discourage technological innovations or internet use. As any other religion, Islam knows diverse (local, regional, political, class) interpretations and therefore *the Islam* does not exist.¹⁵⁴ Many of the 'Muslim' online examples give a very different picture and there is a spectrum of Muslim websites, varying from groups based on violence like al-Qaeda to free-thinking philosophic Sufis, all interested in the internet (Eid 2007). Several scholars have convincingly refuted simplistic interpretations by moving beyond essentialist premises and showing how such views on Islam do not relate to everyday practices. Contrary to primordial analyses about Muslim culture/ideology that it (supposedly) opposes modernization, they have succeeded in proliferating views about Islamic political movements and Muslim communities shaped/set by historical transformation and political/economic contexts (Bayat 1996/2007, Moors 2004, Ramadan 2004, Van der Veer 2001). And as has been argued in for instance the powerful work of Saba Mahmoud (2005) and the interesting contribution from a European context by Nadia Fadil (2008): a process of modernization does not similarly imply secularization.

Internet technology is the clearest manifestation of the juxtaposition of political Islam and modernity, as manifested in for instance the work of Eickelman and Anderson (2001). According to Helga Tawil (2006), the rise of Islamic movements in Palestine illustrates how internet users exploit the very tools of modern society to strengthen and re-institutionalize the fundamental core of their Islamic faith and political objectives. Muslim religion in general, and fundamentalist orientation in specific, may very well shape modern approaches as well as utilizing them, confirming that traditional/religious beliefs are certainly open to ('modern') changes and creatively adapting to technological developments, an argument Olivier Roy (2004) also made.

Online representations have a broad diversity with respect to different cultural, political, and linguistic concepts that can be associated with Muslim identities. In fact, cyber Islamic environments are already shaped by 'Islamic' symbols, images, sound files, including opinions about what is and what is not 'appropriate internet' (Bunt 2000). Moreover, what makes a website 'Islamic'? Many Muslims actively use the internet as a trans-national platform to propagate or disseminate messages. Through various popular newsgroups and email discussion lists, Muslims can solicit information about what 'Islam' says regarding any issue (Mandaville 2001). There are many examples of Muslims enthusiastically participating in internet projects and websites that do not relate to specific political, let alone 'radical', ambitions.

Religion teachers and technology experts worked together to set up the al-Azhar University website enabling Islamic scholars worldwide to access information without having to perform onsite research. The Grand Imam of al-Azhar, Sheikh Mohamed Sayed Tantawi, was concerned about manuscripts that needed renovation;

¹⁵⁴ Noteworthy is the fact that there has been a strong presence of technical experts in the cadres of Islamic parties. For instance, Hamas was particularly dominant in the computer and engineering departments in the student blocks at BZU in the West Bank (Aouragh 1999).

the preservation of the precious books was the initial aim for seeking electronic solutions. More than 100,000 books and manuscripts were digitalized. The project manager pointed out that the site could also help correct misconceptions propagated in the West about Islam.¹⁵⁵ The site started out bilingual (Arabic-English) and continued to operate with more languages. In addition it offered transcripts of sermons by the Grand Imam and a virtual tour of the institution.¹⁵⁶

Moreover, the online fatwa and email system allowed al-Azhar scholars and Muslims throughout the world to request a fatwa and to interact. Bruckner (2001) showed how the distributions of fatwas became a popular component of many Islamic websites. In 1999 he traced more than 10, 000 online fatwas; this number grew to over 14, 000 by 2000.¹⁵⁷ An interesting part of the many online and offline debates was whether there should be a fatwa about the internet itself - i.e. whether the internet is considered haram or halal, when and under which conditions.

I talked with ISPs in Palestine and Lebanon about the character of the internet and its relation to Islamic morals and rules. It was clear that for Islamic organizations, gambling and pornography were the only features not accepted. In this regard it is interesting to note that, although governments rarely appreciate the availability of alternative (powerful) voices, attempts to close down opposition on the net are barely heard of in Palestine. There are two reasons for this. Firstly, whether left, right, Christian, Muslim, or refugee, all Palestinians face a common enemy. Secondly, the Palestinian government does not have the authority or means to control and monitor the internet in either technological or infrastructural ways.¹⁵⁸ This inspired me to ask Joki at *Palestine Monitor* whether the end of the Intifada would potentially mean a decline in the use of internet. And she answered: "New situations create new questions, after intifada maybe we will be engaged with what kind of state we want and need. That will motivate more or other websites, online actions, and online debate." This was a prophetic analysis considering the impasse of the Intifada, and the electoral losses by Fatah/takeover of Hamas.

Like in offline society, not all groups on cyberspace (want to) engage in active dialogues. However, the *Palestine-info* website (Picture 25), host to the major Palestinian political movement Hamas, is eager to push their info through the internet, in languages extending from French to Malawi. In 2003, this Hamas website scored 246, 000 on Alexa; in 2006 it was roughly the same, which actually meant a considerable increase considering the amount of new websites that joined in the meantime. In fact, in his study about political participation on the internet during elections in Palestine, Hanieh (2007) shows a strong growing proliferation online.

¹⁵⁵ Sherine Bahaa. Cyber Islam. Al Ahram Weekly, 27 Feb. – 5 March 2003 (issue No. 627)

¹⁵⁶ Idem. The project was financially initiated by UAE prince and minister Mohammed Bin Rashed Al-Maktoum He had an additional interest in promoting electronic technology as he owns a multimedia company and is involved in web development & design.

¹⁵⁷ Mathais Bruckner, *IslamiCity Creating an Islamic Cybersociety*. ISIM 8/01:17. An interesting part of his description concerned the religious debate on calling a fatwa about the internet, ie, whether the internet itself is haram or halal.

¹⁵⁸ More in chapter 6

Again, time and place are very important. In Palestine, the Islamist/resistance movements had other priorities. But later there were serious changes in the political structures: Hamas decided to challenge the dominant political/power balance by competing with Fatah in the local and general elections in 2005/6. Since 2005, the Hamas-related websites and discussion forums clearly became a prominent voice online (Hanieh 2006). Thus the Islamist tendencies were partly absent before due to everyday/national-liberation factors on one side, and online exclusion on the other side.

As mentioned before, mainstream media mostly wrote about radical Islam and Muslim internet use in terms of *cyber Jihad* or online *radicalism*. According to some references about Hezbollah and Hamas sites, they are merely rhetorical and not interested in the international community. They are considered to be mainly interested in a local/Arab audience, whom they believe they can influence or mobilize for Jihad.¹⁵⁹ But while searching these internet examples I found that many Islamic political websites are multi-language and in English as well. So it may be argued that it is *more* focused on an international Muslim community, rather than *not* interested in the international ("Western") community. Even if they are less interested in Western audiences, this is not strange considering that the West excludes them as fundamentalist or (potentially) dangerous.

Even *Maktoob*, though certainly the image and profile of a secular site, responded to the popularity of Muslim celebrities. *Maktoob* cooperated with the popular television program and website of Amr Khaled through a live interactive connection with Amr Khaled. *Maktoob* members, amongst them many Palestinian, had the possibility to engage in a live debate with Amr Khaled himself. This example symbolized two things: Palestinian internet users are not only interested in national/political issues; Islam is already organically linked with internet technology.

The popularity of the Egyptian Amr Khalid among many of the interviewed is certainly the result of his highly popular [satellite and internet] programs viewed in almost all Arab countries. Amr Khalid does not look like the stereotypical Sheikh often portrayed in the West with long beard, robe, and talking in complicated Arabic with a slightly aggressive tone. On the contrary, some of Amr Khaled's discussions were funny and others tended to be dramatic or emotional. Amr Khaled, wearing a Western suit and a short trimmed moustache, doesn't hide his emotions or personal expressions during a Quran or Hadith recital. As the camera zooms into the audience, we see a mixed crowd of women (veiled and unveiled) and men. At the end of the program, people are encouraged to visit the website or send an email. 23-year-old Nihad from Shatila-Beirut is a fan of Amr Khaled and regularly visits his website. Motivated by him, she wanted to counter the Islamophobia in the West:

Amr Khalid asks from people, guys and girls, to go to the internet to chat with people in Europe and to explain to them about Islam, to encourage them to visit Islamic websites, in order to better understand Islam.

¹⁵⁹ Shahar Smooha "Terror on the net with an olive branch" Haaretz, 2002/06/20.

The 18-year-old Ibtisam from Bourj al-Shamali was more interested in personal feedback from Amr Khaled:

You can ask him anything via the internet. I sent an email last week regarding something that I am not sure whether it is allowed as a Muslim.

Uncovering this inclusion and exclusion of particular Muslim representations via interviews and network analyses is relevant in order to discover how open the virtual public spheres are.¹⁶⁰ It helps to clarify what forms of selectivity (and secrecy) we can find on online public spheres. Several tools, like Alexa, *Google Analytic*, and manual comparison of links can be used. A list was made based on the websites I heard of via interviews and found on the highest Google inventories, this categorization helped to understand and conceptualize ‘virtual Palestine’. Through a manual experiment I explored which Palestinian websites refer to each other. The hyper-link information found for 6 Palestinian websites were coded and depicted in the diagram of Figure 8. Website 1: *Hamas*, is ‘isolated’ and has an asymmetric relation to the rest of the (pro) Palestinian websites. Website 4: *Electronic Intifada*, has the most centred relation compared to others. Due to its dense relation we can say it is popular or ‘relevant’ and, in any case, an influential network source. The arrows represent the out-going hyper-links found on the website. The remaining sites are outlined in grey because they do not have outgoing links, or at least not immediately on a clear link page/list. These sites include *Electronic Intifada* and *Palestine Information Centre*. The thick arrows depict links that are directly bi-lateral, that is, they connect two websites that mutually link to one another and show their relative density and grouping.

One of the evident observations from the diagram is that *Palestine Monitor* is the site with the most outgoing links. Its arrows reach to the greatest number of other sites. On the other hand *Electronic Intifada* is the most linked-to website. But perhaps the most obvious point is that the *Palestine Information Centre*, the official website of Hamas, is the least linked. The network is most dense around the *Palestine Monitor* and *Electronic Intifada*, while it appears least dense in the vicinity of the *Palestine Information Centre*. Once we establish that these two areas of the network represent a sort of centre and periphery respectively, a further point of interest is that, as we can see, none of the “central” sites connects directly to a “peripheral” site. For example, there are no arrows directly from *Electronic Intifada* to *Palestine Information Centre*, rather they are connected only through one other site, namely *Palestine Remembered*.

Yet, an interesting finding is that W1/Hamas has a similar number of hits and at specific moments had more visitors, thus it is also ‘influential’. Alexa statistics

¹⁶⁰ Several of the websites I used to know offering good lists of links either altered their format, like *Electronic Intifada* who changed their Links to Topics with content references rather than websites. *Palestine Remembers* had a direct link to the *Electronic Intifada* old link page format. Hamas did not offer links at all, and *Indymedia*, which use to have good updated content and link references was completely inactive after 3 years of the Intifada. What also became clear is that the type of websites being linked to corresponds to the goal or theme of the website, thus *Palestine Monitor* and *Passia* refer to many other civil society websites. This correlation may also be an explanation for the exclusion of certain websites.

(May 2006) of *Hamas* shows an average daily reach of between 40 and 60 million, with *Electronic Intifada* a bit higher. Yet at the same time the statistics show clear differences. Alexa) showed that 235 sites refer/link to *Hamas*, while more than 1,300 websites at the time were linked to *Electronic Intifada*. Consequently, although a website is rarely referred to by others, it does not mean the website in question is not popular or meaningful: these 'redundant' websites get around by other means. But knowing that Hamas or Hezbollah websites are not on the link page of most (Pro) Palestinian websites, it is even more interesting to see that they are intensely surfed and referred to. In other words, they had other networks and connections besides these hyperlinks.

Beside the newly evolving technological means at the time, simple as it might seem, these other networks were the mouth-to-mouth, face-to-face, and internet café or chat room shared references. As in our offline lives, there is apparently not *one* online public sphere, but a number of spheres with diverse degrees of openness and network styles. The internet-mediated public sphere is thus fragmented as well as overlapping. It is essential to remember that most surfers don't just endlessly browse for websites, but usually go to, or search for, a particular kind of website. The point a respondent made in the refugee camp internet cafés about financial constraints is also a reason. Again, that is why 'networking' is indeed important, and although not determinant, the *Link* page on websites is a powerful tool. Especially in the case of the Hamas website because it does not use its name in the URL (for tactical reasons); this makes a spontaneous or quick search for Hamas less productive and direct linking more relevant. Technological improvements after 2005, such as RSS-feeds, also signify an important development in the politics of networks. This is later confirmed by [P@ISP](#) and will be discussed in Chapter 8.

Many political Islamist websites like Hamas are present and participate in the cyber-war between Israel and Palestine (Chapter Seven). This is also reflected by work that focuses on how the Palestinian-Israeli conflict is constituted online (Bunt, 2003). Though it remains striking to find Hamas, Hezbollah, and even the secular Marxist PFLP and DFLP excluded from main Palestinian website networks. I argue that the reason is not so much political disagreement with these movements. In the words of Hanaa, the webmaster of *Palestine Monitor*:

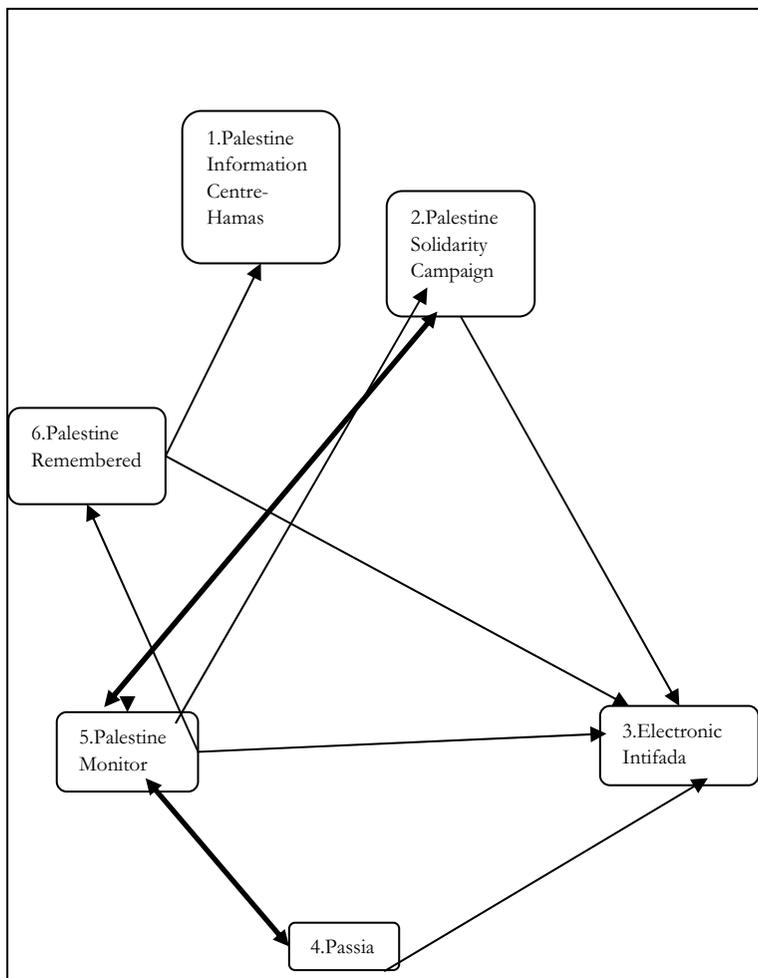
First of all we don't link up to Christian sites either, and we are a non-political organization. But I wouldn't feel comfortable linked with Hamas. If you say 'Hamas, many outside associate it to terrorism. We want to get people's attention to other things besides, for example, suicide attacks. It is an international audience that we target and we need to fight against these strong stereotypes. Ramallah, 08-2002.

The dominant Palestinian political analyses that emerge online do so within a secular nationalist framework rather than a religious one, even those by Hamas or Hezbollah. This ideological representation, facilitated by the internet, shapes the

Palestinian online image towards a wider secular internet public, because the conflict is considered essentially political, not religious.

Many websites, not only *Palestine Monitor*, display a general absence of religious ideology, while a national/secular agenda is evident. (Pro) Palestinian internet sources do not relate to Islamic references and contributions. Often it is for fear of being associated with ‘unwanted’ groups or loosing credibility/support, or even becoming a target of cyber war for merely linking to them; in other words, for fear of being ‘guilty by association’. This is understandable in light of tightened policies and attacks on civil liberties after 9/11, which many of the interviewed activists referred to as anti-Muslim (and ‘McCarthyist’) tendencies.

Figure 8: Manual net analysis of 6 ‘popular’ websites



Another reason is the aforementioned politics of targeting western audiences with the aim to *rehumanize* the Palestinian people and mobilize solidarity. The *Free Palestine!* mailing list that started November 2001 called itself “A secular voice in the electronic wilderness”. It explained that it is ‘irreligious’ so as to maintain its main focus on the political matters; ethnocentric/biased views related to Islam and the Palestinian-Israeli context (successfully) distract from solidarity and resistance to colonial politics.

5.5 Conclusion

The expansion of the Palestinian internet scene was illustrated by the launching of countless (pro) Palestinian websites. The main classifying factors in this chapter regarding the growing number of websites were the different targeted audiences and the territorial reference and framing. The distinction between globalizing and localizing website inclinations helped to explain the politics behind them, predominantly in terms of re-humanizing Palestinians.

Many of the examples reveal the significance of being connected to a locality in offline terms. This focus is shaped by a collective identity, shared future visions, and imagined community. While the internet also causes fragmentation and diversity (as stated in former chapters), its general political context between 2001 and 2005 was mobilizing towards collective solidarity and political unity. Due to historical timing and consequently the changing push and pull factors shaped by their dynamic evolution, I have argued that the development and trajectories of websites are not static or timeless.

The new developments meant that someone in Lebanon could finally come across a site about his/her original village in Palestine. Localizing Palestine was like a virtual highway through which Palestinian diasporans travelled to places in Palestine, making it possible to connect with people around the world without a visa or passport. Although the experience is virtual and nothing can really make up for the actual experience or practical Right of Return, some internet users talked about it with such emotion it was as if they had literally travelled to Palestine. The online imagined communities juxtapose with everyday offline life. Palestinian websites and email, chatting, and mailing lists are the vehicles that structure this dialectic correlation. Thus, the internet revitalized a ‘long distance’ nationalism.

This was greatly assisted by the *Arabization* of the internet infrastructure, and scores of websites and initiatives were launched every month. Extreme political circumstances in Palestine since the al-Aqsa Intifada led to websites like *Dying 2 Live* and *I am a Palestinian*, and the efforts of *Solidarity Design* that explicitly appeal to the West. Notwithstanding the growing Palestinian solidarity movements across Europe and the US, the reoccupation of the West Bank and Gaza, the heavy incursions in March and April 2002, the destruction of Jenin refugee camp in the same period, and the collective punishment by closure and curfew over the years determined the intense

internet activity. The groundbreaking developments were confirmed by the many blogs and .ps websites that continued to appear.

Virtual participation analysis needs to be linked to political economic structures and everyday social realities because this approach underwrites and clarifies the access, circulation, evaluation, and relevance of potential ICT technologies. Besides the production of websites and their specifically targeted audiences, another important theme in this chapter concerned the users of Palestinian websites. Palestinian publics are specifically imagined through the production and consumption of these Palestinian websites. A ‘behind the scenes’ study of producer and consumer participation led to interesting insights in these developments. Those like Mohammed (*Al Bareeq* from Nahr al-Bared camp) who made their own websites spent day and night developing them. By involving friends from his camp, but also online friends in Syria and UAE to help out—the site carried on despite it being attacked by pro-Israeli hackers.

Many studies have analyzed religious motivations and representations in acts of resistance and internet activism. I explained that while religion is an obvious factor in the debate, I tried to go beyond the level of representation and search for the roots of the struggle, a struggle that is often presented in diverse ways but here predominantly represented in a national/anti-colonial fashion. My research took place at a specific political/technological junction in time when online ‘religious’ representations were only one of the fragments of a larger picture—an interesting finding in itself. However, not long after this ‘junction’, many Islamist (related) actors appeared online. Conclusively, the Islamist tendencies were not very present online due to the focus on offline/everyday politics, as well as online exclusion by others for (fear) strategic reasons. This explains the relatively low presence of Muslim politics online between 2001 and 2005. I will reflect on the post-2005 changes—mainly the important political/technological shifts that took place that made online presence more relevant and helped avoid exclusion from former online network methods—in Chapter Eight

As stated, the progressive growth of trans-national websites signifies a politicized enterprise because it corresponded with the Palestinian uprising. It therefore also forced a more strategic use in their aim to target Western audiences, including the way they do and do not associate to other online sources. Interviews with webmasters revealed that some do not want to divert attention from their agendas, nor be ‘guilty by association’. These bottom-up visions helped to reveal how the political-economic logic of ICT structures shapes the attitudes and face-to-face participation of Palestinian producers and consumers; this contextualized/offline analysis will be the main topic of the next chapter.