



الوطنية موبايل

إحدى شركات مجموعة



# Mobile Number Portability

## A Key to Customers' Right to Choose

By Dr. Durgham Maraee

**M**obile number portability (MNP) enables mobile telephone users to retain their mobile telephone numbers when changing from one mobile network operator to another. In other words, when this readily available technology is introduced to Palestine, customers will be able to change mobile operators without needing to change their mobile numbers, avoiding all tasks that such a change currently entails, such as informing all their contacts of their new number, changing their business cards, replacing signage and letterheads, and replacing advertising material, just to name a few. MNP serves customers and reduces costs.

Ever since 2009, Palestine has had two licensed national operators. However, the customers' freedom of choice has been hindered so far by the inability to maintain the same number when they switch from one operator to another. The introduction of MNP into the Palestinian market, through establishing the needed regulatory framework, is long overdue. It is about time to establish MNP in Palestine in order to protect the customers' right to choose their service providers without obstacles.

MNP is today commonplace in most of the world. In Palestine, the issue was first raised in the sector in October 2006 by way of a discussion on the

Information Technology Special Interest Group (ITSIG), and in May 2008, the Palestinian Ministry of Telecommunications and Information Technology (MTIT) held a workshop that focused specifically on the issue of MNP. A decade of research and preparatory work has been done by the MTIT and experts in the area; now is the time to act.

The direct benefits that customers will enjoy from the offering of MNP cannot be underestimated. First and foremost, it will improve the competitive environment in the sector, and that will directly translate to an increased quality of service and lower prices. In addition, as noted, when customers change operators while maintaining their mobile numbers, they will not incur any additional costs related to the disruption of their communications: no need to call and advise all your family and friends of a new number, no need to inform your business clients of a change in number, no need to reprint your signs, business cards, or advertising materials. In short, MNP allows customers to look at one and only one thing when choosing an operator: which one serves them best. Bottom line, MNP puts the customer, not the operator, at the center of the service.

Our MTIT is staffed with qualified telecommunication engineers and experienced regulatory staff who have already been trained on MNP. There should be nothing to prevent the immediate implementation of this service in Palestine. It simply requires regulations from the MTIT so that both licensed operators, Wataniya and Jawwal, make the minor preparations required to bring number portability to all customers. With MNP operational, both mobile operators will be poised to benefit from this service, but most importantly, customers will have a choice to move between operators, which would only increase the quality of service that is provided by each operator.

The telecommunications sector is a pillar of the Palestinian economy. It not only represents a significant percentage of our GDP, it also employs – directly and indirectly – thousands of people. The



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potential of the sector is even greater. Due to the importance of this sector, the MTIT recently requested technical assistance from the World Bank to assess the performance of the telecommunications sector, identify specific issues, and make recommendations for further development and reform. On February 1, 2016, the World Bank released its report titled, "Telecommunication Sector Note in the Palestinian Territories: Missed Opportunity for Economic Development." The report mentioned the need for MNP five times and referred to it as "an important measure."

The report also noted that in April 2010, the MTIT published a statement called "The Palestinian National Authority Statement of National Telecommunications Policy." (PA Statement, 2010). In this PA report, the MTIT highlighted "pressing matters" that were being attended to, including "several regulatory requirements that enhance competition, such as carrier selection and number portability." (PA Statement, 2010, pp. 6–7).

We would all be well advised to learn from the past. Market entry of the second mobile operator was seriously delayed for years, despite the fact that customers and sector stakeholders repeatedly called for the MTIT to prepare for a second operator. The market had been ready for the introduction of a second operator since 2002; however, a license (for Wataniya) was not issued until 2007, and Wataniya was not able to launch its services until 2009. This delay negatively impacted the overall growth of the sector, the cost of service to customers, and tax revenues that the PA could have realized. It is imperative that we do not delay MNP any longer, especially since this is one of the few tools that can be implemented without Israeli interference.

The development of the telecommunication sector has been hindered for many years not only because the Israeli authorities have delayed the release of frequencies needed for 3G services and the introduction of Wataniya's operations in Gaza, but also because our market is facing illegal competition from five Israeli operators. Wataniya has been working hand in hand with the MTIT and the relevant Palestinian authorities to remove these constraints and to secure the frequencies and approvals needed to launch 3G services and to initiate our operations in Gaza. However, despite all the outside constraints placed on our economy, and in particular the telecommunications sector, which are outside our control, there are still significant improvements that can be made in the sector, improvements that reside totally in our hands as Palestinians. Although frequencies and importation of equipment are all issues under the full control of the Israeli occupation authorities, there are other matters that are in our hands, and there are tools that we could use to improve services to our people. This is all the more reason for us to act on regulating the sector with the

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tools available to us and enhance customer choice and service.

MNP is one of the strategic tools that squarely serves customers. It gives customers the right to choose, allows the cost of switching operators to remain limited, and enhances fair and free competition among the operators to the benefit of the customer. All across the region, and globally, when countries adopted MNP, their customer satisfaction in telecom increased, and the competitiveness that the service ultimately introduced into the market served to make the sector more efficient overall. Many countries in the region, such as Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia, have implemented MNP to maintain the competitiveness of their telecom markets and eventually to provide customers with better service.

November 2016 marks the 20-year anniversary of our telecommunications sector; the timing for all of us to act on making MNP a reality has never been more opportune.

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