



#WestBankLive

A Day in the Life in the West Bank

By Elias Rizek



A walk through any Palestinian city can be quite interesting. You'll see someone in a suit, rushing off somewhere; a woman with her young children, who are laughing or enjoying some ice cream; maybe the occasional artist who has set up an easel on the sidewalk. Unsurprisingly, quite a few interesting Palestinians will be walking around, each one going about their unique daily life. And thus, it can be quite frustrating when reminded of the foreign perception of what a "Palestinian" is.

As far as many international media outlets are concerned, the "Palestinian" leads a troublesome existence. Every now and then, the world gets a glimpse of some Palestinians throwing rocks while masked in a *kuffiyeh*; fleeing from their homes; causing havoc with their protests. In fact, a quick Google search of "Palestinian" will bring up exactly these images. Conflict after conflict, the collective imagination of what a "Palestinian" is, has deteriorated. Palestine now seems like a place that is inhabited by a bunch of miserable residents, to whom the average person abroad cannot relate.

But something special happened on July 9th.

Snapchat, a social media platform, decided to feature the West Bank internationally (#WestBankLive). Snapchat is a medium in which users can send photos or videos, known as "snaps," to each other for a set duration. After this duration lapses, the content is permanently erased. Every day, one region is selected by Snapchat, and anyone within its bounds can upload photos to a collection, known as a story. The snaps from the selected region can then be viewed by any



A man waves a Palestinian flag near the West Bank settlement of Ofra, adjacent to Ramallah.
Photo by Issam Rimawi.

On July 9th, the social media platform Snapchat showcased daily life in the West Bank to a global audience. Landmarks were featured, jokes were made, and overall, quite a few stereotypes were broken.



Snapchat user across the globe for 24 hours. When Snapchat recently featured Tel Aviv (unwittingly, on the one year anniversary of the 2014 attack on Gaza), many Twitter users directed their anger at Snapchat. In an effort to quiet down some outrage, and to seem a bit more neutral, the West Bank became the globally featured region of July 9th.

So what did the world see? Something quite a bit different from the host of preconceived notions about this region. People danced, and laughed, and played football. They made falafel, street art, and quite a few sarcastic comments. And the world watched as this stereotype-breaking event unfolded, to see what a real day in the life of a Palestinian looks like.

Many went the informative route with their snaps. One young woman took it upon herself to explain the significance of the *kuffiyeh*; essentially helping to remedy misconceptions about this nationalistic article of clothing. Others decided to highlight the modernity of the West Bank: Ramallah's Palestine Trade Tower

and "the only Krusty Krab in the world" were gleefully displayed to the global audience.

But other Palestinians simply offered snapshots of their daily lives: playing ping-pong to pass the time during Ramadan; getting excited about eating *knafeh*; dancing, with the caption: "Ramadan nights!"





A street artist in Ramallah.



Teenagers wind down after their performance at the Zaytoun Olive Harvest Festival – Jenin. Photo by Richard Stainton.

One man in particular became a Twitter sensation for the day: with incredible gusto, he spontaneously breaks out into *dabke* while singing “Wein ‘a Ramallah,” with great enthusiasm all the way through. The Internet loved him!

In Tel Aviv, one individual was seen eating shawarma with the accompanying hashtag “#shawarmatuesday.” Two days later, one Bethlehem individual embraced the opportunity to sarcastically responded to this cultural appropriation with “#shawarmathursday.”

Of course, no online phenomenon would be complete without the cat videos. Two small kittens were seen passing around a tiny ball with the caption: “Even cats play football in the West Bank.” Another individual was seen giving a high-five to his dog.

Many feared that this publicity would lead to a sort of “normalization” of the conflict, overlooking the fact that Palestinians still face a barrage of daily disturbances because of the conflict. On the contrary, many people decided to showcase the realities of life under the Israeli Occupation. People were seen waiting at a Bethlehem checkpoint in blazing hot temperatures,

with the caption “30°C.” One woman sarcastically exclaimed, “This is the beautiful view from my workplace,” as the video panned along the Israeli separation barrier. Others highlighted the visibility of settlements from their neighbourhoods.

The Snapchat event showed the world that the West Bank is a place where people make delicious food, have trendy haircuts, speak proper English, and sometimes spend a day at the beach of the Dead Sea. But it also showed that in the midst of this reality, there is still a pressing political matter which cannot be separated from the daily experience. In this rare occurrence, though, this political reality wasn’t happening in a far-off land to a faceless population; this was happening to the funny dancing guy, and the spray-painting girls, and the sarcastic taxi driver. The West Bank became relatable.

The international reaction was varied. But from many individuals across the globe, one particularly interesting sentiment was expressed repeatedly: “They’re just like us!”

A day in the life of a Palestinian is not what you typically see in the media. But we live in an world where people get their news from what’s shared on their Facebook walls and where Snapchat is a portal to other cultures. Twitter is not just a place to share random thoughts; it has been used as a powerful tool to crowdsource journalism. The West Bank being featured on Snapchat is thus a social media victory. This region was put into a global spotlight for 24 hours, and the content was strikingly honest, as it was not created by a media agency. It was created by the people.



Young ballerinas in Ramallah take part in a self-portrait project.

Because of the emergence of social media, Palestinians are now able to participate in the public discourse, and shape the collective image about what a “Palestinian” is.

To be fair, however, there was plenty to criticize about this event. For starters, the story was not exactly representative of all Palestinians, as it was created by people in cities, by people who have access to the Internet, and by people who can afford smartphones—which is by no means all of Palestine. Nor should we overlook the fact that Gaza, which is far more stigmatized than the West Bank, was not given similar publicity. And while some snaps were political, it needs to be questioned whether Snapchat moderators censored the more controversially political content. But as far as painting an accurate image of Palestine, no single medium can achieve a full picture; Snapchat came much closer than others.

This event did not represent one single perspective; it was political; it was silly; it was informative; and sometimes just entertaining for the sake of entertainment. But above all, it was honest and represented the views of the public. It was a true day in the life in the West Bank, and for once, the world could watch all that this entails.

So, how about #GazaLife?

Elias Rizek, 20, is from Jerusalem and currently studies communications at the University of Ottawa in Canada.

Our Readers Say ...

“Four years ago, I was walking home, and some kid asked me for money because he needed to get home. I said okay. When I took my wallet out, he said to me, ‘Give me all your money.’ I was about twice his age, so I laughed this off. He tried to be intimidating and said he’d throw a rock at me. I walked away and that ended. I saw him again several months later, and we had the same back-and-forth. He obviously didn’t recognize me. This has happened four times with this same kid, and he never recognizes me or remembers that he’s tried to rob me before!”

Nadim Massad
(Ramallah)