



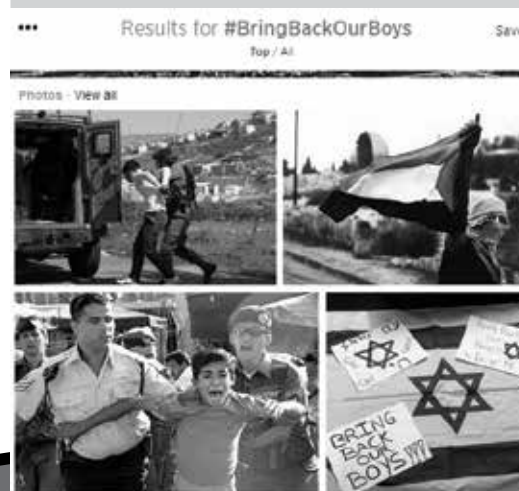
A Social Media Battleground

by Hassan Jaddeh



The story of the hashtag, #BringBackOurBoys summarizes the media battle of social media in Palestine. It was introduced by Israelis, following the disappearance of three Israeli settlers near Hebron (an occupied Palestinian city to the south of the West Bank). Israelis tried to gain sympathy from the world by utilizing social media and mimicking the online global campaign when 230 girls were kidnapped in Nigeria by a terrorist group called "Boko Haram". The crisis of the kidnappings was reflected in social media with the hashtag #BringBackOurGirls. Politicians, artists, celebrities, and public figures participated in this campaign to advocate for their release.

The Israeli hashtag took advantage of the momentum of the Nigerian one. Israelis published thousands of images and posts talking about the missing settlers, their lives, their parents, and calling for more effort in searching for them. Further alluding to the earlier campaign, Israel's First Lady imitated Michelle Obama by posing for a photo with the hashtag



Twitter screenshot for the hashtag #BringBackOurBoys



Upper photo: US First Lady Michelle Obama showing support for 230 girls kidnapped in Nigeria using the hashtag #BringBackOurGirls.
Lower photo: Israel's First Lady Sara Netanyahu joining the Israeli campaign to find three settlers who had disappeared.

This Israeli campaign, however, was intercepted by Palestinians and Pro-Palestinian social media activists, simply by including the same hashtag in posts and images that expose Israeli human rights violations toward Palestinian children, including those who are imprisoned. Anyone can join this media battle by posting to Facebook, Twitter or Google+ using #BringBackOurBoys.

This is just one example of how political issues frequently dominate the social media scene in Palestine due to the ongoing Occupation and the related human rights violations.

Figures on Social Media in Palestine

- For Palestinians, social media still revolves around Facebook. There

are more than 1.5 millionⁱ Palestinian Facebook users in the West Bank and Gaza, which is more than 33% of the population. Palestine is ranked eighth among Arab countries for the highest percentage of Facebook users.ⁱⁱ

- Teens and young adults are the main consumers of social media. Youth ages 13-17 account for 20% of Facebook users in Palestine, while young adults are 55%.ⁱⁱⁱ
- Of the total Facebook users in Palestine, 42% are women—one of the highest rates in female engagement among Arab countries. This percentage is comparable to converging to the global gender ratio of 46% female and 54% men.^{iv}
- 44% of Facebook users have accessed their accounts through a



mobile device. This indicates a high “smartphone” market penetration among Palestinian youth, enabling them to act as an individual media source using mobiles images and videos.

- 64% of Palestinian Facebook users are living in the West Bank, while the rest (36%) live in Gaza. This ratio is comparable with the distribution of the general population in which 40% lives in Gaza.
- Twitter is still lagging far behind Facebook with almost 40,000^v Palestinian users, yet still growing exponentially at a high rate. So, ultimately, Palestinians behaviour on Facebook summarizes all the social media trends in Palestine.

Everyone is using social media!

The vast majority of Palestinians believe in the power of social media, and some even overestimate it! Other than entertainment and social connection, among Palestinians, Facebook is being used for business, education, social mobilizing, and politics. As a result, practices toward social media are getting more and more mature, both technically and strategically.

The most important thing about social media is how it has provided a powerful tool of communication for people—especially youth groups and individuals—a new space for expression, discussion, and broadcasting. Palestinian youth—as a part of the natural Arabic extension—

were inspired by the so-called “Arabic Spring” popular uprisings, in which social media played a substantial role in mobilizing youth, broadcasting news, and publishing opinions. Energized with success stories of Arab youth in Tunisia and Egypt, Palestinian youth started many Facebook groups, and pages were established as an attempt to mobilize youth and represent already established groups.

Localizing a popular chant of the uprisings—*The people want to topple the regime*—was the trap that these groups fell into! All other uprisings in the Arab countries faced a clear regime—a clear enemy to which all the resistance to be directed...but **not Palestine**.

Youth became confused between the tremendous goals for their movements. A lot of questions appeared like:

- Should we fight Israel first as the occupier?
- Should we fight the Palestinian Authority as a repressive regime?
- What are the actual reasons of suppression?
- Who is directly responsible for the current situation?

All the above questions were united with the different parties’ polarization among youth, especially “Fateh”, “Hamas”, and the Leftist parties. The overall failure of these groups provided organizers a chance to learn from their mistakes, which has paved the way toward more mature activists and groups.

Palestinians are now more conscious than ever before about social media, more convinced that it’s a tool rather than a strategic goal. Statistics promise a prosperous future for social media practices among Palestinians, and eventually contributing to the development of many aspects of Palestinian life.

Success Stories

To be clear, I’m neither pessimist nor optimist regarding social media in Palestine. As I’ve said before, social media in Palestine is still growing. We are still learning how things should go with social media, especially when it comes to social change, the Occupation, and media relations.

On the positive side, there are success stories in all aspects of social media use. Palestinian companies, for instance, are becoming very aware of the importance of social media. Some of them are leading the way toward providing professional social media services, others are achieving advanced advertising plans.

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are taking their first steps

toward utilising social media social change. It’s worth mentioning here that Palestinian youth groups preceded organizations in recruiting activists for events and campaigns. Youth have introduced creative initiatives like “رمضان في القدس غير – Ramadan in Jerusalem is Different” which promotes and visualises daily life in Jerusalem during the holy Ramadan. “Boycott – قاطع” is a campaign accompanied the Israeli invasion to Gaza that calls Palestinians to boycott Israeli markets and products, especially in Jerusalem and the West Bank, These are just two examples of creative initiatives in which youth have used leveraged social media.

Keep Posting and Tweeting for Palestine

Palestine continues to achieve advanced ranking among Arab and developing countries in social media consumption and utilization. Yet, Palestine needs a lot of organizing and mobilizing toward a more systematic and mass action—a burden that falls on the shoulders of local community centres, academic references, and governmental planning. In the meantime, our battle on social media provides an alternative discourse to mainstream media and negative stereotypes so that the world may listen, understand and believe in the human rights of the Palestinian people.

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ⁱ Facebook Audience Insights

ⁱⁱ <http://www.arabsocialmediareport.com>

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