The Digital Occupation of Gaza:
An Interview with Helga Tawil-Souri

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ABSTRACT

In this contribution to a Special Issue on Mediatizing Gaza, the author interviews Helga Tawil-Souri on the significance of digital technology to the Israeli occupation of Gaza. In discussing this, she covers the extent to which Israel's military, territorial, infrastructural and technological control over Gaza can be considered an occupation and example of settler colonialism. The interview focuses, however, on the processes by which both Israeli occupation and Palestinian attempts at resistance are technologically-mediated and increasingly digitalized. Ultimately, this interview is concerned with explicating the dialectical relation between the digital and the territorial, and critiquing the neoliberal logic that underlies the infrastructural arrangements that make Palestinians dependent upon, yet segregated from, Israel.

KEYWORDS

colonialism; digital; enclosure; Gaza; Israel; neoliberalism; occupation; Palestine; territory

Simon Dawes: Before discussing the digitalization of Israel's occupation of Gaza, could you first clarify the extent to which Gaza is an occupied territory? Formally, of course, the IDF withdrew from Gaza in 2005, but in what ways did this military withdrawal actually increase Israeli control of the territory?

Helga Tawil-Souri: Despite Israel's "disengagement" from Gaza in which it pulled out its Jewish-Israeli settlers in 2005 and the reformulation by the IDF of Gaza as an "enemy territory" in 2007, the Gaza Strip remains an Israeli occupied territory.

Gaza is not a sovereign or independent state, it has no territorially defined and agreed upon borders, it does not have control over its imports and exports or much of its economy including any of the humanitarian and development assistance it receives from abroad. It does not have its own currency. It has little sovereignty over much of its administrative issues (such as the issuance of identification and passport documents). It has no control over its airspace. In short, everything about Gaza is controlled by Israel, in terms of the flow of people, capital, or goods, in and out.

Israel has not relinquished control over Gaza. If previous to disengagement control existed through on the-ground military and settler presence and forms of civilian surveillance on the part of settlers, the settlers' departure has been replaced with different mechanisms. That the Israeli military for example can continuously and without accountability constantly be present in Gaza, is only the most obvious example. Gaza airspace and naval space for example are also fully controlled by Israel. In fact, various arms of the Israeli government have called Israel's relation to post-disengagement over Gaza "frictionless control." This is supposed to denote the extent to which Gaza is controlled from afar, as if by remote control. It also alludes to the increasingly technological methods of control. Of course "frictionless" is misleading as well, since there is plenty of "friction" in Palestinian lives lost, economic destitution, political marginalization, and military presence.

SD: Could you summarize what you refer to as the territorial "enclosure" of Gaza, and explain how the occupation of Gaza compares with other examples of settler colonialism?

HTS: Most obviously the territorial enclosure of Gaza refers to the territorial, material blockade enforced on and around the Gaza Strip and the flow of people, goods, services, and capital. Here, we may wish to focus on the materiality of the infrastructure that helps lock Gaza up: walls and fences, surveillance towers, remote-controlled cameras mounted with weapons, radars and sensors, UAVs, and a whole range of "securocratic" means enacted on keeping Gaza territorially sealed.

These mechanisms and practices of territorial enclosure have been going on since the 1950s however. From the time of Egyptian control over Gaza and the emergence of fedayeen movements across the "Gaza/Israel border," the territorial sealing of Gaza has been fortified. The entire Gaza Strip in fact is a territorial result of carving out space by Israel and Egypt into which hundreds of thousands of displaced Palestinians (mostly from the Naqab desert area and along the coastal region north of Gaza City) were shoved into. Previous to this there was no such territorial, political, economic or symbolic entity such as the "Gaza Strip." Over the decades of Egyptian rule until the 1967 war and thereafter, the Gaza Strip became an increasingly sealed territorial entity. The disengagement from Gaza is part of the same political continuum since 1967 and the

Allon Plan, through the Oslo process. Formations of fences, walls, and military surveillance existed inside Gaza and along its "perimeter" since the 1970s.

But by using the term "enclosure" I am necessarily making a connection to historical formations. Enclosure is a historically, geographically, and economically specific process which evolved during the industrial revolution in Great Britain in the 18th century and actively transformed a territorial space's social economy, demography, and culture. Hegemonic groups asserted control over territory by redefining "property rights" and thus reorganizing territorial systems of ownership, use, and circulation, and imposing different structures of sovereignty and access. They equally changed the land's contours through the building of hedges, walls, fences, and gates. This combination of legal and architectural articulations resulted in new enclosures that enforced a different system of circulation, flow, and trespass. This pattern can be seen in Gaza.

Additionally, the enclosure of Gaza is also to be understood as the production of a particular kind of economic space. Gaza's economic landscape is entirely de-developed: drowning in poverty, besieged by Israel, and almost entirely dependent on external aid. All imports and exports of goods are controlled by Israel – with the exception of the tunnel economy which is itself an outcome of Israel's enclosure of Gaza. Gaza has also been completely severed from the West Bank and thus also made marginal politically: Gaza and Hamas are seldom part of any future negotiations between the Palestinian Authority (PA) and Israel or other external players, such as the US and the EU, for example. Thus "enclosure" here is also a political and economic process in which a whole range of mechanisms and practices are put in place to prevent, thwart, or at best control the flow in and out of Gaza. One can easily see some parallels here to global formations such as gated communities, labor camps, migrant refugee areas, or very generally the emergence of uneven economic spaces bordering each other.

But there is a fundamental difference between the enclosure of Gaza and these other examples and that is precisely the question of settler-colonialism. Gaza is not simply enclosed for economic and/or racist motives, but by the very logic of Zionism. Following Patrick Wolfe's (2008) definition, settler colonialism's essential feature is the sustained and institutional tendency to supplant an indigenous population, whether through spatial exclusion or confinement, or both. Gaza's contribution to settler-colonialism, if I can frame it that way, is that the technique of dispossession and logic of elimination are much starker here. That Gaza is so enclosed (territorially, politically, economically, and symbolically) is the result of Zionism's exclusivity. Israel is not seeking to assimilate the natives here, nor even enfold them (anymore) as a cheap labor force, but treat them as refuse (something to be thrown out and something you do not accept). This exclusivity makes Zionist settler-colonialism different than its Australian or North American counterpart for example.

To understand Gaza through the lens of settler-colonialism, one must necessarily also understand its relation to the West Bank, which brings us back to the 2005 disengagement. Israel's withdrawal from Gaza represented the end of the project designed to sever the Gaza Strip from the West Bank which had begun in earnest with the onset of the Oslo agreements (1993-95), destroying the Palestinian national body. Without its disengagement from, and isolation of, Gaza, Israel would not have been able to complete the implementation of Oslo's "Gaza and Jericho First " plan which aimed to create a separate, marginalized entity in the Gaza Strip and thus freed Israel to pursue the de facto annexation of the West Bank. Having "relinquished" responsibility for (but not control over) Gaza, then-Prime Minister Ariel Sharon strengthened his argument for

maintaining direct control over those areas of the West Bank deemed essential for security or settlement purposes (including the Jordan Valley) and thereby making increasingly impossible a prospect of a Palestinian state that would include the entire West Bank, let alone one that would connect Gaza and the West Bank. The disengagement plan should also be understood as reaffirming the process of settler-colonialism: to maintain Israel's full control (direct and indirect) over Palestinian lands and resources; consolidate and institutionalize (military and political) control over a majority of the West Bank and East Jerusalem, among other objectives.

Moreover, after the 2005 disengagement from Gaza, Israeli policy abandoned diplomacy in favor of military attacks, as we have seen over the past eight years. This shift is reflected at the economic level: the almost total destruction of Gaza's private sector after 2006 (and excarbated with the 2008, 2012, or 2014 assaults) transforming Gaza's already fragile economy from one driven in large part by private sector productivity to one dependent on public sector salaries and humanitarian assistance. The change in Israeli (and international) policy away from diplomacy was designed, among other things, to undermine and debilitate Gaza, and obviously Hamas, and further remove it from any political equation that might result in a Palestinian state.

SD: Saskia Sassen (2010) and Eyal Weizman (2006, 2007) have discussed the ways in which Gaza has become a site upon which Israel can experiment with new modes of urban warfare. In what ways do you see the occupation as having been digitalized, or, to what extent has it moved from a traditional military to a high-tech occupation?

HTS: There are two points that need clarification. First, an increase in digitization does not necessarily mean a decrease of military means. Second, and more importantly, military practices, whether in terms of urban warfare or otherwise, always change over time and are contingent upon the place, time, and conditions in which they are occurring. In other words, military technological advancements are as old as any organized form of offensive (and defensive) violence itself.

Thus when I use the term high tech occupation (or digital occupation) I am not intending to replace or counter a presumably "low tech occupation." Even if we were to (problematically) divide a low-tech and high-tech form of occupation, the two co-exist. Moreover, in attempting to understand what is fundamentally new here, the question is not "how does technology increasingly play a role in warfare", but rather, its opposite: "to what extent is technology driven with the built-in intent of warfare."

The Israeli case obviously and deplorably demonstrates that the logic of occupation are inherently part of Israeli technological development (I am using "occupation" here as a short-term for settler-colonialism, territorial fragmentation and control, political disability, economic de-development, racism, and so on). Put another way, the question from the perspective of Israel is how do we create technologies in order to best "occupy" Palestinians. This (re)frames our focus, as scholars, on the intent and importance of the logic that drives development, invention, use, testing, marketing, and selling of technology. Israel's armaments, theories of warfare, security-cum-surveillance technologies (which are an extremely important factor in Israel's economic success as well) have been driven by the settler-colonial/occupying framework on which its wars and military occupations have been based. From an ethical and historical perspective, technologies should be understood in the historical context of their development and deployment.

Of course "experimentation" and "testing" take on much more sinister meaning here, which both Weizman and Sassen touch on. There is the definitive practice of testing new technologies in order to perfect, market, and sell them. Israeli firms continuously boast that their technologies have been used in real-life situations, on the ground, with large success – whether these are walls, checkpoints, UAVs, or cyber-bugs. Gaza is a military playground, a testing ground, a laboratory, an open-air prison in which Gazans are treated as guinea pigs, and a number of scholars demonstrate this in their work (Darryl Li 2006, Sari Hanafi 2009, Stephen Graham 2009, Naomi Klein 2007). The importance of this cannot be overstated as these contribute an enormous amount to Israel's internal and external economic position. In that sense, Gaza demonstrates what urban warfare looks like and how this model can be exported and/or emulated elsewhere. A few current examples immediately come to mind: the drone wars over Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Yemen; the forms of aerial and urban warfare being waged in Iraq and Syria; the electrified fences and remote-controlled sensors along various international borders; aerial surveillance over Sao Paolo.

What Weizman addresses is also the "testing" and "experimentation" of law and the tolerance levels of the international community. On this, Weizman is on target (no pun intended). This is an argument that has also been established by Lisa Hajjar (2014), David Kretzmer (2002) and Laleh Khalili (2012), insofar as they deal with the ways in which Israel uses the "law" to legitimize its occupation and absolve itself of responsibility or crime.

This is how I (wish to) understand Sassen's claim that Gaza hints at a future shape of war, or as she states, "a movement, an epoch in a trajectory that moves into the future" (p.43). Gaza demonstrates how far an aggressor's impunity can go, how far the "law" can be stretched away from protecting civilians towards protecting a military power instead. I take issue however with part of Sassen's analysis. Gaza here seems to function as a conceptual space for Sassen to test her theories on. There is value in this of course, but such an analytical tool ought not to be taken at the expense of the reality of lived experience in Gaza and the various forms of violence that are exacted upon and survived by Palestinians. I fear that in using Gaza this way, we portray it as a kind of distant "zoo," a non-accessible space where animals are locked up and have little say in their life conditions. (This is of course part of the result of the Israeli regime of enclosing Gaza.) There needs to be careful balance and attention to what all of this means for Gazans, how they experience being on the "receiving end" of these military and theoretical crosshairs.

SD: What is the relation between territory and the digital here? Does this digitalization enhance Israel's territorial containment of Gaza, and how does it increase Palestinian dependence upon Israel?

HTS: From the perspective of Israeli power, the difference between territorial and digital is increasingly indistinct. The territorial and the digital are interconnected so as to create a unified space of control. There is a wall around Gaza, there are unmanned drones flying above Gaza, all Internet traffic must pass through the Israeli backbone – they are all driven by the same logic. Control over Gazans is achieved through "hard" conventional borders even as it is simultaneously diffused and concentrated in the ethereal and "soft" realm of digital infrastructure. Similar to the process of land enclosure, an active landscaping process produces new forms of property rights

and different systems of circulation, trespass, and exclusion. Gaza for all intents and purposes is a "real," territorial penitentiary, but also a high-tech one. Control over both land and high technology defines Israel's spatial containment of Gaza; one no longer exists without the other.

This enhances Israel's containment – making it all that much difficult for any space, territorial or otherwise, to be "trespassed" by Gazans. Seen in this light, the emergence of tunnels is a natural outcome of this containment. This does not necessarily mean that Israel's power over Gazans is total however, as Gazans continue to resist in as many ways as possible. It is the Israeli regime and its apparatus (the government, the police force, the military, the intelligence services, the high-tech industry, all with incestuous ties to each other) that is the site of power. In the realm of technology, the Palestinian Authority, Hamas, Paltel and high-tech firms are secondary. It is the Israeli state apparatus that decides whether, when, and where Palestinians may install, manage, and maintain infrastructure, just as it is the Israeli apparatus that limits and destroys that infrastructure.

The question of dependence is more complex. Of course tighter controls around Gaza have resulted in increased dependence, on both Israel and the international community. Gazans are dependent insofar as everything must come in through Israel. This dependence is not one that has incorporated or assimilated Gaza or Gazans into Israel, but the opposite (theoretically one may wish to see this as a difference in Israel's practice of settler-colonialism compared to Australia's for example). What exists then, and telecommunications is a prime example, is segregated dependence.

SD: How does Israel place limitations on Palestinian communication infrastructures and ultimately control Palestine's electro-magnetic field? Are landline, cellular and internet technologies in Gaza controlled in the same way? And has Israel deployed similar territorial and digital approaches to their control over infrastructure in the West Bank?

HTS: There are two quotes – from the PA's and Israel's leadership – that demonstrate what is at stake here. In his speech at the 2005 WSIS, Mahmoud Abbas declared: "Our Palestinian people have been suffering and continue to suffer from the deprivation of technological developments because of the continuation of the Israeli occupation, which reaches the earth and the sky, through the occupation and control over frequencies in Palestine, the imposing of obstacles on the development and growth of this sector, and by depriving our people live transmission in telecommunications and information technologies. […] We demand the international community to order the Israeli occupation authorities to enable our people to have the right to directly transmit, and open Palestine to the globe, by all means. "

Netanyahu has also made clear what any future Palestinian "state" would ever look like: it "must be demilitarized, without control over its air space and electro-magnetic field, and without the power to enter into treaties or control its borders."

There is in actuality no such thing as a Palestinian electro-magnetic field (Netanyahu doesn't need to worry on that end). There is only Israel's electro-magnetic field, which Palestinian firms have been given permission by Israeli authorities to use within parts of Gaza and the West Bank. While there is something of a Palestinian communications infrastructure, it is made to be dependent and yet segregated from the Israeli infrastructure (Abbas is correct here too).

In the second round of the Oslo Accords, signed in 1995, the PA and Israel negotiated the terms of the future possibility of an independent and sovereign communications infrastructure in parts of the West Bank and Gaza. At that time, Israel handed over existing landline infrastructure to the Palestinian Authority, which then sold the rights to the private sector and the newly formed Palestinian Telecommunications Company, known as Paltel. What was handed over was what existed in certain parts of the Palestinian Territories and tended to be dilapidated as Israel had until then done very little to upgrade any infrastructure in Palestinian areas. New technologies such as cellular telephony and internet would have to be built from scratch by Paltel.

But everything about the development of infrastructure would remain, ultimately, under Israeli control. The location of where Palestinian infrastructure could be built, maintained, and accessed; what kinds of equipment were permitted; what area codes and access speeds were allocated; which direction signals could beam towards; from whom equipment could be purchased; even how high transmission towers could be erected, were all decisions that required Israeli permission. They still do today. What this has resulted in is a fractured infrastructure, limited in its technological capacity, which remains dependent on Israel's own infrastructure and on the good graces of the occupation regime. For example, Palestinian cellular firms are still not permitted to use 3G or 4G technologies; mobile mapping and financial capabilities, such as GPS and Paypal, are not permitted on Palestinian networks; all telephone and internet lines must ultimately connect through Israeli routers for which Palestinian companies pay higher prices than their Israeli counterparts (called "termination charges"). There is much more that I could get into, but suffice it to say that what exists as a Palestinian network is entirely dependent on Israel, is technologically sub-par, and costs Palestinian end-users more than the better services available to Israeli users. With respect to the West Bank and Gaza, this segregated dependence is more or less the same.

In terms of the issues I just described above, there is little difference between how Israel approaches digital control in the West bank and Gaza. But there are more complex levels to be considered here – which demonstrate the geopolitical difference of how Israel controls the West Bank and Gaza, and what its ultimate future objective may be.

The West Bank is a more directly occupied and fractured space, and this is reflected in its digital landscape: Israeli cellular signals for example are omnipresent under the guise of Israeli firms providing service to settlers and the military. Israeli signals are stronger and beam farther, and cellular companies provide all the latest technologies (because there are not the same limitations imposed by the Israeli Ministry of Communications); Israeli service is also cheaper (in part because there are no "termination charges"). This means that Israeli signals are available in many parts of the West Bank, and Palestinians could choose to purchase Israeli pay-per-use phones, and many do. It's cheaper, more technologically up-to-date, provides better service and coverage. But Israeli cellular companies pay no taxes to the Palestinian Authority – which they should, under the terms of the Oslo Accords, if they provide service in the West Bank. At the same time, the Palestinian cellular companies have to make do with the limitations imposed on them by Israel's Ministry of Communications. In many parts of the West Bank there is no Palestinian signal – near settlements, near "buffer zones", along the separation wall, and so on. Without getting into too much detail, the cellular landscape is one where Israeli signals have the "freedom" to flow throughout almost the entirety of the West Bank and through which Israeli firms gain non-taxable revenue while Palestinian signals are stunted and contained. The cellular landscape is not at all

unlike the territorial landscape; consider for example the relative freedom of settlers and the military moving around the West Bank compared to Palestinians.

With respect to Gaza, the digital landscape parallels Israel's "dismissal" of Gaza. Israeli providers do not directly work in Gaza since settlers were pulled out, but the entirety of the infrastructure remains dependent on Israel's. There is only one fiber-optic cable that connects the entirety of Gaza to the outside world, and it is located in Israel. All calls, even within the Gaza Strip, must be switched within Israel. And, as we have seen with the last three military operations, the Israeli military can bomb and destroy much of the Palestinian infrastructure at will. More perniciously, the military "warning" calls and text messages sent during the last blitz over Gaza (as well as in the previous operations) demonstrate the extent of Israeli control and surveillance over Gaza's digital landscape. That the IDF can interrupt signals, pinpoint the location of beaming signals, call specific numbers in any given location, slow or halt internet access, is based on the simple fact that the entirety of the infrastructure is one over which Israel has ultimate control. That it is easy for the IDF to call Gazans whether to scare, threaten or warn them, is an outcome of the very political nature of the way in which telecommunications infrastructures operate under continuous occupation by Israel. It demonstrates, in fact, that despite Israel's withdrawal of settlers from Gaza in 2005, Gaza remains occupied by all other means. That Israel uses these examples of warning to later justify its killings, is itself the outcome of the logic of occupation. Finally, it demonstrates a different truth: there is no moment in the history of Israel-Palestine when technology has not been a political tool, just as there has never been a moment when politics has not been technological.

SD: You argue that the (digital) occupation of Gaza represents a confluence of neoliberal capitalism and colonialism. In what ways does the Palestinian telecommunications sector follow, or even further, a particularly neoliberal agenda? And to what extent has the Palestinian Authority embraced, and has Hamas done little to counter, a neoliberal agenda?

HTS: The PA was born during the new world-order where the US was the only super power; when panics of "globalization" and where states would fit into this new order took on heightened importance; when, increasingly, the model of economic development followed the Washington Consensus; when "communication technologies" were posited as socio-economic salvations for third world countries to leapfrog into and from. In no exaggerated sense, the PA came into being automatically assuming dependence and debt from the World Bank, the EU, USAid, donor states, as well as through direct foreign investments. From the get-go, the economic structure of the Palestinian Territories was planned as one to follow Western-imposed ideals of economic privatization and liberalization on top of the structure of Israeli settler-colonialism. None of the new policies would challenge Israeli supremacy or Palestinian dependence for example (see the work of Sara Roy 1999 and Rex Brynen 2000). What this has resulted in over the past twenty years is the inheritance of the worst possible aspects of a rentier economy, corruption, neoliberalism, and colonialism. Today's Palestinian economy is marked by complete dependence and de-development, as in the case of Gaza; or, at the end of the scale, the "Bantustan sublime" of Ramallah (as Nasser Abourahme 2009 aptly calls it) against increasing poverty across the rest of the West Bank, within which the PA, economic elites, Israel and foreign investors can still accumulate capital. Telecommunications is a prime example.

The PA immediately passed responsibility for telecommunications to the private sector in 1993. Paltel was formed and was awarded an exclusive ten-year license to operate fixed-line telephone systems and a twenty-year contract to run mobilephone services. There was never any debate on whether telecommunications should be "universal" or whether the "state" should oversee telecommunications as public utility, for example. Paltel's largest investors were the economic powerhouses of Palestine: elites who have managed to amass more wealth in the process. The Palestinian telecommunications infrastructure was "enclosed" (in the sense I meant above) from the outset in that the network was privately owned and users had to accept whatever forms of access and fees Paltel instituted. Over the years, Paltel has become the single largest employer in the Territories after the government (both PA and Hamas); contributes anywhere between 10-15% of Palestine's GDP; is one of the PA's largest tax revenue contributors; and its capital makes up a substantial chunk of the Palestinian stock exchange. Paltel is framed as an economic success story, and it is easy to see why. One must equally keep in mind that Paltel is the single largest client to Israeli telecommunications providers (remember that all telecommunications connections ultimately go through Israel for a fee). In other words, Paltel is equally profitable to Israeli elites' economic interests. As such it is a prime example of how the PA and Palestinian economic elites are dependent agents of Israeli control who have been able to profit economically from the situation. This is not unique to telecommunications, even if this industry has garnered the most economic growth. The Palestinian economy since Oslo has been one of neoliberal policies of "self administration" under occupation.

When Hamas won the 2006 elections and eventually took control over Gaza, it established its own Ministry of Telecommunications and Information Technologies to govern over Gaza – it did the same in all other fields. The MTIT did not change any of the economic structures or legal policies vis-à-vis telecommunications – revenues were simply transferred over from the PA to Hamas. The objective of the Ministry it seems has been one of control over content.

SD: Is there much debate in Gaza and the West Bank over issues such as universal access, or support for media to be regulated as a public good?

HTS: There is very little debate within Gaza on the future structures and policies about telecommunications. The MTIT, Hamas, and Paltel must continuously contend with the rampant destruction of infrastructure at the hands of the IDF during various military operations as well as the dilapidated economic conditions within the Gaza Strip. In a sense, Gaza survives on an ad hoc day-to-day basis with little room or privilege for short-term, let alone long-term, planning. Perhaps unsurprisingly, there are too many other critical issues to contend with: lack of medical care, sub-par water sanitation and sewage, electricity cuts, housing shortages and food insecurity, rampant and deepening poverty, to name only some. Issues such as telecommunications fall a little farther back on the list of basic survival needs; and with every "operation" waged by Israel, those other survival needs become more critical, and further push back what seem like secondary aspects such as telecommunications.

The telecommunications landscape is different in the West Bank for a few different reasons, as I also outlined earlier. First, Paltel and its subsidiaries contend with different forms of Israeli controls and little in the way of the kind of destruction and prevention of rebuilding as they do in the Gaza Strip. Second, in the realm of cellular telephony – which is by far the most used form of

communications – there are two providers in the West Bank: Jawwal, the subsidiary of Paltel, and Wataniya. But the cellular realm is further complicated in a very different way than Gaza. Israeli cellular providers service settlements and outlying areas (such as bypass roads and military installations), which in essence means that Israeli signals are available almost anywhere across the West Bank. Moreover, given that Israeli cellular firms enjoy much wider allocation of spectrum and permission to use the latest cellular technologies, signals on both sides of the green line can easily beam through parts of the West Bank. This creates what Palestinians see (rightfully) as illegal competition. Thus, the "loudest" debate going on is about Israel's telecommunications presence in the West Bank. It comes down, more or less, to two questions: should Palestinians boycott Israeli providers even though Palestinian providers cannot provide the same services; should the PA make it illegal for Palestinians to purchase Israeli pay-per-use phones and cards? Ten years ago, for example, it was relatively easy to purchase Israeli pay-per-use cards and chips all over the West Bank; now the PA has cracked-down on such practices. Nevertheless, one can still buy these all over Israel and use them in the West Bank without any recourse from the PA. Moreover, it remains ultimately Israel's decision whether signals are available in the West Bank; a matter over which the PA, Paltel and Palestinian interest groups have no influence.

Another level of debate is targeted at dismantling Paltel's monopoly, particularly in the realm of internet access. Here, much of the "debate" echoes the World Bank's reports which continuously claim that it is critical for the Palestinian Authority to increase trade, spur private-sector growth and integrate the territory into the world economy as much as possible, but provide no advice on how to overcome Israeli controls that prevent these very measures. A non-profit interest group, PITA, whose mission is to improve and support Palestine's technology, for example, spends a lot of its energy and efforts battling Paltel. PITA sees the primary problem in the larger telecom/IT field as needing to improve competition and control some of Paltel's growth. Any underlying political-economic questions about what may be in the interest of the Palestinian people are simply not addressed. Users complain that they need better and faster access at lower speeds; ministers too echo this language, claiming that faster internet speeds are important for Palestine's economic development. The assumption that opening the landline/internet field to competition would drive prices down is also widely-held. This is partially true, although misses a number of important points. First and foremost is that the entirety of Paltel's landline/internet infrastructure is dependent on Israel's; there is simply no other "choice" for Paltel but to purchase telecommunications capacity from Israeli firms. The Israeli Ministry of Communications further mandates much about telecommunications, even how much bandwidth Israeli providers are permitted to sell to Paltel. Moreover, Israeli firms seek to gain revenue and profit from reselling capacity to Palestinians. And while Paltel too must respond to the logic of profit-making, it also exists in a telecommunications landscape with its hands largely tied behind its back. Thus it is deeply ironic – and short-sighted – for critics of Paltel and its internet subsidiary, Hadara, to harp on limited bandwidth since this is out of Paltel's control. Paltel could in theory lower its prices and sell less services, sign on less subscribers (in order for speeds to remain faster and more reliable), but Paltel is a for-profit firm whose underlying logic is to increase its profits. Furthermore, introducing a competitor in the field does not do away with any of the measures of Israeli controls, which remain the fundamental problem faced.

There is very little debate or mention of transforming Paltel into a non-profit entity. The model of telecommunications as a state-run public utility is one that is seldom talked about. This is a

largely outdated vision; in great part itself a demonstration of the success of the expansion of the (ideology of) neo-liberalism in the Palestinian context. There are no discussions about restructuring Paltel's mandate to provide "universal service" or "universal access," to provide free services to schools or refugee camps for example. A few efforts fall under the purview of "corporate social responsibility" – the building of tech-learning centers or the co-sponsorship of all kinds of cultural events – but these are far from a re-evaluation of the legal/policy structure of telecommunications. It is not in the interest of either economic elites or the PA to dismantle Paltel's structure. In other words, changing Paltel's structure would seriously impact the (current) political economy of the West Bank. Of course, it bears repeating, that even if there was a movement towards turning telecommunications "public" in the West Bank, Israel still remains in charge.

SD: You refer to the dialectic of digital space in Gaza: how do Palestinians also occupy digital spaces, and how do Gazans negotiate life under Israeli occupation?

HTS: I am partially playing with the term occupation, using "to occupy" in its meaning of the use of or existence in a particular place. Quite simply then, Gazans occupy digital spaces: they browse the internet, they use cellular phones, they make and upload YouTube videos, they chat on-line, they "like" posts on Facebook, they follow Tweets, and so on. Gazans show their existence and their resilience through the on-line content they create. During the latest attack on Gaza for example, Gazans created the "Gaza rubble bucket challenge" in response to the ALS "ice bucket challenge" occurring at the same time in the US and elsewhere. There were equally YouTube clips of Gaza renditions of Pharrell Williams' "Happy;" thus emulating scores of spin-offs from around the world. One of my favorite examples was Jean Claude van Damme's "Epic Split" video in which the thespian shows off both his muscles and the stability of a Volvo truck doing a split between two trucks while driving. In one of the Gaza spin-offs, the split was made between two cars being pushed by a group of people on foot, making the point that there is a serious fuel shortage there. Such responses are not unique to social media or digital spaces, as there have been other contemporary responses to global trends taken-up in Gaza from surfing to parkour. What these demonstrate is that Gazans, despite the horrendous conditions they live in, are attempting to connect to the world, making their presence felt (or at least shared), and have a healthy dose of humour to boot.

Of course I do also mean "to occupy" in the dialectic sense that any space – even a virtual one – is the result of complex relations. As much as Israel may control and limit digital access, such controls are responses to Palestinian practices (real and imagined), and Palestinians will not only use the spaces given to them but also attempt to create new spaces and practices. Palestinians "occupy" the digital realm not only by using the internet and cellular phones for example, but by finding alternative means of sharing access, "stealing" signals from Israeli, Egyptian, and Jordanian providers (if they are within geographic range), as well as creating their own spaces – whether in terms of internet cafes built in basements or in the back of one's house. They also try to circumvent or overcome technological limitations and controls. Souktel for example allows subscribing employers and job-seekers to share CVs and job offers via text messages. In another example, a text-messaging system has been launched, by a company calling itself Ezma (Arabic for traffic), to help drivers through traffic and checkpoints, since GPS maps are not permitted on

smartphones. These too have their "low tech" parallels, such as using cooking oil as a means of fuel or digging tunnels to smuggle brides, cows, Viagra, and weapons.

Having said this, it is important not to place too much "agency" on such spaces and practices and see these as wholesale forms of "resistance." There is a tendency to jump to conclusions that such digital practices (or even territorial practices) will change the political conditions. This is far from true, as the mechanism of Israeli occupation and control is deep and wide. The creative SMS-based traffic or job services for example do not circumvent military presence on the ground or economic closures. Rubble bucket challenges and in-house internet cafes may alleviate certain difficulties, but they don't bring back power during electricity cuts, prevent drones, or grow back limbs or lives lost in bombing campaigns.

SD: To what extent do the visualisation of a virtual Palestine (on Google or palestineremembered.com) and the existence of the google.ps domain name also contribute towards a digital political resistance?

HTS: Google's mapping technologies provide Palestinians with the means to collaborate in ways heretofore impossible and create new (virtual) spaces of agency to sacralize the Palestinian (territorial) nation. This is one way to understand, for example, websites such as palestineremembered.com. Or, as I alluded to above, here is an instance of Palestinian "occupation."

Palestineremembered is a website that allows users to provide historical accounts of land lost, amount lost, personal biographies, current and historical photos and videos, interviews, visits to what 'is left'. Sites such as this are examples of memorializations that attempt to recreate the village/town as it existed prior to 1948 and to emphasize Palestinians' historical claims to the past and also to the present and future. They are forms of what Rochelle Davis (2010) has called "geographic nostalgia" which characterizes the way people write about the spaces of the past. Different methods of mapping the past (cartographic maps, lists, poems, journeys) suggest a variety of ways in which these spaces are shaped and claimed as places, post-1948. The very act of "creating" the map of the past claims an authority to know (by listing names of places, people show their knowledge of that place) and to imprint their presence on the land through this authority of knowledge. On the one hand, these practices create a direct emotional relationship between memory and the places of the past, and on the other hand, they perpetuate the villages for future generations. They are not just exercises of documentation and recollection, but of anticipation.

Palestineremembered is a combination of different processes, and ways in which we ought to assess the practices of cartography. A map is an expression of ideological and political values, a symbolic element of landscape that reflects abstract and /or concrete national and local sentiments and goals. It is a communicative form of spatial/national representation, an example of nation-hood performed, reflecting abstract and concrete, national and local sentiments and goals. The politics of map-making and the power of maps is in the extent to which they serve as part of a wider process of cartographic propaganda and territorial socialization. Mapping is a technology of inclusion and exclusion – of inheritance, of attempting to combat absence or silence, of reconstructing a nation. Maps are equally processes of cultural production, interpretative acts, in

which the product – the map – conveys not merely "facts" but always the author's or underwriter's intentions and values. Their communicative capacity rests in the selection of featured items, in the manner these are arranged and depicted, in the capability of users to understand, interpret and relate these to their real worlds: in the past, the present, and the future.

The parallel to Zionism's overarching success should not be lost here: what begins as a utopian fiction of knowledge often ends as territory. Efforts to map (indigenous) territories are often the basis for claiming political rights, so that it comes down to a matter of map or be mapped. Palestineremembered, and to a certain extent then the emergence of national area codes and "google.ps", are sites for a production of symbolic and geo-political references that are other, often in stark contrast, to what is available in the mainstream. They can be understood as a call to document or reveal indigenous territories that exist in spite of and counter to "official" maps. The spaces of Palestine, the dream of a nation-state, the politics of resistance, the inclusion/exclusion in the global order is not simply in the physical spaces (walls, buildings, servers), but in the symbolic spaces of the arts, of media, of culture. As such the significance of such websites and symbols are that spatial configurations of power are being reconfigured, and today, reconfigured in virtual spaces. Visual practices of mapping Palestine, and especially the 'disappeared' cities, villages, and places since 1948, serve as a means to contest Israeli geographic and cartographic erasures and maintain a memory of a Palestine lost and still hoped for. These sites then are attempts at countering that history that is written by the victorious. They afford Palestinians space heretofore forbidden to them: of a collectivity. Importantly, what they do provide is a counter-history, a counter-hegemony, a counter-memory to the hegemonic Israeli/Zionist versions of the land, the people, the conflict.

Put differently, presence on the internet is becoming an integral part of a nation's geo-politics. Palestine becomes not just a contested territory but also a virtual space through which the physical geography and the actual beings can re-territorialize themselves onto the lost (historical, physical, distant) spaces and imagined future of Palestine. As such, this can be seen as a moment of cartographic resistance where Palestine is opened, or accessible, to the diaspora, to those in exile, to those not "there" – wherever the "there" is. Those previously marginalized or disenfranchised (on maps, in archives, and otherwise) now have 'access'. Palestinians are allowed to visualize their proximity: to each other and to the "entirety" of "Palestine."

SD: You suggest that there has been a transformation in the public mediation of protest since the second Intifada in September 2000. How effective do you think citizen journalism has been at changing public opinion on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict? Is there a belief among political activists in Gaza that they are capable of affecting public opinion, and that any good will come from doing that?

HTS: Historically, Palestinians everywhere have had a complex relationship to the importance of others' or global "public opinion." There has always been a tension between wanting the world to see the horrors committed against Palestinians and not wanting to be misrepresented. Palestinians' approach on this issue is on the one hand very simple and very complex: there is a widely held belief that if only others saw (or knew of) what Israel does to Palestinians, then Israeli occupation would collapse under the weight of global public opinion against it. In other words, Palestinians are convinced that justice is on their side, and that change is simply a matter

of getting the word out. On the other hand, there is also recognition that the "Palestinian problem" is more than just a media or technological issue but a complex set of geopolitical interests in which the Palestinians themselves, and especially Gazans, are pawns. Moreover, Palestinians are well aware of their widespread and historically rooted "misrepresentation" in the media, and especially in the US, which remains an important node because of its unshakable economic, military and other forms of support for Israel and its simultaneous insistence on being a neutral moderator. There is no simple answer as to whether Palestinians can change public opinion and whether that would result in any political change.

What has happened since the Second Intifada is an increasing "performance" towards foreign audiences, as a result of technological and political changes. (I say "performance" rather carefully because targeting international audiences and wishing to chance public opinion is not new to the Palestinian cause. The PLO and freedom fighters made it a point through the 1960s for example to speak to an international audience, through speeches made at the UN, the creation of Palestinian revolutionary cinema, the output of posters, and even the "spectacular" terrorist attacks in the early 70s.)

Technologically, the second intifada erupted at a moment of a media landscape that became accessible to more and more people, in terms of price and ease of use, whether in production or consumption or distribution. Let's just think of the various technological changes since then: cheaper video cameras, faster computers, widespread internet access, handheld phones with built-in cameras, YouTube, Facebook, live feeds, and so much more.

Politically, I think the fall-out from the Second Intifada marked a moment in a collective Palestinian consciousness that the geopolitical status quo was not leading to any improvements for Palestinians. One simply has to look at last twenty or so years of the "peace process" to realize how little Palestinians have gained: settlements have increased exponentially, Gaza has been continuously bombed to smithereens, Jerusalemites are losing more and more of their land and their livelihood. Palestinians inside Israel haven't made much headway in obtaining any rights from where they were prior to Oslo, the millions of refugees and Palestinians in the diaspora still have no recourse for any "return" or repatriation. In other words, neither the US's involvement, nor the EU's, nor Russia's, nor the Quartet, nor anyone else's has gotten Palestinians (and Israelis) any closer to "peace" or any possible "solution." In the meantime, the West seemed to be continuing its crusade against Arabs and Muslims and speaking the language of human rights and global justice. I see all of these as converging and resulting in an increased awareness (paradoxically partially based on helplessness and frustration) among Palestinians to try to effect change in different ways. There are many examples: websites launched by diasporic Palestinians (electronic intifada), video cameras given out to Palestinians to document settler violence (B'Tselem), the creation of local news networks (Ma'an), the emergence of grass-roots social media-based movements (Gaza Youth Breaks Out (GYBO), #March15, and the Third Intifada Facebook group), supporters adopting particular hashtags (#GazaUnderAttack), interest groups connecting Palestinian rights to other forms of identity or economic rights (such as LGBTQ or the Occupy movement). At the same time, there have been efforts to document non-violent resistance movements, such as the BDS campaign and the weekly protests in Bil'in; as well as forms of Israeli aggression, like the bulldozing of one Bedouin village, al Araqib, dozens of times a year, or the inadvertent capture on camera of a Palestinian kid being shot or beaten up.

I am not suggesting that this is a concerted effort, but this is what I am trying to get at when I say an increased "performance" towards the outside world.

Citizen journalism has added to that mix. All of these practices have emerged because of particular technological, political, economic conditions. They contribute to a changing media landscape. At the same time however, they cannot be divorced from the continued importance of mainstream and official sources, whether coverage of the latest Gaza war by satellite channels, YouTube clips uploaded by the IDF, or news reports by the BBC or the *New York Times*. To suggest that one or the other on its own will immediately impact public opinion and effect political change is to have a rather myopic view of technology and of politics.

SD: Have social media been effective at strengthening a collective Palestinian identity and getting the Palestinian perspective across? How have corporations, such as Facebook, Google and Twitter, themselves intervened, and what are the consequences of corporate algorithms (over open source alternatives) filtering digital resistance?

HTS: There is no denying that certain new technologies have given Palestinians the ability to connect with each other first and foremost, keeping in mind that for decades communication between those inside Palestine and those in refugee camps in Lebanon for example were non-existent. (It is also important here however to remember that previous to digital technologies, other ways of communicating a common identity existed -- images on TV, words in newspapers, smuggled content, similar political experiences of dispossession, and so on.) Similarly, there are more and more efforts to archive, map, document, and represent various forms of Palestinian identity, history, perspectives. There is of course always the ongoing danger of fragmentation, a lack of centralization, and of voices being lost in the din of information overload, or one simply interacting with messages she already agrees with.

Various technological firms have adopted particular language that seems to recognize or empower Palestinians (and frustrate Israel): Yahoo and Google for example have now "recognized" Palestine. Here too a slightly wider historical view is important to keep in mind: the ITU (International Telecommunication Union) already in 1998 and ICANN (Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers) in 2002 had laid that path, in providing Palestine its own codes, 970 and .ps, respectively. One cannot help but think of these semantic changes as diplomatic tools, not unlike Abbas' request for recognition as a "state" at the UN. While these are of course important symbolic markers, I (perhaps pessimistically) note that neither 970 nor .ps does away with the underlying "segregated dependence" on Israel that I described above: dialing a 970 code for example still requires the call to be connected through Israel. Nor do these incorporate the millions of Palestinians who are left out of the equation because they are on the other side of a geopolitical border. This reality does not preclude people of all colors from taking issue with these symbols. It is fascinating (to me) the amount of energy that goes into what we may call hashtag-wars or cyber-battles between "pro-Israeli" and "pro-Palestinian" groups either hacking each other's websites or trying to convince corporate entities such as Facebook to take certain pages down.

One recent example revolves around a group of young Palestinians who launched a Facebook page calling for a third intifada. The groups' administrators set out to promote non-violent civic

action in support of a free and independent Palestine. Page members began posting messages that promoted violence and hatred towards Israel. Formal complaints from the Israeli government to Facebook resulted in the company taking the page down. (The Israeli government often files official complaints to these ends. In the case of telephony for example, the Prime Minister's office personally complained to the ITU in 1998 when the 970 code was awarded. It did the same with Sprint in 2001 when outgoing calls to 970 were listed as "Palestine" on one's bill; Sprint later changed it to "PALE. AUTH." Even AT&T's semantics were complained about and eventually changed from "Israel including Palestine" to, quite simply, "Israel".) Facebook could have simply suspended the accounts or pages of commenters promoting violence, rather than taking the entire page down. For those in the mix, these details matter: free expression is better preserved when harmful and/or hate speech can be targeted at the level of the individual, rather than an entire page. Facebook claimed that it removed the page in an effort to extinguish violent and hateful language. Of course Palestinian users and activists like to point out that Facebook does not follow the same standards or respond in equal measure when it comes to Israeli hatespeech against Palestinians. For Palestinians, this reflects the hegemonic status-quo in the larger geopolitical realm: the dominant discourse is one largely framed by US and Israeli interests. This is equally related to the issue of corporate algorithms which increasingly filter and "define" the digital world – thus limiting one's ability to post things, use certain language, share a particular perspective, etc. On the question of open-source, in Palestine the perspective is quite parallel to the rest of the world. Noncommercial alternatives remain largely marginalized in a commercially-driven and commercially-defined landscape. The world and possibility of open-source is relegated as one of importance only to serious internet activists, hackers, and programmers. In that sense, Palestine is no less "victim" to hegemonic powers – whether discursive or economic – as much of the rest of the world.

SD: To conclude, would it be right to say, therefore, that you are critical of technologically deterministic (and/or liberatory) accounts of the radical potential of social media? To what extent, for example, would you say that the digital resistance of Palestinians is circumscribed by material limitations in the geopolitical context of Gaza?

HTS: I would venture to say that anyone trained in a critical theory approach to media studies is careful to take into account the social, economic, political, and material conditions within which technology has been developed, distributed, and used at any particular historical time period. Technologies are outcomes of social relations and their potential must be placed alongside economic and political considerations.

We certainly need to move beyond an instrumental approach which presumes that technologies are mere tools or aids to human activity and thus deemed liberatory or neutral. We should equally move away from an apocalyptic approach such as that of Jacques Ellul's (1964) or Martin Heidegger's (1977), who argue that technology constitutes a new type of cultural system that restructures the entire social world as (merely) an object of control. As Langdon Winner (2010) argued, technology is not neutral but always political. This is to acknowledge that social hierarchies or political goals may be reproduced and/or undermined through technologies, for example.

In my own work, I look at how technology infrastructures – such as telecommunications and the internet – are material artifacts that are 'records' of activities intimately bound to political and economic processes. I aim to show how the internet is connected to Israeli and Palestinian forms of oppression, to Palestinian elites' interests in capital accumulation, to Israel's settler colonialism and the spatial forms it has engendered both territorially and virtually. I find that much of the rhetoric about digital resistance or internet activism more broadly fails to address the historical origins and ongoing power relations in Palestine/Israel. Change always depends not only on how the technology allows us to use it, but the context within which the technology operates.

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