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# Palestinians, Israelis, and the Internet's Imagined Communities

by [Hannah Kazis-Taylor](#)

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

### [Hannah Kazis-Taylor](#)

Hannah Kazis-Taylor is a former intern for the Washington Institute and senior at Yale, studying History and Modern Middle East Studies and. Her research focuses on Israeli-Palestinian issues and religious political philosophies. Her work has also appeared in Tablet Magazine.



### Brief Analysis

In recent years, social media has provided a digital bridge across the short but physically uncrossable geographic distance separating Palestinian populations. Arab citizens of Israel consume a constant flow of social media content from the occupied territories; these connections strengthen the population's Palestinian identity. Within an already-divided Israeli society, social media encourages both sides to occupy mutually exclusive echo chambers, further eroding the possibility of a two-state solution.

For much of Israel's history, Arabic-language media was state-sponsored, and the government limited the circulation of independent Arab newspapers and radio broadcasts that might promote the development of Palestinian identity. Harel Chorev-Halewa, a researcher at Tel Aviv University, commented in an interview: "I grew up in an Israel where you had only one channel, with an hour and a half of broadcasting in Arabic... you would get whatever the government wanted to give you vertically."

This changed when satellite television allowed Arab citizens of Israel to more easily connect to broader pan-Arab trends. In the 2000s, Arab satellite television joined radio and literature as modes for Arabs in Israel to access the cultural and political conversations occurring in the broader Arab world. In his book *The Arab Public Sphere in Israel*, sociologist Amal Jamal writes that this media enabled Arabs living in Israel to "overcome their physical location" and "become part of the cultural space of what they view as their kin nation." Jamal's research indicates that, among the general population, 41 percent of people who watched Arab television felt that it strengthened their sense of belonging in the Arab world; in elite circles, this number shot up to 73 percent.

More than ever before, people can now choose what media to consume—and in what cultural enclave they want to live. Social media use engenders some of the paradoxes of the current situation of Israel's Arab minority. Today, its members are integrating into Jewish Israeli institutions and workplaces in unprecedented numbers: a recent study

reported that the percentage of Arab citizens of Israel who spent leisure time with an Israeli Jew rose steadily from 44.2 percent in 2003 to 72.6 percent in 2015. Yet, when it comes to national identity, people are increasingly reporting a stronger affiliation with the term “Palestinian,” rising from 47 to 63 percent during the same period.

Social media is far from the only factor that has contributed to the Arab minority’s rejection of Israeli national identity; this population has always identified with Palestine. Israel’s steady political shift toward the right—recently culminating in the passing of the “nation-state law”—has certainly alienated Israel’s Arab population. The breakdown of the peace process, the perpetual expansion of West Bank settlements, the government’s failure to bridge socioeconomic inequality between Jews and Arabs, and certain Jewish organizations’ deliberate efforts to prevent Arabs from entering some Jewish neighborhoods and workplaces have all increased many Arab citizens’ animosity toward the Israeli state. Disenchantment with left wing governments, which have historically failed to improve the poor services available in majority-Arab communities, has also played a role.

In this context, the diametrically opposed worldviews expressed in Arab and Jewish social media networks are further deepening the rifts between the two populations’ politics. Increasingly, young, politically-minded Arab citizens of Israel use the internet to live and work within Israel while socializing in a virtual Palestinian world, with their Jewish colleagues experiencing another ‘internet’ entirely.

### **Creating a Sense of Connection**

Internet usage by Arab citizens of Israel reflects a broader Palestinian reliance on the internet to connect. Although younger generations of Gazans can remember little of life before the ongoing 11-year siege on Gaza, the internet provides Palestinians with a digital window into one another’s lives across separation barriers. Gazans have always used social media at very high rates, according to surveys conducted by eminent pollster Khalil Shikaki. The drivers behind Gazan social media usage are “obvious,” Shikaki said in an interview: “If you can’t access [the world] physically, you access it virtually.” Palestinians in Lebanese and Jordanian refugee camps also rely on the internet to connect to their homeland. Virtual tools allow users to view historic Palestinian sites on Google Maps, connect to Palestinians living in the West Bank and Gaza, and coordinate protests on Palestinian issues.

Today, content from Facebook news pages and influential activists in Gaza and the West Bank fill the social media feeds of Arabs in Israel; as satellite television strengthened bonds with the Arab world, this technology fosters a sense of connection to the Palestinian nation. For example, Arab citizens of Israel account for a disproportionately high share of the popular online West Bank newspaper al-Ma’an’s Facebook readership. In the first half of 2018, Al-Ma’an’s Facebook content had approximately 590,000 clicks from the West Bank’s and Gaza’s populations of over 5 million, but almost the same number—over 570,000—from Israel, largely from the Arab minority of only 1.8 million, according to a journalist at al-Ma’an with access to its Facebook account.

Social media may have a stronger effect on identity than did previous technologies, since it creates a sense of intimate connection. Real-time footage can allow viewers to vicariously experience hardships documented by residents elsewhere. This exposure to a constant stream of content documenting Palestinian suffering often has a powerful impact on Arab citizens of Israel. After following an activist or friending someone from Gaza on Facebook, “you can see that he’s got no water to drink, that he’s unemployed, or doesn’t have enough food or medical services,” said Raja Zaatry, a journalist and the secretary of the Communist Party in Haifa.

Zaatry describes how this content influences users to “feel that I am Palestinian and that my people there are dying, so it’s OK if I get arrested or hurt by police violence,” while protesting Israel’s policies and actions. During the course of the recent Gaza border protests, for example, Arabs in cities and villages in Israel demonstrated in solidarity and raised close to a million shekels (\$270,000) for Gazans.

As Khalil Jahshan, executive director of the think tank Arab Center Washington DC, remarked: “You cannot

underestimate the importance of that [social media] communication in solidifying the common identity between the different segments of Palestinian society.”

### **Creating an Echo Chamber**

Across the globe, social media platforms aggregate content they know users will view and share, keeping people online by promoting emotionally wrenching material. Further, people assemble media feeds that affirm their pre-existing views often by appealing to their emotions; in this way, platforms create echo chambers, despite the veneer of broader accessibility to contradicting arguments. Ultimately, it is increasingly apparent that social media can drive people to become more purist and uncompromising in their political beliefs. Palestine is no exception to this phenomenon.

Polls indicate that Arab citizens of Israel are more likely to support a two-state solution than other involved groups, at nearly twice the rates of other Palestinian and Israeli populations. They are consequently a key voting demographic for electing political representatives in Israel committed to pursuing this peaceful solution to the conflict. Were Israel’s Arab population and the Jewish left to align on this issue, as they sometimes have historically, the coalition might help overcome current domestic political obstacles to the two-state solution. However, decades of marginalization and discriminatory policies have eroded Arabs’ trust in Jewish political movements. A widening gap in what social media looks like for these two groups may make future dialogue in real life increasingly difficult.

For example, just as Palestinian social media often highlights solidarity, space for discussions of intra-community challenges can be sidelined. According to Ghaith al-Omari, a fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Palestinians tend not to “air the dirty laundry” of internal political and social divisions online. Moreover, social media users inside Israel can be similarly reluctant to address how they accommodate living in the occupying state. As al-Omari put it, “Very few Palestinians will post, ‘I had a great coffee with my employer in Tel Aviv or Efrat... [And] you will not see anyone taking a selfie in their shop with Israeli products behind them.’” In both cases, an idealized virtual reality is formed at the expense of social media content acknowledging the real life accommodations required throughout the broader Palestinian community.

Rather, Arab citizens of Israel consistently navigate social media feeds with powerful posts memorializing jailed or murdered Palestinians. When a friend or relative eulogizes a “shahid,” or martyr, such posts often receive wide coverage through ‘reposting.’ There is also a tradition of documenting terrible injuries and children’s suffering through pictures and pointing to the occupation as perpetrator.

Alon-Lee Green, the Jewish national director of the organization “Standing Together,”— a movement working to unite Jewish and Arab Israelis in support of the two-state solution emphasized how deeply social media content affects Arab citizens of Israel. Arabs in Israel “read what people are writing in Ramallah, Gaza, Hebron and Nablus, and then they share it. And it hurts,” he said. Graphic images of injured or dead Palestinians don’t break through to Jewish social media networks; they will only feature images of Israeli victims and homes destroyed by Palestinian rockets. Within Israel itself, social media increasingly strengthens each side’s commitment to its narrative, preventing engagement with the other’s parallel one.

Arab citizens’ reactions to events like the shooting of protesters in Gaza are based on an “emotional politics that is being translated from “what they see and we don’t,” Green thinks. Meanwhile, some Western and Israeli sources have linked the preponderance of memorial posts to retributive attacks. The Israeli government heavily surveils Palestinian social media, and has passed laws allowing police to arrest posters for online content deemed to incite violence. Consequently, many Jewish Israelis associate these posts with violence against other Jewish Israelis rather than against Palestinians.

Especially if left unaddressed, this major dissonance between newsfeeds may lead to Arab citizens of Israel increasingly shying away from partnering with organizations like “Standing Together” or left-wing Jewish parties promoting the peace process. Green himself has noted that he has sometimes found it difficult to partner with Arab politicians and activists recently, partly due to the Palestinian political conversation. To Green, it feels as if Arab leaders in Israel are increasingly building on an internal narrative developed in part online and “are not trying to address the public,” which Green describes as alienating rather than recruiting left-wing Jews.

Much has contributed to the growing rifts between Israeli Jewish and Arab societies in the political sphere, and efforts must be made to protect civil rights and achieve socioeconomic equality between all citizens, if the Arab population’s alienation is to be reduced. So long as these efforts remain limited and current Israeli politics keep peace negotiations well out of sight, social media echo chambers will proliferate and may encourage Arab citizens of Israel to increasingly substitute their much-needed support within Israel for a two-state solution with participation in a virtual Palestinian nation. ❖



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