

Palestinian Center for Development and Media Freedoms (MADA)

Internet and freedom of expression in Palestine

Special report

The World Wide Web has become one of the most important tools of communication between individuals around the world, where the Internet has formed a broad space for the flow of information and exchange of ideas in all languages. In the past few years social networks started a new revolution in the world of communication, they began for educational and social goals and then evolved to become an infinite invented world, where one can find all that they are looking for.

The Internet and the broad tools of communication made available by the social networks gained great importance specifically in the lives of Palestinians in Gaza, who have been under firm siege by the Israeli occupation forces since 2006, and for the Palestinian people in general due to the dispersion they have experienced since the Nakba of 1948, and according to the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics there are 11.6 million Palestinians around the world “4.3 million living in the West Bank and Gaza”, and now they can communicate with their relatives and friends in the different parts of the world quickly and immediately.

The Palestinian Center for Development and Media Freedoms (MADA) realized the importance of the social networks as platforms that allow citizens to express themselves, and as tools that contributed greatly in encouraging the Palestinians to write what is on their minds in an easy and fast manner. Therefore MADA published a study about two years ago on "the new media relationship to freedom of opinion and expression in Palestine: Facebook as a model", the most significant results of the study was that 67% of Palestinians who participated in answering the questionnaire and who use Facebook believed that Facebook contributes to the promotion of freedom of expression, as opposed to 33% who said it has no contribution. The content analysis of the Palestinian groups on Facebook also showed that there is no culture of accepting the opinion of others and that there is a verbal attack and intolerance during an exchange of views in these groups.

It was clear that the internal division captured the attention of many, which was dominated by the style of accusations, insults, defamation, treason, and blasphemy during a lot of discussions, this wasted the opportunity of those groups for a peaceful dialogue to discuss a lot of societal issues, and try to promote civil peace.

MADA monitored during the past 20 months attacks on journalists for expressing their opinion on Facebook, and some journalists reported to MADA that security services attempted to force them during investigation to reveal their emails and social profiles passwords, and this report will shed light on the reality of the internet in Palestine and the violations committed against journalists for expressing their opinions on the social networks.

The measurement of the extent of freedom of expression on the Internet is linked to several factors: the ability of citizens to access the Internet, speed, prices, filtering, censorship, and violations of the right of Internet users.

According to a report issued by the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics and the Ministry of Communication and Information Technology, the percentage of households that have an Internet connection in Palestine in 2012 reached 32.1%, 34.3% in the West Bank and 27.9% in the Gaza Strip. Though this ratio is considered one of the highest rates globally for the number of the population, yet a large proportion of the Palestinians are not able to get Internet services due to lack of necessary infrastructure, and due to their inability to pay the necessary fees for the service.

Director of the General Administration of Communications at the Ministry of Communications, Engineer Florid Zurba, said that there is a difficulty in access to all areas in Palestine, especially some of the villages, due to the blockade and the separation wall and Area C which increases the costs kink lines required to connect the Internet, which increases the price for this service.

He adds: "For example, the maximum speed of home Internet reach up to 12 megabits per second, which is the provided speed by the access lines, while the speed of commercial Internet that connects via optical fiber are unspecified and high. Prices range for home Internet service range from 60 to 300 shekels a month depending on speed (approximately 17-84 USD), the commercial Internet service begins at almost 180 shekels per month (approximately 50 USD).

On the reason for high prices compared to Israel, for example, says Zurba that there are many reasons including: the competitive environment in providing Internet services in Palestine needs for greater regulation, in addition the number of Internet users in Israel far exceeds the number of Palestinian users, which gives companies the largest power over the market. The Internet in Israel is a single integrated network, in Palestine there are two networks one in the West Bank and the other in Gaza Strip, which increases the cost to providers.

The Executive Director of the Association of Internet community in Palestine Hanna Quraytem, reported that the price and the infrastructure control the Palestinians' ability to access the Internet. He believes that the biggest problem facing internet access is related to the Israeli occupation, which prevents Palestinians from getting third and fourth generation Internet service on their mobile phones, which limits their ability to communicate immediately with others and participate in events and express themselves immediately and directly from anywhere. The unlimited Internet speed gives people the ability to communicate faster and use sophisticated techniques, such as direct broadcasting and video, which most Palestinians are unable to do.

The rise in prices of Internet limits the ability of citizens of low income to use it, and thus they lose the ability to communicate rapidly with others at home and abroad, and their right to express their opinion and the delivery of their voices to the world, although it is well needed by this sector of the society for the amount of issues they experience.

At the same time some journalists are deprived by the Israeli occupation from accessing third and fourth generation Internet service, for example, if the journalist went to cover a given event he/she cannot upload it directly to the news site, instead must go to the office or to the nearest

point where there is internet to upload the news, which hampered the delivery of information in a timely manner.

Filtering and blocking:

MADA stressed that what distinguished the Internet in Palestine was its openness and non-use of filtering and blocking of websites by authorities. However, during the past two years the center monitored a number of violations in this field; in the month of February of 2012, 8 Palestinian news websites were blocked by a decision of the former Attorney-General Ahmed Al-Mughni, where it was considered a dangerous precedent of its kind against the right to freedom of expression online, they were [unblocked](#) later in early May of the same year by a decision of the Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas.

In Gaza, the Internal Security arrested editor-in-chief of the torch news site “Al shoa’la lel Ilam” Saher Alaqra on 3rd December 2012, and forced him to close the site after being beaten and tortured in prison. In addition the Director of Licensing at the Ministry of Communication and Information Technology in the Gaza Strip Kamal Masri announced on 30th August 2012 that “all pornographic sites and projection sites by intelligence” will be filtered.

Violations:

MADA monitored over the past two years a good amount of violations related to journalists' activity on social networks, particularly Facebook and blogs being the most commonly used in Palestine. The most notable violations in this field are:

- [The sentence of journalist Mamdouh Hamamrah](#) to imprisonment for a period of one year on 7th May 2012, and the rejection of appeal and approval of the sentence on 28th March 2013. Charged for an Image he was tagged with that is offensive to President Mahmoud Abbas. President Abbas has pardoned Hamamrah and he was released afterwards.
- [The trial of journalist George Canawati](#) for posting a criticism comment on Facebook about the work of the Directorate of the Health department of Bethlehem district on 8th September 2011. Where the case is still being considered in court.
- [Arresting the journalist Esmat Abdel Khalek](#) by the public prosecutor for a comment she made on Facebook demanding an end to the Palestinian Authority (PA) on 28th March 2012.
- [Threatening](#) the director of the Chinese news agency Imad Drimli and freelance journalist Majed Abu Salama with "death and cut of their tongues" if they continued to express their opinions about what is going on in Egypt on Facebook by unknown individuals who identified themselves as members of the Qassam Brigades, on 4th July 2013.
- Arresting the editor of Wafa news agency and Radio Ajyal, Rami Samara, at his work place at the agency's headquarters in Ramallah, and his release after about three and a half hours, for writing [a critical comment on Facebook](#) of the decision-makers of the Ramallah PA headquarters “Almokata’a” on 31st January 2012.

- [Arresting Jamal Abu Rihan](#), a blogger, by the Preventive Security Service in the city of Jericho. Following a blog he set up on Facebook titled "the people want an end to corruption", where he was charged with slander of a public officer.
- The referral of writer and blogger Yousri Alghol, the managing editor of the Madarat magazine of the Ministry of Culture in Gaza, to [an urgent interrogation](#) by the Court of staff, after having published a "literary thoughts", he was also pressured to remove it from his blog on 24th September 2012.
- [The investigation of Zaman Press correspondent Tareq Khamees](#) by the Palestinian Preventive Security on 1st April 2012 for several hours for a comment he made on Facebook linked to the case of Ismat Abdul Khaliq.

MADA noticed from the testimonies of journalists who have been exposed to investigation because of their journalistic work, that they were pressured by the security services to reveal their email and facebook passwords, the most recent case was of Safa Agency correspondent Musab Al-Said, who reported that he suffered great pressure by members of intelligence in the city of Ramallah to reveal the password of his personal facebook account on 1st August 2013.

Pressuring or forcing journalists to reveal their passwords is a violation of the sanctity of private life, guaranteed in Article 32 of the Palestinian Basic Law, and Article 12 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Also President Mahmoud Abbas issued a decree on 4th April 2010 to be implemented by the Minister of the Interior stating: "In the light of the report of the Special Commission of Inquiry by d. Rafiq Hussein, and as confirmation of our previous instructions, the Minister of the Interior must inform all security agencies to prohibit any violations of personal freedoms and privacy rights contrary to the provisions of the Basic Law and the laws in force under penalty of accountability" *according to SAMA News Agency*.

The violations and attacks on Facebook users and bloggers asserts the control and censorship of the authorities in the West Bank and Gaza of the social networks, where we (MADA) noticed that this control has increased in the last two years after the success of revolutions in a number of Arab countries, especially Tunisia and Egypt, where youth played a primary role in coordinating and mobilizing the masses through social networks.

The violations against journalists and citizens simply for expressing their opinions leads to promoting self-censorship, which is incompatible with the idea of having the platforms that makes expressing opinions easier for citizens and journalists, and therefore MADA calls on all relevant authorities in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip to stop Internet censorship, end the infringement on the right of journalists and citizens to express their views on social networks, stop violating their privacy and don't pressure them to reveal their passwords, and to respect freedom of opinion and expression guaranteed in Article 19 of the Palestinian Basic Law and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

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