



Hashtag Palestine

هاشتاغ فلسطين



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#Hashtag Palestine 2021

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2021 Hashtag Palestine

Introduction	6
Methodology	7
Authorities	8
Israeli Authorities	8
The PA and the De Facto Authority of the Gaza Strip (Hamas)	12
Tech Companies	15
Overview	15
Social Media Companies	17
Surveillance Companies	21
Other Companies — Digital Economy	22
Society	23
Findings	25
Recommendations	27
Third Party States	27
Companies	27
Local and International CSOs	28
The PA and the De Facto Authority of the Gaza Strip (Hamas)	28
Annexes	28



Introduction

Through Palestinians' eyes, 2021 was a stage for a multitude of political twists and turns, whether internally, with the Palestinian Authority (PA), or with the Israeli occupation. This slew of events shaped the Palestinian digital space in one way or another—and marked a watershed moment for Palestinian digital rights compared to earlier years.

A positive atmosphere pervaded the Palestinian landscape after the PA had announced that parliamentary, presidential, and national council elections would be held in the first quarter of 2021.¹ However, shortly after, the elections were derailed at the end of April, dispelling hopes for peaceful political change and creating a state of frustration among Palestinians. This setback engendered several political activists critical of the PA and the Palestinian situation at large.²

As the second quarter unfolded, specifically in early May, protests swept the streets of Jerusalem, particularly in the Sheikh Jarrah neighborhood. Triggered by Israeli violations in the occupied East Jerusalem—especially the plans to evict Palestinian families from Shiekh Jarrah and other neighborhoods, several other demonstrations were organized in many cities across the West Bank, Gaza Strip and Israel, and daily protests were held in Shiekh Jarrah to thwart the forcible removal of Palestinian households in favor of Israeli settlers.

As the Israeli aggression against the Palestinians escalated, the Israeli authorities unleashed extreme military assault on the Gaza Strip on May 10th for eleven days. Against the deteriorating situation, widespread Palestinian protests were held in various cities, only to be met with violent repression by the Israeli forces. The onslaught against Palestinians in Jerusalem and the Gaza Strip and the crackdown on Palestinians in other parts of occupied Palestine occurred concurrently with a digital purge of Palestinian content on social media platforms.

May's events had a tremendous influence on the digital space, revealing the extent to which social media corporations, particularly Meta (formerly known as Facebook), restrict Palestinian content. Owing to the endeavors of civil society organizations (CSOs) and the decision of the Facebook Oversight Board, the company formed an independent investigation committee to conduct a comprehensive and independent audit of content management policies in Arabic and Hebrew.

During that period, the restriction on freedom of opinion and expression in the digital space became more evident, as social media was the most used medium to document human rights violations against Palestinians. However, the Israeli authorities exercised censorship, followed by arrests on the grounds of expression of opinion. Not to mention the work of the Israeli Cyber Unit to censor Palestinian content to put pressure on social media companies to increase the censorship of Palestinians.

During that period, the restriction on freedom of opinion and expression in the digital space grew more evident, as social media was the most used avenue to document human rights violations against Palestinians; still Israeli authorities exercised censorship, followed by arrests for political speech. Not to mention the work of the Israeli Cyber Unit, which filters Palestinian content to put pressure on social media firms to censor Palestinians even more.

In a similar repressive vein, the PA violently quashed demonstrations with loyal government individuals who spearheaded smear campaigns against activists. As a result, the Palestinian digital space was being targeted and even led to arbitrary detention for expressing opinions on social media platforms.

Last year's political conditions have created a hotbed for violations of digital rights, particularly violations of the right to freedom of speech and expression and violations of the right to privacy and security in the digital space. 7amleh documented many digital violations during 2021, whether by the Israeli authorities, the PA, the de facto authority in the Gaza Strip, or social media platforms that suppressed Palestinian and pro-Palestinian content.

This report maps and diagnoses the most prominent developments in Palestinian digital rights during 2021. Furthermore, it addressed all Palestinian rights violators, the practices devised by each, and constituted a breach of Palestinians' digital rights.

Methodology

To dissect the situation of Palestinian digital rights, Hashtag Palestine 2021 relies on the database of the Palestinian Observatory of Digital Rights Violations (7or)—the first Palestinian watchdog monitor of Palestinian digital rights violations. Also, the report tapped into other partner institutions with a niche focus on monitoring and documenting digital rights violations.

7amleh also reviewed the contents and corpus of literature issued during 2021 on Palestinian digital rights, whether academic, journalistic, or human rights-related. Besides, several interviews with experts and representatives of CSOs were conducted to garner insights about digital rights over the past year.

1. "عباس يحدد مواعيد إجراء الانتخابات الفلسطينية على 3 مراحل وحماس ترحب." الجزيرة. كانون الثاني 2021. <https://www.aljazeera.net/news/politics/2021/1/15/%D8%AD%D9%85%D8%A7%D8%B3-%D8%AA%D8%B1%D8%AD%D8%A8-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B1%D8%A6%D9%8A%D8%B3-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%81%D9%84%D8%B3%D8%B7%D9%8A%D9%86%D9%8A-%D9%8A%D8%AD%D8%AF%D8%AF>

2. "محمود عباس يعلن تأجيل الانتخابات البرلمانية الفلسطينية." بي بي سي. نيسان 2021. <https://www.bbc.com/arabic/middleeast-56938649>



Israel

■ Internet Infrastructure

Through a variety of tactics and practices, the Israeli authorities continue to block the growth of the internet sector in the occupied Palestinian territory (OpT). Having only permitted the third generation (3G) in 2018, Israel still prevents the fourth generation (4G) of broadband cellular network technology in the West Bank. It also continues to prohibit the third and fourth generations in the Gaza Strip. In addition, the occupation continues to bar the entry of necessary equipment and machines to construct an adequate infrastructure for providing high-quality internet service in the Gaza Strip.

At the beginning of 2021, Israeli authorities expanded the coverage of Israeli cellular companies to 95 percent of the West Bank instead of 75 percent, inflicting heavy losses on the Palestinian economy and Palestinian companies that cannot match and compete with Israeli telecommunications companies due to the power relations and imbalances.³

Against internal Israeli political developments, the impact of the Israeli aggression on the Gaza Strip, and the events of Sheikh Jarrah, the Israeli authorities permitted, for the first time, the use of fourth generation internet frequencies in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip per an agreement concluded with the PA early in September.⁴ The Palestinian Ministry of Telecom and Information Technology (MoTIT) announced that the operation of the fourth generation needs at least a year to be set in motion.⁵

While the occupation impedes the growth of the internet and information technology sector in the West Bank, Israel targets the Gaza Strip's telecoms and internet infrastructure. For example, during Israel's most recent attack on the Gaza Strip in May 2021, Al Mezan Center for Human Rights documented numerous cases in which Israel targeted internet distributors, software businesses, telecom and cellular operators, and other facilities providing technological services.⁶

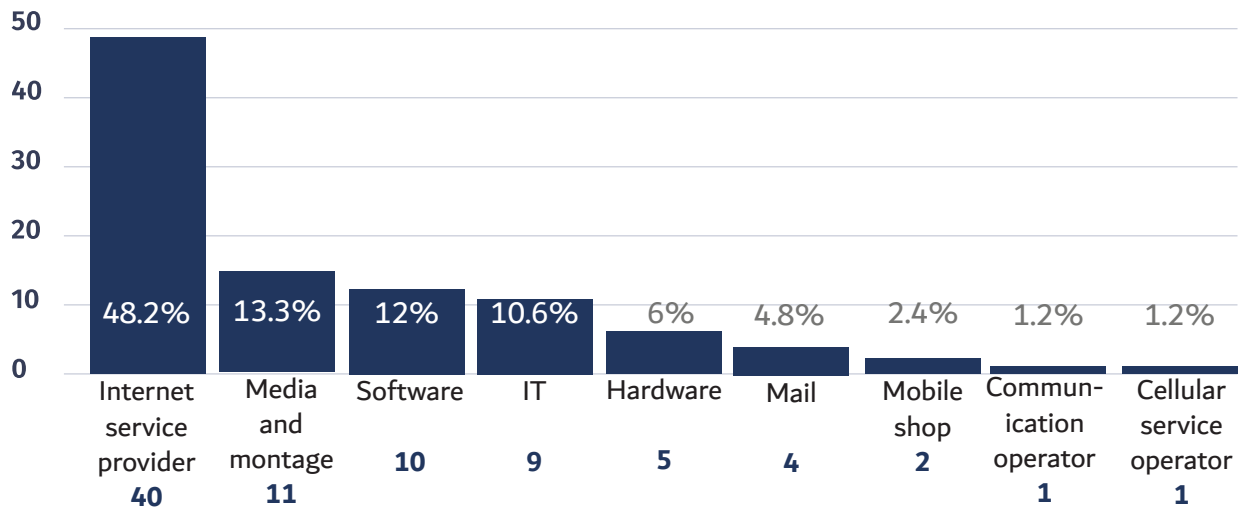
3. "الاتصالات الإسرائيلية.. تهديد إستراتيجي واجتياح تقني للمناطق الفلسطينية" الجزيرة. شباط 2021. <https://www.aljazeera.net>

4. "إسرائيل تسمح للسلطة الفلسطينية باستخدام الجيل الرابع للشبكات الخليوية." إندبندنت العربية. أيلول 2021. <https://www.independentarabia.3>

5. "وزير الاتصالات: خدمة 4G بحاجة لسنة على الأقل للتشغيل والأسعار ستكون منافسة للإسرائيلية." صحيفة القدس. أيلول 2021. <https://alquds.com>

6. قطاع الاتصالات وتكنولوجيا المعلومات والحقوق الرقمية الفلسطينية. "مركز الميزان. آب 2021. <https://www.mezan.org/uploads/files/16280852961013.pdf>

Distribution of Affected IT Companies



Privacy/Surveillance

Against the dramatic surge in the use of surveillance technology, the right to privacy is one of the most violated rights in the digital era. Some local and international reports have documented the ways and surveillance tactics used by the Israeli authorities to harass and track Palestinians everywhere.

During the Sheikh Jarrah events last May, many worshippers at al-Aqsa Mosque got text messages on their mobile phones threatening them with prosecution for the protests inside al-Haram ash-Sharif of Jerusalem.⁷ This measure violates the worshippers' privacy, as Israeli authorities identified their presence in al-Aqsa Mosque by tracking their phones and randomly sending texts to individuals present without establishing their actual involvement in any protesting activities.

The Israeli authorities proposed enacting a law to install facial recognition cameras in public places and streets. And the proposal would enable several Israeli security agencies other than the police to obtain the information collected by the cameras. This bill has sparked controversy in Israeli circles because of its repercussions on the right to privacy in Israeli society. Notwithstanding, Israeli authorities deploy this type of camera in oPt without any hindrance or protest against the violation of Palestinians' right to safety and privacy.⁸

In a similar vein, the Israeli police pushed a plan to increase the number of cameras in coastal cities and Jerusalem under the pretext of fighting crime. In fact, this tactic entails many risks, including collecting, storing, and using biometric data about Palestinians to perpetuate racist and oppressive practices against Palestinians.⁹

7. "ترهيب متواصل.. رسائل نصية تتوعد المقدسيين بالمحاسبة لدفاعهم عن الأقصى." TRT عربي. أيار 2021. <https://www.trtarabi.com>

8. "نصب الشرطة الإسرائيلية كاميرات التعرف على الوجوه ينتهك حقوق الإنسان." عرب 48. آب 2021. <https://www.arab48.com>

9. "Israeli Police to Boost Number of Security Cameras in Two Mixed Arab-Jewish Cities." Haaretz. October 2021. <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/premium-israeli-police-to-boost-number-of-security-cameras-in-two-mixed-arab-jewish-cities-1.10322671>

In the same context, it has been recently revealed that Israeli authorities have expanded the surveillance technologies they use against Palestinians in oPt in the past two years by integrating facial recognition technologies with a growing network of cameras and smartphones, which partially includes a smartphone technology called 'Blue Wolf'. This technology takes pictures of the faces of Palestinians and matches them with a large-scale image database. These technologies can classify Palestinians as they pass through the Israeli military checkpoints in terms of "danger" to Israeli occupation soldiers. In addition, settlers use the White Wolf software (an older technology) to scan Palestinians' ID cards and faces before entering settlements.¹⁰

A former Israeli officer revealed an organized effort to eavesdrop on the phone calls of Palestinians in oPt, indicating that Israeli authorities have the ability to spy on all Palestinian phone calls and insert mobile phones entering the Gaza Strip with spyware to entrap members of vulnerable and marginalized groups—and thus control Palestinians and tighten the security grip on them.¹¹

■ Freedom of Expression and Speech

Palestinians and those who support the cause of Palestine worldwide face many problems and difficulties in freely expressing their opinion about Palestine and criticizing Israeli authorities. Due to Israeli surveillance practices, residents in occupied Palestine are subject to restrictions, whether by arresting them, summoning them, or other restrictions. Outside occupied Palestine, activists who support Palestinians are subject to campaigns by Zionist organizations, penalties by their employers, and restrictions from their governments.

This all coincides with the new motion to enact new legislation in the Israeli Knesset to restrict freedom of opinion and expression on social media platforms, following the approval of the Ministerial Committee for Legislation on the first draft of the law, which was called the "Facebook Law." The law allows the Israeli Public Prosecution to request Israeli courts to remove any content from the digital space because it is "inciting" or threatening the "state security" or "personal security." The law has significant repercussions on Palestinians' freedom of expression in the digital space and is an addition to the effort of Israeli authorities to control the Palestinian digital content and space.¹²

A survey of Palestinian Jerusalemite youth, carried out by 7amleh in 2020, showed that 87 percent of young people rarely express their opinions or participate in political discussions on the internet for fear of reprisals by the occupation authorities and because of the surveillance Israel imposes on social media.¹³ Of course, the percentage may vary from one Palestinian context to another; However, the feeling of insecurity and lack of comfort in expressing political opinions is a concern shared by Palestinians and activists supporting the cause of Palestine across the world.

10. "Israel escalates surveillance of Palestinians with facial recognition program in West Bank." The Washington Post. November 8, 2021.

https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/israel-palestinians-surveillance-facial-recognition/2021/11/05/3787bf42-26b2-11ec-8739-5cb6aba30a30_story.html

11. "Israel can monitor every telephone call in West Bank and Gaza, says intelligence source." MEE. November 2021. <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/israel-can-monitor-every-telephone-call-west-bank-and-gaza-intelligence-source>

12. "الائتلاف الأهلي للحقوق الرقمية ومجلس منظمات حقوق الإنسان يحذران من خطورة تمرير قانون "الفيستوك" في الكنيست الإسرائيلي على الحقوق الرقمية الفلسطينية." مركز حملة. كانون الأول 2021.

<https://7amleh.org/2021/12/29/alaetlaf-alahly-llhqwq-almjls-mnzmzat-hqwq-alinsan-yhthran-mn-khtwrh-tmryr-qanwn-alfysbwk-fy-alknyst-alisraely-ala-llhqwq-almjls-alfstnyh>

13. "الانتهاكات الرقمية بحق الشباب والأطفال في القدس." مركز حملة. تموز 2021. <https://7amleh.org/2021/07/05/alanthakat-almjls-bhq-shabab-walatfal-fy-qlqds>

In addition, the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee (ADC) has documented many cases of punishment of government employees in the United States for their pro-Palestine posts through dismissal or other disciplinary measures. Supporters of the Palestine cause are subject to discrimination in the workplace because of their public support on social media platforms.¹⁴

■ Smear Campaigns

Government-backed Zionist NGOs, as well as official bodies such as the Ministry of Strategic Affairs, have waged a fierce campaign to discredit Palestinian and Israeli human rights organizations supporting Palestinian rights for years, trying to silence their voices and restrict their work due to its impact on exposing the crimes of the occupation.¹⁵ This campaign escalated during the past year and included surveillance of governmental and international organizations working on the cause of Palestine and the Palestinian media.¹⁶

UNRWA responded to pressure from Israeli organizations, smear campaigns, and false news claiming that dozens of UNRWA employees and teachers in its schools had published anti-Semitic and inciting content. For its part, UNRWA announced the launch of an investigation into the alleged publications while confirming that only ten people from the 22-name list published by the Zionist organization UN Watch¹⁷ are UNRWA personnel. That being said, UNRWA affirmed its willingness to investigate the claims associated with its employees.¹⁸

■ Incitement

The Israeli official and unofficial incitement against the Palestinians continues in the media and on social media platforms.

7amleh - The Arab Center for the Advancement of Social Media, published a report at the end of May, in which it indicated the extent of the spread of inflammatory and racist rhetoric and hate speech directed against Palestinians in the digital space. The report also pointed out that the level of incitement in the digital space in the Hebrew language increased by 15 times during the aggression on the Gaza Strip during May 2021, compared to the same time period in 2020.¹⁹

During that period, Israeli media revealed groups on the Telegram platform that members of the Lehava movement had used to incite against Palestinians and engineer systematic attacks against them. Leaked conversations from one coordination group showed how the members identify potential targets and determine the attack time and tools.²⁰

14. "ADC urges probe of rising discrimination against Arab Americans." The Arab Daily News. August 2021.

<https://thearabdailynews.com/2021/08/10/adc-urges-probe-of-rising-discrimination-against-arab-americans/>

15. "Joint Submission to the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Promotion and Protection of Freedom of Opinion and Expression, Ms. Irene Khan, in Response to a Call for Input on Disinformation and Freedom of Opinion and Expression." Al-Haq. February 2021.

https://www.alhaq.org/cached_uploads/download/2021/03/03/210225-joint-submission-sr-expression-final-website-1614779016.pdf

16. "إحالة موظفين في 'أونروا' للتحقيق بسبب شكوى من منظمة داعمة لإسرائيل." العربي الجديد. آب 2021. <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/society>

17. UN Watch is a notorious Zionist organization that monitors the work of the United Nations and all its arms and bodies, monitoring UN decisions regarding the Palestine cause, and rages nonstop smear campaigns against international bodies supporting the cause of Palestine.

18. "لدواع سياسية.. أونروا تستجيب لضغوط منظمة صهيونية وتوقف موظفين عن العمل." الجزيرة. آب 2021. <https://www.aljazeera.net>

19. "مؤشر العنصرية والتحرش: ارتفاع العنصرية والتحرش ضد الفلسطينيين/ات والعرب خلال العدوان الإسرائيلي الأخير." مركز حملة. حزيران 2021. <https://7amleh.org/2021/06/15/mushr-alansryh-walthrydh-artfaa-alansryh-walthrydh-dhd-alfstynyn-at-walarb-khlal-aladwan-alisraeyly-alakhyr>

20. "اليهوديم התארגנו ברשתות החברתיות: 'הולכים לרצוח ערבים, נקודה'." ידיעות אחרונות. מאי 2021. <https://www.ynet.co.il/news/article/ryFAxnlc00#autoplay>



"Afula residents, today we'll do terror, at 21:00 we gather at Neen village junction, we have tires to burn and Molotov cocktail bottles, today we do a mass terror attack ."

The PA and the De Facto Authority of the Gaza Strip (Hamas)

■ The Right to Privacy

The reality of privacy and data protection is still bleak in the Palestinian context, while major companies continue to violate users' privacy. The Israeli authorities are seeking to expand their surveillance, security surveillance, and tracking and espionage techniques against Palestinians. In a similar vein, the PA, the de facto authority in the Gaza Strip, and Palestinian private IT companies, violate user privacy, especially in the absence of legislation regulating the law of the right to privacy and data protection.

In April, Meta (formerly known as Facebook) announced in its blog that the Palestinian security services, especially the Preventive Security Service, waged a campaign of espionage and hacking into the accounts of about 800 political opponents, journalists, and activists. Furthermore, the security services used about 300 fake accounts on Facebook and primitive hacking methods for this purpose.²¹

7amleh published an investigative report on privacy and data protection in the Palestinian context. The report concluded that the concepts of privacy and personal data are unknown to 51 percent of Palestinian society and that a small percentage of users check the privacy policies of the websites they use. By and large, the vast majority believe that a law should be enacted to protect privacy and data. The report also underlined that the Access to Information Law was not brought into effect, although it had been presented as a bill in 2005.²²

21. "Facebook says Palestinian spies behind hacking campaign." Reuters. April 2021.

<https://www.reuters.com/technology/facebook-says-palestinian-spies-behind-hacking-campaign-2021-04-21/>

22. "واقع الخصوصية وحماية البيانات الرقمية في فلسطين." مركز حملة. آب 2021.
<https://7amleh.org/2021/08/25/hmlh-ytlq-tqryr-jdyd-hwl-waqa-alkhswsyh-whmayh-albyanat-fy-flstyn>

A report conducted by Access Now and Impact International on data privacy at the level of internet service providers in Palestine concluded that not all companies adhere to privacy and data protection standards. Furthermore, the report pointed out that one-third of the users are ignorant of the meaning of the privacy policy, and the other third do not read the privacy policy when using and subscribing. Above all this, most subscribers do not know how companies deal with their data.²³

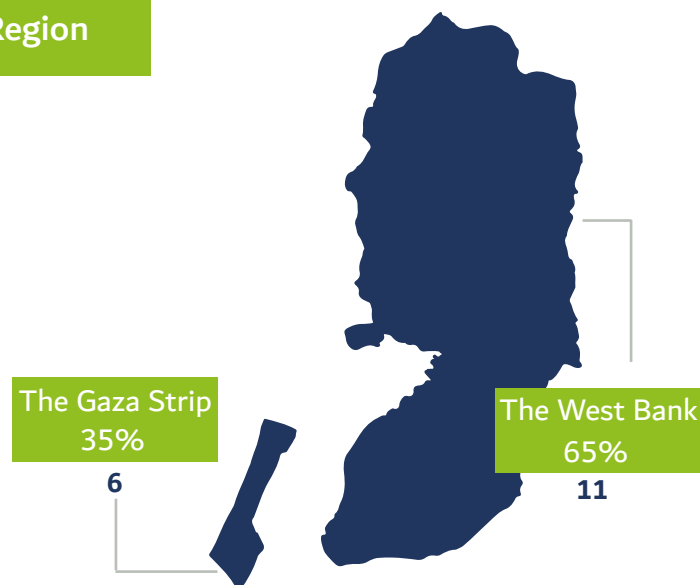
Nonetheless, Maryam Dar Issa, the representative of the Ministry of Telecommunications & Information Technology “MoTIT”, indicated on a study day held at 7amleh Center that the government is currently in the final stages of legislation to protect personal data and information. She added that the bill is ready to be presented before the Cabinet and relevant ministries before being furnished to be signed into law. This new law aims to regulate the protection and processing of personal data and to establish a national authority to manage this issue.²⁴ However, the CSOs participating in the same study day indicated that they were not engaged in drafting the said bill.

■ Freedom of Expression and Speech

The Palestinian security services murdered political activist Nizar Banat during a security operation to arrest him on June 24th, 2021, for his activity on social media and his political opinions. Nizar Banat is considered a noted member of the political opposition of the PA and the most critical of it on social media platforms. He used his Facebook page to comment on the PA performance and practices regularly—and was arrested more than once due to his critical views and opinions.

Documents from human rights organizations indicate that 17 persons have been arbitrarily detained or summoned for interrogation about social media posts during the past year.²⁵

Distribution of Cases by Region



²³ "خصوصيات مستباحة: دراسة جديدة حول حماية البيانات الشخصية ومزودي خدمات الإنترنت في فلسطين." إمباتك الدولية وأكسس ناو. آب 2021. <https://www.accessnow.org/%D8%AE%D8%B5%D9%88%D8%B5%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D9%85%D8%B3%D8%AA%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%AD%D8%A9-%D9%81%D9%84%D8%B3%D8%B7%D9%8A%D9%86>

²⁴ "واقع الخصوصية وحماية البيانات الرقمية في فلسطين." مركز حملة. آب 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D64KyPJ3p3c>

²⁵ As documented by al-Haq, the Palestinian Center for Human Rights.

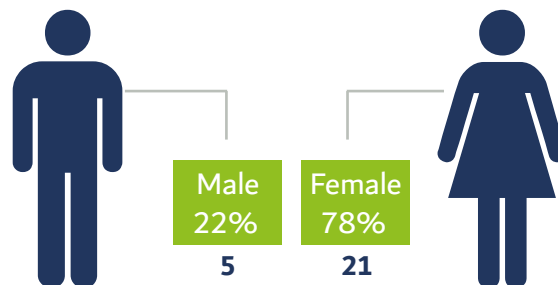
■ Smear Campaigns/Gender-Based Violence

Protest demonstrations took to Palestinian streets following the killing of political activist Nizar Banat. In addition, entities and individuals affiliated with the PA have confiscated and stolen the phones of a group of activists and journalists. What is more, personal photos were leaked from the mobiles after being hacked to defame and deter activists from exercising their right to freedom of opinion and expression.²⁶

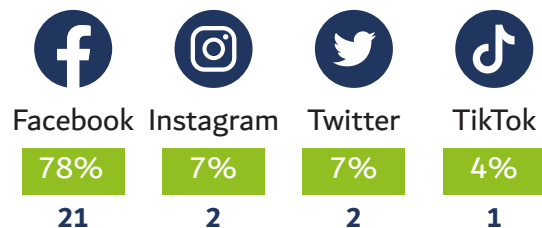
7amleh documented 26 cases of defamation in the Palestine society, including 22 smearing content targeting journalists and activists due to their participation in protests and demonstrations against the killing of activist Nizar Banat. In addition to being blatant smear, most of these cases sit squarely within incitement to violence, particularly gender-based violence. The defaming content targeted 18 female activists and 4 male activists.

7amleh Center documented 21 cases of smearing content on Facebook, 2 on Instagram, 2 on Twitter and 1 on TikTok. 7amleh contacted Facebook and reported the accounts and defamatory content, requesting their removal. For its part, Facebook responded to our requests and deleted the reported content.

Distribution of Cases of Smear Campaigns by Gender



Distribution of smear campaigns across social media platforms



²⁶ "اتلاف الحقوق الرقمية يستنكر انتهاكات الحقوق الرقمية مع تصاعد الأحداث الأخيرة على الأرض." مركز حملة. حزيران 2021. <https://7amleh.org/2021/06/29/aetlaf-alhqwg-alrqmyh-ystnkr-anthakat-alhqwg-alrqmyh-ma-tsaad-alahdath-alakhyrh-ala-alardh>

Tech Companies

Overview

Tech corporations witnessed many developments over the past year. However, perhaps, the events of last May confirmed the extent of surveillance of Palestinian human rights, political and critical content about Israeli violations against the Palestinians. Social media platforms increased surveillance of Palestinian content, deleting and restricting hundreds of posts related to the Palestinian situation during a period not exceeding two weeks. Such measures caught the attention of local, regional, and international media outlets, human rights organizations, and social media users, shedding light on violations of Palestinian digital rights at the hands of tech companies.

As a result, a coalition of Palestinian and international human rights organizations and tens of journalists, human rights defenders, and artists required Facebook to stop its campaign to silence the Palestinian voice.²⁷

The Instagram platform announced a change to its access policies of shared posts to be equal to and get the same access and exposure as original posts. After receiving a barrage of criticism about its censorship and restriction of Palestinian content and pro-Palestine content, the platform took this measure. The platform claimed that the reason for the low visibility of posts about Palestine is due to policies that increase the reach of original posts and reduce that of republished posts, later confirming that it has nothing to do with the political position in the post.²⁸

Events unfolded, and in June, more than 200 Facebook employees signed an internal petition calling for an investigation into the content management policies, which led to the censorship of pro-Palestine content and the restriction of accounts that express opinions supportive of the Palestine cause. This petition was followed by other petitions within Apple, Google, and Amazon calling for support for Palestine and the termination of sales deals with the Israeli occupation authorities because they violate the rights of Palestinians.²⁹

These developments resulted in the leakage of the so-called Meta's "dangerous individuals and organizations" lists, which included (48) names of Palestinian individuals and organizations, some of which are CSOs that do not have any questionable activity. On the other hand, the list included only two Israeli names, one of which is an individual and an institution related to crime and not based on a political background.³⁰

In this context, the TikTok platform witnessed a significant increase in the volume of use among Palestinians, following the policies of managing and controlling content on other platforms such as Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook—notably during the recent Israeli attack on the Gaza Strip. In addition, the application became more widely used among Palestinian users after it became an essential tool for disseminating content about the events of Sheikh Jarrah last May.³¹

The Israeli occupation authorities noticed the impact of this platform, and therefore calls came out from the top of the Israeli political hierarchy to close the platform in "Israel." And Defense Minister Benny Gantz held a meeting with the company in order to restrict Palestinian content.³² As a result of the organized Israeli effort and a slew of pressures, TikTok began censoring and restricting Palestinian content, and leaks showed that the company tolerated content that calls and incites violence against Palestinians.³³

The Executive Director of 7amleh, Nadim Nashif, highlighted that the management of Arab and Palestinian content, in particular, has been going on for years, and not only during the May uprising, yet activists and organizations working on the digital space were able to accumulate experience that enabled them to present the issue to international media, which could not ignore the extent of censorship of Palestinian content. May's events and resulting solidarity and dissemination by social media influencers made it possible to bring pressures to bear on companies, leading to the recognition of the most prominent of them, Meta Company (formerly Facebook), that there is a problem in dealing with Palestinian content. Having that recognized Meta formed an independent investigation committee based on the Facebook Oversight Board's recommendation is an initial positive step in addressing discrimination against Palestinian content.³⁴

Considering the nature of violations committed by tech companies, it is noted that deletion/suspension/restriction of accounts prevailed over the nature of the actions taken by companies against the Palestinian digital space. During the past period, personal accounts were targeted, some noted Palestinian media agencies' pages and accounts were closed, including but not limited to Maydan and al-Qastal news network.

In a related context, Google was required to apologize for linking the Palestinian national keffiyeh to the search results for "terrorism." Users were taken aback after receiving keffiyeh images as suggested results when searching for the costumes worn by "terrorists." Such an incident provides a clear example of discrimination against Palestinians and their national symbols.³⁵

27. "Global Civil Society Coalition Calls On Facebook To #StopSilencingPalestine." Scoop. June 2021.
<https://www.scoop.co.nz/stories/WO2106/S00139/global-civil-society-coalition-calls-on-facebook-to-stopsilencingpalestine.htm>

28. "Gaza conflict: Instagram changes algorithm after alleged bias." BBC. May 2021.
<https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-57306800>

29. "Facebook employees call for company to address concerns of Palestinian censorship." The Verge. June 2021.
https://www.theverge.com/2021/6/1/22463952/facebook-employees-petition-palestine-content-moderation-policy?fbclid=IwAR0X7qbxwARAvj6_0httT8DulRXontNc6vXnXp4jLM7o8JgzYK-VPASweNc

30. "الكشف عن أسماء 48 منظمة وفردا فلسطينيين.. فيسبوك صنفتهم بالإرهاب." عرب 48. تشرين الأول 2021.
<https://www.arab48.co>

31. "TikTok becomes vital weapon in Palestinians' digital war." Al-Monitor. June 2021.
<https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/06/tiktok-becomes-vital-weapon-palestinians-digital-war#ixzz7EYq0TpbJ>

32. "Israeli minister to Facebook and TikTok executives: You must take action." Centre de Ressources sur les Entreprises et les Droits de l'Homme. May 2021.
<https://www.israelnationalnews.com/news/306224>

33. "'There's not enough brutality': Former TikTok moderator says workers told to leave up 'disturbing' violence against Palestinians." Triplej Hack. November 2021.
<https://www.abc.net.au/triplej/programs/hack/former-tiktok-moderator-asked-to-leave-up-disturbing-violence/13613958>

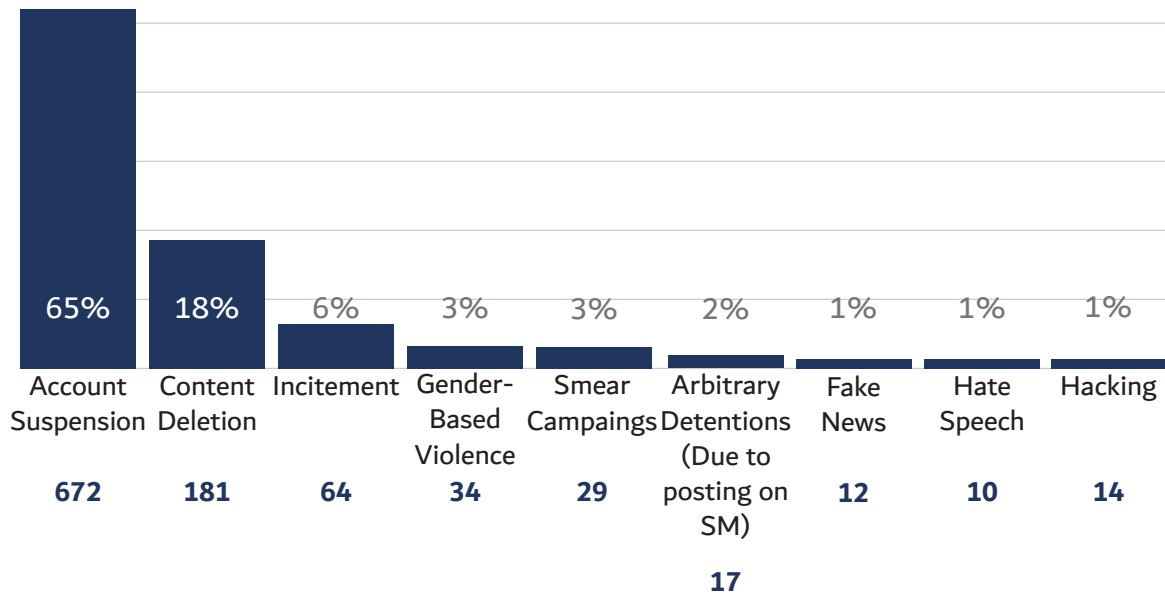
34. Nadim Nashif, a research interview, 7amleh

35. "بعد اتهام محرك بحثها بالانحياز ضد الفلسطينيين.. غوغل تعتذر عن أي إهانة غير مقصودة." الجزيرة. أيار 2021.
<https://www.aljazeera.net>

Social Media Companies

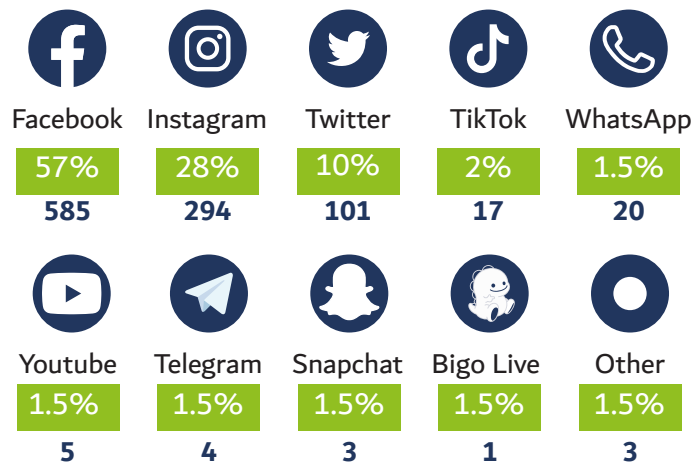
The total number of violations documented by 7amleh reached 1033 during 2021. They are distributed by the type of violation as follows:

Distribution of Violations by Type



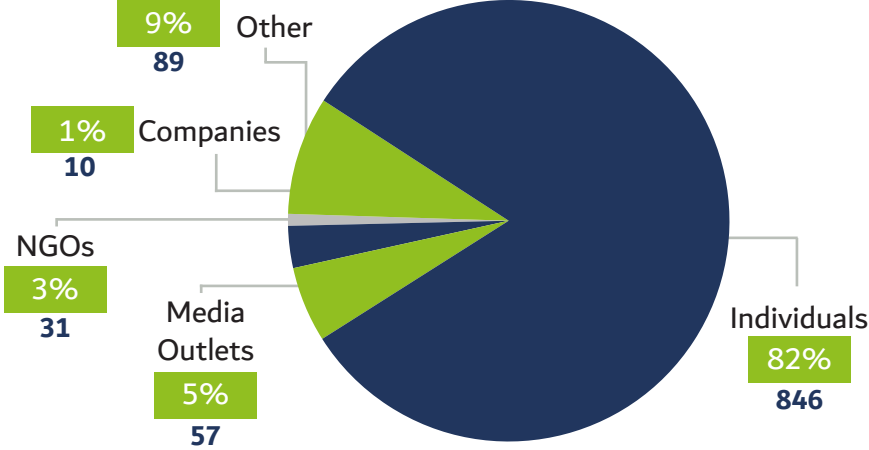
Violations are distributed by the social media platform as follows:

Distribution of Affected People by Gender



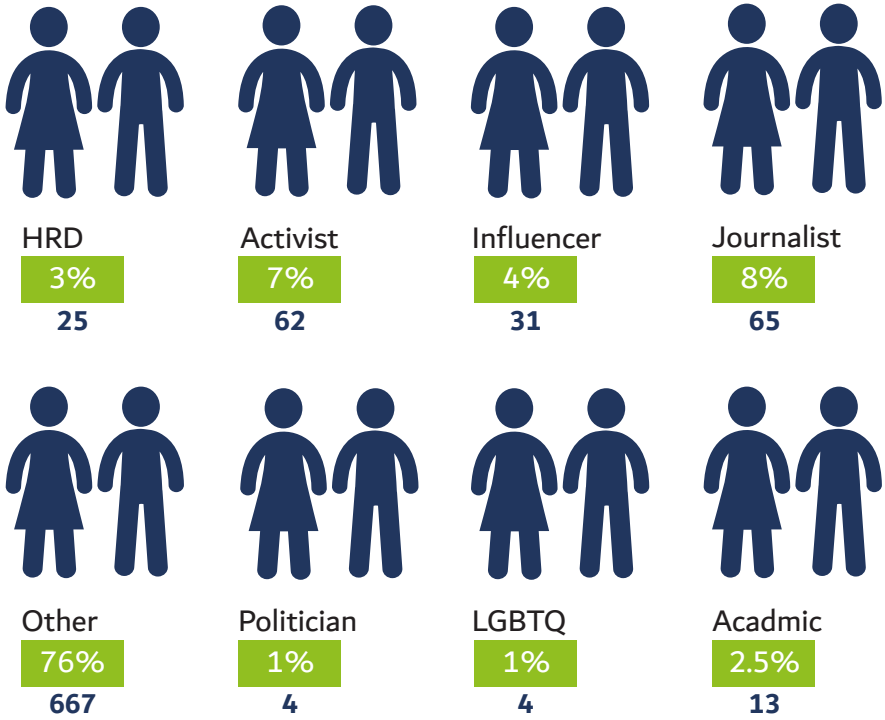
The violations were distributed by the violated entity as follows:

Distribution of Affected Entities



The violations were distributed by the role/occupation of the affected individual as follows.³⁶

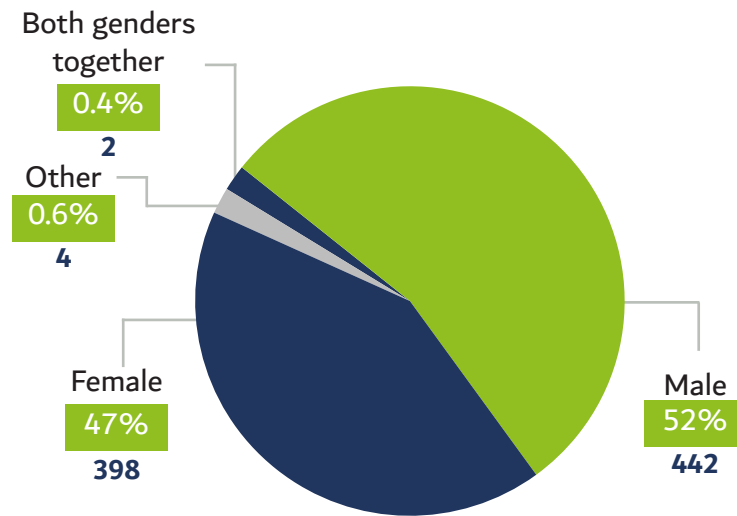
Distribution of Affected Individuals



36. Some persons have more than one capacity, so the number of capacities will pass the number of individuals. For example, an individual might be a journalist and an activist.

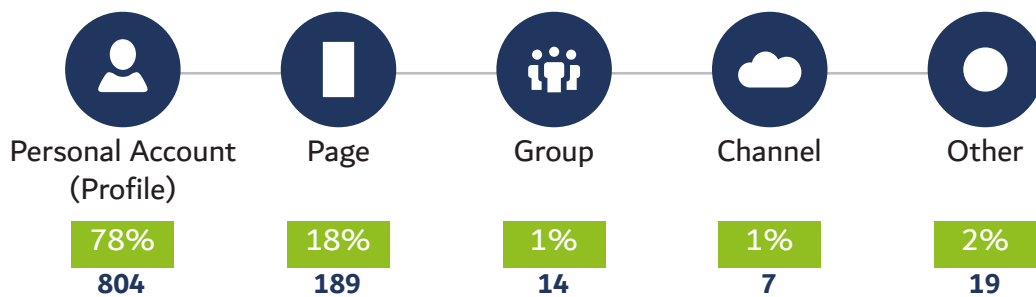
The distribution of affected people by gender was as follows:

Distribution of Affected People by Gender



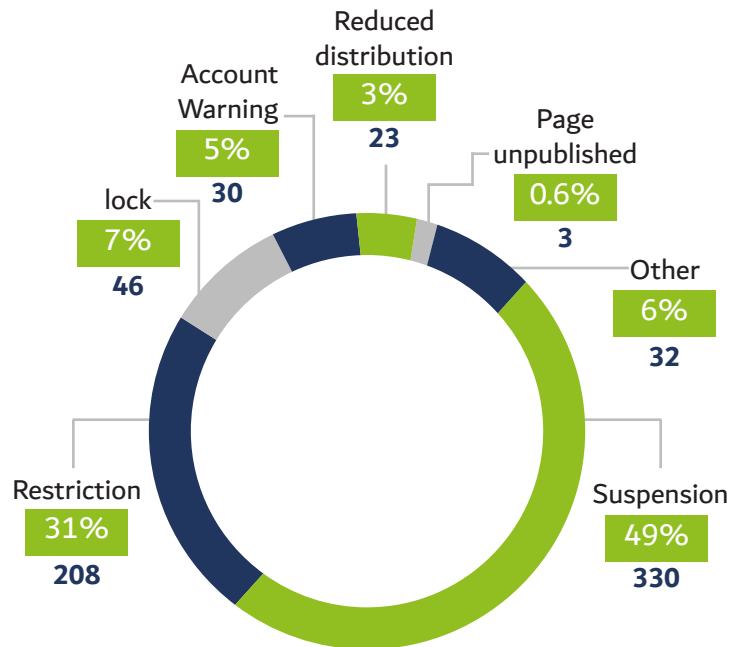
According to the type of affected account, the violations were distributed as follows:

Affected Account Type



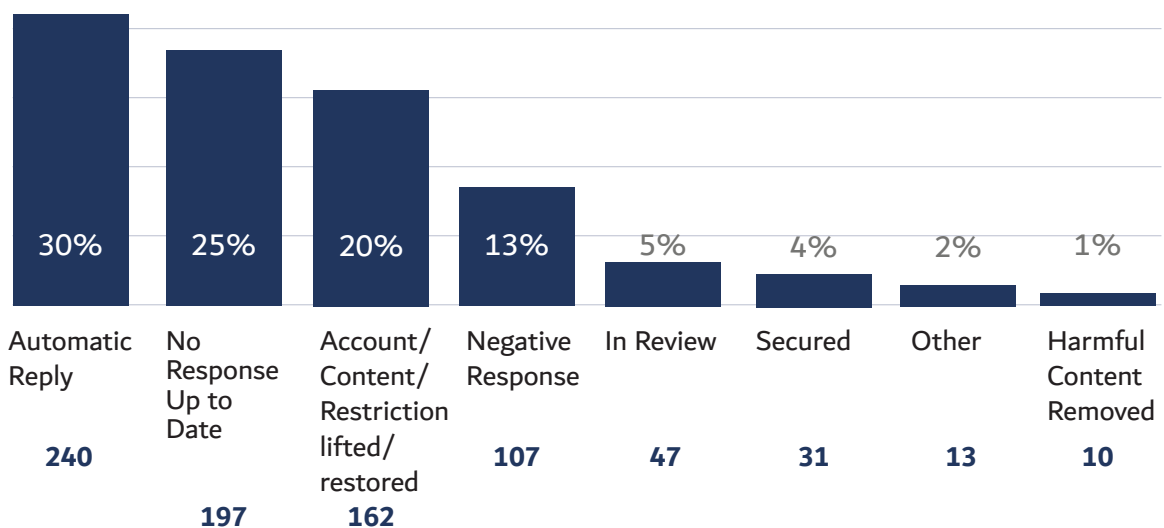
Distribution of violations by the type of account suspension as follows:

Distribution of Account Suspension by Form



While 7amleh appealed 820 violations, companies' response was as follows

Companies' Responses



It is noted from the above graphs, that the most prominent forms of corporate practices that constitute a violation of the Palestinians' rights are the deletion and restriction of accounts, pages, and groups, specifically personal accounts. Deletion, suspension, and restriction of accounts prevailed over other forms of surveillance.

Surveillance Companies

■ Israeli Occupation's Surveillance Technologies

Over the past few years, Israeli surveillance has dramatically intensified to surveil Palestinians through several techniques; It is, perhaps, safe to say that Pegasus software stands to be the most remarkable. This software uses facial recognition cameras and allows comprehensive surveillance of all Palestinian phone calls in a severe breach of the right to security and privacy. Moreover, the government surveillance techniques used against Palestinians are integrated with the surveillance techniques developed by private Israeli companies. Being used internally aside, such software is also exported to different countries worldwide to monitor human rights defenders, journalists, and political opponents. Perhaps the NSO company and its Pegasus software have come under the microscope more than others during the past year due to the widespread use of this software to eavesdrop on tens of thousands of people around the world.

■ NSO

A group of human rights organizations and international media launched an investigation that revealed the existence of a list of more than 50,000 names of individuals, public figures, human rights organizations, activists, and journalists to be infiltrated by the Israeli company's customers. This exposé sparked a lot of confusion, controversy, and discussions and revealed Israel's role in suppressing opposition worldwide—not just in the occupied Palestinian territories.³⁷

The repercussions of using Pegasus software produced by the Israeli company NSO are still resonating worldwide. The United States announced the inclusion of the company on the blacklists. Also, the use of the software has strained some diplomatic relations between Israel and some countries such as France.³⁸ In recent developments, Apple filed a case against NSO to sue it for hacking devices produced by the company, in another blow in a case that is still moving at an accelerating pace.³⁹

The most prominent development that proves the extent and size of the use of this type of software against Palestinians is the discovery of the software on the phones of 6 human rights activists and workers in Palestinian human rights organizations and the Palestinian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA). These developments prove that Israel systematically uses these technologies against Palestinians and tests them before exporting them abroad to profit from them.⁴⁰

The extent of surveillance of human rights organizations and Palestinian activists has not yet been determined; however initial indications demonstrate that Israeli authorities systematically surveil and spy on activists and human rights organizations, and a campaign is spearheaded against them, the latest of which was declared a group of human rights organizations as "terrorist" organizations" and are the same institutions in which the privacy of their employees was hacked and spied on using the "Pegasus" software.

37. "Private Israeli spyware used to hack cellphones of journalists, activists worldwide." The Washington Post. July 2021. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/investigations/interactive/2021/nso-spyware-pegasus-cellphones/>

38. "France and Israel hold 'secret' talks to defuse phone spyware row." The Guardian. October 2021. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/oct/22/france-and-israel-hold-secret-talks-to-defuse-phone-spyware-row>

39. "Apple Files Lawsuit Against Israeli Surveillance Company NSO Group." Gizmodo. November 2021. <https://gizmodo.com/apple-files-lawsuit-against-israeli-surveillance-compan-1848111559>

Saleh Hijazi, Amnesty International's deputy regional director for the Middle East and North Africa, highlighted that an essential characteristic of these grave developments in terms of surveillance is that this type of technology became a commodity developed by private companies and sold to countries and marketed just as any other commodity—of note such software was exclusively used by governments. He also stressed that what disclosed appears to be part of the surveillance techniques used by Israel and exported to governments. Thus, NSO is one of the many other Israeli companies preoccupied with surveillance and spy-tech because the organizations do not possess the sufficient expertise and techniques necessary to quickly detect the developing surveillance and spy-tech.⁴¹

Other Companies — Digital Economy

■ PayPal - Venmo

A coalition of human rights organizations from around the world, including 7amleh, addressed PayPal and Venmo to stop their discriminatory violations against Palestinians by closing and freezing accounts on political and ethnic grounds, especially those of Arab and Muslim users. In addition, the coalition called on the two companies to enhance the principle of transparency and accountability in their practices and policies, provide clear appeal mechanisms and develop notification mechanisms following account suspension or lockout.⁴²

In the same context, the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) has signed a memorandum of understanding with PayPal to investigate how what it calls "extremist and hate groups" are used to finance "terrorism." This means that PayPal recognizes ADL's definition and criteria for the meaning of "terrorism." It is known that the League is making a tremendous effort to label critical Palestinian content on Israel. The ADL is also known for its smear campaigns against activists, falsely labeling them as antisemitic, seeking to protect Israel from any criticism and stifle freedom of opinion and expression of activists and defenders of human rights.⁴³

7amleh's team monitored the most important global tech companies to explore whether they allow Palestinians to use them, and results were as follows:

Paypal	No
Stripe	No
2Checkout	Yes
Payoneer	No
Apple pay	No
Google pay	Partially
Venmo	No

Amazon Pay	Yes
Dwolla	No
Worldpay	No
Cash App	No
Payment Spring	No
Mollie	Yes

PayHere	No
Zelle	No
WooCommerce	No
Magento	Yes
OpenCart	No
Presta	No

40. "المطالبة بتحقيق دولي وملاحقة قانونية.. إسرائيل تتجسس على نشطاء حقوقيين." الجزيرة، أيلول 2021. <https://www.aljazeera.net>.
41. Saleh Hijazi, a research interview, 7amleh. December 20th 2021.

42. "22 Rights Groups Tell PayPal and Venmo to Shape Up Policies on Account Closures." Electronic Frontier Foundation. June 2021. <https://www.eff.org/press/releases/22-rights-groups-tell-paypal-and-venmo-shape-account-freezes-and-closures>

43. "Israel lobby group ADL teams up with PayPal." Days of Palestine. August 2021. <https://daysofpalestine.ps/post/16953/Israel-lobby-group-ADL-teams-up-with-PayPal>



Society

Against all restrictions Palestinians face on their digital rights from the three authorities and tech companies—including constraints on their right to freedom of speech and expression, the right to privacy and data protection, the right to digital assembly, and the right to access information and the internet, Palestinians face additional societal challenges that affect their involvement and participation in the digital space.

Recent research by 7amleh showed that 85.7 percent of respondents said that they were exposed to hate speech on social media platforms. Furthermore, it indicated that the most prevalent form of hate speech is political hate speech, which stems from the lived Palestinian experience, of permanent political tensions due to the Israeli occupation and Palestinian divisions. Hate speech impacts freedom of speech and expression and fuels the fear of acting freely in cyberspace and the behavior of individuals on the ground. 86.1 percent of the respondents said that this type of hate speech impacts individuals' behavior and is not just a transient event that can be bypassed. Still, 55.9 percent of the respondents prefer to ignore hate speech when exposed to responding or reporting, which, in fact, helps to perpetuate hate speech.⁴⁴

The types of hate speech vary, including accusations of failure to preserve honor, infidelity, class or gender discrimination, insults, justification of assault and murder, calls for harm, or accusation of treason, and other types.⁴⁵ This type of discourse reflects the hate speech and discriminatory expressions prevalent within society on the ground, but social media platforms provide this type of discourse to spread widely and very quickly within a short period.

While there are no comprehensive statistics on misleading news over the past year, select indicators indicate the spread of this type of news. For example, during September and October only, Kashif Center documented a total of 158 pieces of misleading news. The majority of this misleading news spreads on social media. At other times, professional press outlets spread this type of news without verifying its reliability.⁴⁶

The nature of misleading news varies in each period according to the nature of events on the ground. At the same time, the character of misleading health news prevailed during the spread of the Corona pandemic in 2020. According to Bakr Abdel-Haq, managing editor at Kashif Center, this trend took on a political turn in 2021 with the events of Sheikh Jarrah, the Israeli aggression on the Gaza Strip, the murder of activist Nizar Banat, and the escape of Palestinian prisoners from the Israeli Gilboa prison. Abdel-Haq points out that some of this misleading news does not spread spontaneously, but rather people with different agendas stand behind it. Misleading news is broadcast, in this case, on a large scale—sometimes using uncontrollable Telegram and WhatsApp groups.⁴⁷

44. "شبكة كارهة: خطاب الكراهية في منصات التواصل الاجتماعي بين الفلسطينيين/ات وأثره على حقوقهم الرقمية." مركز حملة. أيلول 2021. <https://7amleh.org/2021/09/29/hmlh-ytlq-bhtha-jdyda-hwl-khtab-alkrahyh-abr-mnsat-altwasl-alajitmaay-byn-alfstynyn-at>

45. The Palestinian Anti-Hate Speech Network. <https://kafa.ps/>

46. تقارير وإحصائيات. كاشف. <http://kashifps/category>

47. Baker Abdel-Haq, a research interview, 7amleh. December 9th 2021.

As for people with different sexual and gender orientations and experiences and organizations working on the rights of these groups, they were subject to two primary attacks in 2021. The first was in April, with the announcement of organizing a study day in partnership with another center to launch research issued by the Qaws for Sexual and Gender Diversity in Palestinian Society. The partner center, Qaws, and the LGBTQ community were exposed to a fierce attack on the digital space. Last November, the second took place when Qaws organized the Hawamesh forum in cooperation with a cultural center in Jerusalem. An incitement attack was launched against Qaws, the partner center, and its director for hosting an activity by the Qaws. Social media platforms were filled with incitement, hate speech, and smear campaigns against the organizations and the LGBTQ community.

Omar Al-Khatib, the media coordinator of Qaws, highlighted the challenging work environment and movement constraints. While the authorities are prosecuting the work of human rights institutions such as Qaws and preventing them from carrying their activities freely, there is a general rejection of this social group, which prevents individuals from expressing their different sexual and gender identities. Hence, CSOs fail to defend organizations such as Qaws and do not support them publicly, clearly, and seriously for reasons of social stigma and perhaps due to attack from the anti-queer rights community.⁴⁸

Other groups are subject to violence of a particular kind, such as women. Gender-based violence against women increases in the digital space, as indicated by Lamiaa Naamneh, director of the Assiwar - The Feminist Arab Movement, when striking patterns have emerged of attacks on women and restrictions on their presence in the public space. There have been campaigns using fake pages that publish pictures of women in public places (bus stops, streets, etc.) with abusive and inflammatory comments against them to restrict their ability to perform the most basic daily practices such as going to universities, workplaces, shops, etc. There has also been a noticeable increase in the number of women who experienced electronic blackmail from their peers, ex-husbands, or relatives.⁴⁹

48. Omar al-Khatib, a research interview, 7amleh. December 9th 2021.

49. Lamia Naamneh, a research interview, 7amleh. December 13th 2021



Findings

The data in the report shows that the Palestinian digital space is still far from safety, justice, and the protection of rights and freedoms. Although the violations rise and fall according to the current political conditions in reflection and interaction with the Palestinian landscape, the approach of companies and authorities in pursuing social media activists and punishing them for their opinions, surveilling content, taking deterrent actions, launching smear campaigns, spreading misinformation and incitement continues to fill the cyberspace.

Israel continues to lead the world in the spy-tech and surveillance industries, which were highlighted during the second half of the year—specifically after the launch of the investigative report that Amnesty International worked on in cooperation with a group of organizations and the investigations that followed on other tools and methods of surveillance. As a result, this type of security industry has been exposed to many analyses and comments through various local and international media, an issue which has taken on wide-ranging political and diplomatic dimensions.

The Pegasus case and the reports received about Israeli surveillance software, facial recognition technologies, and mobile spyware revealed the extent of the Israeli security grip on the Palestinian digital space and restrictions imposed on freedoms on the grounds.

The report also indicated that official and unofficial Israeli incitement through the media and social media platforms is a systematic phenomenon, which continued throughout 2021. On the other hand, there is no evidence of any response by social media platforms to combat incitement, including incitement to violence in the Hebrew language across cyberspace. On the contrary, such platforms endeavor to fight Palestinian content even if it does not include incitement to violence.

As the results stand, women are also more vulnerable to violations on social media platforms, particularly in incitement to violence and smear campaigns, as well as in the LGBTQ community. Social biases, political and cultural structures, and the fragility of these groups render them an easy target in cyberspace.

While it turns out that the majority of violations are directed against individuals and personal accounts, this does not mean that the pages of organizations and media outlets are not exposed to this type of violations. Civil society spaces are shrinking significantly on the ground and in the digital space, but the proportion of personal accounts in terms of number makes them the most vulnerable to surveillance.

Because of the widespread Facebook and Instagram among Palestinians, these two companies top the list of platforms that violate the digital rights of Palestinians and Palestinian content. Perhaps the most common form of abuse is the suspension and restriction of accounts and content removal. The most common forms of deleted content were images, followed by text posts, then comments.

Various social media platforms were not equally responsive to 7amleh's notifications. Some of these companies justified their occasional low level of responsiveness by being preoccupied with news related to the Corona pandemic. However, companies like Twitter and TikTok, for example, are more responsive than Meta, whose apps are the most used in Palestine.

Despite this, Meta's decision to form an independent investigation committee to look into the company's bias against Palestinian content, upon the recommendation of the Facebook Oversight Board, was a turning point for human rights and media organizations that have been working for a long time to prove the company's bias against Palestinian content.



Recommendations

The Third-Party States should:

- Pressure the Government of Israel and social media companies to comply with human rights principles, especially the right to privacy and freedom of speech and expression, thus ending discrimination against Palestinians.
- Cease funding countries, companies, and research institutions that develop spy and surveillance technologies and devices that violate human rights in general and the rights of Palestinians in particular.
- Develop mechanisms to protect journalists, activists, and human rights defenders from digital violations, especially in times of crises and aggression.

Companies should:

- Expedite procedures for responding to Palestinian CSOs' reports on digital violations and platform policies.
- Fight smear campaigns, misleading and false news on Palestinian CSOs promoted by the Israeli occupation authorities and other Zionist and Israeli organizations.
- Invest in Hebrew content management should be increased. Companies should also work with CSOs to create a Hebrew glossary of hate speech, incitement, and racist terms used against Palestinians.
- (Financial services companies) should stop providing their services in illegal Israeli settlements and, in return, provide services in the oPt.
- Follow the principle of transparency, disclose their policies and explain their behavior regarding the cause of Palestine—without equivocation
- Conduct a human rights impact assessment that includes Israel's impact on the Palestinians inside and out and in the oPt, and check if their policies and practices exacerbate the adverse effects of Israeli policies and practices on Palestinians.
- Align their global policies to consider Israel's illegal occupation of OpT.
- Ensure transparency about "voluntary removal" requests and add information to transparency reports about the volume and content of those requests, as well as user locations reported to government authorities.
- Endeavor to remove misinformation disseminated by the Israeli government, politicians, and government-supported NGOs from platforms.
- Ban ads that promote violence and human rights violations, including ads in illegal settlements in oPt.
- (Financial services companies) avoid any decisions restricting Palestinians' right to access financial services without properly assessing realistic risks, implementing transparent policies, and providing ways to address wrongful closures or blocking financial accounts.

Local and International CSOs should:

- Intensify awareness of digital rights and tools for appealing against digital violations; Increase efforts to document digital violations, whether violations by companies or authorities;
- Organize advocacy and lobbying campaigns to pressure companies and authorities to stop digital rights violations;
- Organize training and awareness-raising campaigns on digital gender-based violence, smear campaigns, and mechanisms to counter such malpractices; and Promote investment in studies and research on Palestinian digital rights.

The PA and the De Facto Authority of the Gaza Strip (Hamas) should:

- Annul the Electronic Crimes Law or amend it to ensure and safeguard the rights of Palestinians in line with relevant international conventions and treaties the PA is a party to;
- Cease arrests on the grounds of freedom of speech or expression or the right to peaceful assembly in cyberspace;
- Expedite the holding of Palestinian parliamentary elections, to expedite the issuance of a law on the right to access information, the right to privacy and data protection in line with international conventions and covenants;
- Hold every pro-PA individual that stole mobiles and leaked private information or pictures of Palestinian activists; and
- Integrate concepts of digital rights and digital safety into Palestinian curricula.

Annexes

Annex 1: Table of the interviews held with civil society experts and representatives

Name	المؤسسة	التاريخ
Baker Abdulhaq	Kashif Center	22.11.2021
Abed Khouly	Center for Continuing Education - Birzeit University	17.11.2021
Nadim Nashif	7amleh - The Arab Center for the Advancement of Social Media	9.12.2021
Omar al-Khatib	Qaws for Sexual & Gender Diversity in Palestinian Society	9.12.2021
Lamia Naamneh	Assiwar - The Feminist Arab Movement	13.12.2021
Saleh Hijazi	Amnesty International	20.12.2021

Have you been exposed to any act violating your digital rights?

Report now on 7or, the first online platform to monitor and document violations of Palestinian digital rights:

<https://7or.7amleh.org>



Hashtag Palastine

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