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The Great Divide: The Political Process and Palestinian Discourse on the Social Networks

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An estimated one third of Palestinian society today are active users of social networks, which feature frequent discussions on Hamas and the Palestinian Authority, Palestinian identity, internal Palestinian conflicts, the relationship between the population and its leaders, the economic situation, and the impact of regional changes. New Media has thus become a platform for an open Palestinian discussion that highlights the complexity and the different processes within Palestinian society in Gaza, the West Bank, and East Jerusalem. Interestingly, the resumption of Israeli-Palestinian talks has sparked a number of protests in Ramallah, but has not received significant attention within the domestic Palestinian discourse on the social media.

Although Palestinian society is sometimes perceived as monolithic, the geographic separation between Gaza, the West Bank, and East Jerusalem is echoed by differences in lifestyle, outlook, and ideology. There is a common Palestinian identity, but the realities on the ground dictate completely different areas of interest, so that the populations of these three areas share few mutual interests that are topics for discussion. Gaza is oriented toward Egypt and influenced by events there. The Arab residents of East Jerusalem conduct themselves in an Israeli context and are influenced by the discourse among Israeli Arabs, taking little interest in the discourse in the West Bank and Gaza. In the West Bank, the Arabs are influenced by what is happening in Jordan, politically, economically, and socially. The Arab Spring, political Islam, democratization, and the demand for justice, rights, and freedoms have had a completely different impact on the three entities.

Gaza–Egypt. The Hamas leadership took sides in the domestic political struggle in Egypt, and Gaza is now paying the price. With the Muslim Brotherhood's rise to power, the leaders of Hamas chose to publicly and fervently support the movement, thereby disengaging from Syria, Hizbollah, and Iran and counting solely on its Egyptian patron. The fall of the Muslim Brotherhood regime and the ouster of President Mohamed Morsi was a crushing blow to Hamas, with severe repercussions for the Gaza population. The



three main opponents of the Muslim Brotherhood in the internal Egyptian struggle, the army, the revolutionaries, and the “street,” have been sharply critical of Hamas, and criticism of Hamas’ involvement in the events in Egypt has eroded Egyptian sympathy and support for Gaza. Egypt’s citizens have given their full support to the army’s security operations against the tunnels and terrorist elements in Sinai, which depend on an infrastructure in Gaza. In addition, one of the stated reasons for Morsi's arrest was cooperation with Hamas (it was claimed that Hamas assisted in his release from prison during the revolution in January 2011). Many Egyptian social media activists call Hamas a terrorist organization and blame Hamas for undermining the security situation in Sinai and for the deaths of soldiers and members of the security forces. There has been a clear call to adopt a hard line and increase operations against terrorists, even at the cost of closing the Rafah crossing and stopping the supply of fuel, money, and food. For the first time, encouragement has been sounded for the Egyptian army’s operation in Gaza, against the terrorists who migrate from the Gaza Strip to Sinai, should it become necessary. In addition, some refer to the process in the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood as “Hamasization,” since the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt is using the language of jihad – *muqawama* and martyrdom – and conduct itself in ways similar to Hamas in Gaza. Surprisingly, new media activists in Gaza are publicly removing their support for Hamas, coming out openly against the Muslim Brotherhood, and giving their full support to the revolutionaries in Egypt. Gaza residents are even asking Egypt not to impose collective punishment on them and seek to underscore that they are not Egypt’s enemy.

East Jerusalem–Israel. The Arab residents of East Jerusalem are perceived as traitors by many Palestinians in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, who claim that they identify more with Israel than with their Palestinian brethren. The majority of young East Jerusalem Palestinians are preoccupied with the problems and rights of Israeli Arabs: the Judaization of Jerusalem, the lack of building permits, the boycott of goods from the settlements, and even the problems of the Bedouin in the Negev. Along with the alienation and the growing rift between East Jerusalem Arabs and the residents of the West Bank and Gaza, there is a process of radicalization and Islamization of the leadership very similar to what is taking place among the leadership of the Israeli Arab Islamic movement. Social media discussions indicate the assimilation of the Arab population of East Jerusalem into the Israeli Arab population as well as radicalization and a passion for Islamic slogans. Evidence of this can also be found in the Friday sermons in the al-Aqsa Mosque, when public calls were issued to support Morsi and verbal abuse was heaped on the Egyptian army. These were not condemned or mentioned by Palestinian Authority president Mahmoud Abbas.



West Bank–Jordan. Palestinian activists in the West Bank do not romanticize the Arab Spring, are indifferent to the peace process, and watch Jordan closely. They question President Abbas' legitimacy and are increasingly critical of the corruption of the Fatah leadership, but most of the public in the West Bank is enjoying the quiet and the relative economic prosperity. Influenced by developments in Jordan, there is a sense in the West Bank that Arab democratization will lead to bloodshed and even a civil war. There is a widespread assessment that in the absence of an organized liberal, secular leadership, there is a reasonable chance that political Islam will seize the reins of power, even for a limited period. Palestinian society is not eager now to pay such a price, even if only during a transition period. However, the Palestinian “street” is aware of its power, and tends to exert pressure on the leadership if required to do so. Jordanian trends affect social trends in the West Bank, as seen in August 2012, when the rise in gas and fuel prices in Jordan had a direct impact on the West Bank and, as in Jordan, prompted West Bank demonstrations against these price hikes.

The Common Denominator. The three entities are united by their rejection of the existing leadership, concern about rising prices, and an unwillingness to compromise the “right of return.” Two primary themes that reveal common attitudes resound on the social media. The first is the denial of any legitimacy of Hamas and Fatah leaders, and therefore, the Palestinian public will consider any national political decision made by these leaders to be illegitimate. The second theme is opposition to concessions by these leaders on the “right of return” in the negotiations. Conceding the “right of return” is considered taboo, especially among young Palestinians who do not recognize Israel as a Jewish state (60 percent of Palestinians are under 30). Any agreement in which the Palestinian leadership gives up the “right of return” would likely elicit a sharp response and be seen as a blow to social justice and a violation of civil rights.

In conclusion, contrary to expectation, the main discussion on Palestinian social networking sites is not focused on the resumption of the peace process, rather on the daily fundamental problems of the population. Three separate entities are oriented toward their respective geographical neighbors: the Gaza Strip toward Egypt, the West Bank toward Jordan, and East Jerusalem toward Israel. The Hamas leadership in Gaza and the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank have lost much legitimacy in the eyes of the Palestinians. They do not respond to civil society needs, and their policy does not enjoy public support. President Abbas has little support from the Palestinian public for resuming the peace process, and the common perception is that he is motivated by foreign interests and not by the desire to advance domestic Palestinians needs.



There is almost no discussion on the social media about violent resistance or calls for terrorist activity against Israel. The young Palestinian society advocates a social struggle over justice and civil rights, not necessarily by means of violence.

