

# 'Can I chat with Palestine?' How a stateless nation connects online

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*For Palestine's diaspora and exiled communities, the internet has become an important medium for the formation of Palestinian national and transnational identity.*

**Miryam Aouragh** looks at the internet as both a space and an instrument for linking Palestinian diasporas in Palestine, Jordan and Lebanon. **Sophie Richter-Devroe** finds through the author's detailed ethnographic work, Aouragh paints a complex and nuanced picture of the interplay between online activities and Palestinian identity constructions, nationalisms and political activism.



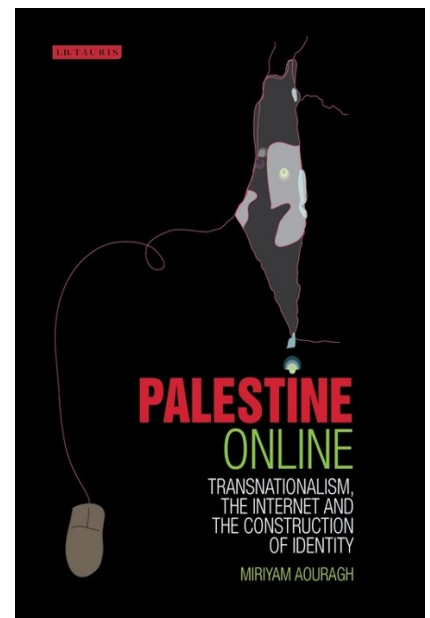
**Palestine Online: the Internet and the Construction of Identity.** Miryam Aouragh. I.B. Tauris. March 2011.

Miryam Aouragh takes up a timely topic in her book *Palestine Online: Transnationalism, the Internet and the Construction of Identity*. She investigates whether and how internet usage impacts upon national identity constructions and political activism. How is 'Palestinianness' expressed, presented and formed online? Has the internet strengthened or undermined the Palestinian national struggle?

Over the last decade there has been a surge in internet studies and research on new social media, also in relation to the Arab world.

This interest has grown particularly since the recent Arab uprisings. Dubbing the uprisings as web 2.0, Facebook or Twitter revolutions, accounts have claimed that the Arab masses took to the streets, because they were informed, mobilised and coordinated through Facebook, Twitter and YouTube. It is as a result of these new information communication technologies (ICTs), such accounts find, that elite nationalisms were questioned, authoritarian regimes brought to fall, and social and political change initiated. Such optimistic statements should be viewed with caution: surely the internet has potential to act as a transgressive space overcoming censorship and advancing alternative political imaginaries, but the link between online activities, political activism and change is not as straight-forward as we are sometimes led to believe.

Aouragh investigates exactly these questions in a very specific context: that of a stateless nation,



Palestine. She shows that the link between online and offline dynamics is indeed very complex, not lending itself to easy predictions about political transformations or the changing role of the nation-state. Postmodern celebratory accounts that find that ICTs, by overcoming time/space restrictions, have the potential to undermine the symbolic and actual power of the nation-state (and its control over territory) do not apply to Palestine, Aouragh argues. Her in-depth analysis of internet usage among members of the scattered Palestinian nation shows that the importance of, and desire for, a Palestinian nation-state is not diminishing: “transnational online communications here did not erode the meaning of a Palestinian state, but reconfirmed it.” (p. 126). “Palestine Online”, according to Aouragh’s central argument, does not question or reduce Palestinian nationalism, but rather strengthens a specific “anti-colonial nationalism online” (p. 111).

Aouragh’s study relies on an impressive amount of ethnographic field data from Jordan (collected in 2003), Lebanon (2003-2004) and the West Bank (2001-2002). The author visited different internet cafes, spoke to internet café owners, ICT specialists and planners, observed online behaviour of ordinary internet users, online activists, men and women, young and old, from different backgrounds (class, religion, urban-rural-camp, etc.).

Using gender, generation and class as primary lenses of analyses, Aouragh shows that access to the internet, as well as the ways in which it is used by, and in which it influences, its users is by no means homogeneous across the Palestinian community. Access to the internet is limited by class, but also by gender: girls from Nahr El-Bared camp in Lebanon, for example, said that they preferred to go to internet cafés outside the camp to escape the watchful eyes of conservative members of their close-knit community who consider internet cafés immoral places, unsuitable for girls.

Generation also is a major factor determining internet usage. While the internet has become part of everyday life for most young Palestinians (who master elaborate IT skills, have their own chat language, etc.), many elderly Palestinians still have difficulties to imagine the scope of possibilities offered by the internet. This incomprehension of how the internet works and what it is, of course, amuses the young, like Shaker who commented: “It is funny to hear elderly people sometimes ask: ‘Did anyone call us on the Antinet today?’” (Beirut, 2003, quoted on p. 181).

The ways in which Palestinians understand, access and use the internet thus varies greatly: some promote and mobilise for activism online, others use it for advertising, yet others for playing games, or for online romances. Yet, the most significant meaning of the internet for the Palestinian community seems to be its ability to (re-)connect people. One internet café owner in Beirut told Aouragh: “The first thing many would ask when they came was ‘Can I chat with Palestine?’” (2003, quoted on p. 188). The internet, both as a tool and as a space, thus plays an important role in strengthening connections between members of the fragmented Palestinian community, despite their physical separations and the restrictions placed on them by national borders. “Chat, email and websites”, according to Aouragh (p. 147), “provided accessible instruments and to some extent overcame the fragmented nature of the Palestinian diaspora.”

At the same time, it did, however, also reveal – to the surprise of some users – differences within the Palestinian community and its national discourse. Through the internet Palestinian refugees find out what life in Palestine – under siege, occupation and a ethno-nationalist regime – really is like; and what Palestinians living ‘inside’ really think. This can sometimes be off-putting: refugees in Lebanon stressed how disappointed they were when they realised online that not all Palestinians were interested in the situations of refugees and their rights. The often romanticised and idealised image of Palestine and a unified Palestinian community thus, while surely being strengthened, might also become questioned or further fissured through and on the internet.

Aouragh presents a thoroughly rich ethnography of Palestinian internet usages, perceptions and meanings. Yet, her writing at times is dense, particularly in its theoretical references. The book would have benefited from a more robust theoretical framework, bringing together the various theoretical advances (ranging from theories on space & place, (trans-nationalism/s, identity formations, ICTs and new media, postnationalism, settler-colonialism, public sphere, etc.) into a more coherent whole. Added to these at times repetitive and jargon-filled theoretical sections the book has some editorial lapses (incomplete referencing, repetition of interview quotation).

Despite these shortcomings, Aouragh’s Palestine Online without doubt constitutes a much needed and important contribution to the literature. Aouragh makes a very crucial point, adding to both theoretical and empirical knowledge in the field: that postmodern celebratory accounts on transnationalism and the decline of the nation-state do not hold for cases like Palestine: Here, in the context of a stateless nation, “mobility and territorial fragmentation modify into long-distance nationalism rather than causing its decline” (p. 232). Through her detailed ethnographic work, Aouragh paints a complex and nuanced picture of the interplay between online activities and Palestinian identity constructions, nationalisms and political activism – one that clearly defies easy categorisation of the internet as a ‘revolutionary’ or necessarily ‘transgressive’ space.

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**Sophie Richter-Devroe** is a Lecturer in Gender and Middle East Studies at the University of Exeter. Sophie’s PhD research at the Institute of Arab and Islamic Studies, at Exeter, examined Palestinian women’s different types of formal and informal political activism in ‘peacemaking’ and ‘resistance’ after the Oslo Accords. She is currently conducting research on Palestinian refugees’ different political cultures on the right of return in the West Bank, Jordan and Lebanon with Dr. Ruba Salih (SOAS), funded by the Council for British Research in the Levant. [Read more reviews by Sophie.](#)

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