



Digital Repression in Palestine

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ABSTRACT

While Israeli suppression of Palestinian voices is well-understood, much less is known about the Palestinian authorities' repression of Palestinians – the very people they are supposed to represent. This paper investigates digital repression by Hamas and the Palestinian Authority through semi-structured interviews – in-person and online – with 19 Palestinian activists who post on social media. Many of our findings echo those from other repressive contexts, but the unusual Palestinian context also gives rise to several unique elements. For example, Palestinian authorities, while incorporating some high-tech methods, appear to rely primarily on a low-tech, labor-intensive apparatus to monitor, intimidate, and censor their targets, some of which involves highly personalized forms of repression. We also heard credible accusations of Palestinian authorities' collaboration with Iranian and Israeli governments, the latter typically viewed as an adversary by Palestinians. We consider the implications of these findings and offer recommendations both for activists and social media platforms.

CCS CONCEPTS

• **Human-centered computing** → **Social media**; • **Social and professional topics** → **Censorship**; **Governmental surveillance**.

KEYWORDS

Online activism, digital repression, internal repression, Palestinian governance

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1 INTRODUCTION

Palestinians experience a relatively rare situation in the world, where they exist under dual layers of governance: one by the occupying Israeli government and another by Palestinian governance structures, namely the Palestinian Authority (PA) in the West Bank and Hamas in the Gaza Strip [32, 41]. Both layers of government are involved in repression of the Palestinian people [26, 88, 100], but while Israeli repression is widely known and studied [79, 89, 90, 99],

there is a conspicuous dearth of scholarly investigation into the internal repression exercised by Palestinian authorities, and little focuses on the accompanying *digital repression* that occurs on or in response to communication through digital channels [32].

What is known about digital repression in Palestine is relatively recent and often focused on specific political events. For example, the events of Sheikh Jarrah in 2021, when Palestinian families faced forced evictions, resulted in a surge of online activism that elicited solidarity around the world [5, 61]. Online activism, in turn, shined attention on the content moderation practices of social media companies, which critics claim discriminated against Palestinian content through restriction and censorship [5]. This has raised critical questions about the role of social media in Palestinian political discourse [5, 73, 100].

Reports by human rights organizations and non-profit organizations have documented the ways in which both the Palestinian Authority and Hamas utilize social media platforms to suppress dissent regarding *their* governance, employing various punitive measures to deter online expression [19, 29, 41, 58, 73]. However, these reports often lack details with respect to the repressive measures, the nature of the content that is suppressed, consequences for activists, and activist response. And, as their primary aim is to influence governmental policy on human rights, they make few recommendations for technology platforms or activists.

Most recently, Hamas's attack of Israel on Oct. 7, 2023 and the aftermath have spotlighted the tragic toll that the regional conflict can take on both Palestinian and Israeli civilians. The conflict, still ongoing as of this writing in February, 2024, underscores the importance of work seeking to understand repression in the region and activists who give voice to the communities they represent.

In this paper, we present initial research into digital activism and repression focused on the interaction between Palestinian activists and Palestinian authorities, with an emphasis on two elements largely neglected by the existing literature. First, we highlight Palestinian activists' views. Activists who engage on digital channels have first-hand knowledge of their own motivations and behaviors, and they experience a range of repressive responses from Palestinian authorities. Their experiences thus offer a close-up view into the methods and impacts of Palestinian digital activism *and* repression. Second, we hope to bring out novel insights with regard to digital repression as a broader phenomenon. We anticipated that the unusual context of Palestine would provide additional insight into the forms that digital repression can take. Through semi-structured interviews with 19 Palestinian activists, we sought to answer the following research questions:

- (1) What goals and strategies do Palestinian activists have when engaging in online activism?
- (2) How do Palestinian authorities respond to online activism?



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- (3) What can we learn from the above that informs scholarship on digital activism and repression overall? What unique insights does the Palestinian context bring to our understanding of digital repression?

We make three sets of contributions. First, our raw findings reveal the specific nature of repressive strategies employed by Palestinian authorities, ranging from low-tech physical means to high-tech cyber-tactics, as well as potential collaboration with technology companies and the Israeli state. We also find resilience among Palestinian activists, most of whom continue their activism in spite of repression. Though some of these findings echo those found in other geographies, they are nevertheless new in their detail with respect to what has previously been reported about the Palestinian context; meanwhile, we also identify features of Palestinian digital repression that differ from what has been reported in other contexts.

Second, the concrete details of digital repression by Palestinian authorities enable us to make further contributions to an understanding of digital repression more broadly, especially as it might exist in contexts where two centers of power co-exist or overlap. Though the specifics of Palestinian governance are unique, there are many other contexts where governance happens in layers: federal and state/provincial governments; official and unofficial power structures (e.g., as occurs in Somalia); law enforcement and organized crime's power over a community; etc. In the Discussion, we consider how our findings have lessons for multi-layered digital repression that could happen in such contexts.

Finally, we contribute a set of recommendations, both for technology platforms and activists. The recommendations come with significant ethical concerns, which we also raise.

2 BACKGROUND

A comprehensive review of modern Palestinian history is beyond the scope of this paper, but we outline the elements critical to understanding our topic below.

In 1948, the modern state of Israel was created, leading to what Palestinians call *the Nakba* – “the Catastrophe” in which approximately 700,000 Palestinians were displaced [8, 53]. Subsequent regional conflicts resulted in Israel gaining control over the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, where together, approximately five million Palestinians reside today [71]. Those residents live under Israeli occupation; they have no formal representation in the Israeli government [9]. (An additional two million Palestinians live in non-West-Bank/non-Gaza Israel, and carry Israeli citizenship.)

At the same time, those territories are administrated by non-sovereign Palestinian governance structures, namely the Palestinian Authority (PA) in the West Bank, and Hamas in Gaza [39]. The Israeli state recognized the PA as the representative of the Palestinian people when it signed the Oslo Accords in 1993 [13, 52]. The United Nations admitted Palestine as a “non-member observer state” in 2012, with the PA as the representative of the state [42, 75]. The PA receives the majority of its funding through the Israeli government, which taxes Palestinian imports and exports, and passes on 97% of the revenue to the PA [1]. Hamas is not recognized by Israel or the United Nations, and it does not receive revenue directly from Israel [38].

Both the PA and Hamas each had a claim to democratic legitimacy, as they were voted into power at different times by residents of the West Bank and Gaza [13, 28, 52]. But, elections have not been held since 2006 [13, 16].

The differences between the PA and Hamas are not only geographical, they are political and ideological; an ongoing rivalry exists between them [13, 52]. Some observers claim that the Palestinian Authority allocates the majority of its funds to its security forces, which focus not on resisting occupation or safeguarding citizens but on suppressing individuals critical of the PA in the West Bank; a similar approach is said to be adopted by Hamas in Gaza [26, 88]. Thus, Palestinian individuals voicing dissent are sometimes cast as supporting the rival faction, and they often encounter an array of punitive measures, ranging from social ostracization to accusations of treason [6, 29, 41].

This dynamic extends to the digital sphere, with policies under both authorities that make it illegal to compromise “public interests” or to defame public figures online [6]. For instance, in 2017, the PA’s President Mahmoud Abbas ratified an Electronic Crime Law, which instituted severe financial penalties and arbitrary detentions for online critiques of Palestinian governance [64]. An analogous policy exists in Gaza [6, 41, 73, 84, 92]. Both sets of policies have been criticized for incursions into free speech [29, 41, 87]. Such laws underscore a key challenge for today’s Palestinians: having formal representation that voices their needs and aspirations, without being distorted by a self-serving ruling class.

3 RELATED WORK

We begin by reviewing research on digital activism and digital repression in general, and then focus on what is known about these activities in the Palestinian context.

3.1 Digital Activism

Digital activism refers to political or social action in which individuals, often collectively, use technology to mobilize people to achieve a common purpose [67, 72]. Scholarly research tends to focus on how social media and the internet have revolutionized the means through which activism is conducted [34, 44]. Multiple sources note how digital platforms have democratized activism by providing spaces for expression and action that were not available through traditional broadcast technologies, thereby empowering activists with more autonomy and agency [17, 34, 44, 50, 67, 78].

Despite the benefits for activists, however, there is a consensus that the transition to digital activism brings challenges, as well [11, 14, 17, 48, 72]. These challenges range from issues of unequal access to the means to activism, due to the digital divide or accessibility issues [56, 89], to concerns about the “echo chamber” effect, where messages circulate within limited, like-minded groups, without interacting with a broader audience [37, 77, 95, 97]. Additionally, the transient nature of digital campaigns, often characterized by fleeting engagement or “clicktivism” raises doubts about the sustainability and long-term impact of these movements [30, 31, 34, 66, 80, 94]. Another challenge faced by digital activists is the heightened risk of surveillance, data breaches, and targeted cyber-attacks, all of which can lead to self-censorship, and limit the formation of solid organizational structures for effective activism [11, 30, 34, 35, 98].

Several studies suggest that the effectiveness of digital activism depends on the influence of factors beyond technology, such as political context, economic conditions, social norms, and activist strategies [11, 35, 51, 94, 97]. In more stable democracies, where there is generally a greater tolerance for dissent, digital activism can thrive, taking on innovative forms such as online petitions and social media campaigns [17, 46, 50]. These environments enable activists to leverage the full spectrum of digital tools without fear of severe repercussions, fostering a culture of open and vibrant discourse [17, 46, 50].

Conversely, in countries governed by authoritarian regimes or marked by political instability, the landscape of digital activism is significantly more challenging. Activists in these regions confront formidable barriers including stringent internet censorship, pervasive surveillance, and the ever-present risk of legal actions, ranging from fines, imprisonment, and even death [17, 30, 31, 50, 72, 78]. Under such oppressive conditions, digital activists are often forced to operate covertly, relying on encrypted communications and anonymous networks to avoid detection and suppressive measures [17, 46, 50].

Perhaps the most enduring view of digital activism is that its impact is deeply context-based, influenced by the specifics of political context, economic factors, social norms, activist strategies, and technologies used. Variations of this view are supported by a range of scholars [11, 35, 51, 57, 67, 94, 97]. Corollaries of this view are that it is difficult to predict the outcome of digital activism in any one context, and that for activists, a “hybrid network approach” – integrating both traditional and digital means of activism – might be most effective [34, 74].

Our work takes the existing literature largely as it is, with little to add to broader theories of digital activism itself. We adopt the view that the impact of activist work is highly contextual, and we offer additional views into the work of digital activists specifically in the Palestinian context.

3.2 Digital Repression

Considerable existing literature has explored various dimensions of digital repression, examining its relationship with traditional forms of repression and its correlation with different ruling systems and governance structures [25]. Governments restrict online speech, monitor digital communications, and employ digital surveillance technologies to maintain control and suppress dissent [30].

The prevailing view is that the development of technology did not lead to the end of traditional methods of repression; instead, it effectively broadened and enhanced existing repression [21, 25, 30, 60]. Traditional repression typically involves physical versions of surveillance, imprisonment, torture, censorship, and harassment [21]. In contrast, digital repression involves online surveillance, hacking, internet shutdowns, censorship, defamation, and trolling [22, 40]. The goals are similar, but the reach of digital repression is often broader and faster, thanks to the speed and scope of the internet [18, 59, 97]. In practice, authoritarian regimes frequently utilize a hybrid approach, combining both traditional and digital repression to maintain control over power and suppress challenges to their legitimacy [25, 30, 59, 63].

Over time, repressive governments have refined digital tools for repression, and at this point, research has reported on a rich range of digital tactics [22, 66, 86]. For example, Chinese social media platforms such as WeChat and Weibo, have implemented pervasive censorship and surveillance controls to comply with government regulations [30, 31]. Saudi authorities used smartphone spyware to gain access to the conversations between Khashoggi and other dissidents [45].

Digital repression often serves as a precursor to more traditional forms of repression. Digital surveillance can lead to activists being jailed, tortured, or even killed [22, 25, 97].

Digital repression is not solely a phenomenon of authoritarian governments. Even democratic governments employ sophisticated technologies for monitoring and control, resulting in the reduction of civil liberties [30, 31]. It was reported, for example, during 2020 Black Lives Matter activism in the United States, that tracking and surveillance technologies were employed to scrutinize social media posts for potential warnings of collective action [30, 31]. Digital surveillance can then lead to “self-censorship” even in societies that value free speech [70].

Our work occurs within this larger examination of digital repression. Though many of our findings echo those found in other contexts of digital repression, the Palestinian context serves as a unique example because of its dual governance structure. Little, in particular, is known about digital repression by a quasi-governmental authority with aims that differ from the formal government it exists under.

3.3 Digital Activism and Repression in Palestine

The literature on Palestinian digital activism indicates that there are at least two separate kinds of activities that could be called “digital activism”: First, there is activism that seeks greater digital access itself, but which does not necessarily take place on digital platforms. For example, until 2005, internet services in occupied Palestine were extremely limited [89]. Activists marched in the streets in a campaign called “Enough Walls, Say No to Internet Quotas” [89, 90].

Second, there is the more common form of digital activism in which the goals are more broadly political – this is the kind that we focus on in this paper. The literature suggests that this form of Palestinian digital activism is primarily focused on sharing stories of suffering and struggle and mobilizing support both locally and internationally [7, 89, 90]. Sometimes called “cyber intifada,” these efforts have gained traction and rallied a global audience in support of the Palestinian cause. For example, the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement, launched in 2005, advocates for an economic, cultural, and academic boycott of Israel [91]. The movement uses digital platforms to coordinate its campaigns.

Since then, Palestinian activists have quickly learned the tools of social media. One example of this was the increased use of Twitter hashtags, such as #GazaUnderAttack, which became globally recognized as a means of tracking updates during the 2014 Gaza War [82]. Annual events commemorating the Nakba, Land Day, Intifadas, Naksa, and others are now regular features of Palestinian social media posts [89, 90]. Other online campaigns have focused on former U.S. President Trump’s decision to recognize Jerusalem as the

capital of Israel [76]; the killing by Israeli forces of Shireen Abu Akleh, a journalist working in Palestine [49]; and most recently, the Gaza-Israel conflict that began on October 7, 2023 [3, 62].

The impact of social media activism on Palestine echo those of social media's impact on politics elsewhere [7, 65, 90], but some argue that a unique feature of Palestinian activists is that "clusters" of them compete and clash rather than build collective power [55].

Meanwhile, a substantial body of literature explores digital repression in the Palestinian context, most of it enacted by the state of Israel. For example, the security industry in Israel has placed a growing emphasis on adopting digital technologies, resulting in more security-oriented digital regulations, as well as forms of electronic surveillance such as video monitoring and fingerprinting [79]. It is also known that Israel has stepped up monitoring of social media [68]. In 2015, Israel established a cyber unit to combat incitement on social media platforms and to remove Palestinian content through pressure on, or collaboration with, social media companies [73, 87]. A noteworthy example of Israeli technological capacity is its development of Pegasus, a spyware system widely believed to enable comprehensive remote access to any iPhone [27, 29, 30, 33, 54].

Israeli digital repression can often lead to cycles of more activism and repression, some of which generates international news. In 2021, the Israeli attacks on the Sheikh Jarrah neighborhood in Jerusalem [5] led activists to launch an online campaign under the hashtag #SaveSheikhJarrah, which gained global attention [47]. The surge in online activism resulted in the removal of Palestinian content from social media sites, particularly Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram [5]. That sparked another wave of outrage among Palestinians and prompted Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International to accuse Facebook of mis-applying content moderation policies against Palestinians [29, 41]. A subsequent report revealed that Meta had breached fundamental principles of free expression by employing censorship tools and exhibiting deliberate bias [12]. The report received extensive coverage from various human rights organizations and media outlets.

Though most of the literature on digital repression of Palestinians focuses on Israel as the primary oppressor, there are reasons for Palestinians to be concerned about internal repression, as well, and some writing has considered it. Several human rights reports mention that Palestinian authorities apprehend and torture individuals who express unfavorable political opinions [6, 41]. Others note that the PA carries out arbitrary detentions and frequent summons of activists and journalists over their digital activity [73].

The work above demonstrates that both Palestinian online activism and efforts to counter it through digital means exist, undertaken both by the state of Israel and Palestinian authorities. As is the case with digital repression in general, digital repression in Palestinian territories appears to represent an extension of conventional repression. However, the work above provides little insight into the specific nature of digital activism or repression in Palestine under Palestinian authorities. Nor does it set out to explore features of activism or repression that arise when oppression occurs under two layers of governance. Our work builds on what is known so far, and seeks to provide a view into what frontline Palestinian digital activists experience.

4 METHODOLOGY

Between May and August, 2023, We conducted semi-structured interviews with 19 Palestinian activists and journalists who had experience posting their opinions on social media *and* who believed they had encountered some form of digital repression. The participants were recruited through civil society organizations and snowball sampling. We sought participants from both the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. A mix of men and women were sought,¹ though our eventual participants skewed heavily male. We also sought a mix of professional backgrounds – our participants identified as journalists, politicians (several hoped to run for elective office), members of political parties (including those not in power), among other professions. Participants were recruited by email and phone, and warned about the nature of the research (detailed below). Several people (not among our final 19) declined to be interviewed. We provided the equivalent of USD 25 in cash payments to participants for their time.

Most interviews were conducted in person in the West Bank by the first author; a few were conducted over Zoom, due either to participant preference or scheduling challenges. The interviews were conducted in Arabic and lasted between 60-150 minutes. For participants who agreed to being recorded, interviews were recorded and transcribed in Arabic by hand. Detailed notes were taken for interviews without recording. Most, though not all, of the Arabic transcriptions were also translated into English by the first author.

Our interview protocol was focused on our three research questions (noted in the Introduction), with emphasis on the first two (the third, we expected to identify in analysis). We asked a series of questions about participants' motivation for activism, the content and form of their activities (both online and offline), the nature of any negative responses they experienced as a result, any relevant interactions they had with Palestinian authorities, details of repressive responses, and the participants' own responses to repression.

4.1 Research Ethics and Participant Safety

Though our Institutional Review Board (IRB) provided a standard exemption for our study, we made extra efforts to ensure that participants were fully aware of the political risks of participating in our study, and we have been careful to leave out personally identifiable content.

Some of our participants are considered public figures in Palestine due to their activism, professional roles, or both. Because the mere participation in a study like ours could have repercussions, all participants were approached through trusted intermediaries or directly through encrypted means, such as WhatsApp messages. We asked participants to choose their interview sites with the understanding that sensitive topics would be discussed. We also made considerable effort to discuss the potential outcomes if for any reason, the participant became associated with the study, whose results we hoped to publish. All of our participants, however, were consistent in that they understood the concerns but did not seem phased by them. Many noted that their identities and activities were already well-known to the authorities, and that an academic

¹Prevailing Palestinian social norms severely inhibit the expression of non-binary sexual identities.

publication would not add risks they were not already exposed to. Several participants actively wanted to participate in the research so as to support others who have been similarly impacted, and some went as far as to offer to go on the record with their names. (We declined.)

4.2 Data Analysis

Data was analyzed through iterative thematic analysis. The first author listened to interview recordings and read transcripts multiple times, pulling out participant comments that were relevant to our research questions, resulting in 420 relevant utterances from our 19 participants, of between 27 to 127 words in length. Those comments were then clustered by related content and organized hierarchically by theme by both authors using open and axial coding. Through repeat passes through the transcripts, we identified a set of inductively derived codes that aligned with our interests, such as activist motivation, preferred social media platform and features, nature of posted content, detainment experiences, insight into PA/Hamas organization, response to repression, mention of Israeli state, mention of other governments, and so on. Codes were assigned to individual utterances in the transcript. That was followed by axial coding, resulting in ~40 "clusters" of findings. Several attempts to merge these clusters and to identify a coherent organization led to a final hierarchical structure, the top-level of which is roughly reflected in the Findings section below. Participant comments within each theme were then selected, with the goal of choosing revealing or representative comments; repetitive or overly abstract content was removed. Further comparison of our findings against the existing literature revealed the most novel of our findings, which we highlight in the Discussion.

4.3 Limitations

Our sampling methodology was neither representative or comprehensive. The recruitment process, predominantly via civil society organizations and snowball sampling, may have introduced us to participants with similar experiences or viewpoints.

Despite effort to achieve diversity in gender and professional backgrounds, our participants skew heavily male, likely because activists themselves are predominantly male. In any case, our sample does not represent well the experiences of female and non-binary activists, the latter of whom face additional and significant societal challenges in expression.

Finally, our participants often stated their thoughts about how Palestinian authorities work with conviction born of years of experience. From our vantage point as researchers, however, we can only say with certainty what our participants *reported*, not what is actually the case. We have striven to make the difference clear in the Findings and Discussion sections below.

4.4 Author Positionality

The first author is Palestinian, was born and raised in the West Bank, and lived there for all but 3 years of higher education in the United States. Though she is not an activist to the degree that this study's participants are, she occasionally posts or re-posts political content on social media and has experienced several instances of content being censored or an account being suspended. Her

experiences provided the initial motivation to undertake this research, and her viewpoints align with much of what they heard from participants. It is thus difficult for her to express skepticism of participant claims, but she has striven in this paper to separate fact from opinion and secondhand information, and to be clear about the difference. The second author has no strong personal ties to the Middle East and has lived and worked primarily in the United States. His research focuses on how economically and politically marginalized communities use digital technology to further their aims.

5 FINDINGS

Below, we explore our findings across six broad categories: goals of Palestinian activists; activists' intended audience; methods of digital repression; methods of punishment and torture; activist response to digital repression; and finally, Palestinian cooperation with technology companies and the state of Israel.

In this section, we hope to provide a comprehensive view of what we heard from our participants. While doing so results in some of the content – perhaps even the majority – echoing similar findings with regard to digital activism and repression in non-Palestinian contexts, we have chosen this method of exposition to honor the work and experience of our participants and also to provide a record of digital activism and repression as it happens in the Palestinian West Bank and Gaza. In the Discussion, we will highlight what is novel in our findings or unique to the Palestinian context.

5.1 Activist Motivation

Palestinian activists who have issues with Palestinian authorities appear to have three long-standing grievances which motivate their activism: They believe (1) that Palestinian authorities are not fulfilling their obligations to support residents; (2) that Palestinian authorities are undermining efforts to enable Palestinian sovereignty; and (3) that Palestinian authorities are not democratically legitimate.

Activists often focus on issues where they believe Palestinian authorities are failing, on topics such as the implementation of public services, or their right to vote for representatives of their own choosing. P016 spotlights their struggles against systemic failures:

I participated in and organized a movement against power cuts in Gaza because the situation is totally incomprehensible. How and why is the electricity being cut off?

P13 was focused on education:

I intensified my digital activity after deciding to run for legislative council elections that have not yet been held. My primary goal was to represent the educational field in the legislative council; to give a voice to teachers and schools. Someone should rise from the field to carry these concerns and address the marginalization of this important group.

P15 summarized the situation: *[Palestinian authorities] are not concerned with Palestinian rights or resistance; their only aim is their own gain. To them, it doesn't matter if Palestinians die; they find it acceptable.*

Many activists are concerned that Palestinian authorities hamper effective resistance against Israeli oppression. For example, there is considerable concern about repressive social media laws. P15 said, “*All my activity is based on Facebook around violations committed by the Palestinian Authority, issuing new laws or decisions that negatively affect us, political statements from the leadership, and of course, resistance against the occupation.*” He was alluding to the Electronic Law of 2017 mentioned in Section 2, which outlawed political content online deemed to threaten security – an ambiguous statement activists believed only protected the interests of the PA. A few participants noted that the Palestinian authorities’ response to accusations of ineffectiveness was to divert public attention toward problems they could not be blamed for.

P8 suggests that the social media landscape is carefully curated to stifle the most difficult debates:

It’s as if there’s a strategy to preoccupy people with certain issues like the cost of living [which most people accept as being beyond PA control]... It’s like the social media space is carefully directed; there are topics that are permissible for people to debate, and there are topics that are forbidden to discuss.

And, some pointed to the illegitimacy of Palestinian Authority and Hamas as the underlying issue. P9 made a comment that represented this view:

This ongoing repression against us occurs because they know they manage our affairs illegally. We never voted for any of them to remain in office, and I have the right to choose my own representative. Moreover, they have proven that they are unqualified to handle our issues. So, what reason do I have to remain silent?

Finally, running through all of the activists’ motivations is a belief that the future can be brighter. P6 mentioned,

I hold hope that reality will change, and sharing opinions with people and engaging in discussions about them paves the way for this change. If I didn’t have this hope, I would be a merchant now, living life far removed from public concerns. I also believe that I have a mission and a voice capable of influencing at least a group, particularly the students I teach.

Similar feelings were widely shared among our participants.

5.2 Target Audience of Activists

Activists use social media platforms differently to target multiple audiences. Some of our participants are professional journalists, and they were clear that they sought to educate the global public using well-researched information. Others were more concerned with provoking immediate shifts of opinion among Palestinians. P1 wanted to communicate with both groups:

I use all social media platforms and I don’t have a favorite audience. I aim to share our reality with the world, but I mostly care about writing for and addressing the general public, specifically the entire Palestinian community, because I am a journalist. I possess tools that allow me to present opinions based on documents and reports, which can help people better understand our

reality. My hope is that we all become encouraged to participate in changing it.

Though the global community and general Palestinian public are somewhat obvious audiences for activists, one unexpected target of communication was mentioned by P17, who explicitly wanted to be read by the Palestinian police and security forces:

I certainly care about sharing with the community around me any event that I find worthy or important. But, I also won’t hide that I care for the security agencies and the authorities to know that I won’t be silenced. I will continue to exercise my right to express myself despite all their ongoing attempts to suppress me.

This person wanted the security forces to know that their activism would continue in spite of the repression.

5.3 Methods of Digital Repression

Our Palestinian activists were subject to an extensive regime of digital repression involving surveillance (digital and physical), censorship, online harassment, physical intimidation, arrest, torture, material penalties, and attempts at appropriation. We provide details of these instances below. See Figure 1 for a summary of the relationships among entities, as compiled based on what we heard from participants.

5.3.1 Digital Surveillance. Activists report pervasive digital surveillance carried out by the Palestinian authorities, involving the monitoring of online activity and phone calls. A few participants seemed to have more direct knowledge about these processes, which seem to involve a cadre of paid monitors as well as occasional loans of technology from Iran or Israel. And, while our participants were not always clear about the mechanisms, they certainly experienced the results: online comments, targeted harassment, and consequences in response to content they had only posted online or discussed by phone.

P3’s case is typical of what many participants reported:

I receive responses that include screenshots of what I had posted. The online stalkers use fake accounts to send abusive messages to me because of what I wrote, often threatening.

In fact, this type of online trolling was one of the most pervasive forms of repression experienced by our participants, and it serves as evidence that our participants were in fact being surveilled.

Another common tactic appears to be to hack into activist accounts.

I’ve been subjected to many phone hacking attempts to steal my Facebook account. I contacted Facebook when my account was shut down, and the company told me that it wasn’t them who closed the account. The account had been stolen, the email and phone that received the code were changed, and yes, it was deleted.

Similarly, other activists said that they had received notifications on email alerting them to an attempt at account access. P13 mentioned,

A while ago, I got a hint that someone was tracking me when I received a notification on Telegram about an attempted account access. The intruder got as far

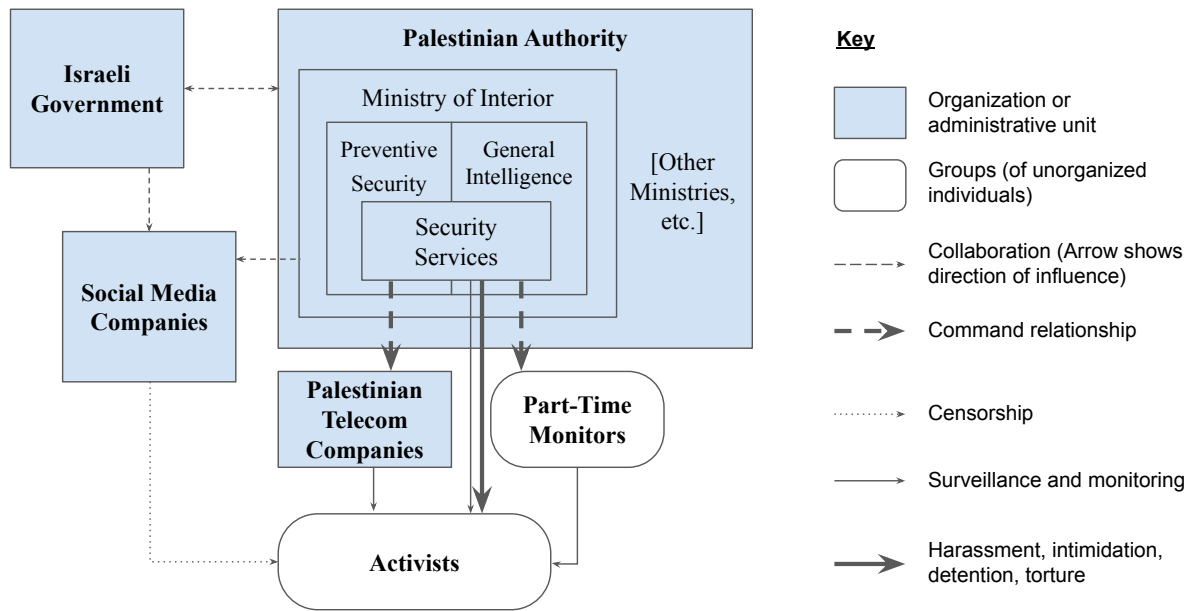


Figure 1: Diagram illustrating the relationships among relevant entities in the West Bank, as implied by our activist participants. The Palestinian Authority appears to devote considerable resources and attention to monitoring and repressing activists, with likely support from the Israeli government, social media companies, telecom companies, and private citizens. Our participants suggested something similar for Gaza under Hamas, though with support from Iran, rather than Israel.

as the password prompt but couldn't proceed further. This led me to suspect that someone was attempting to compromise my Telegram account. A similar situation occurred with WhatsApp on two separate occasions.

P16 gave an example that is revealing: "I once checked the settings of the Messenger app and found that a second email had been added to the account."

The examples so far suggest a relatively low-tech approach to digital surveillance, with activists' social media accounts being monitored on an individual basis. Some of our participants had interactions with the security apparatus that suggests this is exactly the case. P7 stated,

I once asked a representative during a sit-in, how I was being monitored. He told me that there is a large room at the police department to follow up on activists, and security personnel dedicated to this task. Every employee has a device, and their job is to follow a group of activists and monitor their online activities by official assignment.

Similarly, P7 discussed how he knew that his phone calls were being monitored: "Two months ago, I met with an employee from the telecommunications company, and he disclosed that I am being monitored by them." In other words, Palestinian authorities appear to use a labor-intensive process operated by security personnel and telecom workers to keep track of activists. (Though we have no means to corroborate these claims, to the degree that they go against what authorities would seem to want the public to know,

they seem believable – were they intended to deceive, they could simply have minimized the existence of such programs.)

Yet, the surveillance is not necessarily all low-tech, either. P11 noted,

The internal security in Gaza takes your phone and installs a virus in it... After they returned my phone, I checked it and found a program inside that can only be installed by physically accessing the phone.

P12 suggested that Hamas might possess technology from Iran to eavesdrop on phone calls:

During interrogations with internal security, they played back a recorded call between me and these young men... Hamas now possesses very powerful devices that came from Iran. These devices are capable of eavesdropping and infiltration... listening in on WhatsApp conversations.

Multiple activists expressed concerns about the potential use of the Israel's notorious 'Pegasus' spyware which enables comprehensive remote access to iPhones without any user involvement. Participants recounted experiencing unusual device behavior, such as rapidly draining batteries and unknown phone calls in their logs. P9 claimed,

The Palestinian authority has purchased the Israeli tracking and spying system, Pegasus. You may notice that I use a cover on my phone's cameras, because I could be under surveillance and my private space might be invaded without my knowledge.

In the absence of hard evidence about surveillance mechanisms, our participants were not always sure exactly how they were being surveilled, and we could not verify their claims through other means. But, the essence of what the participants were conveying is credible: Palestinian authorities appear to monitor activist social media posts with regularity, and in some cases they also seem to have access to activists' private communications. Without that access, some of the downstream consequences mentioned by our participants could not have happened.

5.3.2 Online Censorship. Activists frequently reported having their posts or accounts restricted or shut down, particularly on Facebook. P3 mentioned,

There are techniques developed by the Palestinian security forces. You might think that Facebook has shut down the page, but in reality, it's Palestinian security [who is behind it]. That is, when there's a report on the post, Facebook provides a feature to learn more, and Facebook responds to us, stating that the reason for the restriction and deletion is not from Facebook but due to mass reporting.

This participant is suggesting that Facebook mentioned that the number of incoming complaints was the reason a post was censored, and other participants mentioned the same thing on multiple occasions. Facebook, however, announces very clearly, "The number of times something is reported doesn't determine whether or not it's removed from Facebook" [15]; instead, content is taken down only if it violates Facebook's "Community Standards" [15, 83]. Given these conflicting statements, it is unclear what Facebook's actual policy is. There are several possibilities: Facebook may have changed its policy over time; Facebook's publicly posted policy may differ from actual practice; the number of reports may have a secondary effect on content moderation; or if enough of an activist's posts are reported, some may inevitably fall outside of Facebook's Community Standards, which, incidentally, leave room for much subjective judgment.

Whatever the actual policy, most of our participants had experience with their Facebook account being suspended or taken down. P3 said something reflecting comments from almost all of our participants,

My social media pages on Facebook have been shut down more than once... My page was completely deleted in July 2021; the page was 10 years old. Then I created a new account and it disappeared after a while. I am always living in this state.

A few activists shared knowledge of events that suggest that the Palestinian Authority meets with social media platform representatives, with at least part of the discussion focused on specific accounts that ought to be taken down. P1 explained,

A meeting was convened where activists, Meta representatives, and officials from the Ministry of Telecommunication came together. In this meeting, the Ministry presented a report to Facebook, advocating for the shutdown of activist pages, citing them as a threat to the social fabric and alleging that their content violates Facebook's policy. The meeting was conducted

over Zoom. I received an invitation to attend but was unable to participate, as I was arrested by the Israeli army on the same day.

We cannot confirm the content of these meetings, and were unable to track down anyone who was present at them, but three other participants mentioned that they had also heard of similar meetings.

5.3.3 Online Harassment and Intimidation. Repression, of course, can take more active forms. Activists report experiencing all types of harassment, ranging from abusive comments to attempts at defamation.

Several activists mentioned that they receive offensive comments from fake accounts. These comments often label the activists "spies" or "traitors." P11 stated, "I was receiving negative and bad comments from online trolls, comments from fake accounts... They dispatched their electronic trolls to write offensive comments like 'Wait for the confessions of the spy.'"

When such comments are made consistently through posts across an activist's social media presence, it can affect their reputation, as P17 explained:

After I published the video and photos proving that Palestinian security forces had beaten me, the threats started coming in continuously, either through comments or private messages. Most of these threats focused on morally discrediting me in the community.

P16 stated with some disgust, "One of the most harmful comments accuses me of colluding and benefiting from the authorities."

One common strategy is defamation through false allegations. P10 described a deeply unsettling doxxing experience:

You wake up the next morning and find screenshots of your post on many sites and pages belonging to them. Thousands of people that you don't know start accusing you of being a spy, an infidel, or something, they use your personal photos, it's practically a kind of intimidation and fear, for me this is harsh, it is scary.

Defamation attempts can extend into online impersonation, where fake accounts are created in an activist's name and used to disseminate damaging or explicit content. P12 described,

They created multiple fake accounts using my name to exploit my followers, especially while my account was shut down. People naturally search for me and end up following these fake accounts. They then engage in insults while posing as me, tarnishing [my] reputation.

In addition, various activists have encountered diverse forms of intimidation, including advisories to leave the country. The experience of P16 not only exemplifies this pattern but also reveals coordination between the Palestinian Authority security forces and Israeli authorities. This collaboration aims to quell dissent and compel activists to abandon their activism, they detailed:

People from the Palestinian security contacted me, informing me that there was a decision to assassinate me due to my opposition to the Authority and openly expressing my thoughts on social media. They advised me to leave the country, and I did so for two months. However, I returned because I simply want to live in

my homeland. Upon re-entering the country, I was summoned by the Israeli intelligence. They interrogated me in detail about why I left the country and informed me to remain silent and cooperate with the local authorities, meaning the intelligence and Palestinian security.

Many activists reported receiving death threats through various channels, via private messages on social media or via mail. Some have even received threats against their children or other family members; and sometimes, family members are threatened directly. P12 and P19 were so severely impacted by these threats that they chose to move to another country. P12 explained, *"The death threats continue to this day. They then escalated to kidnapping threats against my family members, particularly my children. I receive almost daily threats about killing my kids even now."*

Similar to what we found with Palestinian authorities' digital surveillance tactics, online harassment and intimidation seem to occur through relatively low-tech, labor-intensive means.

5.3.4 Physical Surveillance and Harassment. Some activists describe more physical forms of harassment, including physical surveillance, house or workplace visits by officials, and formal summonses. A few of our participants shared experiences of being physically followed, which generated discomfort and fear. P1 mentioned,

It happens to me at certain times when I am publishing intensively and critically against the authority; I notice that the same person follows me and chases me wherever I go, not just for one or two days but continuously.

P16 mentioned a story that could not have happened without physical surveillance:

My friends were interrogated for associating with me... Once, they called my friend and asked, 'Why are you sitting with [P16]?'

Others describe visits by state officials. P8 said,

An intelligence officer used to investigate me at my workplace. He would print the social media posts that criticized the president and the Authority and to threaten me with them. He would use a loud voice, the military uniform, and the weapon he constantly carries, which is supposed to be prohibited in a public institution. He officially requested that I stop using Facebook.

Still others were summoned to security offices and received strong requests to cease posting. P11 explained being summoned multiple times: *"I was summoned three times in the Gaza Strip. Yes, because of political opinions on Facebook. And yes, I signed pledges not to post. But, I still post regardless."*

All of these instances demonstrate digital activism being met with traditional repressive tactics, adding further evidence to the existing consensus that digital repression extends other forms of repression [21, 25, 30, 60].

5.3.5 Material Consequences. Many activists highlighted that Palestinian authorities wield the power to inflict long-lasting consequences on their livelihoods or those of their families and friends. About a quarter of our participants mentioned employment repercussions due to their activism. P1 experienced salary cuts and saw

his office closed. His wife received repeated employment suspensions. P15 experienced rescinded job offers, and his sister was denied a business license:

Many organizations have offered me jobs. The last time I accepted an offer, they later apologized and rescinded it. I discovered that they had received an official recommendation against hiring me. As a result, I remain unemployed, and this pattern repeats every time I apply for a job... My sister was penalized by being denied a license to open a childcare center, but my clan intervened and forced the relevant authorities to grant her the license.

What P15 meant by an "official recommendation" is reportedly a request from the PA. P8 reported that his brother was denied a job:

My brother applied for a job at the Ministry of Transportation and Communications. He passed the written exam and succeeded in the personal interview, but he failed the security check... He was informed that he was not eligible for the job because he is my brother... They punished my brother because of me.

A few participants experienced restrictions on travel. P4 was threatened with travel restrictions: *"There was once a threat from a Palestinian officer that they would prevent me from traveling, and indeed I was prevented from traveling. But not by them, it was by the Israeli authorities.* It was unclear whether that instance involved collusion between the PA and Israel.

5.3.6 Detention and Torture. Arguably the ultimate tool of repression is detention and torture, and our participants experienced their share of these brutal tactics. We emphasize that these are Palestinian authorities arresting and torturing Palestinian residents. Activists reported being arrested and interrogated by Palestinian security forces in both the West Bank and Gaza Strip. They were subjected to various levels of mistreatment, ranging from verbal interrogations to physical beatings and other forms of torture. P9 details one such case, describing the exact nature of his arrests and the reasons:

I was arrested 10 times for my Facebook posts from 2011 until 2019, twice each year. The following charges were leveled against me: one for inciting sectarianism, one for defaming high positions, one for collecting and receiving money from illegitimate sources, and one for affiliation with armed militias. During the investigation, I was interrogated about the content of the post, what I meant and why I wrote this post. They also demanded that I stop posting.

P10 experienced beatings while jailed:

They sent a statement to my house, and the charge was that I had insulted the Internal Security Service. I was assaulted inside the detention. After three days of detention, I signed a pledge that I would not write about this personality on social media again. Then I was released, and I have since committed to this pledge.

Others described a range of methods of both psychological and physical forms of torture. P12 and P19 reported being put in small

cells and not allowing them to change their position for long hours. P12 said,

These cells are just half a meter by half a meter. Imagine spending about twenty hours in such a confined space, while others are forced to sit on chairs just thirty centimeters wide for months at a time. In my case, I was made to sit on such a chair for months, hugging my knees.

A few journalist participants shared that they were attacked while covering events and were subsequently beaten and detained by security forces. P15 stated,

While covering news in the city, I was attacked by the Palestinian police. The beatings were terrifying... I endured nearly a month of ongoing beatings. I spent a day in the hospital and had difficulty breathing normally afterward, as all my ribs were bruised.

Again, these are all cases where digital repression transitions seamlessly into classical forms of repression [21, 25, 30, 60], with the consequences of digital activism being physical arrest and assault.

5.3.7 Appropriation, or "Coercive Persuasion". Finally, we discuss one subtler form of repression, which activists referred to as "coercive persuasion." This is a form of appropriation in which the person is offered some reward to alter or cease their dissenting digital activity. For example, P1 disclosed that he was offered employment in exchange for ending his social media criticism:

They sent me a message that both I and my spouse would be employed in government institutions on the condition of stopping my digital activity and changing my content, or changing my positions. But I did not agree.

P16 and P17 were offered prestigious governmental positions in exchange for redirecting their digital activities. P17 said, "Of course, this is a form of bribery in exchange for silence on all the violations committed by the authority," so he did not accept.

5.4 Activists' Responses to Digital Repression

Despite facing consequences, many of them severe, activists were resilient and committed to their goals. They adopted several strategies to continue their activism.

5.4.1 Just Keep Posting. For a few of our participants, the digital repression appeared to succeed. P2, for example, mentioned,

The reason I have opportunities for work today is because I am not present on social media platforms. For about two and a half years, I have remained outside, without any arrests or threats from online networks.

This is an understandable stance, and highlights the difficult choices that activists must make.

But, a significant majority of our participants have continued their online activism, despite having experienced multiple consequences. P1, P3, P4, P5, P6, P9, P10, P12, P14, P15, P16, P17, and P19 all stated that they will keep posting until this kind of repression stops. They refuse to be silenced or compromised. P3 said:

There are actions taken by the Palestinian Authority that push me and others to continue our online activism

because we reject repression. I refuse to have my voice silenced by intimidation exerted on us through the exclusion of other activists.

P16 agreed: "I was arrested and tortured in prison for [my activism], and this has only increased my determination to continue writing." And, P17:

I'm not going to stop writing no matter what happens. I have lost a lot, my life has been repeatedly threatened, and there have been ongoing attempts to smear me. It's impossible for me to stop.

P16 represented a unique case, where they seemed to think they were protected from the worst consequences. They were told they would not be arrested due to their lack of historical activism before social media, suggesting that authorities view some arrests to be counterproductive. He said:

I have not been arrested, and I was personally informed that even if I used live video to insult the president, I would not be arrested because I have no history of activism. For example, I was not in the country at the time of the first intifada, and I did not participate in the second intifada. I am not affiliated with any political party, and therefore I do not work for any entity. I am not wanted by Israel and do not have a party agenda. Therefore, any arrest would only increase people's anger toward the authority, which would bother them.

P16's claims cannot be taken entirely at face value, because some of our participants (who have faced consequences) also share traits that he claimed protected him. But, his point does suggest that the Palestinian authorities are hesitant to make a martyr out of some class of activists.

5.4.2 Switching Platforms, Adjusting Privacy Settings. Several activists reconsidered aspects of their digital presence, in response to consequences they faced. They modified their social media privacy settings; they switched to platforms that offer enhanced safety and privacy; they were extra cautious about entry points for malware. All who continued to post, however, were conscious of trade-offs between safety and visibility to their audience.

Our participants agreed that the majority of the digital repression they experienced occurred on or through Facebook,² followed by WhatsApp and TikTok, and their adaptations were tailored accordingly. P1 and P3 expressed their frustration with the high volume of digital attacks on Facebook. Although both initially published content publicly and never considered altering their audience settings, the ongoing attacks have led them to make more frequent use of the block feature and to change their audience settings to "friends only" when necessary. P1 said, "I'm using platforms that may offer more protection than others. There are some applications that offer 'ephemeral messaging,' like iMessage, Slack, and possibly Telegram." P3 stated, "I use Signal, Botim, and email. I use Signal a lot. I don't trust WhatsApp or the regular phone, and in any case, if I can reach someone without these means, I do so." P4, P7, P10, and P13 highlighted the value of platforms like Instagram, Twitter,

²Currently, Facebook appears to have the largest social media user base in Palestinian territories [85].

TikTok, and Telegram, stating that they do not experience as many attacks on these platforms as they do on Facebook. P13 explained,

I still use Facebook, but due to the ongoing restrictions and publication policies, I have moved to other platforms. I frequently use WhatsApp and manage groups that deal with political activism.

A number of activists have stated that they deliberately avoid using certain keywords that are flagged by social media algorithms, especially those on Facebook. They often use euphemisms or indirect language to get around automatic detection. Yet, despite this careful approach, their posts are still at risk of being reported by Palestinian online trolls. P9 said,

I try to avoid using words sensitive to Facebook's algorithms. Instead, I use euphemisms or words with multiple meanings that Facebook can't easily detect, to avoid restrictions. However, using euphemisms and fragmented words is locally understood, so the security apparatus affiliated with the Authority picks them up, reports the posts, and sends threats accordingly.

Others mentioned that they were careful not to give spyware a foothold. P4 said,

I was extremely careful not to accept any links from anyone. I mean, I was sure not to open any link from a stranger. [I once experienced] a hacking attempt. During that period, Pegasus had just started its operations.

However, given Pegasus's reputation, it is unclear whether such a tactic alone is sufficiently protective.

Finally, one of our participants resisted any effort to change their ways. P16 emphasized the importance of remaining consistent in their approach, refusing to bend to repressive pressure.

I am not thinking of changing the privacy settings or changing the publishing approach. I use video and writing and will continue to publish. We use a method that I cannot disclose because I believe everything is monitored, and I don't want to cause my group any trouble if security members find out about it.

5.4.3 Move Elsewhere, Gain Citizenship. Some activists, notably P11, P12, and P19, found a way to continue their online activism while staying out of reach of repressive authorities: They moved out of the Palestinian territories.

Among those who remain in the West Bank or Gaza, several acknowledged the safety of emigration, while others voiced the desire to have the option. P15 agreed that emigration is the only viable option for a decent life as an activist. They see no future in Palestine for themselves or their children as long as the current regime controls both the virtual and physical spaces: *"The only thing that would make me happy right now is to leave the country, because there is no other option in front of me except to starve to death, either me or my family."* P8 said that Palestinians live in 'cages,' each controlled by a different military body, all of which aim to silence Palestinians: *"I strive with all my might to obtain another nationality. Having another nationality greatly helps to feel safe in our country."*

6 DISCUSSION

The findings above lead to two broad classes of contributions: First, we have documented the activist's view of digital activism and repression that occurs between Palestinian activists and Palestinian authorities at a level of detail not available in previous scholarly work [7, 65, 82, 89, 90, 99] or human rights reports [29, 32, 41, 73]. We believe this contribution is important in itself as a record of the Palestinian context, and it has implications for how social media companies ought to engage with Palestinian users. Second, though many of our findings echo those in the existing literature on digital activism and repression, we also find unique features exhibited in the Palestinian context that expand on what is known about the forms that digital repression can take. Those features offer potential lessons about digital repression for other contexts in which two or more layers of authority exert control over a population, and they suggest concrete recommendations for both activists and technology platforms who seek to support human rights. These points are discussed in detail below.

6.1 Confirmatory Findings

We find, first, that both digital activism and repression in the Palestinian context is real, sharing elements with digital activism and repression elsewhere. Palestinian activists use social media because of its accessibility and global reach, just as others have been found to do [5, 17, 20, 23, 30, 31, 46]. Palestinian authorities repress these activists through digital surveillance, censorship, harassment, and intimidation, just as repressive governments do in other geographies [2, 65, 68, 69, 90, 100]. Palestinian digital repression connects with physical and material forms of intimidation, arrest, and torture, also as happens elsewhere [17, 18, 30, 31, 46, 50, 58]. Overall, our findings support the existing consensus that digital repression extends traditional forms of repression, rather than replacing it [21, 22, 63, 74, 78, 94, 95, 97].

That there is widespread digital repression by Palestinian authorities of Palestinian activists has one immediate implication: Any social media companies engaging with Palestinian users must work harder to hear their concerns as local content moderation policies are considered. Our findings suggest that entities such as Facebook meet with the PA, and investigative journalism confirms that they work with the Israeli government [36]. (It is unclear whether Facebook interacts with Hamas.) But neither entity can be said to speak for the Palestinian people themselves; rather, both are involved in repressing Palestinian voices.

6.2 Unique Features of Palestinian Digital Repression

Next, the Palestinian context exhibits unique features with respect to digital repression (less so digital activism). First, both the PA and Hamas, neither of which are sovereign states, appear nevertheless to have developed intricate systems of ongoing digital monitoring and repression that appear to rely on labor-intensive, low-tech means for the most part, but occasionally capitalize on high-tech tools they may be granted use of through Israel or Iran. Most of our participants experienced the effects of this system; some came into direct contact with authority trolls; and a couple, such as P7 (in Section 5.3.1), were offered detailed descriptions of how these

offices worked by the people who worked in them. That such an apparatus exists is striking in itself, given that both the Palestinian Authority and Hamas require annual financial contributions from Israel or other foreign powers to operate [13, 28, 43, 52, 93].

At the same time, because the repression relies heavily on human personnel, it is at once more personalized, but also inconsistent and less effectual compared to, say, the Chinese internet censorship machine which is highly systematized and thorough [30, 31, 63, 70]. Thus, activists are personally trolled online, monitored at their workplace by colleagues, pressured by penalties applied to relatives, and individually plied with bribes. These efforts often seem discomfitingly 'intimate.' Yet, most of our participants appear to bounce back from repressive efforts repeatedly. Though activist resilience is a feature of digital repression in other contexts, as well [17, 97], it does feel as if Palestinian activists enjoy somewhat more latitude, with some ceiling to the severity of consequences. Without diminishing the dedication or adaptability of our participants, or the severity of detention, torture, and attacks on livelihoods, we did also find career activists who continue their activism over decades despite dozens of rounds of repressive measures. This may be due in part to the fact that Palestinian authorities lack the ultimate power of a sovereign state – in the end, their own powers are limited by Israel and by the fact of their less-than-nation status.

Meanwhile, Palestinian authorities also appear to collaborate effectively with a range of formal institutions, including local telecommunications companies, social media platforms, the Israeli state, and the Iranian state – not all of whom are natural partners for collaboration. Our participants suggested that the PA eavesdrops on voice calls through local telecoms; holds meetings with social media company representatives; and shares information and technology with Israel. Hamas, meanwhile, is believed to use technology provided by Iran. These claims require further investigation to prove with certainty, but there are grounds for their credibility: our participants corroborated one another's points, even when they did not know each other; they were presented with their own private communications, which could not have been obtained without external support; and a collaborative relationship between the PA and the Israeli state is widely acknowledged [26, 28, 88, 99, 100].

Most politically significant are the collaborations between Palestinian authorities and Israel and Iran. Several of our participants mentioned the likely use of Israel's Pegasus software [27, 30, 54], though it was unclear whether Palestinian authorities had direct access to the software itself or just the critical data. Another participant noted that Hamas may have phone-tapping capabilities provided by Iran. These findings add credence to what many scholars and digital activists claim: That Palestinian authorities are at least partly captured by Israel and other outside interests, and often unable or unwilling to further the interests of the Palestinian people themselves [26, 28, 88, 99, 100].

6.3 The Nature of Multi-Layered Digital Repression

The Palestinian context offers potential lessons for digital repression in other contexts with multiple layers of governance. In combination with the existing literature about Israeli repression of Palestinians, our findings demonstrate a complex set of interactions: First,

that when two centers of power exist, each may conduct repressive activities in their own way, suited to their means, and for their own purposes. Whereas Israeli concerns are primarily threats – physical or political – against it [36], our findings show Palestinian authorities suppressing political speech that casts *them* in a bad light. As to means, Israel has as its disposal world-class technology and strong influence over social media policies within its borders [36]; Palestinian authorities seem to rely more on human personnel and external sponsorship or support. At least some of these differences seem likely to be caused by the relative differential in economic and military capacity between the two entities. We conjecture that in other contexts with more than one governance entity, such differences in goals and tactics will also be reflected in the digital sphere.

Second, despite both political and administrative differences, governing entities may also collaborate. Our findings add credence to claims made elsewhere [36, 96] that the PA collaborates with Israel, and Hamas with Iran, with collaborations that appear to involve exchanges of information, if not also digital tool use. As the saying goes, "Politics makes strange bedfellows." Other contexts with overlapping governance structures might also see such collaboration despite conflict.

For activists, the intertwined forces under plural governance come with pros and cons. On the one hand, activists may have more room to maneuver, and somewhat less to fear in response to their digital activism; on the other hand, they may be surprised by the resources available to even the less powerful or less funded of their oppressors.

All of these points add further evidence to theories of technological reinforcement or amplification in politics [4, 94], rather than theories that proclaim a transformational role for technology [14, 81]. Reinforcement theories suggest that technology does not add to or fundamentally alter underlying political intentions, but instead strengthens the power of technology users, in some proportion to their pre-existing power. In our case, each entity – the PA, Hamas, Israel, Iran, Palestinian activists – uses digital technology to further its own aims in directions consistent with their politics, and repressive inclinations are backed by physical power. But, also as reinforcement theories suggest, ultimate impacts remain difficult to predict, because the underlying power dynamics are in flux. We can expect these patterns to apply to other contexts where people are repressed by multiple entities.

6.4 Recommendations

Based on our findings, we offer recommendations for both Palestinian online activists and social media platforms that wish to support freedom of expression. We acknowledge the marginality of these recommendations given the stark and stubborn politics facing Palestinians; at the same time, conveyance of the Palestinian struggle internationally through digital channels may offer the greatest hope for liberation.

6.4.1 For Palestinian Activists. We cannot know the full extent of the challenges that Palestinian activists face, and we do not claim that we have a superior vantage point to make recommendations. Nevertheless, by hearing from many activists, we have a broad sense for the constraints they face and the varying tactics they use. Our

recommendations are offered humbly, and merely as suggestions to consider:

First, despite the possibility of collusion between social media platforms and repressive Palestinian (and Israeli) authorities, social media platforms dislike public exposure of any inconsistencies or hypocrisies in their content moderation policies. Activists may therefore escape some amount of censorship by keeping their content well within posted content-moderation guidelines – e.g., avoiding violent language or referring to violent events. Our participants' reports of social media companies meeting with the PA suggests that they accede to some extent to the PA's wishes, so cleverly working around local restrictions on speech may also be fruitful.

We also heard from a couple of activists that *either* solid insider status with respect to a strong political party *or* strict political neutrality can have a protective effect. This seems contradictory, but the points might be reconciled if interpreted as a caution against being in the middle – expressing views aligned with an opposition party without having its full backing can be the most dangerous.

At least in the context of Palestine, it does seem that Palestinian authorities, and perhaps more so the PA, are hesitant to turn activists into martyrs. Thus, there do seem to be some lines they rarely cross, though arrest and torture are not unheard of. Hardy activists may be able to continue their digital activism for quite a while.

Finally, we heard from a number of activists that Facebook appears to be the greatest site of repressive effort by Palestinian authorities. Activists might therefore consider migrating to other platforms, though that may also have the effect of reducing internal reach, given that Palestinian users still favor Facebook. More generally, being one step ahead of platform trends may provide greater room for digital activism.

6.4.2 For Social Media Companies. For social media companies who genuinely wish to support human rights, we have several recommendations.

First and foremost, companies must be clear-eyed about their engagements with formal authorities. Even those that are nominally democratically elected may not have citizen interests at heart. Our recommendation here is to ensure that companies employ participatory approaches [10, 24] that seek out perspectives from a range of local civil society organizations (even these must be carefully considered), and to seek their input outside of earshot of governmental authorities.

Second and related, companies must continually review their content moderation policies, holding local political contexts in mind and keeping a careful eye on the balance between avoiding harmful content and squashing dissent. It is in the nature of dissent by the politically marginalized that they must engage in some degree of attention-grabbing in order to have their voices heard. Also important is vigilance against gaming of systems to take down content or disable accounts. Social media platforms presumably have the data to detect such efforts.

Finally, based on what we saw as confusion regarding the reasons for content deletion or account suspension, social media platforms should adopt a more transparent and communicative approach when a user's page is reported for potential restrictions or deletion. The absence of direct engagement leaves users confused and, at

times, unfairly penalized without a clear understanding of the violations they are alleged to have committed. We propose that social media platforms appoint local representatives – drawing again from civil society organizations at least in part – who would serve as cultural and political intermediaries between the platform and its users.

7 CONCLUSION

An investigation of the digital activism and repression that occurs between Palestinian activists and Palestinian authorities re-emphasized how offline politics carry over online, while also demonstrating unique aspects of Palestinian digital repression that may have lessons for situations involving dual governance structures elsewhere. Of particular note are the ways in which Palestinian governance bodies such as the Palestinian Authority and Hamas maintain their own agendas and modes of operation while also cooperating with the states of Israeli and Iranian, telecom operators, and global social media companies.

Ultimately, online activism in Palestine holds out the possibility of raising global awareness about the suppression of human rights in the West Bank and Gaza. As the Israel-Hamas War continues, protests have erupted around the world calling for a ceasefire in Gaza. Through social media platforms and digital networks, activists have been able to share real-time updates, personal stories, and critical information, thereby galvanizing a global audience. The resulting global outcry reflect a growing consciousness and solidarity with the Palestinian cause, demonstrating that with sustained effort and organization, grassroots digital activism can transcend power and borders to bring together people in a common pursuit of justice.

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