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Authors:

Giulia Daniele, Ph.D. & Sophia Maria Kelsch, Ph.D. Candidate

Correspondence address:

Centro de Estudos Internacionais

Instituto Universitário de Lisboa (Iscte)

Av.^a das Forças Armadas

1649-026

Lisboa

Portugal

Email:

Giulia.Daniele@iscte-iul.pt

Notes on contributors:

Giulia Daniele is Assistant Professor at the Instituto Universitário de Lisboa (Iscte), Portugal. She is the Deputy Director of the Centro de Estudos Internacionais of the same university (CEI-Iscte).

Her main research interests extensively cover the intersection of Middle East politics with a focus on Palestine and Israel, social movements, gender and feminist studies, conflict resolution, settler colonialism, and ethno-national narratives.

She has conducted fieldwork researches across the Middle East and North Africa, especially in the West Bank, Gaza Strip, Israel and Tunisia. She has also been engaged with international organizations and cooperation projects.

Her first book is entitled “Women, Reconciliation and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict: The Road Not Yet Taken” (Routledge 2014, paperback edition in 2018).

Among her latest publications: “Political and Social Protests From The Margins: The Role of Mizrahi Jews in Israeli Grassroots Activism” (Etnográfica, 2019), “Mizrahi Jews and the Zionist Settler Colonial Context: Between Inclusion and Struggle” (Settler Colonial Studies, 2020), “Intersectional Politics and Citizen Activism: An Israeli Mizrahi Feminist View” (Women’s Studies International Forum, 2023).

ORCID iD <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4976-4859>

Sophia Maria Kelsch is a PhD candidate in International Studies and researcher at the University Institute of Lisbon (Iscte). She obtained a Master’s degree in International Studies with a specialization in the MENA region from the same university, and holds a Bachelor’s degree in European Studies with a major in Human Geography from the University of Passau in Germany.

Her research centers on social movements in the digital age, primarily hashtag activism and its culture-communication nexus, in addition to her scholarly interests in the Middle East, particularly Palestine/Israel. She aims to adopt a creative and contemporary perspective towards methodological approaches, such as by doing extensive and immersive digital ethnography.

ORCID iD <https://orcid.org/0009-0004-4178-7177>

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Beyond Online and Offline Activism:

#SaveSheikhJarrah and Contemporary Resistance in Palestine

Abstract

This article focuses on the interconnections between online and offline activism in Palestine, with a detailed analysis of the case of Sheikh Jarrah (east Jerusalem). We examine current strategies of Palestinian digital resistance that have highlighted the relevance of interlinking struggles both at the grassroots level and on the internet. Within the settler colonial framework, the hashtag #SaveSheikhJarrah stands as one of the most emblematic contemporary struggles against the Israeli military occupation, particularly against the ongoing evictions taking place in areas such as Sheikh Jarrah in east Jerusalem and the West Bank. In recent years, this hashtag has drawn unprecedented global attention to the Palestinian cause. This article is based on extensive digital ethnography and semi-structured interviews with young Palestinian activists conducted from 2021 to 2023. Through an exploration of activists' narratives surrounding the #SaveSheikhJarrah movement, we critically examine the interplay of diverse forms of resistance in the age of social media. Our lens of analysis links grassroots and online struggles, offering a fresh perspective on digital activism in the current discourse on culture and communication within Palestinian studies.

Keywords: digital activism, everyday resistance, hashtag, Palestine, #SaveSheikJarrah

Word count: 10124

Introduction

This article examines the most recent developments within the activist landscape of Palestinian digital resistance with a specific focus on #SaveSheikhJarrah. We study the Palestinian activist campaign that went viral since May 2021 through the hashtag #SaveSheikhJarrah. After being created by a grassroots action against settler colonial evictions of Palestinian families by Israeli military forces in Sheikh Jarrah, a Palestinian neighborhood in east Jerusalem, the hashtag has been shared all over the world and has helped to create awareness of the cause itself. In addition, it has sparked and addressed debates on highly contentious matters regarding the relationship between daily violations of Palestinian human rights and the necessary interconnection with digital resistance and activism in the field.

We explore in detail the dynamics of offline and online struggles in Palestine and their ongoing interconnections. In a context characterized by the increasing role of transnational social movements, the recognition of the connectivity between past and present forms of popular resistance, along with the tools developed in such struggles, has been central to the study of grassroots activism in Palestine, and also among Palestinian diasporic communities. Based on this framework identifying linkages between past and present struggles, we argue that a critical analysis of the evolution of one of the most well-known Palestinian hashtag campaigns that has taken place worldwide, namely #SaveSheikhJarrah, provides an excellent opportunity for deconstructing the online-offline dichotomy related to grassroots activism, and for understanding their interdependency in terms of adding value to Palestinian everyday resistance.¹

The analyses of (everyday) resistance across diverse streams of communication scholarship provide a framework for comprehending nuanced narratives of resistance and a window into the processes of meaning-making underpinning different types of resistance and communication

¹ Theories of “everyday resistance” have been developed since the 1980s and dealt with several heterogenous and contingent practices as well as different backgrounds. Among the most relevant scholarship, we have founded our reflection on James C. Scott (1989) and Anna Johansson & Stellan Vinthagen (2020).

practices that articulate them (Pal & Dutta, 2008, p. 70). This perspective on everyday resistance also contributes to the growing academic interest in creating spaces “to broaden the understanding of international and intercultural communication from the margins” (Pal, 2023, p. 1) - an idea we expand as we explore everyday resistance in the Palestinian context.

To address this topic with a focus on the last decade, it is important to recognize that the dynamics of social movements in the Middle East have undergone a drastic change due to the use of internet,² enabling mass communication and facilitating mass mobilization across borders. Contemporary literature has largely discussed the innovative role of networks of people coming from different political, socioeconomic, cultural, and religious backgrounds, motivated to achieve common goals and strategic agendas towards social justice (Bayat, 2013; Beinin & Vairel, 2013; Castells, 2012; Dabashi, 2012). Nonetheless, Palestine has been marginalized within the broader discourse, which tends to concentrate much more on the Middle East and North Africa as a region, rather than on the peculiarity of the Palestinian question.

Even beyond the regional arena, if we look through a transnational lens of analysis, “*Palestine as communication, across borders and beyond territory*” still represents an unexplored field in media and communication studies (Matar, 2022, p. 361). As we accept the invitation to consider such a pathway of reflection, we aim to amplify Palestinian voices online, highlighting their diverse frames of solidarity, including those from the diaspora. Such an emphasis on Palestine can primarily be made through a decolonial lens of analysis, which supports restoration of the Palestinian narrative - one that has been historically excluded and absent from mainstream scholarship of cultural and communication studies (Ghabra and Afifi, 2022). In our specific case, we focus on the continuous interplay between physical and online contexts, to critically examine

² We adopt Aouragh’s idea of spelling internet in lower case, considering it as a mass medium such as television, or radio (Aouragh, 2008, p. 109). Additionally, we would like to add one more adaptation to this suggestion: by writing internet without an article, we consider it, apart from being a medium, to be a tool, or space. When using the article (“the internet”), we describe the generality of the world wide web, as a whole.

Palestinian digital activism, particularly its current relevance in both transnational spaces and within Palestine itself.

Our research also stresses an interdisciplinary approach by engaging with three main areas of study, namely social movements, communication, and Palestine studies. Bringing different fields into conversation has allowed us to expand our analysis beyond pre-constructed borders and boundaries and explore the strict and ongoing relationship between diverse Palestinian spatial spheres and practices of grassroots activism. Clearly, the virtual sphere and its related communication play out on a space that “is no longer territorialized” enabling it “to evolve outside physical boundaries” (Ghabra, 2020, p. 199), as is happening with most contemporary forms of Palestinian resistance such as the one studied in this article.

Accordingly, to fully appreciate the digital space Palestinians are increasingly entering into, we need to refer to the concept of ‘cyber-colonialism’ (Tawil-Souri and Aouragh, 2014), as it has underlined that “Palestinian Internet usage has been substantially higher than elsewhere in the Arab world” (Tawil-Souri & Aouragh, 2014, p. 119), together with ‘digital occupation’ “to describe the multifaceted process that combines the territorial and economic dynamics of land and digital enclosures (alongside other limitations).[...]. Digital occupation is necessarily an expansive notion that uncovers how spatialities of inclusion and exclusion operate across logics and processes of neoliberal restructuring, legal frameworks, military violence, and modes of manipulation and exploitation at different scales” (Tawil-Souri, 2012, p. 31). From narrating people’s everyday sufferings and struggles to documenting Israeli violence against Palestinians and sharing different Palestinian narratives, the proliferation of the use of internet has impacted various actors both within and outside Palestine.

We center our analysis on the relevance of the so-called “Hashtag Activism,” where hashtags (#) are used as an organizational tool or “indexing system” on social media, facilitating dialogue, sorting topics and ranking trends (Xiong et al., 2019). They support participatory culture

(Jenkins, 2006) by allowing users to form groups around political causes and topics as well as specific historic events³ (Xiong, et al. 2019; Bonilla & Rosa, 2015). The participatory capacity of a hashtag might help explain how a specific hashtag “produces the experience of being ‘in the digital crowd’” (Postills & Pink, 2012, p. 10) by providing access both to the content and to the users discussing it (Jost et al., 2018).

This article is organized into seven parts. The following section introduces the contemporary forms of online activism in North Africa and the Middle East. Next, we critically analyze the relevance of overcoming the dichotomy between meanings and roles of online and offline activism within the cyber-colonial context in the West Bank and east Jerusalem. Then we explain our method before moving on to the core of our research, which is analyzing the role of the hashtag #SaveSheikhJarrah both within the context of history of Palestinian resistance and looking at new innovative forms of grassroots politics at the transnational level. We conclude reflecting on the main theoretical and empirical challenges in engaging with such a study at present, both academically and politically.

Setting the Scene: Discussing New and Old Spaces of Activism

Reflecting on the Arab Spring that swept across the region in late 2010, protesters began occupying both physical spaces in the streets and digital spaces online, driven by “outrage against blatant injustice and hope for change, and inspired by successful uprisings in other parts of the world” (Castells, 2012, p. 248). The actions of the protesters have mostly meant that the occupation of urban space as well as virtual space as a key resistance strategy, making these movements a continuous interaction between online and offline strategies. Often referred to as “networked social movements” (Castells, 2012; Diani & Mische, 2015) and as “social movement communities”

³ In the specificity of the Palestinian case, we refer to present day commemorative social media activity reflecting on past historic events such as for example the Nakba of 1948.

(Hassan & Staggenborg, 2015; Staggenborg, 1998), these forms of grassroots activism are characterized by have been networked in a multimodal way, decentralized and with local autonomous representations connecting different contexts globally, typically operating without a leader. However, as participants in transnational digital rights movements, Arab activists have often needed to confront different forms of digital repression on social media platforms (Alimardani & Elswah, 2021). A notable example of this is the online mobilization around the Sheikh Jarrah case, where the voices of key figures and their international supporters were particularly targeted through censorship and silencing.

In this context, understanding how online engagement influences offline action, and vice versa, has become essential to analyzing these emerging structures of political expression. Emphasizing the intertwined dynamics of activism both online and on the ground also encourages a rethinking of narratives that extend beyond conventional approaches to mobilization and protest. Khalili (2005, p. 127) refers to this as the “politics of cyberculture,” emphasizing its “communicative and cultural possibility” (Willis, 1990, p. 136, as cited in Khalili, 2005, p. 127) to drive political change. This potential is exemplified by the involvement of Palestinian youth in the #SaveSheikhJarrah movement. Across different contexts and practices, current scholarship has explored the existence of a complex, and sometimes controversial, relationship between online and offline activism (Abbas et al., 2022; Boulianne, 2018; Cervi & Marín-Lladó, 2022; Greijdanus et al., 2020; Slavina & Brym, 2020; Soler-i-Martí, Ferrer-Fons & Terren, 2020). Accordingly, the online-offline frame could be examined either as a reciprocal cooperation and reinforcement or as an interaction between one side of activism that can help strengthen the other side (Kim, et al., 2017; Krueger, 2006; Velasquez & LaRose, 2015). In any case, there is evidence that the two are connected and they may reinforce each other.

As a result, the integration of online and offline spheres has fostered internal debates and heightened awareness of the need to support simultaneous forms of activism, moving beyond the

concept of digital dualism (Greijdanus et al., 2020). In this way, these new forms of communication and technology have reshaped political action (Gerbaudo, 2012), opening up new opportunities for expression, especially for those on the margins of society. We argue that digital activism, combined with more traditional forms of social movements, creates a powerful synergy, particularly when addressing the struggles of oppressed and marginalized communities, as seen in the case of Palestinians living under ongoing Israeli military occupation and settler colonialism.

Offline and Online Narratives of Palestinian Resistance: Beyond Dichotomies

From this perspective, and delving deeper into the Palestinian context, internet usage in the West Bank and Gaza has significantly increased since the early 2000s (Abu-Shanab & Ramer, 2018; Aouragh, 2011; Khoury-Machool, 2010; Siapera et al., 2015; Tawil-Souri & Aouragh, 2014). It has become a primary tool for Palestinians to challenge the dominant Zionist narrative and empower themselves to tell their own stories of everyday resistance. This shift can be connected to the ongoing socio-political impacts on the Palestinian people following the collapse of the Oslo Accords, which led to fragmentation of families and neighborhoods, implementation of roadblocks and checkpoints, and intense periods of violence and Israeli military operations. Additionally, all landlines and later cellular signals, as well as internet, have gone through and been controlled by Israeli providers. The situation of cyber-colonialism has resulted in Palestinian internet use being subjected to surveillance, hacking of signals, and repeated destruction of internet and telecommunication infrastructure by the Israeli military (Tawil-Souri & Aouragh, 2014).

The increase in internet use and the associated development of cyber-colonialism along with digital occupation is not a coincidence. There is indeed a correlation between internet growth and political resilience. As a matter of fact, social movements and activists have mainly used internet to reach a broader audience and garner support, since the content they usually share does not make it through mainstream media channels. While traditional activism has tended to focus on mobilising

people, new forms of online activism have aimed at reaching as many people as possible and establishing a culture of community and solidarity (Cervi & Marin-Lladó, 2022; Fuchs, 2014; Li & Prasad, 2018; Qawasmi & Othman, 2016; Stein, 2012). Since social media are inherently participatory (Jenkins, 2006), they have enabled common Palestinian people to create their own social media accounts, share their own thoughts and opinions on a wide range of topics, comment on other users' ideas, and engage in public conversations. Hence both creators and users have been able to participate equally in shaping their discourses, thereby challenging the settler colonial status quo (Aouragh, 2008; Nahon, 2015; Xiong et al., 2019; Yousef, 2022).

Apart from #SaveSheikhJarrah, other hashtags such as #SaveSilwan, #SaveBeita, #SaveMasaferYatta have been circulating on social media in the last few years, referring to similar situations involving settler colonial activities, mainly forced evictions and dispossession of Palestinian families from their houses and land in east Jerusalem and the West Bank. Furthermore, some hashtags have addressed the settler colonial violence experienced by individuals, mainly Palestinian political prisoners detained in Israeli prisons such as #FreeAhmadManasara, #JusticeForSalah, #SaveIsraa, #FreeNofoz and #unchilding, and advocated for the end of their detention.⁴

These Palestinian digital platforms and acts of digital activism have provided a space to advocate for human rights. However, they have also become spaces for violations, including surveillance, breaches of privacy, and online violence such as harassment and hate speech. Such actions infringe upon the Palestinian's right to freedom of opinion and expression, as stated in Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UN, 2022). Although it has been declared at the international level that "human rights apply equally online and offline" (CoE, 2022; UN, 2022), power relations and asymmetric dynamics persist in Palestine and beyond in its online space

⁴ Israa Jaabis and Nofoz Hammad were both freed during the hostage exchange deal in November 2023 (Al Jazeera, 2023; Middle East Eye, 2023).

(Tawil-Souri & Aouragh, 2014). In fact, repressive Israeli policies, combined with the actions of social media companies, have frequently restricted and censored Palestinians' rights to freedom of expression (Taha, 2020).⁵ Palestinian internet activism has always depended on the realities on the ground, particularly regarding digital occupation and tools of surveillance (Kuntsman & Stein, 2015; Stein, 2012; Tawil-Souri & Aouragh, 2014, p. 128).

In contrast, new forms of digital activism have sparked what has been termed a “cyber intifada,” which, alongside traditional activism, has broadened “the spectrum of political involvement without sacrificing existing modes of recruitment, mobilization, or political hierarchies” (Aouragh, 2008, p. 12). In this context, online and offline activism can be considered as parallel paradigms that can merge to create a dynamic space for exchange at both the local and transnational levels, as we will examine in the case of #SaveSheikhJarrah.

Methods

In terms of methodology, we relied on a digital-ethnographic approach, with the aim of providing a broad overview of activists' perspectives and opinions. Specifically, we oriented ourselves towards the social-network analysis and netnography approach, as suggested by Postill & Pink (2012) and Kozinets (2010; 2015). We understand digital ethnography as an intensive and committed process involving phases of active involvement aimed at mapping the narratives of young activists and the cyberspatial challenges they face, while also reflecting deeply on ethical considerations. The experience as well as the output of a netnographic journey are characterized by “data creation rituals” that include “interviews, investigation, instigation, and insights” (Kozinets, 2015, p. 161). Such a characterization emphasizes the importance of collecting data from multiple

⁵ The contentious “Social Media Incitement Law” was unanimously approved by Israel’s Ministerial Committee on Legislation at the end of 2022. Israeli MPs assert that the readjusted law, previously referred to as the “Facebook Bil”, enables the government to delete user-generated content from social media websites like Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram that it deems to be “incitement” or “harmful”. The rule is stricter than in the past, enabling Israeli authorities to restrict content on any websites, including recently launched platforms, in addition to removing content from social media (7amleh, 2018; Nashif, 2022).

sources beyond text-based content, which are typically found on social media feeds. Additionally, we believe that it is critical to focus on collecting data from the “backstage”⁶ (Treré, 2020) of social media platforms, which refers to the more mundane (everyday) interactions with participants. This includes, for example, text and voice messages on messenger and other social media applications (e.g., WhatsApp and Instagram). The approach has allowed us to move beyond the public “frontstage” (Treré, 2020) of social media feeds.

As we explored diverse boundaries and dichotomies in several cases of grassroots activism, we positioned ourselves along the online-offline spectrum, mainly navigating between virtual chat rooms on social media platforms and public spaces through face-to-face interviews with young Palestinian activists in Portugal. Through this process, we, as researchers, experienced that the distinctions between virtual and non-virtual realms became increasingly blurred, reinforcing our main argument that online and offline worlds cannot be viewed as distinct dichotomies. As Kozinets points out, “online communities are not virtual. They are real communities populated with real people, which is why so many end up meeting in the flesh” (2010, p. 15). Our digital ethnography employed the analysis of selected Instagram posts, stories, and tweets of prominent activists, as well as their comment sections, which one could classify as virtual participant observations. Additionally, nine semi-structured interviews with Palestinian activists, aged 20-45, were conducted between May 2021 and December 2022, and were followed by prolonged everyday interactions on the platforms along with field-insights. Simultaneously, we considered several reports from the

⁶ Treré introduces the term “backstage” activism, in opposition to the “frontstage” activism, with the example of WhatsApp. As the frontstage is the public and visible space of online activism, “the backstage instead is where more banal, mundane, submerged, informal, emotionally driven daily interactions are performed. The concept is thus used as an entry point into the complexity and hybridity of activist practices that continuously navigate, merge and differently use both front and backstage spaces” (Treré, 2020, p. 3).

NGO 7amleh⁷ to examine our findings based on the activists' narratives, and especially those focusing on the challenges they experience from digital human rights violations.

On the day of the interview, some activists wanted to confirm that all their personal information would be entirely anonymized. However, others blocked us, never replied again, or cancelled on the day of the interview because they were “no longer confident about sharing [their] experiences” (quote from Instagram chat, person remains anonymous). This pattern clearly reflects the pervasive cyber-colonial structures and their subsequent effects on the online and offline behaviors of Palestinian activists. In terms of ethical challenges, we needed to consider where we could find ourselves on the public-private spectrum and what steps we needed to take to ensure the ethical feasibility of this research. Taking into account the sensitivity of this topic, we decided to use pseudonyms for all comments and interviews.

In the following section, we begin the analysis by situating the #SaveSheikhJarrah movement⁸ in its historical context, starting from 1954 to the most recent events of *habat ayaar* in May 2021.⁹ Thereafter, we discuss the grassroots dynamics behind the hashtag and its global relevance to the broader Palestinian cause through a detailed assessment of our findings, which explore different forms of this particular activism that transcend the online-offline dichotomy.

#SaveSheikhJarrah: A New Framework of the Palestinian Resistance

⁷ 7amleh (The Arab Centre for the Advancement of Social Media) is a Palestinian non-profit organization. 7amleh's aim is to provide Palestinians with access to a free, fair and safe online environment. The NGO takes on a monitoring position regarding digital rights and their violations, conducts regional and global advocacy campaigns, researches and explores issues related to Palestinian digital rights, and provides opportunities and training for Palestinian activists and civil society to strengthen their capacities in digital rights, digital activism and digital security (Qawasmi & Othman, 2016). For more information, see their website: <https://7amleh.org/>

⁸ We refer to the #SaveSheikhJarrah digital activism campaign as well as a movement. The term has not been introduced by us, but it is based on the narrative that the interviewees conveyed to us. Most of the time, when talking about the hashtag campaign, participants were talking about a movement.

⁹ The May uprising, also known as *Habat Ayar* (May uprising, but also Unity uprising), *Habat al Karama* (Dignity Uprising), or *Habat al Quds of 2021* (Jerusalem uprising) in Palestinian parlance, is one of the most recent and significant events in the Palestinian struggle against Israeli settler colonialism. These spontaneous demonstrations that took place in Jerusalem and other Palestinian towns and cities within Israel marked a new chapter in the Palestinian struggle (Nasara, 2021, p. 330).

In order to geographically, historically, culturally and politically analyze the neighborhood of Sheikh Jarrah, we need to keep a perspective of its relationship to Al-Quds and other areas of the occupied Palestinian territories. The Sheikh Jarrah neighborhood is the strategic borderland between west Jerusalem (Israel) and east Jerusalem (Palestinian Authority), and further northern cities in the West Bank including Ramallah. In gaining control of Sheikh Jarrah, Israel would take over Damascus Gate, which consequently would isolate the area and other northern neighborhoods from Al-Quds, and importantly Al-Aqsa and significant Christian sites (Nasara, 2021; WhatsApp chat with Nura, 7 and 10 August 2022). As described by one interviewee:

There [in Sheikh Jarrah] are museums, a lot of culture and history, and when you walk or drive through the neighborhood you will also realize that some parts of it are situated on a hill, and I believe that this is also part of why Israel wants to take the neighborhood. [...] Usually, their settlements are built on the top of the hills, and I feel like Sheikh Jarrah is like that as well. Its location gives them [Israel] the power to take over most of east-Jerusalem. (WhatsApp chat with Nura, 10 August 2022).

In 1954, 28 Palestinian families were forced to leave their homes in the coastal cities of Haifa and Yafa and relocate to the Sheikh Jarrah neighborhood, which was under Jordanian rule. However, once Jordan lost its control of Palestine following the *Naksa*¹⁰, and east Jerusalem was occupied by the Israeli authority, the “land dispute,” also defined as “robbery” by some scholars and interviewees, in Sheikh Jarrah, began (Alsaafin, 2021; Eghbariah & Khoury, 2022; El-Kurd, 2022; Nasara, 2021).

In 1972, Jewish settlers mainly from the settler organization *Nahalat Shimon* started to file lawsuits against these Palestinian families residing in Sheikh Jarrah, claiming their biblical right to the promised land, as well as arguing that the land was originally owned by a Jewish Trust

¹⁰ The *Naksa* (Arabic for “Setback”), it has been commonly referred to as the “Six-Day War” in the Western world. In June 1967, it dramatically altered the Middle East map once more, changing the Palestinian remaining native land into Israeli occupied territory. About 300.000 Palestinians were forced to flee their country, some of whom became refugees for the second time (Qumsiyeh, 2011; Pappé, 2017).

(Alsaafin, 2021). Contrary to those arguments, there are several archival documents proving that Israeli authorities had to abide by the 1968 agreement between Jordan and the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East - UNRWA (Alsaafin, 2021; Nasara, 2021). However, “Israeli courts - judge, jury and legislation - are all in the service of the Jewish settlers” (Alsaafin, 2021). From such a historical background, it is possible to understand how another peak of violence was reached in May 2021, when on-ground protests in Sheikh Jarrah brought together thousands of Palestinians, including youth and women’s delegations, students, as well as international activists and news agencies - despite Israeli violence against these demonstrators.

The historical perspective also helps us understand how the paradigm we propose as “beyond the online-offline dichotomy” emerged with the rise of the #SaveSheikhJarrah hashtag. The grassroots action was sparked by two of Sheikh Jarrah’s residents, the el-Kurd twins, Muna and Mohammed, who have since gained global recognition as activists (Yousef, 2022). They have gained a global following reaching millions of people for their live streaming on ground reports, and for spreading awareness of the settler colonial brutality they have directly experienced and witnessed in the neighborhood as well as within their own home (El-Kurd, 2021a; El-Kurd, 2021b; Saba, 2021; Sabbagh-Khoury, 2022; Eghbariah & Khoury, 2022). The dynamics of the hashtag campaign during the May uprising in 2021 soon became clear, as stressed by the following statement:

The hashtag #SaveSheikhJarrah was present from the moment the threat of eviction arose again. Sheikh Jarrah was unique in that sense, that this time 500 Palestinians in one neighborhood were being evicted all at once. This was also happening at the same time as the holy month of Ramadan, with “clashes” rising in aggression and provocation towards Palestinians at Al Aqsa. [...] However, the peak of the hashtag being viral and seeing it on a global platform was in mid May of 2021, where all these issues combined

and Gaza was also brought into the mix.¹¹ These momentums and their magnitude was the beginning of the world paying attention. (Salma, 20 June 2022, written interview via questionnaire).

Our digital ethnography and engagement with activists bring forth how #SaveSheikhJarrah has propelled the Palestinian cause to a level of attention never achieved in the last few decades. Prior, when it was possible to learn about Palestine, it was mainly through mainstream media and in most cases by means of biased news (Philo & Berry, 2004, 2011). With the increasing use of social media, it has become possible to provide direct access to Palestinian narratives, voices and faces related to the cause, while openly exposing Israeli settler colonial violence. The shift has helped move conversations away from the typical rhetorical phrase “it is complicated...” (Salma, 20 June 2022, written interview via questionnaire).

The hashtag #SaveSheikhJarrah is particularly remarkable for how it initially aimed to draw attention to the local events in Sheikh Jarrah but then has quickly represented a microcosm of the broader experiences across historic Palestine since 1948.¹² Internationally framed as a “real estate dispute” (El Kurd, 2022), the case of Sheikh Jarrah represents the essence of ongoing Zionist settler colonialism, which began at the end of the 20th century when Zionist settlers arrived in the land of historic Palestine. Since then they have confronted the native Arab Palestinian population by means of territorial conquest, land dispossession and a logic of elimination (Pappé, 2006; Veracini, 2006; Wolfe, 1999).

¹¹ In May 2021, the protests in Sheikh Jarrah were used by the Israeli government as justification for violent raids against Palestinian civilians at the Al-Aqsa Mosque Compound and a new bombing campaign on the Gaza Strip. See also footnote 7.

¹² The year 1948 represented, on the one hand, the establishment of the Jewish state of Israel and, on the other, the *Nakba* (the “Catastrophe” in Arabic) that affected Palestinians through the loss of their homes and dispossession of their lands, forcing them to become refugees, mainly within the land of historic Palestine and in the neighbouring Arab countries. According to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), these refugees were about 750,000 persons in 1948 and 5,9 million at present.

In the next section, we discuss the significant position this hashtag has gained trying to connect online and offline struggles, and the meanings it has assumed for the younger generation of Palestinians as well as for international activists who stand in solidarity with the Palestinian cause.

Towards “An Ongoing, Digital Intifada”

We now present an overview of the significance and impact of this type of campaign, both for an internal Palestinian audience and transnationally, before delving deeper into our analysis of the “beyond the online-offline dichotomy” as demonstrated by the #SaveSheikhJarrah movement. Three main goals have been evident with #SaveSheikhJarrah: first, countering the Zionist narrative and the increasing normalization of the ongoing Israeli military occupation; second, raising awareness and educating the international community on the Palestinian cause; and third, fostering a connection to the homeland and Palestinian resistance history.

First, the refutation of entrenched Zionist narratives and myths emerged as an overall and central issue. As Hancox (2019) argues, storytelling represents a core dynamic within social movements, especially for social groups who are often represented by others. In this case, a participant highlighted the significance of achieving Palestinian autonomy and agency in the digital sphere: “It means that we can advocate our own voices and stories and not wait for anyone to do it for us” (Farah, 5 July 2022, written interview via questionnaire). Almost all of the participants were persuaded about the efficacy of social media as a medium for disseminating the Palestinian narrative:

[...] our vehement defense of our cause, our voices, our land and each other is the most unwavering and consistent activism we have had available to us, without that we would falter. Using the hashtag meant exposure, exposure meant access to all information,

information meant knowledge and shares and this culminated in a recipe to global reach and engagement. (Salma, 20 June 2022, written interview via questionnaire).

This has also meant increasing the opportunity to expose contexts that have been largely dominated by the Zionist narrative or that have not previously been touched by such a debate. In this way, a narrative of resistance has been developed and extended beyond the boundaries that historic activism had managed to reach in the past decades.

Second, the fundamental purpose of participants' social media engagement through the hashtag was to raise international awareness and educate others about the Palestinian cause. This is, in part, a response to the misleading image of Palestinians that has been perpetuated by Western media for decades. In addition, it has grown increasingly difficult for Palestinian journalists to cover the news (Philo & Berry, 2004, 2011), due to the pervasive presence of the Israeli occupation and the increasing persecution, and even killing, of journalists. A recent example is the tragic case of Palestinian-American Al Jazeera journalist Shireen Abu Akleh, who was killed in May 2022 (Ayoub, 2023). All participants shared similar perspectives regarding the distorted image of Palestinians portrayed in mainstream media outlets worldwide. In contrast, through #SaveSheikhJarrah, a powerful Palestinian narrative suddenly emerged and resonated on a global scale.

Indeed, as Kareem asserts, Palestinians (particularly the El-Kurd twins) were seen on global news networks in a way that was unprecedented, "using the correct terminology¹³ to describe the plight of the Palestinian people" (Kareem, 15 June 2022, written interview via questionnaire). The hashtag sparked multimodal approaches to raising awareness internationally, ranging from social media spaces to infiltrating global news outlets and provoking everyday conversations on the street

¹³ In detail, Kareem refers to the use of vocabulary such as "occupation", "settler colonialism" and "ethnic cleansing", instead of what mainstream media usually refer to as a "conflict" (15 June 2022, written interview via questionnaire). On this, see also: Ilan Pappé, Lorenzo Veracini, Patrick Wolfe.

(Kareem, 15 June 2022, written interview via questionnaire). This goal becomes particularly relevant in supporting our main argument about the inextricable link between online and offline activism. It demonstrates how social media, and in this specific case hashtags, can play an active role in the everyday life of common people and help start new discussions around contemporary matters.

Third, the internet enables diasporic Palestinian communities to reconnect with their homeland, providing a virtual means for crossing borders (Khalili, 2005; Tawil Souri & Aouragh, 2014). Salma (written interview via questionnaire, 20 June 2022) and Lina (Lisbon, 21 June 2022) discussed how the story of Sheikh Jarrah and the outpouring of support on social media brought Palestinians together, whether they live in the occupied Palestinian territories or in the diaspora around the world, and reinforced their unity. They explained:

Behind each hashtag there is a story, a story of resilience and truth that has been kept silent for many years. [...] The story of Sheikh Jarrah captures the situation in Palestine for the past 70 years. It brought back memories of the Intifada and the unity of Palestinians, Christians and Muslims standing shoulder to shoulder in the face of the oppressor. (Lina, Lisbon, 21 June 2022).

From this quote, it is evident that another vital point of this analysis is the urgency of linking the present with the past. The events surrounding the Sheikh Jarrah movement (and #SaveSheikhJarrah) are not merely a temporal moment, rather they reflect a “microcosm” of the ongoing Nakba (Kareem, 15 June 2022, written interview via questionnaire). As dispossession and ethnic cleansing continue in Sheikh Jarrah, so does the resistance, which is inspired, connected, facilitated, and activated by new tools and mechanisms that challenge the settler colonial apparatus affecting people’s daily lives both in Palestine and in the diaspora. As Kareem explains: “#SaveSheikhJarrah

was and is an ongoing Intifada, a different form of uprising, a digital Intifada, from the Palestinian perspective, #SaveSheikhJarrah is a continuation of the struggle” (Kareem, 15 June 2022, written interview via questionnaire).

Beyond the Online-Offline Dichotomy

We interrogate the idea of online-offline dichotomy by delving deeper into hashtag activism and grasping the delicate everyday meanings behind the underlying perception of digital resistance that some Palestinian activists have adopted. As we discussed already in the first section of the article, it now becomes clear via the lens of #SaveSheikhJarrah and the interviewees’ experiences that online and offline worlds of activism are not separate, but deeply linked. At this point, we want to emphasize the necessity of understanding the “beyond the online-offline dichotomy” framework within a broader spectrum that encompasses highly nuanced and diverse methods of connecting, which can also vary over time as social media platforms evolve. This interconnection can be defined as a symbiotic relationship between the two spheres that are in continuous dialogue, relying on each other to achieve their objectives.

The main perspective we identified through the lens of #SaveSheikhJarrah is a symbiotic relationship between online and offline activism, reflecting the interaction between on-ground action and online activities. Hanan points out:

Each type of activism has its importance. They are complementing each other. I don’t think one is enough without the other. And I think it is that way, because each one of them has a different effect and is done for a different reason. Everything we do is part of a puzzle. People need to remember that. (Hanan, 23 December 2022, Zoom interview).

The metaphorical use of “puzzle” effectively illustrates the concept of transcending the online/offline dichotomy. Various acts, whether online or offline, can occur independently, but at specific touchpoints they can be connected with each other, or even merged, contributing to a wider panorama. This can manifest in numerous ways: from the straightforward act of sharing (visual) footage of a protest on social media to the more indirect approach of a participant conveying the enthusiasm and motivation gained from being in a real crowd - whether at a protest or community gathering, or other types of activism, as highlighted by one of our participants:

I swear everybody needs to hear a vibrating energy and sound around them that is so full of rage and so full of focus, because if you don't feel that then there are so many things that you are not ready for. It gives you this sense of releasing. This rage is good when you do it collectively. If you hear this rage on the street [during a protest] it is being poured back into the cause. Does this make sense? [...] We are hoping, that this voice of rage in our streets, gets to *Falasteen* (Palestine in Arabic), so they know we feel the same way they do, you know to show that they have people who stand with them against this injustice. It is taking a little bit of energy so we can keep going. (Hanan, 23 December 2022, Zoom interview).

We encountered widely varying assessments of the impact of the online and offline environments when considered in isolation. Broadly speaking, majority of the activists emphasized the extraordinary attention garnered by #SaveSheikhJarrah, stressing the far-reaching dynamics and aspirations that Palestinian online activism carries with it. One participant indicated, “#SaveSheikhJarrah is a very significant event in the Palestinian struggle, we should not underestimate the power of social media in shaping events on the ground” (Kareem, 15 June 2022, written interview via questionnaire). However, several voices urged for a more critical examination of the hashtag, as it often neglected (indirectly) to acknowledge and communicate the struggles and

risks faced by those who record footage on the ground, including local journalists and individuals directly impacted by the expulsions in Sheikh Jarrah. Here is an excerpt on this:

Its purpose is to make sure nothing important goes unreported. My duty was to strengthen the campaign with actual reporting from the ground, to provide it with content. [...] Today the # is a means to collate a large trove of material under one subject and perhaps control a narrative by flooding the hashtag with useful material that anyone can click on if they search for the term. [However,] tweeting on its own is not worth anything. As for activism on the ground it can be strengthened and amplified by tweeting. (Tabeed, 5 July 20022, written interview via questionnaire).

As mentioned by several participants, the way through which social media can intensify what is happening on the ground stresses the powerful connection that exists between online activism and real life. This was clear in the interviews we had, in particular in the initial ice-breaking phase when we invited the participants to briefly describe themselves, their hometowns and the places where they have lived, as well as how they first got involved in online activism; but then, the discussion rapidly turned highly political:

There is a story that happened with me and my brother: So, when we were in Jordan, we wanted to visit Palestine, through the Jordanian border. At the Jordanian border everything was fine, then we went to the Israeli border. I felt it from the beginning: There is a no way in. Even though I have a [European] passport, they interrogated me and my brother and have spoken to us for hours and hours and hours and made us wait. I spent there 14 hours just at the border. So, this hurts of course. It made me see my country from the border, which I have never done in my life. It made me feel closer to my country. [...] And of course this [experience at the border] is part of my motivation. (Omar, Lisbon, 8 June 2022).

Whether in the diaspora, physically in Palestine, at the border, or in a virtual sphere, daily acts of dehumanization related to the Israeli settler colonial status quo were almost always the focus of our conversation. This focus became especially evident in the most mundane activities of everyday life, such as speaking with relatives in Gaza via the internet, crossing the Qalandiya checkpoint¹⁴ daily on the way to school (Nura, Zoom interview, 7 July 2022), and being denied entry to one's home country (Omar, Lisbon, 8 June 2022). These experiences have increasingly compelled them to advocate online.

As outlined, the digital resistance around #SaveSheikhJarrah has brought to the surface the meanings that this type of internet activism holds for the younger generation of Palestinians. At the same time, it uncovers the many mechanisms of the Israeli cyber-occupation that are increasingly spreading on social media, as will be discussed in the following subsection.

Censorship and Concerns Surrounding the Cyber-Occupation

Abu-Lughod's perspective on viewing resistance as a diagnostic tool for understanding hegemonic power structures (1990) is essential when examining the virtual world. As young Palestinians are forming a "virtual army" (Tabeed, 5 July 2022, written interview via questionnaire), by organizing "digital storms"¹⁵ (Palestinian Youth Movement, 2022), they indirectly uncover the mechanisms and tools of the Zionist digital occupation that has increased its targeted censorship against the Palestinian narrative (Tawil-Souri, 2012; Tawil-Souri & Aouragh, 2014). In the

¹⁴ After the 2nd Intifada, the number of checkpoint installations grew exponentially. Around 100 of them operate officially inside the West Bank. However, there are more than 500 informal checkpoints. Not only do these geographical barriers influence the mobility of Palestinian natives, and complement the Israeli system of oppression and control, they abuse them psychologically, by their unpredictable nature (Minca & Rijke, 2018). The Qalandiya checkpoint is the biggest military checkpoint, connecting Jerusalem and the West Bank.

¹⁵ Throughout the events of May 2021, the so-called "Twitter storms" or also "digital storms" were organized by various groups, which meant mobilizing people to participate in a mass-tweet event in order to influence the algorithm and for specific hashtags to become trending hashtags, primarily on Twitter, but also on other social media platforms (Palestinian Youth Movement, 2022).

specificity of #SaveSheikhJarrah, between May 6 and May 19 of 2021, 500 instances of digital human rights violations were documented by 7amleh, of which 50% occurred on Instagram, 35% on Facebook, and 15% on Twitter (7amleh, 2021). The most common infractions fell under the following categories: removing content (such as stories or posts), restricting access to accounts (such as that users cannot use their accounts for a while), or even closing accounts entirely. Other less traceable restrictions might include the limitation of story views, or for example “shadowbans”¹⁶, as Mohammed El-Kurd notes and asserts in a tweet. Excerpts from the respective comment section confirm the extent of this type of restriction:

My story views on IG [Instagram] went down from 250k to 90k (El-Kurd, 2021).

@userA: It is so upsetting that every Post gets censored!!!! On FB Twitter and Instagram. We have to find an alternative platform

@userB: ...and it isn't just you, Mohammed, all of the people I follow who post on Palestine have disappeared from my feed :(

@userC: ALWAYS happens when I mention Palestine!

(Comments retrieved from the Twitter thread, Note: wording in comments has been slightly changed due to reasons of anonymity)

All our participants mentioned the term “shadowban” at least once during their interviews. If they have not experienced this kind of censorship personally, they shared accounts of similar experiences reported by close friends:

It became clear what content or how you used the content would subject you to censorship or shadowbanning and how the algorithm supported that, so there became a wide push to advise others on how to navigate this and avoid this impacting your

¹⁶ If social media accounts are about to be shut down (due to “violating the community guidelines”), users are usually given a warning. With the mentioned less traceable restrictions, as the shadowbans, users are not notified. Usually, this restriction is characterized by the decrease of story views, as well as by the followers, as they cannot search for the profiles anymore, or for example do not see the account's posts and stories in the feed.

posting. [...] Sheikh Jarrah created a guide-book on how to navigate this new form of activism and how to reap its fruits. (Salma, 20 June 2022, written interview via questionnaire).

In contrasting the actual censorship and silencing of Palestinian narratives on social media, the interconnection between the online and offline worlds becomes increasingly evident. The ongoing Israeli military occupation of Palestine infiltrates their private spaces, their homes and smartphone screens - through the digital realm. Moreover, this shows how these activists have been able to create a foundation to counter online censorship and inspire new perspectives that can bolster further struggles and causes, beyond just the Palestinian issue.

From this angle, several participants have mentioned either how they avoided using hashtags in some situations, or advocated online anonymously, as they were afraid of “being falsely smeared due to being vocal about Palestinian rights” (Dima, 17 June 2022, written interview via questionnaire). Another interviewee went one step further and described her everyday experiences when dealing with the cyber-occupation:

It makes you feel as if the smallest things are not allowed. It is like a tactic that they [Israel] use to make you fear, what you are going to post. And sometimes my Instagram goes crazy: it doesn't allow me to send audios or photos, it doesn't allow me to even like stories or posts and I am going crazy. And crazy not just because it is frustrating, crazy because you start being paranoid and that every little twitch and thing that happens on Instagram, means that your account is about to be shut down. These are mind games really... This is their goal...(Hanan, 23 December 2022, Zoom interview).

These statements provide a glimpse into the cyber-colonial system and its mechanisms, both online and offline. This also demonstrates once more that our conceptual framework of going beyond the

online-offline dichotomy is extremely relevant, particularly for examining the specificity of the Israeli settler colonial context. In Palestinian daily life, psychological violence spreads to the internet, fueled by the unpredictability of which “moves” are permissible in the cyber-colonial landscape (Tawil-Souri, 2009a).

Conclusion

This article discusses the significant interconnections between online and offline Palestinian activism and their related forms of resistance, questioning the mainstream idea of an existing dichotomy between these activist practices and approaches. We argue that since the early 2000s, the role of the internet in the everyday resistance of the Palestinian people has offered a new scenario worth exploring in both academic and political contexts, alongside the historic role of the popular resistance movement. Under the current system of “cyber-colonialism” (Tawil-Souri and Aouragh, 2014) and “digital occupation” (Tawil-Souri, 2012), we explore the transnational relevance of the hashtag #SaveSheikhJarrah as a critical case of political activity that highlights the enhanced interconnection between events occurring on the streets and those taking place online. Adopting an interdisciplinary approach that takes into account three major areas of study, including social movements, communication, and Palestine studies, we aim to reflect on the innovative potential of hashtags, which activists often consider as movements in their own right, as seen in the unique case of #SaveSheikhJarrah. These digital movements can contribute significantly to advancing the Palestinian cause. This also entails recognizing culture and communication as central analytical tools for achieving social justice in marginalized contexts, both in theory and praxis (Pal, 2023). As the Palestinian case shows, these insights can be extended to other global contexts as well.

We advance three main themes that are at the core of our work. First, and in dialogue with contemporary scholarship (Abu-Shanab & Ramer, 2018; Alimardani & Elswah, 2021; Aouragh, 2008, 2011; Khalili, 2005; Khoury-Machool, 2010; Kuntsman & Stein, 2015; Qawasmi & Othman, 2016; Saba, 2021; Siapera et al., 2015; Stein, 2012; Taha, 2020; Tawil-Souri and Aouragh, 2014), we uncover current Palestinian digital activism in its diverse forms through a multilevel approach, both within Palestine and in the transnational context. The critical engagement with digital activism brings forth the importance of dynamic linkages not only between online and offline frameworks, but also inside and outside Palestine, while always considering an intergenerational lens of analysis.

Second, we discuss #SaveSheikhJarrah as a clear example of the ongoing normalization of the Israeli military occupation and settler colonial project, both within the Israeli-Palestinian context and at an international level. This perspective offers a critical reflection aimed at addressing the literature gap on “*Palestine as communication, across borders and beyond territory,*” as suggested by Dina Matar (2022). In response, and by contributing to a space that amplifies Palestinian online voices, we explore #SaveSheikhJarrah campaign in greater depth, assessing it through our proposed lens of overcoming the online-offline dichotomy. By integrating our research in the arena of Palestinian cultural and communication studies (Ghabra & Afifi, 2022; Matar, 2022; Tawil-Souri, 2009b), we consider cultural and media expressions always in connection with domains of power and resistance. We illustrate both the activist and communicative opportunities this hashtag has offered in the peculiarity of the Palestinian cause. In doing so, we also highlight the significant potential for future studies that go beyond Palestine to navigate these new forms of activism and interrelated struggles in other contexts across the world.

Third, we also contribute to the ongoing transnational debate on the urgency of embracing diverse avenues of everyday resistance, where Palestine is examined through a decolonial lens that

centers Palestinian voice and narratives. This means decoloniality as a necessary step towards the construction of alternatives able to bring down oppressive structures that have characterized the entire history of the Palestinian people. Within cultural and communication studies, such an approach is framed as an “existential necessity for communication studies” (Ghabra and Afifi, 2022, p. 357). #SaveSheikhJarrah, not only as a digital tool but more broadly as a movement, has successfully mobilized Palestinian youth and activists worldwide in solidarity with the Palestinian people, reinvigorating the Palestinian cause.

Overall, this work has crystallized the relevance of viewing hashtag activism beyond its online-offline dichotomy. By employing this contemporary lens and by highlighting the significance of generational dynamics, we offer novel perspectives on the everyday acts of resistance and the increasing challenges, online and in the field, within the Palestinian cyber-colonial reality. Specifically, by examining #SaveSheikhJarrah as a movement, we have explored these dimensions through our engagement with the digital landscape and the narratives of Palestinian activists. Simultaneously, we have uncovered, through a diagnostic lens, the far-reaching mechanisms of the settler colonial project as it plays out on the internet.

To grasp the transformative potential of hashtags in our contemporary digital era, the case of Sheikh Jarrah - both locally and transnationally - has allowed us to uncover the underlying meanings behind them. As one participant noted, the #SaveSheikhJarrah movement, beyond its powerful mobilizing capacity, has transformed “into a corridor to understanding the Palestinian cause and decades of occupation” (Salma, 20 June 2022, written interview via questionnaire) and has showcased the interconnections between various forms of Palestinian everyday resistance - both online and offline.

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