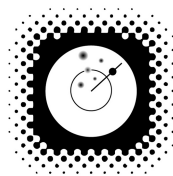


Internet Filtering in

Gaza and the West Bank



OpenNet Initiative

Overview

Access to Internet in the Palestinian territories remains relatively open, although social filtering of sexually explicit content has recently been implemented in Gaza. Internet in the West Bank remains almost entirely unfiltered, save for a single news Web site that was banned for about six months. Media freedom is constrained in Gaza and the West Bank by the political upheaval and internal conflict as well as by the Israeli occupation and forces.

Background

In 1993, the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) and Israel signed the Declaration of Principles on Interim Self-Government Arrangements (also known as the Oslo Accords), providing for a five-year interim government until permanent settlement is reached.¹ Since then, however, a peace agreement has not been reached due to disputes over major issues such as the status of Jerusalem, the right of return of Palestinian refugees, and Jewish settlements in the West Bank. As a

result, the West Bank continues to be occupied by Israel, while Israel ended their occupation of the Gaza Strip in 2005.²

In 2006 Hamas, an Islamic political party and armed resistance movement, won 42.9 percent of the vote in the Palestinian parliamentary elections,³ resulting in violent clashes between Hamas and Fatah, the center-left Palestinian political party that remains in power in the West Bank today. As a result of Hamas' victory and its subsequent rejection by several countries as a legitimate governing body, a series of sanctions were implemented, which the World Bank reports further widened the economic gap between Gaza and the West Bank.⁴ According to the CIA Factbook, "high population density, limited land access, and strict internal and external security controls have kept economic conditions in the Gaza Strip even more degraded than in the West Bank."⁵

Human Rights Watch blames the human rights crisis in the Israeli-occupied territories on Israeli's seizure of the Gaza

RESULTS AT A GLANCE

Filtering	No evidence of filtering	Suspected filtering	Selective filtering	Substantial filtering	Pervasive filtering
Political	●				
Social				●	
Conflict/security	●				
Internet tools	●				
Other factors	Low	Medium	High	Not applicable	
Transparency	●				
Consistency		●			

KEY INDICATORS

		worst	best
GNI per capita, PPP (current international \$).....	2,056		
Life expectancy at birth (years).....	72.9		
Literacy rate (% of people age 15+).....	92.4		
Human development index (out of 177).....	106		
Rule of law (percentile).....	22		
Voice and accountability (percentile).....	10		
Digital opportunity index (out of 181).....	98		
Internet users (% of population).....	6.7		

Strip and restrictions on freedom of movement in the occupied territories, the indiscriminate firing of rockets on Israeli towns by Hamas, and on the “serious abuses” by the Palestinian factions Fatah and Hamas of each other’s supporters.⁶

Although international watchdogs regard the media as being generally more independent than in much of the Arab World, self-censorship is prevalent, as Palestinian and foreign journalists working in the Palestinian territories are exposed to restrictions by both the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) and the Palestinian factions.⁷

Internet in Gaza and the West Bank

The effects of the occupation, including Israel’s severe closure policies, have led to a consistent decline in the socioeconomic conditions of Palestinians, creating underdevelopment, unemployment, and general poverty, particularly in Gaza. Despite these challenges, however, both the West Bank and Gaza continue to have two of the most literate populations in the world – a factor in the surprisingly high number of Internet users for a conflict zone, with Internet penetration and connectivity rates (approximately 6.7 percent as of 2008⁸) that far exceed that of other conflict zones.⁹

Established by the Palestinian Authority, PaITel is the main telecom

operator in the Palestinian territories, and provides Internet services including wireless, dialup/ISDN and ADSL connections, FrameRelays and leased line connections, as well as Internet Web hosting and domain name services.¹⁰ A subsidiary of PaITel, Hadara, is a facilities-based ISP that offers its customers both ADSL and Internet access. It additionally provides access to its Internet facilities to approximately 20-25 Palestinian ISPs, all of which act as resellers of Hadara’s capacity due to their own lack of infrastructure or facilities.¹¹

The telecom market in the Palestinian territories faces a number of challenges. For example, there are restrictions on what equipment can be imported. Businesses reported that Israel does not allow the importation of equipment such as GPS devices for security reasons.¹² Palestine does not have a direct connection to the Internet infrastructure, and Internet services go through an Israeli service provider.¹³

A recent poll found that 96 percent of the Palestinians have a telephone, 57 percent live in a household with a computer, and 32 percent have Internet access.¹⁴

Life under the occupation and in an often-violent environment where there are restrictions on movement has produced conditions for homegrown online activism

and non-violent resistance.¹⁵ Some Palestinians have organized online campaigns in support of current U.S. President Barack Obama.¹⁶ Interestingly, some Palestinian computer engineers and Israeli entrepreneurs manage to defy the barriers between the Palestinian territories and Israel and jointly establish software businesses using the Internet as a means of communication.¹⁷

On the other hand, Palestinians and Israelis have accused each other of hacking into each other's Web sites. In August 2009, Israeli political party Kadima's Web site was hacked, and images of wounded Palestinians were posted to it, forcing Kadima to temporarily shut down the site.¹⁸ In June of 2008, Israeli hackers were accused of hacking into several Palestinian sites, including that of Arab nationalist party Balad, adding the Israeli flag and lyrics to the Israeli national anthem.¹⁹

Internet cafés and other entertainment outlets in Gaza have been attacked by radical Islamic groups under the pretext that they corrupt the morality of young Palestinians.²⁰

Legal and regulatory framework

Media in the Palestinian territories is regulated by the 1995 Press Law, which states, "no security agency has any right to question, interrogate, detain, incarcerate or arrest a journalist on matters pertaining to his work."²¹ However, according to press freedom organization Article 19, the law imposes "extensive restrictions and conditions on freedom of the press" and includes provisions that are not "compatible with Palestine's international obligations to respect and protect freedom of expression."²²

Press freedom watchdog groups have reported various violations against the media, particularly in Gaza, a situation

worsened by the conflict between Hamas and Fatah. The Palestinian Center for Development and Media Freedoms (MADA) says, "[t]his deterioration of the freedom of media in the Palestinian territories is a reflection of the continued tension between the Fatah and Hamas movements."²³ Reported violations include arrests, arbitrary detentions of journalists, and confiscation of their equipment.²⁴ Reporters Without Borders says that journalists in the Palestinian territories are "paying the price of the political tension between the different Palestinian factions."²⁵

In July 2009, Al Jazeera Television's West Bank office was suspended from work by the Palestinian Authority for allegedly promoting and publishing false news. The Authority's decision to suspend and sue the TV channel came after the TV station broadcast a statement made by a senior Palestinian political figure who accused the Palestinian Authority Leader Mahmoud Abbas and a former security official of complicity in poisoning late Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat.²⁶ The authority cancelled the suspension decision later in the month but said it would still file a lawsuit against the TV network.²⁷

Additionally, press freedom watchdogs have reported violations committed by the Israeli occupying forces against media workers in the Palestinian territories where journalists and have been detained and harassed by the Israeli forces.²⁸ Media freedom advocacy group The Palestinian Center for Development and Media Freedoms has called upon the international community to put pressure on the government of Israel to cease its violations of freedom of speech in Palestine.²⁹

The Palestine Journalists Syndicate (PJS) has said that, "Israeli forces have targeted vehicles and journalists who were

clearly identified as such, with 'Press' or 'TV' markings."³⁰ Following Israel's offensive against Hamas in Gaza in January 2009, the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) accused Israel of targeting Palestinian media and banning foreign media from accessing Gaza.³¹ IFJ has also condemned Israel for attacking a television station in Gaza during the conflict.³²

In regard to telecom regulations, the Ministry of Telecommunications and Information Technologies (MTIT) was established to create a legal and legislative framework, and implement policies and procedures for fair and transparent partnerships, in order to build "the information society in Palestine as a tool for economic and social development."³³ On the other hand, the Palestinian National Internet Naming Authority (PNINA) was established in 2003 "to formulate the necessary registration policies for the .ps domain and to set appropriate policies for enhancing Internet usage in Palestine."³⁴

Surveillance

ONI found no evidence of Internet surveillance within the Palestinian territories.

ONI testing results

ONI conducted 2008-2009 Internet filtering testing using PalTel from Gaza and the West Bank. Initial tests showed no evidence of technical filtering from either location.

In May 2008, news sites reported that Hamas officials had asked PalTel to block access to pornographic Web sites within Gaza, citing an aim to "protect the Palestinian community from cultural pollution." Gaza's Ministry of Communications reported that PalTel had agreed to the arrangement.³⁵

Approximately one month after this development, ONI ran new tests via PalTel in Gaza and the West Bank. While results from within the West Bank continued to show no evidence of filtering, tests run within Gaza revealed that PalTel had indeed implemented filtering targeting sexually explicit Web sites.

Only one Web site has ever been known to be filtered within the West Bank. In November 2008, online news site Electronic Intifada (electronicintifada.net) reported that the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank had blocked access to Gaza-based news Web site Donia al-Watan (www.alwatanvoice.com) "because of the site's reporting on widespread corruption among the entourage of PA President Mahmoud Abbas."³⁶ The site added that users trying to access the blocked Web site encounter the message saying, "We are sorry, the site was blocked based on attorney General instructions [sic]."³⁷

ONI verified that access to the Web site Donia al-Watan was in fact blocked from the West Bank, but that the site remained accessible for users from Gaza. The Web site reported in April 2009 that Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas had given instructions to the Prosecutor General to lift the ban on accessing the site.³⁸

Conclusion

Despite their deteriorating economies and deficient infrastructures, Gaza and the West Bank have Internet penetration and connectivity rates that far exceed those of other conflict zones. However, Palestinians have access to a fractured Web: users in Gaza are prevented from accessing sexually explicit content, while users in the West Bank have largely unfettered access to the Internet.

Although only a single news site has ever been reported blocked in the West

Bank, this censorship and the social filtering in Gaza indicate that Hamas and the Palestinian Authority have limited tolerance to certain types of online content.

Overall, media freedom continues to be constrained in Gaza and the West Bank by political upheaval and internal conflict as well as by the Israeli occupation and forces.

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