



The Attacks on Palestinian Digital Rights

Progress report, May 6-19, 2021

Over the past two weeks, 7amleh - The Arab Center for the Advancement of Social Media has worked to document and respond to the digital rights violations occurring during the 2021 Israeli attacks on Gaza, Palestinians in mixed cities in Israel and forcible displacement of Palestinians in East Jerusalem as a part of ongoing ethnic cleansing of Palestinians. There has been a dramatic increase of censorship of Palestinian political speech online, coupled with increasing examples of hate speech and incitement against Palestinians including organizing of violent Israeli lynch mobs online. This pattern of censoring Palestinian and Arabic political speech, while allowing hate speech directed towards Palestinians and Arabs to remain online, is exasperating the human rights violations already occurring on the ground and is preventing people from exercising their fundamental rights and documenting violations.

Palestinians are using social media at high rates to protect and defend their human rights

Since the beginning of May Palestinian groups have been demonstrating against the Israeli Supreme Court's decision to forcibly displace Palestinians in the East Jerusalem neighbourhood of Sheikh Jarrah, in favor of Israeli settler organizations and companies. Through social media, the families of Sheikh Jarrah and human rights groups gained attention from Palestinians in Israel, the occupied Palestinian territory and international supporters who mobilised to protest against this decision. When peaceful protests were met with [Israeli police brutality](#) and extremist Israeli settler groups started [organizing lynch mobs](#) on [Whatsapp and Telegram](#), leading to the killing of two Palestinian Citizen of Israel, injuries and [arrests of hundreds](#), Palestinians took to Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and TikTok to [document](#) and denounce the [human rights violations](#), reporting and sharing cases of censorship, publishing statements, petitions, letters, social media videos, infographics and other forms of digital activism.

Mass takedowns are being carried out by social media companies

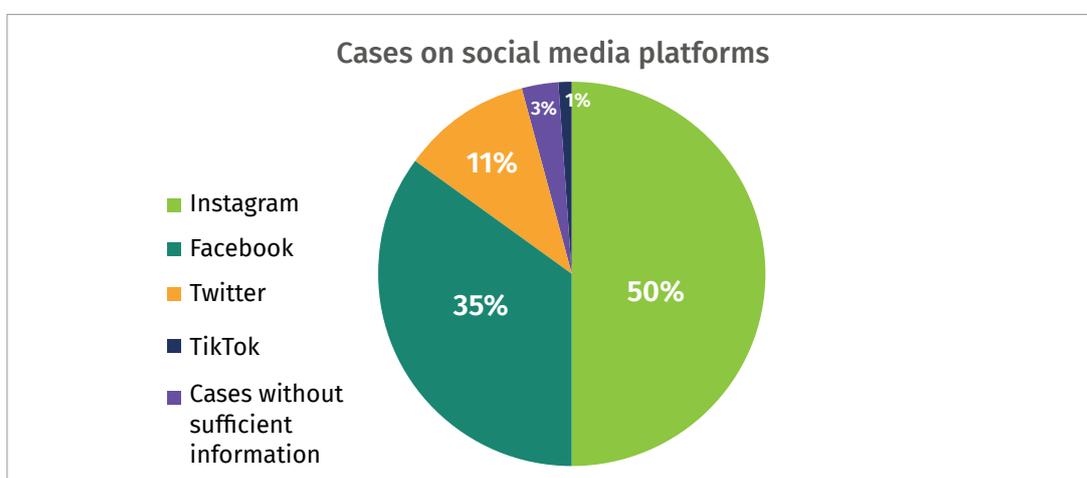
Starting on May 6 social media companies started removing Palestinian content from platforms, often without clear reasons or violations. Many of these cases are likely related to the Israeli Ministry of Justice's Cyber Unit, which has been reporting thousands of cases to social media companies without legal proceedings and without the knowledge of citizens or those living under Israeli occupation in past years. On May 13th the Israeli Minister of Justice and Israeli Minister of Defense,

Benny Gantz, met with social media companies on and called for companies to remove Palestinian content which “incites to violence or spreads disinformation” and emphasized the importance of responding quickly to appeals from the governmental cyber bureau and proactively removing content, further intensifying the censorship. This unauthorized and unchecked power wielded by the Israeli state, allows it to govern online speech and censor people who do not align with the political views of the state. At the same time, despite repeated documentation of hate speech and incitement to violence against Palestinians by extremist Israelis online, these groups continue to be spreading disinformation and organizing violent attacks online.

Although some platforms have made public statements about the censorship of Palestinian political speech, their claims have only focused on “technical issues” which is not sufficient explanation for the pronounced rate and type of censorship that digital rights advocates have documented. In addition, no company has made any statement regarding the need to address the issue of incitement to violence against Palestinians on their platforms. Palestinians have been subjected to the following digital rights violations in the last weeks:

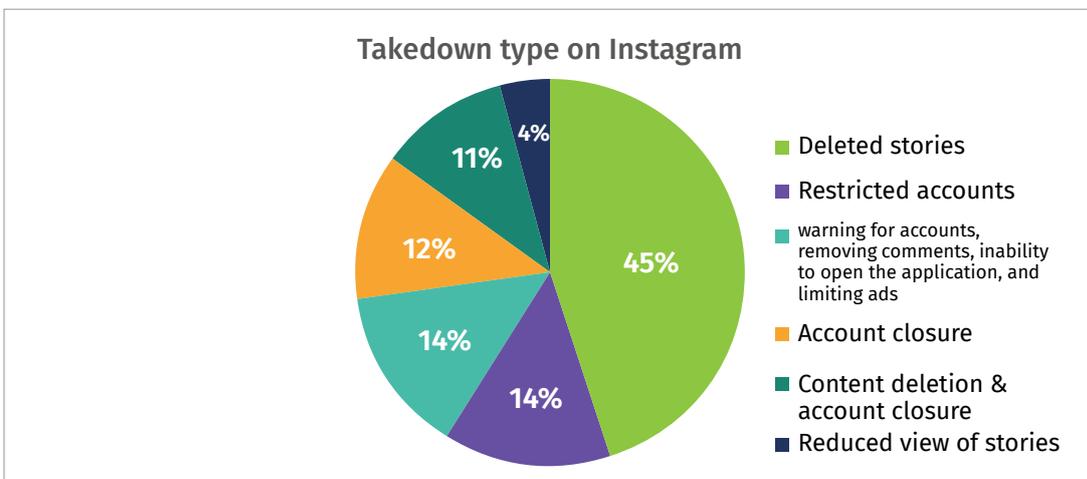
Summary of Content Censorship and Account Suspensions

7amleh has documented 500 cases of digital rights violations of Palestinians between May 6 and May 19, 2021 through a form disseminated through its social media channels and with the support of partners, allies and the public. These cases include several types of violations such as content takedown, closing accounts, hiding hashtags, as well as reducing the reachability to specific content, deleting of archived content, and restricting access and removing accounts. The reported cases include various social media platforms, with 250 of the 500 on Instagram (50%), 179 on Facebook (35%), 55 on Twitter (11%), 1% of the reported cases were on TikTok. Despite the fact that we heard about many violations that happened on the platform 7amleh only had received and documented 4 cases on TikTok, the other 3% were cases without sufficient information from the reporters.

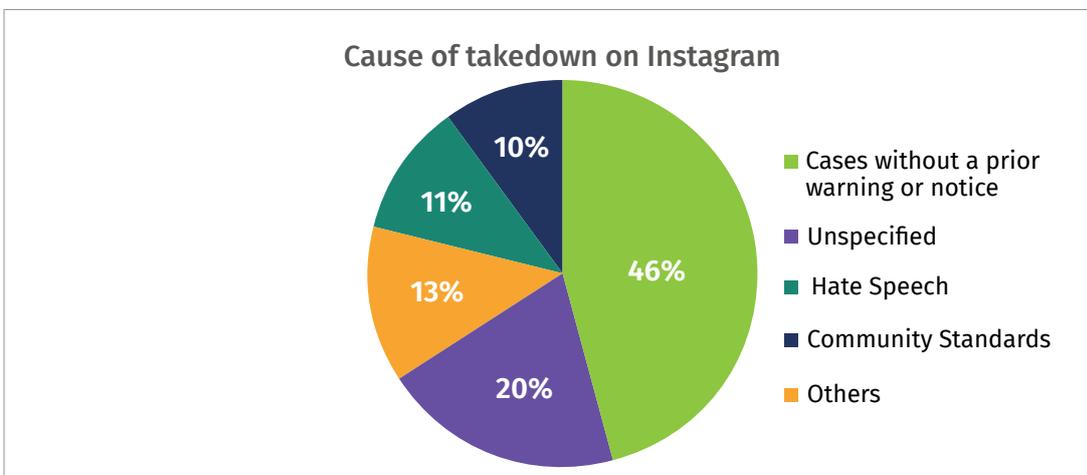


Instagram

7amleh received 250 reports of content violations on Instagram, the most prominent of which was removal of stories from accounts, which was more frequent in the first week of the reporting period. A total of 134 cases of deleted stories, 45% of all reported violations on Instagram. Additionally, 14% referred to restricted accounts, content deletion and account closure accounted for 11% and 12% respectively, 4% for reduced view of stories. The remaining 14% of cases reported varied between warning for accounts, removing comments, inability to open the application, and limiting ads.



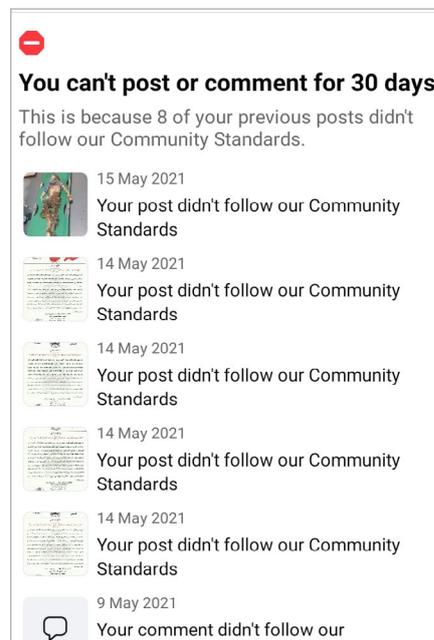
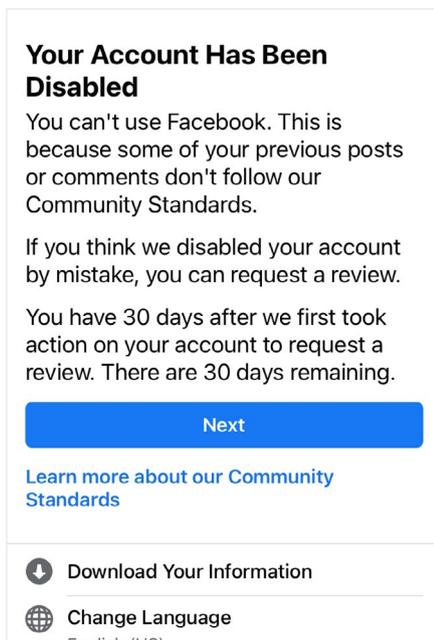
Despite a [tweet by Instagram itself on May 7](#), claiming a technical problem to cause the majority of violations, 7amleh continued to receive large numbers of reports of violations daily. Indeed, the number of reports received after this tweet accounts for 68% of the total reports.



Almost half of the incidents, 46% occurred without a prior warning or notice to users about deleting content, and 20% of the cases did not receive a specified reason with the notice of restriction of content. In 11% of the cases users were informed that the content is considered hate speech by Instagram, and in 10% that the content goes against community standards. The remaining 13% varied between Instagram terms, community standards, dangerous organizations, copyright infringement, need for identification, violence or incitement, and compromised accounts and errors.

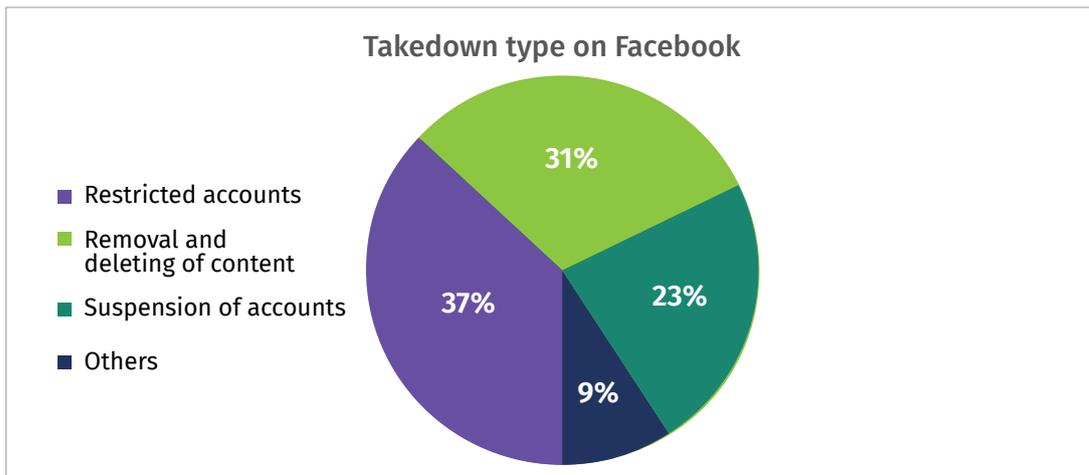
7amleh reported to Instagram the restricting of content related to the hashtag Al-Aqsa to Instagram, the company was responsive and lifted the restriction on the hashtag.

7amleh received letters from Instagram confirming receipt of reports submitted by 7amleh. Although part of the content related to the stories was automatically restored, the company only informed 7amleh about 12 cases in which the content was restored. Instagram also confirmed that only one case violated the community standards, meaning that it will not be restored, and confirmed that there are 26 cases that need to be examined and reviewed, which they are working on. However, there are still 142 cases that Instagram did not respond to, except with an automatic message confirming receipt. 7amleh confirms that it will issue an updated report to address these cases at a later time.

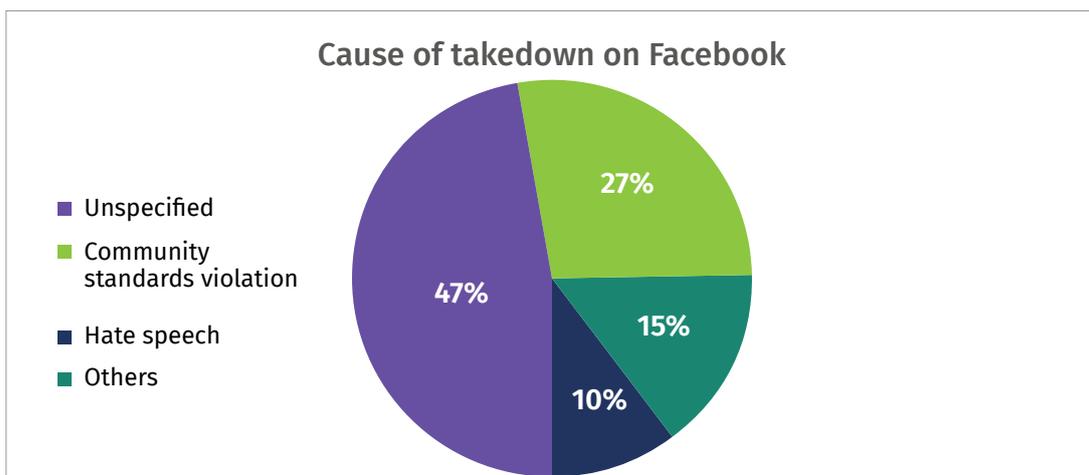


Facebook

7amleh documented 179 cases on Facebook. Users reported the following violations: 37% restricted accounts, 31% removal and deleting of content, 23% suspension of accounts, 9% various reasons such as deleting authentication, warnings to accounts, warnings about specific posts, restricting groups and pages, hacking attempts, reduced access, hiding hashtags, hiding share buttons on posts.

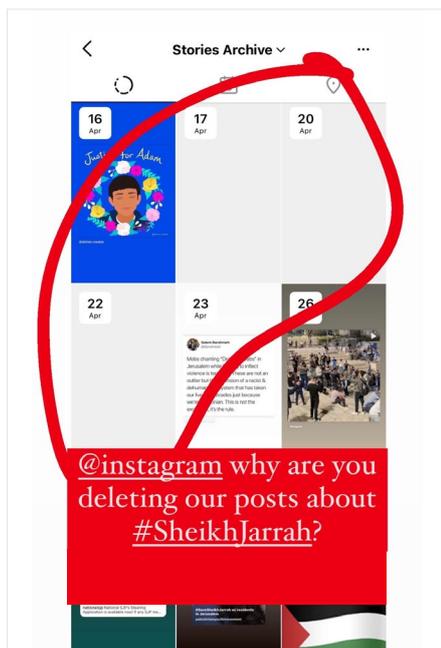
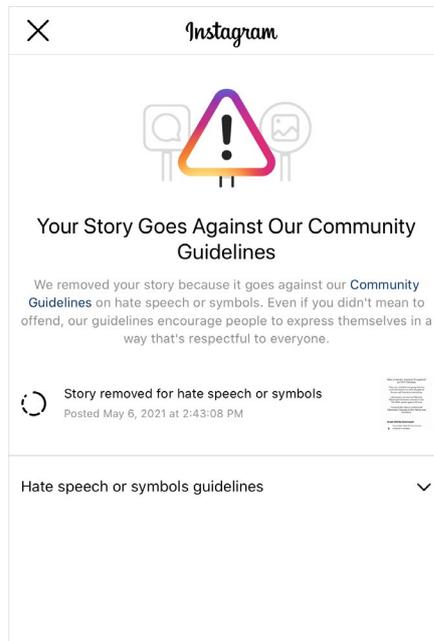
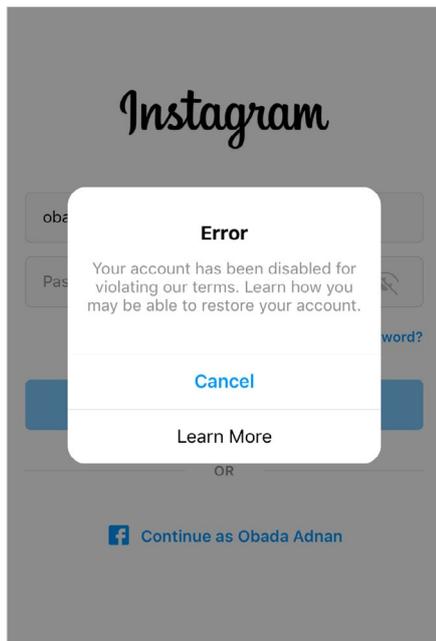


Facebook has not provided sufficient response to reports. Almost half, 47% of cases, did not receive any reason for Facebook's actions, while 27% were justified by Facebook with the violation of community standards. 10% of reported cases received a notification that the content was considered hate speech, and the remaining 15% were given different reasons such as misuse, sensitive content, need for ID, violent and dangerous organizations, age limit, unusual activity, harassment, and spam.



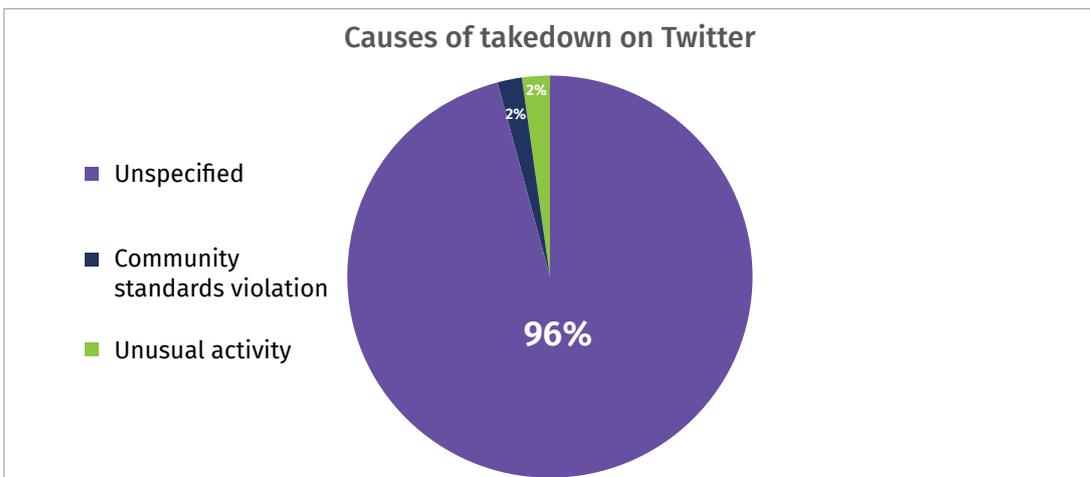
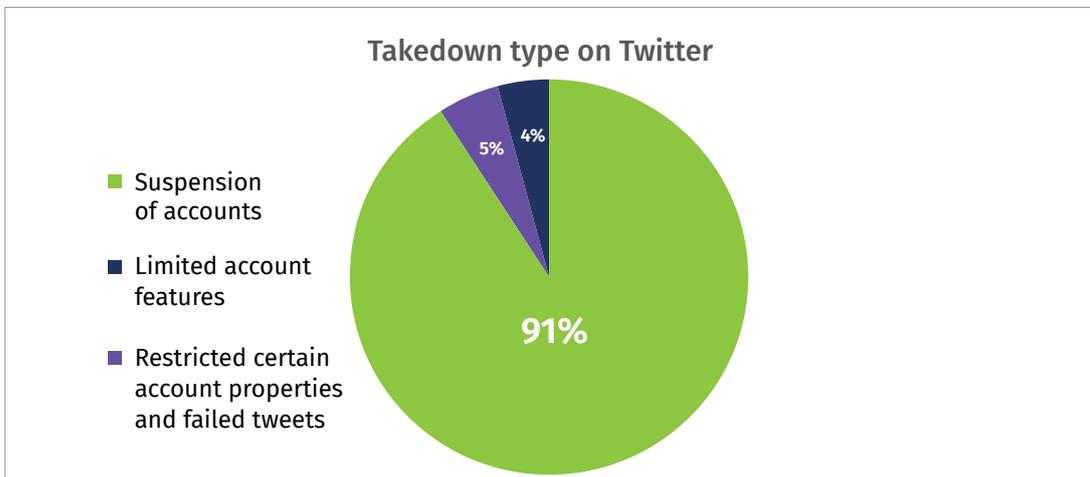
7amleh also observed an increase in ‘Geo-blocking’ on Facebook, when social media companies determine the geographical location from where content was published. 7amleh documented a number of these cases for activists from the occupied Palestinian territory that were not been reported through it’s reporting form.

Disinformation circulated on social media platforms including Facebook, who worked to address the circulation of a story about [Palestinians faking injuries and death](#) that was circulated and a video about Palestinians supposedly staging a funeral which was identified by Reuters as misinformation.



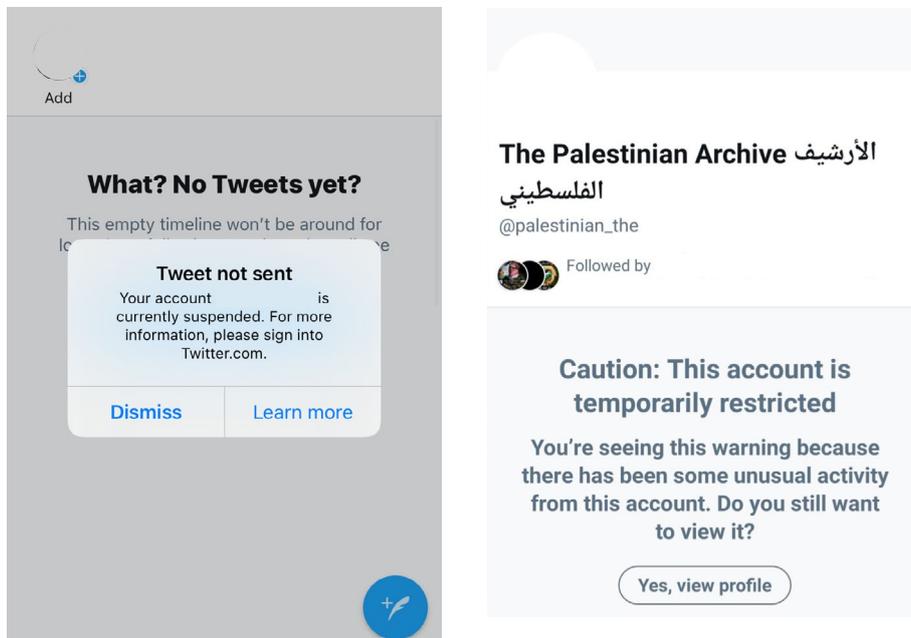
Twitter

7amleh documented 55 cases of violations of Palestinian content on Twitter, 91% of which were suspension of accounts, two cases of limited account features, and 5% of restricted certain account properties and failed tweets. 96% of users did not receive a reason for the action taken by Twitter. one case violated the community standards of Twitter, and in one case the detection of unusual activity led to the suspension of the account. However, Twitter was the platform most responsive to 7amleh's submission of reports on content violations. Twitter responded positively to 89% of cases submitted by 7amleh and restored access to the owners of accounts and content. The response to the remaining 5 cases is still outstanding.



7amleh observed misleading hashtags being suggested by Twitter. For example instead of #GazaUnderAttack, the suggestion came up as #GazaUnderAtackk, with an additional 'k' at the end, or #SaveSheikhJarrah, which was suggested as #SaveSheikhJarrahh. The suggestions are normally for the most commonly used and 'trending' hashtags, however these changes to the suggestions are misleading and can drastically reduce the reach of tweets.

7amleh also observed other violations where content (pictures and/ or videos) was hidden from some users, but not others, and thus decreased the visibility and reach of the content as well as created confusion and suspicion amongst users.



Whatsapp and Telegram:

Incitement against Palestinians and Arabs on Social Media Platforms

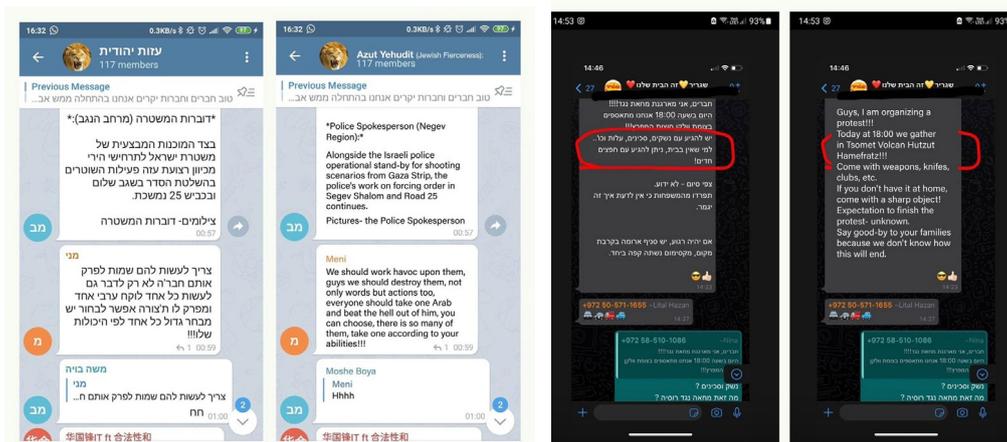
7amleh observed through submissions to our [monitoring form](#) organized groups mobilizing for and inciting against Arabs and Palestinians through both WhatsApp and Telegram. 7amleh has documented more than 40 such cases where content included inciting speech against Arabs and Palestinians, either with the aim of killing, burning or directly assaulting them, as well as racist and hate speech. Examples of such cases include:

- **Incitement and hate speech**

We need to arrange a holocaust for Arabs, exterminate them, murder their children who will grow up and become terrorists, neuter their women, sterilize their men, bomb their homes, send them to incinerators, shoot them in the head and dump their bodies in the street. everyone who is an Arab need to fuck off to Gaza, death to Arabs you sluts I hate you, I hope you die like insects after extermination I hate you all! All jews should come out to the streets to murder them, rape them, beat them up, and what the army and the police won't do we will, even if it costs our freedom and lives. Death to Arabs.

- **Racist speech**

Wait and we will send you to hell, you piece of shit, soon you will starve. You zero and all those like you I will pee on your blood.



7amleh's monitoring showed that these groups are not solely used to call for incitement to violence, but are used to mobilize for and organize attacks on Palestinians in some cities such as Haifa, Acre, Jaffa, and Lydd. 7amleh has documented cases of organizing attacks on Palestinian through these groups, with group members often [sharing pictures of the victims of their attacks](#) to encourage others to do similar attacks.

7amleh was successful in reporting part of this inciting and racist speech as well as hate speech to civil society and social media companies and succeeded in having some removed. Nevertheless, similar content still exists on networks, especially as social media companies do not proactively monitor hate speech and incitement

directed towards Palestinians sufficiently. This problem is further exasperated by the fact that social media companies continue to overmoderate Palestinian political speech, content to a similar degree as Palestinian content.

7amleh highlights that there is a huge disparity in the intensity of social media companies monitoring and censorship of Palestinian content, which often documents human rights violations they are exposed to at the hands of Israeli forces, settlers or civilians; and the insufficient monitoring of racism, incitement, and hate speech against Arabs and Palestinians posted in Hebrew on the same platforms. 7amleh's annual report "[The Index of Racism and Incitement](#)" for the year 2020 showed that 1 in every 10 publications about Arabs and Palestinians in Hebrew contained violence, and violent discourse against Arabs and Palestinians. This was an increase of 16% in comparison to 2019.

"Israeli surveillance, tracking and threats"

On March 11, Israeli intelligence sent text messages to the [worshippers at the Al-Aqsa Mosque](#) informing them that they had been "classified as participants in violence in the Al-Aqsa Mosque, and accordingly, Israeli intelligence will hold them accountable." This message was a result of the Israeli intelligence's use of GPS tracking which determined the geographical location of these worshippers. [The Israeli intelligence](#) also contacted Palestinians and threatened them with arrest and trial in case they did not remove their documents and posts on social media platforms regarding the Israeli police violence against them.

YouTube ads promoting the Israeli aggression on the Gaza Strip

The Israeli Ministry of Strategic Affairs promoted a video clip on YouTube that aims to justify the violent aggression launched by the occupation authorities on the Gaza Strip. The advertisement shows the last footage of missiles launched from the Gaza Strip and exploding in Israel, and a message appears through this clip informing viewers that "Israel will protect its citizens from Hamas terror." This ad was published against the backdrop of Israeli authorities' repeated justifications of their killing civilians in the Gaza Strip, including children, as 'self-defense'. The video reached [approximately 1.2 million views within five days](#), before it was finally removed by YouTube.

Google Maps

In 2018 7amleh published the research [“Mapping Segregation - Google Maps and Human Rights of Palestinians”](#), illustrating how Google Maps’ mapping in regards to the occupied Palestinian territories supports forming public opinion in the interest of the Israeli government, while contradicting Google’s commitment to international human rights frameworks.

During Israel’s current aggression on the Gaza Strip, the Gaza Strip [appears hazy and in low resolution](#) on Google Maps. Google claims that it’s goal is to “keep densely populated places updated regularly”, but nevertheless, the Gaza Strip, one of the most densely populated areas of the world, was unclear. The low resolution and outdated maps are impeding human rights groups ability to document the destruction by Israeli bombing and destruction of agricultural lands, and thus the documentation of human rights violations.

Venmo

Venmo is reportedly [blocking donations to Palestinian orgs](#) carrying out vital relief work in aid of Palestinians. This includes the Palestinian Relief Fund and Palestinian Relief Society. However, approved organizations such as Palestine Children's Relief Fund and in fact, organizations simply containing the word "Palestine" are being blocked from receiving donations.

International Law Analysis

The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) states, “Every human being has the inherent right to life. This right shall be protected by law. [No one shall be arbitrarily deprived of his life](#)”. Specifically, Article 26 states, “All persons are equal before the law and are entitled without any discrimination to the equal protection of the law.” Article 19, the right to freedom of opinion and expression, is enshrined in a number of international and regional human rights instruments and as a state party to the ICCPR, Israel is obligated to protect the [“freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds.”](#) Furthermore, Article 20 of the ICCPR, often described as being [“among the strongest condemnations of hate speech”](#), because it prohibits by law any propaganda for war, as well as any advocacy of national, racial or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence. Israel as a state party to the ICCPR, is violating Palestinians fundamental human rights, and blatantly neglecting their responsibilities. Their blatant censorship and racially discriminatory policies, which are aimed at silencing Palestinian content, experiences, and voices are a direct violation of Palestinians’ fundamental human rights, as well as a mechanism of allowing for the incitement of violence, as a result of not monitoring and holding accountable extremist Israeli calls to commit violent acts against Palestinians.

The International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD) commits its members to the elimination of racial discrimination and the [promotion of understanding among all races](#). The Convention also requires its parties to [outlaw hate speech and criminalize membership in racist organizations](#). Israel ratified ICERD in 1966, while placing a reservation on Article 22 of the Convention that allows disputes between State Bodies to be referred to the International Court of Justice. Israel's compliance with ICERD is reviewed regularly by the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination, and in December of 2019, the Committee recognized the issues of security and stability, however affirmed that Israel, as the state party, needs to conform with the principals of the convention. Specifically, stating that, “measures taken are proportionate, do not discriminate in purpose or in effect against Palestinian citizens of Israel, Palestinians in the Occupied Palestinian Territory; and that they are implemented with full respect for human rights as well as relevant principles of [international humanitarian law](#).”

When considering the obligations of the State Party to ICERD, it is important to also recognize Article 4, which requires, “States Parties condemn all propaganda and all organizations which are based on ideas or theories of superiority of one race or group of persons of one colour or ethnic origin, or which attempt to justify or promote racial hatred and discrimination in any form, and undertake to adopt immediate and positive measures designed to eradicate all incitement to, or acts of, such discrimination and, to this end, with due regard to the principles embodied in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the rights expressly set forth in [article 5 of this Convention](#).” Such acts of discrimination and promotion of hate speech are offences punishable by law.

Recommendations

Third Party States

- Third party states must pressure the Israeli government and social media companies to uphold human rights -- particularly the right to freedom of expression and the right to life and privacy of a person -- and to end discrimination against Palestinians.
- Third party states should stop funding states, companies and research institutions that are developing surveillance technologies and apparatuses that violate the human rights of Palestinians.

Companies

- Companies should do a human rights impact assessment that includes the impact of Israel on Palestinians in Israel and the occupied Palestinian territory, and ensure that their policies and practices do not further the negative impacts of Israeli policies and practices on Palestinians.
- Companies must adapt global policies to take into account that Israel is illegally occupying the Palestinian territory and, as many human rights organizations have analysed, an apartheid state, which is extending to the Palestinian digital space.
- Increase investment in Hebrew content moderation and atomization, and work with civil society to create a lexicon of hate speech, incitement and racist terms in Hebrew that harm Palestinians.
- Companies need to provide transparency on voluntary takedown requests and add information to transparency reports about the volume and the content of those requests, as well as locations of users reported by government authorities to ensure that social media companies do not support Israel in extending its law to the occupied Palestinian territory, which is a violation of international laws and norms.
- Companies must stop the spread of disinformation by hiring fact checkers that will look at Israeli and Palestinian content and have a human rights understanding of the context.
- Disinformation being spread by Israeli government, politicians and government organized non-governmental organizations must be removed from the platforms.
- Companies should not allow advertising that supports violence and furthers violations of human rights, including illegal settlements in the occupied Palestinian territory.

- Financial services companies should not take wholesale decisions restricting the Palestinians' right to access financial services without a proper assessment of factual risks. Companies should implement transparent policies and provide remedies when financial accounts are wrongfully closed or blocked."
- Companies must not deny people access to geo-spatial information needed to respond to humanitarian crises. They must also be designed to reflect international laws and norms, and not perpetuate the narrative of occupying states.
- Companies must work to respond to letters and reports from trusted civil society organizations and partners with sufficient content and in a timely manner.

International and Local Civil Society

- Inform the public of their rights and raise their awareness with tools to protect themselves.
- Amplify the voices of Palestinian human rights organizations and advocates.
- Intensify efforts to document and report the violations of Palestinian digital rights on the internet and report the violations by submitting reports to independent monitoring mechanisms and social media companies.
- Support legal action and apply pressure on companies and governments to ensure the protection of and respect for human rights and humanitarian law.

The information in this report
was collected till 19 March 2021

Contact 7amleh:

info@7amleh.org | www.7amleh.org

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