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The Hashtag Conflict:

Social Media Players in the Israeli-Palestinian Crisis

and the Battle for Public Opinion

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Abstract:

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict has taken place across various arenas and social media has undoubtedly become a major battlefield that draws global attention. Many key media players including legacy outlets such as The Guardian and The New York Times, counter-hegemonic media represented by news platforms like Al-Jazeera and France24, NGOs and activists as well as official government spokespersons employ social networking sites to share information and to fight for public opinion. This paper looks at these four groups and their online engagements concerning two key recent episodes in the Israeli-Palestinian crisis -Sheikh Jarrah and Nakba74- and reveals how this battle takes place not only in real life but also through social media such as Twitter, Facebook and Instagram. Moreover, the analysis of the hashtags is conducted to indicate which side of the conflict gains more attention on these platforms.

Keywords:

social media, Israeli-Palestinian conflict, hashtag battle, media coverage, activists, #Save Sheikh Jarrah, #Nakba74

Type:

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1. Introduction

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is considered one of the most serious and complex crises to date. As it has lasted more than 70 years, the media coverage of the issue has been significantly evolving. The most visible change in portraying the conflict has been seen in the 21st century when digital media and, most importantly, social media started to play a key role and surpass the legacy media such as newspapers and television. The Internet and social networking sites are now the major communication tool that allows people to express their views, raise important questions and attract public attention to the cause. Therefore, we may observe the new phenomenon in which social media becomes a battlefield for the already enduring conflicts while hashtags and posts are used as weapons in information warfare.

Furthermore, social media is now a place for users to reach the audience from different parts of the world, not necessarily from the territory of the conflict. Since both supporters of Israel and Palestine can fight for the attention of the worldwide public within a few clicks on their phones, the previously dominated pro-Israeli traditional media has started to be outcompeted by pro-Palestinian online content. The current data shows that pro-Palestinian hashtags are shared more willingly and their hype lasts longer than pro-Israeli ones.

However, social networking sites such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter are available to both allies and opponents of Palestine, therefore, the new phenomenon of social media battle has emerged. Although there is no direct harm and fight through social media, aggressive language, social discrimination, or threats may and do still occur.

Hence, this paper looks at online engagements concerning the Israeli-Palestinian crisis applied by the key media players that are: legacy media; counter-hegemonic news platforms; non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and activists practicing citizen journalism as well as official government social media accounts. The aim of this analysis is to indicate that social media stands as a powerful communication tool to fight for public opinion through producing more varied content but also educating people who previously tended to ignore the lack of historical context and oversimplification of the issue presented in newspapers and television. In this way, the significance of this research relies on the idea of social media being a game-changer in framing the conflict and serving as a platform on which users may seek freedom to present their perspectives.
2. Literature Review

2.1. The role of social media in covering social conflicts

As communication tools have been evolving and surpassing one another, the media coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has also gone through changes. The freedom of speech offered by social media allows Palestinians to raise their voices, which was almost impossible a few decades ago when the western media tended to use specific language that indicates they are more in favor of Israel (O’Toole, 2021). This tendency has been most visible in the United States as their mainstream media very often puts emphasis on the right of Israel to defend itself and, simultaneously, dehumanizes the image of Palestinians portraying them as offenders (Al Jazeera English, 2014).

The feature of spreading news rapidly and creating media hype has made social media incredibly powerful in fighting for public opinion. Also, it is important to emphasize that “the leading social networks are usually available in multiple languages and enable users to connect with friends or people across geographical, political, or economical borders” (Statista, 2022). Hence, different parties of the social conflicts may reach a global audience, which is significant for Israelis and Palestinians as they try to gain attention in the western world, not only in Middle Eastern countries.

Another crucial attribute of social media is being a communication and coordination tool that allows users to mobilize and organize actions that can take place both in real life or cyberspace. For instance, some of the protests that are being advertised through social media could encourage people to come to a certain place and demonstrate on the street while others involve online protests such as a Twitter storm. The latter refers to “a story that starts on Twitter and through a feedback loop with traditional press generates a significant amount of attention across a broad audience” (Greenslade, 2011) and has been widely used by different campaigns, usually to spread hashtags.

Nevertheless, the use of social media coverage may also have negative and even harmful effects. The feature of providing independent, unchecked, and biased information can contribute to spreading fake news, disinformation, misinformation, fueling the informational war, and creating bigger division and hostility between the adversaries. Nowadays, it seems easier than ever to cover the conflict using manipulative methods to reach a national and international
audience. A great deal of online content such as images and videos lacks context or worse still, provides the wrong message (Suciu, 2021). Since bad news is seen as good news because they catch public attention, the more daring the hashtag is, the more rapidly it is disseminated.

Moreover, some of the posts, such as those connected with the #SaveSheikhJarrah movement have been censored or deleted from social media, which undermines the right to freedom of expression that the Internet has been known for. Since Palestinian activists have relied on social networking sites to document the events taking place in their neighborhoods and have a direct impact on the global discourse, the censorship of the posts stands as a serious problem for them. This kind of systematic discrimination can be most visible on Facebook and Instagram because the Palestinian content was constantly flagged as “sensitive” or even deleted without providing any justification (Alhamdan & Campbell, 2021). According to the digital rights organization 7amleh, in May 2021 there were “500 cases of digital rights violations, including content takedowns, deletion of accounts or content, and restriction or removal of accounts” (Ibid).

2.2. The contribution of Twitter, Instagram and Facebook to social conflicts

To better understand the role of social media in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, it is crucial to look into the most popular social networking platforms and the possibilities they offer. This paper focuses on Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook as they are commonly used by various media players to fight for public opinion. Although all of them may contain similar or even the same online content, users chose them frequently for different purposes.

In their paper “Ties, Likes, and Tweets: Using Strong and Weak Ties to Explain Differences in Protest Participation Across Facebook and Twitter Use,” Valenzuela, Correa & Zuñiga compare the role of Twitter and Facebook in political participation. The results of their research suggest that “Facebook is efficient at promoting engagement by providing the social pressure and reinforcement needed to engage in costly, time-consuming actions such as participation in street demonstrations” while “Twitter, in contrast, is better at injecting novel information (e.g. political news, mobilizing information, contacting, etc.) by relying on a weaker, more heterogeneous, social network structure” (Valenzuela et al. 2017, p. 2). They emphasize that Twitter enables protest participation as well as collective action due to the follower/followee
relationship that is rather unstructured and makes it possible for users to spread updates and various messages rapidly (Ibid).

Twitter not only has become a platform for official real-time reporting of each side's successes and failures but it also has attempted to actively engage followers by asking them to retweet if they found their claims to be right (Ben-David, 2014). The platform is a useful medium to reach significant individuals as it is popular among politicians, therefore, users might comment and retweet their posts as well as tag them in their tweets, which gives them a sense of direct conversation with influential people. Moreover, Twitter is known for popularizing the use of hashtags that are considered a powerful weapon in online battles for public opinion. It is also worth mentioning the role played by Twitter and Facebook during the Arab Spring. For instance, in the midst of the protests in Tunisia, despite the attempts of the government to censor and control the online content, Tunisians turned to social media to present the events taking place in their country to the rest of the world. In this case, Facebook was used by them to document the protests by sharing the updated videos as the platform remained uncensored during that disturbing period (Zuckerman, 2011).

Facebook, compared to Twitter and Instagram, is a good place to organize protests by creating groups that may be public, private, or secret. An interesting example is a private group created on April 9, 2021, called “Israelis & Palestinians for Peace سَلَم شَلَوْم” with over 4,400 members of whom 3000 remain active every month (i24NEWS and ILH Staff, 2022). The administrators of the group describe it as a grassroots movement aimed to create peace and trust between Israelis and Palestinians. According to them, what distinguishes it from other peace organizations are the real-time discussions on Zoom during which both parties are engaged to have a respectful dialogue. The members need to follow the rules, mostly about the use of certain language while posting and commenting, and since activists review the online content posted there, the discussions are civil. A founder of the group, Mori Sela, explains that while it might be challenging, it is worth trying to speak about and listen to both narratives (Ibid).

The last social media this paper looks at is Instagram which also has significantly contributed to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It is a platform where news channels, activists, NGOs, and politicians may reach an audience through pictures, videos, hashtags, and Instagram stories. Nevertheless, the platform seems to be the handiest for activist influencers that very often target their content to the young audience as it is considered to be Gen Z’s favorite social media
(McLachlan, 2022). Due to their high engagement in boosting awareness of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and their personal involvement in the case, they are referred to here as activist influencers to distinguish them from celebrity influencers. Nevertheless, through Instagram, many celebrities have also decided to raise their voice and show support, for instance, in the Save Sheikh Jarrah protest.

3. Methodology

The research is focused on key social media players in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict engaged in the ongoing battle for public opinion on social media. For that reason, they have been divided into four groups, namely legacy media, counter-hegemonic news platforms; NGOs and activists, and official government accounts. Hence, this paper uses content analysis to present similarities and differences between their online engagements and attempts to reach the audience as well as to present their perspectives.

As for the examples of the legacy media, this paper looks at The Guardian and The New York Times due to the Anglo-American narrative that dominated at the beginning of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Moreover, these news channels still command respect and are considered to be reliable due to their journalistic ethics.

The second group represents a new type of journalism and refers to the emergence of global media such as Al Jazeera and France24, which tend to compete with the international media mentioned before. The choice of Al Jazeera is based on its origin as it was founded in Qatar and it covers the news from the Arabic world, therefore, it is closely related to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Nevertheless, along with France24, Al Jazeera has targeted the whole world. Both news outlets have their journalists in different countries and each of them provides news not only in English but also in other languages such as French, Spanish, and Russian.

The third group concerns non-governmental organizations (NGOs) such as 7amleh and Stand With Us as well as activists that practice citizen journalism. The activist influencers chosen for the research are Mohammad el-Kurd, Mariam Barghouti, and Ahmed Shihab-Eldin from the pro-Palestinian side and Adiel Cohen, Ysabella Hazan, and Gal Gadot from the pro-Israeli one. Their role in shaping public opinion about the conflict is crucial as they are usually
the most active users on social media. They also initiate hashtag battles or run online campaigns encouraging people to protest.

Last but not least, the paper looks at the online content produced by official government accounts such as the State of Palestine, the Palestine Liberation Organization’s Negotiations Affairs Department (PLO-NAD), Israel Defense Forces (IDF), and the State of Israel. Despite their attempts at political correctness, some of the tweets and posts are outrageously aggressive and provocative. Hence, they are considered to be powerful media players in covering the issue and contributing to inflaming the conflict.

After the introduction to the social media players, the case studies will be conducted based on two campaigns: Save Sheikh Jarrah and Nakba74. The first one refers to the evictions of Palestinian families from the Sheikh Jarrah neighborhood in East Jerusalem in May 2021, which created strong resistance and protests visible on social media. A year later, in May 2022, there were widespread calls for demonstrations commemorating the 74th anniversary of the Nakba, which refers to the ethnic cleansing of Palestine in 1948. Since at least 750,000 Palestinians were expelled from their homes by Zionist military forces, this historic event is known by Palestinians as the Catastrophe (Haddad, 2022). The posts shared on social media aimed to encourage people to take part in protests and show support for Palestine.

The empirical research of this paper is based on tracking and analyzing certain hashtags that are widely used on Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook. The chosen hashtags for this research are: #SaveSheikJarrah, #GazaUnderAttack, #FreePalestine, #PalestinianLivesMatter, #BoycottIsrael, #IsraelUnderFire, #IsraelUnderAttack, #StandWithIsrael, #IsraeliLivesMatter, #ProIsrael as well as #Nakba74 that appeared on social media later. The choice is based on their regular appearance within posts and tweets on the above-mentioned platforms. Also, five of them are Pro-Palestinian and another five are pro-Israeli to make the comparison equal for both sides of the conflict. The latest #Nakba74 refers to the 74th anniversary of the Palestinian catastrophe and protests that took place on May 15, 2022. The platform that enables the tracking of hashtags through these platforms is called BrandMentions and provides daily analytics and the automatic update of posts or tweets added by various users.
4. Introduction to Social Media Players

4.1. Legacy media

It is believed that journalism may bring a change while journalists are those who chase the change (Tiripelli, 2016). Throughout history, one can observe that mass media has contributed to the majority of social conflicts and wars, therefore, its role might be controversial as the power to shape public opinion can inflame the conflict or simply be manipulative. In the case of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the media coverage from the 1960s to the 1980s was dominated by the western media, many of which favored one side over another (Ozohu-Suleiman, 2014, 86).

As social media has become a “vital part of news media business” (Roese, 2018), the major news channels, either printed media or television ones, have been forced to digitize with the aim of staying updated and maintaining their audience. It is estimated that in 2022, social networking sites are going “to reach 3.96 billion users and these figures are still expected to grow as mobile device usage and mobile social networks increasingly gain traction in previously underserved markets” (Statista, 2022). For that reason, key newspapers such as The Guardian and The New York Times have upgraded their reach to official websites and social media accounts. Nowadays, each of these legacy news channels can be found on Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook and the online followers are as important as the newspaper readers. Nevertheless, the previously printed-news outlets needed to face the challenge of following the journalistic ethics and values, yet, in a digital world.

4.1.1. The Guardian

The Guardian published its first online content in 1995, and soon after it became the most popular newspaper site in the United Kingdom (Riordan, 2014). In 2011, “the Guardian announced it would become a digital-first organisation, with the internet site at the heart of its operations” (op. cit., p. 39), which later expanded to a disruptive data blog, the Guardian Witness site, different apps, and social media. However, as the newspaper relied on journalistic guidelines that value transparency, fairness, and accuracy, the editors needed to adjust them to fit
the Internet. For that reason, the Guardian formulated a set of Community Standards and Participation Guidelines regarding the Guardian Witness Site, discussion threads, and reader comments (Ibid).

Currently, the Guardian has 5.2 million followers on Instagram, 10.5 million on Twitter, and around 8.7 million on Facebook. At the end of 2021, it also reported a million subscriptions from readers from across the world (The Guardian, 2021). Regardless of the successful online engagement of the reputable newspaper, the Guardian did receive some criticism about its coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which has been covered by them for more than 100 years (Elliott, 2014). The complaints “come from both sides although the overwhelming number are from those who are pro-Israel” (Elliott, 2016).

Yiftah Curiel, a press attache at London’s Israeli embassy, pointed out the disproportion between the number of articles concerning Israel/Palestine issues, especially about Gaza. According to him, the daily Guardian Eyewitness middle page has included more images from Palestine such as photos of a child in Gaza and a West Bank protest, whose captions emphasize the Israeli brutality (Elliott, 2014).

Apart from that, the Guardian was accused of a poor choice of headlines as was for example the case of the article from February 2016 which said: “Three Palestinian teenagers shot dead on West Bank” (Elliott, 2016). Curiel blamed the Guardian for portraying Israeli soldiers as perpetrators while the young Palestinians were those who opened fire, adding that the subheadline also made them look worse. However, Chris Elliott rejected the complaints and the headline remains in the article without change (Ibid).

4.1.2. The New York Times

In 2014, the New York Times’ Innovation Report showed that one of the most prestigious newspapers producing high-class journalism was contending with adapting to the digital era (Riordan, 2014). Philip Corbett, an associate managing editor for standards, explained that the New York Times’ journalists feel obliged to maintain the fundamental journalistic standards no matter the platform they use to publish the news. He also said that for people who
consume their content, it does not matter whether it appeared on the phone, laptop, or in print because they still look at it as the product of the NYT (op. cit., p. 46).

What distinguished the New York Times from other popular media outlets was their approach to social media which allowed the journalists for more freedom on their personal accounts as they do not adhere to formal guidelines (Ibid). According to Corbett, that would discourage journalists from being active on social media, which should not take place in the era of the Internet. He added that their two principles involve being aware that every online engagement is a public activity and that they always represent the New York Times regardless of platform or time of day (op. cit., p. 47). However, there was still the question of whether impartial journalism and neutral language might be applied to the web and social media (Ibid).

To answer it, one may take a look at the current online content shared by a popular and respectable news outlet. Currently, The NYT has 15.4 million followers on Instagram, 53.1 million on Twitter, and over 18.6 million on Facebook. Despite the much higher number of followers in comparison to the Guardian, it seems that the NYT has more critics too, also in terms of covering the Israeli-Palestinian crisis. The majority of complaints refer to the language used by the NYT’s journalists that has an anti-Palestinian overtone. The study conducted by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology that looked into over 30,000 New York Times’ articles during the First and Second Intifadas showed that compared to Israelis, the articles cited Palestinians much less while the violent language and passive voice were used more often (Diwakar, 2021).

Nowadays, the NYT continues to misinterpret or fail in covering the Israeli-Palestinian crisis as some of the current articles have been suggestively biased or lacked key information. For example, Yara Elmjouie pointed out the flaws of journalistic rules in Patrick Kingsley’s article “As Gaza War Escalates, New Front Opens in Israeli Cities” (Kingsley, 2021). The fragment of the body text says that Palestinians have died yet Israelis were killed by Hamas, which is biased and unethical (Diwakar, 2021).
4.2. The counter-hegemonic news platforms

As mentioned before, the legacy media of the 20th century tended to be dominated by western news channels that usually were more pro-Israeli, mostly due to cultural, geo-strategic, geo-economic, and anthropological reasons. Furthermore, the key media players have been based in the United States, which is the homeland of a major Jewish community. Hence, the perspective of Palestinians was usually marginalized or they were portrayed as those who attack Israel forced to defend themselves.

However, the major shift in covering the Israeli-Palestinian conflict appeared when global television along with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and citizen journalism started to play a role in covering the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The emergence of the counter-hegemonic news platforms such as Al Jazeera and France24 represents a new type of journalism that is more independent and stands out from the Anglo-American. Also, as many of the counter-hegemonic news platforms use different languages to reach a global audience, the news is accessible to everyone, wherever you may live.
4.2.1. Al Jazeera

Since Al Jazeera is a television and news channel that covers news feeds all across the globe having foreign bureaus in Europe, the United States, and Canada, it is undoubtedly a serious competitor for other media outlets including western ones. In 1996, Al Jazeera Arabic became the first independent news platform in the Arab World while Al Jazeera English, launched 10 years later, has been a part of a developing network that contains more than 10 channels in various languages (Al Jazeera, 2022). At the moment, Al Jazeera English is followed by 2.6 million people on Instagram, 7.8 million on Twitter, and 16 million on Facebook. Furthermore, it is also considered a key player in the politics of the Arabic region (Elmesry et. al. 2013).

However, the popular media outlet has received some criticism, for instance, from the US government as it has been accused of presenting distorted reality and having a negative impact on public opinion (Elmasry et. al. 2013). Yet, compared to other Arabic news channels such as Al-Arabiya, “Al-Jazeera devoted considerably more time and resources to the story and arguably produced journalism of higher professional standards” (op. cit., p. 15) in the period between 2009 and 2010. On the other hand, both Al Jazeera and Al-Arabiya tended to portray Palestinians as victims and, at the same time, the Israelis as the aggressors. While they were including images of grieving Palestinian families and reporting details such as names and ages of the Palestinian sufferers, they seemed to marginalize the same information about Israeli victims (op. cit., p. 16). Also, it is worth mentioning that in terms of the direction of coverage, Al Jazeera was “positive toward Hamas and critical of Egypt, the USA and the United Nations” (Ibid).

On May 11, 2022, Al Jazeera lost one of its journalists, 51-year-old Shireen Abu Akleh, who as an American-Palestinian first field correspondent was strongly attached to the case of the Israeli-Palestinian crisis. This tragic event continues to be covered by various news outlets across the world since the woman was shot in the head while being on assignment in Jenin, a Palestinian city in the occupied West Bank (Tahhan, 2022). The controversy has aroused as witnesses claim it was Israeli forces that killed her, however, the Israeli military refused to investigate. Moreover, the Israeli authorities claimed that the people responsible for the shooting were Palestinian fighters (Al Jazeera Staff, 2022). In one of Al Jazeera’s articles that appeared one day after Akleh’s death, Umut Uras writes about western media being biased when covering
the event. He claims that although media organizations showed respect for her, at the same time, they “were careful to avoid implicating Israel in the killing, despite assertions by Al Jazeera and witnesses who were with her that Abu Akleh had been killed by Israeli forces” (Uras, 2022). One of the most criticized media outlets was the New York Times as it avoided providing a Palestinian version and instead of saying that Akleh was killed, one of the headlines only mentions that she dies at 51. The user @Bassam_Khawaja addressed the NYT in his tweet criticizing its coverage of her death (Ibid).

4.2.2. France24

Another important counter-hegemonic media outlet that covers news from all over the world is France24. Currently, it is broadcasted in French, Arabic, English, and Spanish to about 355 million households, scoring over 61 million viewers, which makes it the first international news outlet in the Maghreb as well as French-speaking countries in Africa (France24, 2021).

In terms of social media, it has 1.6 million followers on Instagram, 3.9 million on Twitter, and 11 million on Facebook. Although these numbers are smaller than Al Jazeera’s ones, it is still a popular news outlet that also focuses on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. On their website, there is a whole section called Palestinian Territories where users can find articles and videos referring to the conflict. Recently, the newest content is mostly dedicated to the killing of Al
Jazeera’s reporter Abu Akleh. The overtone of headlines that appear on the page, in comparison to the NYT, seemed to be clearly pro-Palestinians as they include words such as: “Palestinian probe finds Israel deliberately killed her” or “Al Jazeera journalist killed during Israel West Bank raid” (France 24, Palestinian Territories, 2022).

On the other hand, some of the Israeli politicians such as Minister Avigdor Liberman accuse global media including France24 of implying bias against Israel (TOI Staff and Agencies, 2018). Another pro-Israeli media-monitoring organization, The Committee for Accuracy in Middle East Reporting in America (CAMERA), claims that France24 Arabic denies Jerusalem’s Jewish history and distorts the facts (CAMERA Arabic & Masri, 2021). As an instance, Meir Masri refers to its coverage on Tisha B’av, a Jewish day of mourning, in July, 2021. According to him, the journalist used false terminology, Palestinian nationalist narrative, and they referenced to a commentator Khaled al-Gharabli, who gave counter-factual observations on the Israel-Hamas escalation before (Ibid).

Nevertheless, as the criticism comes from the pro-Israeli news channel based in the United States, it is difficult to indicate whether France24 is indeed biased or it just gives the voice to Palestinians who suffer from being silenced over the decades.

4.3. NGOs and activists practicing citizen journalism

The social media coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian crisis would not be possible without the activist influencers and non-governmental organizations that use Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook on a daily basis. They are the ones who seem to have the biggest power in shaping public opinion through social media as they are allowed to be critical or even controversial. For that reason, they represent citizen journalism which is an alternative type of news reporting that can involve anyone and is divided from the legacy media structures (Dangerfield n.d.).

It is considered that the emergence of citizen journalism in the Arab world began during the intense period between December 2008 and January 2009 when Israel started a military offensive in the Gaza Strip and Hamas responded with rocket firing (Hamdy, 2010). Before this crisis, there were other peaks such as the War in Iraq in 2003 and the Lebanon crisis in 2006 that made citizen journalists and bloggers contribute to shaping public opinion as well as have an impact on traditional media (Ibid). Yet, the Gaza conflict was a catalyst for “the explosion of
citizen generated content, the furthering of other manifestations of cultural and technological convergence in journalism and the emergence of some forms of participatory journalism” (Ibid).

Nowadays, social media plays a crucial role for those who directly experience oppression because they can show the evidence and bring accountability for the mistreatment they have to struggle with (Barghouti, 2021). This point is particularly important for Palestinians since very often the traditional media has marginalized their perspective. According to Chaker Khazal, a Palestinian writer, Palestine needs younger people, technology, and a good story to represent the national cause and brand the nation (Iriqat, 2019).

Influencers are expected by their followers to add content concerning global issues on their social media and the violence in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is one of them (Haasch, 2021). Nevertheless, special attention should be given to activist influencers and NGOs that have devoted their lives to educating people on the crisis and fighting for public opinion.

4.3.1. 7amleh

7amleh, the Arab Center for Social Media Advancement, is a non-profit organization that addresses projects and initiatives, which allow Palestinian and Arab communities to get involved with digital media campaigns concerning Palestinian rights (APC, 2022). Moreover, it helps activists, civil society organizations, and human rights defenders to receive training so that they can improve their online engagements and have a bigger impact on policies (7amleh, 2022).

Its team is also responsible for initiating or supporting campaigns or virtual actions such as #FacebookCensorsPalestine during which they called for people to sign the petition to raise awareness of social media censorship. The initiative started when Emi Palmor, a director sitting on Facebook’s Oversight Board who previously worked for the Israeli Ministry of Justice, censored the legitimate speech of Palestinian journalists and human rights defenders. 7amleh began encouraging people to address the problem by offering various sample posts they could use to take part in this protest. In this case, the hashtags #DropEmiPalmor and #FacebookCensorsPalestine were used to promote the campaign through social media and gain the attention not only of users but also members of Facebook to make them take steps and solve the issue (7amleh, 2020).
Another interesting project was launching a mini-site called “Google, Put Palestine on the Map” that collects “information on Google Maps’ discriminatory policies towards Palestinians and their impact and repercussions” (7amleh, 2018). Except for the key information, the link to learn more, and two short videos explaining the topic, 7amleh encourages users to support the case in three ways: by sending an email to Google CEO, tweeting them, or signing and sharing the petition. After clicking on the second option, the minisite automatically transfers us to Twitter and provides a complete message to be posted with the hashtag #GoogleMapPalestine at the end.

Currently, 7amleh is followed by over 8,840 people on Instagram, 6,300 on Twitter, and 5,860 on Facebook in the English version but over 30,700 in Arabic. As they prepare lots of useful reports, they are very often cited by other authors or organizations covering the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

4.3.2. StandWithUs

StandWithUs is a nonprofit organization founded in 2001 and headquartered in Los Angeles that aims to support Israel and fight antisemitism as well as stand up to misinformation and hate speech. Similar to 7amleh, the campaign provides various programs and resources but also encourages users to take action through initiatives such as writing letters, joining rallies, or signing petitions.
However, compared to 7amleh, StandWithUs reaches more countries as it is an international organization having its offices in the US, Israel, the UK, Canada, and Brasil. Their work is mostly based on social media because it shares information and newsletters through the Internet (StandWithUs, 2022).

StandWithUs has over 1.4 million followers on Facebook, more than 383,000 on Instagram, and around 168,400 on Twitter. With this impressive result, it is easier for them to fight for public opinion, which, on the other hand, confirms the fact that the Israeli perspective dominates over the Palestinian one across the world.

In terms of issues concerning the Israeli-Palestinian crisis, StandWithUs clearly defends Israel from criticism and blames Hamas for fueling the conflict. In its official statement from May 2021, the organization shared its point of view about “the Hamas-Israeli” conflict. Although it highlights that this crisis is a tragedy for both Israeli and Palestinian civilians and it opposes the brutality of Arab and Jewish extremists, the majority of the text focuses on Israel being unjustly attacked by the rest of the world. For instance, they mention the social media propaganda based on anti-Israeli and antisemitic online content that has been pushed by different political movements. By writing that “there is never an excuse for promoting racist slurs on social media, assaulting Jews, or vandalizing Jewish communities” (StandWithUs, 2021), the organization seems to refuse the fact that the assaults and hate speech on the Internet touches Palestinians as well. They understand that people are getting more interested in Palestinian narratives shared on social media as they believe in the right to free speech, however, they complain that too many users do not reach for educational resources and comment on the conflict without basic knowledge. Therefore, StandWithUs claims that, ironically, they are also allowed to ignore international critics. As for the IDF’s actions, they say that “there is also strong evidence that the IDF consistently aimed at military targets and did not intentionally harm civilians” and it is their obligation to stop Hamas at all costs. Blaming Israel to be more powerful is, according to them, dishonest and morally bankrupt (Ibid).

4.3.3. Palestinian activist influencers

Mohammad el-Kurd, a 23-year-old poet, writer, and recently an influencer who has experienced losing his home in the Sheikh Jarrah district, has played a significant role in
popularizing the hashtag #SaveSheikhJarrah. Since he started publicizing the issue on his social media, he “gained more than 180,000 Twitter followers and more than half a million on Instagram” (France24, Jerusalem (AFP), 2021). He and his sister, Muna El-Kurd, do not limit their online engagements to spreading the hashtag through tweets and Instagram posts as they both participate in live sessions on Instagram and attend interviews to provide first-hand information from the occupied neighborhood (Holzman, 2021).

Recently, el-Kurd has 765,000 followers on Instagram, 249,500 on Twitter, and over 15,600 on Facebook. He is also popular because he works as a Palestine Correspondent for The Nation. Furthermore, he owns his website “mohammedelkurd.com” in which he uploads his articles concerning Sheikh Jarrah and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that he wrote for The Nation, The Guardian, and the Arab-language newspaper Mada Masr.

Mohammed El-Kurd inspired other users, celebrities, politicians, and campaigns to share content on social media, mostly on Instagram and Twitter. Except for the previously mentioned hashtag, the posts include useful information that educates people about the situation in Sheikh Jarrah but also encourages them to take action in social media storms or protests that take place in real life. One of them, shared on March 13, 2021 on his Instagram informs about joining the social media storm on all social media platforms.
Another activist influencer, Mariam Barghouti, is also a writer, researcher, and journalist based in Palestine. She is followed by 50,100 people on Instagram, 77,800 on Twitter, and 2,290 on Facebook. Barghouti is known for sharing her personal opinion in a direct, non-neutral overtone pointing out the injustice and oppression Palestinians have to live through. She is also the author of several political commentaries and articles on news platforms such as Al Jazeera English, The New York Times, TRT World, and The Guardian in which she shares the difficult experiences of Palestinians.

In May 2021, during the intensified protests in Sheikh Jarrah, many social media accounts, including Barghouti’s one, got suspended as they contain pictures and videos of the demonstrations. Since the journalist was reporting live from the West Bank to document Israeli aggression, her Twitter account got suddenly restricted. Barghouti sent a direct message to
Motherboard, an online magazine, writing that Twitter asked her to delete some of her posts yet she did not know which ones. The message “@MariamBarghouti’s account is temporarily unavailable because it violates the Twitter Media Policy” was appearing in place of her bio and many of her tweets (Maiberg & Cox, 2021). A Twitter spokesperson said that the suspension of her account was an error and they reversed the action, however, Twitter refused to explain what was the specific part of the company’s terms of service Barghouti supposedly had infringed. According to her, Twitter targeted her account because she has been visible on social media and it would not have happened if she did not gain that much attention. Before her account was restricted, she posted a tweet that referred to the Israeli aggression toward Palestinians beginning with the words: “I feel like I’m in a war zone in Beit Al” (Ibid).

A prominent Arab-American, Emmy-nominated journalist Ahmed Shihab-Eldin also represents the Palestinian perspective on his social media. In 2011, he joined Al Jazeera English to co-create and co-host The Streams, which is a show focusing on social media news stories from trending discussions. A year later he started to work for the Huffington Post and in 2015 Arab Business added him to the list of the 100 most influential young Arabs (Palestine Square, 2016). With that background, his online engagements are influential in terms of bringing awareness and fighting for public opinion. He is followed by over 236,000 users on Instagram, more than 84,100 on Twitter, and 82,000 on Facebook. Similar to Mohammad El-Kurd, he also owns a website, “ahmedshihabeldin.com”, where he mostly uploads videos. On May 14, 2022, he added a graphic on his Instagram account that shows a journalist Shireen Abu Akleh and Israeli soldiers shooting in her direction with the text “She’s armed with a camera!” coming out from one of them.
Shihab-Eldin has also reported the settlements in East Jerusalem, for instance, in the Silwan neighborhood. In 2015, while he was working on a documentary film for Vice, one of the scenes he and his colleagues managed to capture was completely removed by editors. The journalist was frustrated as the script they sent him later differed a lot from what he had written. Vice was excusing itself for it by using the argument that settlements are controversial and they cannot take one side because although some people consider them illegal, Israel does not (Ismail, 2021). Shihab-Edin mentioned that when he worked for the New York Times and PBS eight years earlier, he “would have to have arguments about using the word occupy, just to point out that these cities are occupied” yet know journalists use an “apartheid” term (Ibid).

4.3.4. Israeli activist influencers

Adiel Cohen, an Israeli activist and a digital creator, describes himself in his Instagram and Twitter bio as a proud member of the Nation of Israel. Currently, he has 18,800 followers on Instagram and around 2,300 on Twitter yet he remains active on both platforms. The majority of
his posts highlight the injustice and antisemitism that Jewish people need to face. One of his commentaries appeared in the section of The Jerusalem Post in which he writes about erased moments of Jewish history due to the invention of Arab Jews (Cohen, 2021).

However, not all of his posts defend Israel from the antisemitic narrative as he also confronts Hamas or Palestinian perspective. In one of his tweets, he calls a news company Eye On Palestine with more than 3 million followers on Instagram, “an antisemitic propaganda machine spewing Jew-hatred to millions of followers worldwide” (Cohen, 2022).

He also promoted hashtags #StopHamas and #IsraelUnderFire, for instance, on his Instagram post adding that using the words “disproportionate power dynamics” between Israel and Hamas is a ridiculous claim. Although he frequently refers to Hamas rather than Palestine itself, he highlights that Israel needs to defend itself and the world should understand that.

Ysabella Hazan, a Jewish activist, speaker, and writer, is another prominent public figure who mostly publishes on Instagram. Currently, she has 17,200 followers on the platform,
however, it is worth mentioning that her last post is from November 2021. Nevertheless, Hazan continues to add content on her Instagram Story yet she usually shares videos from her TikTok account.

In comparison to Cohen, she often emphasizes the equal rights of Israeli and Palestinian citizens for freedom and peace. According to her, being anti-Zionist yet advocating for a Palestinian state that is connected with the destruction of one people is a sign of hypocrisy.

Nevertheless, in one of her Instagram posts, she writes that both Jews and Palestinians are victims of British imperialism, therefore, she adds two flags in the caption. She also encourages the next generation to address the problem in a peaceful way.
Another instance of a pro-Israeli influencer is the actress Gal Gadot. Her tweet presenting a moving message and individual perspective on the crisis became controversial as she used the words “Israel deserves to live as a free and safe nation, Our neighbors deserve the same.” Her post met with fierce feedback as critics pointed out that Gadot served in the mandatory military in the Israel Defense Forces, therefore, she was accused of being an Israeli “propaganda” tool. On the other hand, others claimed that she should have written “Palestine” instead of just “our neighbors” (Haasch, 2021).
Although she is not considered an activist, she is third on the list of “2021 Top 50 Pro-Israel Influencers,” which put her higher than Cohen and Hazan who are on 34 and 40 places (Top Pro-Israelis, 2021). As she has over 3.2 million followers on Twitter and 8.7 million on Instagram, it is not surprising that her post got so much attention and controversy.

### 4.4. Official government accounts

The last social media player described in this paper refers to the Israel and Palestinian authorities who also use social media, mainly Twitter, to gain attention and fight for public opinion. Although one can think that politicians would use neutral language to remain politically correct, several examples prove this statement wrong. As they represent their nations, their online engagements need to be taken into account while analyzing the media coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian crisis.
4.4.1. Palestinian official government accounts

The official account of the Mission to the United Nations, State of Palestine, has over 83,100 followers on Twitter. On June 6, 2022, the first two tweets that users could see while entering their account were retweeted posts referring to the death of Abu Akleh, which says that she was killed in a targeted attack by Israeli forces, and another about a Palestinian victim, Mahmoud Abu Ayhur, murdered by Israeli occupation Army. The third post was their own tweet about the illegal displacement of Palestinian families in the Southern West Bank. Almost every tweet on their profile reports Israeli violence towards Palestinian including children assaulted by Israeli soldiers.

On May 11, 2022, while tweeting about Abu Akleh, they used the words “Israeli occupying forces (IOF), #murdered in cold blood a veteran Palestinian journalist” and added the letter sent to United Nations.

State of Palestine
@Palestine_UN

Today, yet another crime was perpetrated against the #Palestinian ppl by this criminal occupation, Israeli occupying forces (IOF), #murdered in cold blood a veteran Palestinian journalist, #ShireenAbuAkleh, age 51, in #Jenin in occupied #Palestine. Read our letter sent to @UN
Then, Palestine PLO-NAD, which is the official Twitter account of the Palestine Liberation Organization - Negotiations Affairs Department, has almost 59,000 followers. Similar to the State of Palestine, they capture Israel's occupation. One of their recent posts includes a video of the Israeli march celebrating “#Jerusalem’s occupation and hatred of Palestinians” that, according to them, was approved by the Israeli government. In the video, Israeli citizens chant offensive, racist slogans and insults toward late journalist Abu Akleh.

Yesterday, the Israeli government approved a march celebrating #Jerusalem’s occupation and hatred of Palestinians. While Israeli settlers chanted racist slogans and physically attacked Palestinians, the IOF attacked peaceful Palestinian protesters for raising #Palestine’s flag.

Another controversial video uploaded by Palestine PLO-NAD on May 15, 2022, shows the Israeli police attack on Shireen’s coffin, which was widely criticized around the world even by American politicians such as Barnie Sanders. The day of her funeral was also an anniversary of the Nakba, therefore, the tweet criticizes both Israeli crimes.
4.4.2. Israeli official government accounts

The Israel Defense Forces’ Twitter account, with over 1,500,000 followers, has continuously aroused controversy due to the aggressive language implemented in their messages. One of the most striking instances of confronting an adversary in real-time was a tweet posted by its spokesperson in November 2012, which has been considered a declaration of war on Hamas (Newcomb, 2012). Exactly six days before the Operation Pillar of Defense in the Gaza Strip, the above-mentioned unit tweeted: “We recommend that no Hamas operatives, whether low level or senior leaders, show their faces above ground in the days ahead” (Ben-David, 2014). This message triggered a quick response from the Palestinian Al Aqsa Brigade that in its counter-
tweet addressed the IDF spokesperson’s account writing: “@idfspokesperson Our blessed hands will reach your leaders and soldiers wherever they are (You Opened Hell Gates on Yourselves)” (Ibid).

Nowadays, the IDF’s Twitter account continues to surprise with its narrative of their posts as they seem to inflame the conflict with insensitive content. Moreover, they portray themselves as heroes while this tragic situation costs lives from both sides.

On May 15, 2022, which was the 74th anniversary of Nakba, IDF added a video to show that Jenin has been a hotspot for Palestinian terrorism. It was the only tweet posted by them that day, therefore, they avoided mentioning the Palestinian exodus from 1948. Furthermore, Jenin is a Palestinian city in the West Bank where Abu Akleh was shot by, according to witnesses, Israeli forces. However, IDF published a video in which the IDF Chief of the General Staff LTG Aviv Kohavi blames Palestinian gunmen for starting the fire. He also adds that “unlike Palestinians, IDF soldiers open fire in a professional and precise manner” and that it is not possible to determine who killed the journalist.
As for the Israeli government, this paper looks into the State of Israel's official Twitter account (@Israel) which is followed by over 855,000 users and managed by the Israel Foreign Ministry’s (@IsraelMFA) Digital Diplomacy team. In comparison to the IDF's account, Israel’s account focuses on promoting their country and presenting it as a tolerant place open to tourists. It does not mention the crisis nor Israeli forces’ actions whatsoever. On May 14, 2022, they tweeted “74 years later and we’re still going strong” with a video that shows Israel from the best perspective. Users may interpret this tweet as Israel being proud of becoming independent yet no one can find a word about the consequences the Palestinians have to face so that Israel can celebrate.
However, on May 11, 2022, Israel retweeted a post from IsraelMFA concerning the death of Abu Akleh. In this tweet, the Israel Foreign Minister wrote: “Palestinian terrorists, firing indiscriminately, are likely to have hit Al-Jazeera journalist Shireen Abu Aqla.” In this way, they immediately reject the idea of Israeli soldiers’ being responsible for her death, which was witnessed by Palestinian journalists.
4.5. The case studies: Save Sheikh Jarrah and Nakba74

4.5.1. The hashtag battle

The hashtags are now considered a new type of news, yet, they do not have to be produced by journalists but by every single user. Therefore, their power to spread and reach a global audience cannot be underestimated.

Similarly to articles, some of the hashtags contain words that may be perceived as biased or even controversial. It is believed that words are social constructs and language has critical functions, therefore, they may unite, divide, and shape one’s thoughts and feelings (Divine, 2019). For that reason, it is worth paying attention to the message each hashtag sends and what impression the language evokes on the audience. For instance, the hashtag #BoycottIsrael indicates an aggressive attitude toward Israel and has a negative overtone. On the other hand, hashtags #GazaUnderAttack, #IsraelUnderFire, and #IsraelUnderAttack create the notion that just one side is being an offender that attacks the other side. Since the adversaries in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict both experience rocket attacks followed by injured and killed civilians, it is inappropriate to portray themselves as the only victims. In the case of #PalestinianLivesMatter or
#IsraeliLivesMatter, one may argue that all lives matter regardless of the religion and views of a person and that all people have an equal right to life. In conclusion, the majority of hashtags concerning the Israeli-Palestinian conflict are not neutral and the biased language of the hashtags is usually chosen deliberately so that the opponents could fight for public opinion by using more persuasive messages.

**4.5.2. Save Sheikh Jarrah**

One of the most controversial yet successful examples of hashtag use is the campaign #SaveSheikhJarrah which is aimed at supporting Palestinian families who have been threatened to be expelled by the Israeli regime from their homes in Sheikh Jarrah, a neighborhood in East Jerusalem (Hawari, 2021). Despite the popularity of the hashtag including the online involvement of celebrities such as Roger Waters and Dua Lipa (Khatib, 2021), the presence of the hashtag #SaveSheikhJarrah in cyberspace has had its ups and downs. The reason for that is the censorship implemented by Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, which is believed to be connected with their relationship with the Israeli government (Paul, 2021). In May 2021, hundreds of posts concerning the issue were deleted without warning or explanation (Ibid). According to Mohammed el-Kurd, the views of his posts sometimes tend to “drop from a quarter of a million to 90,000 or just 5,000” (France24, 2021).

The coverage of the campaign differs depending on the media player. For instance, the NYT poorly described the events from last year concerning the expulsion of Palestinian families. Assai Rad confronted the famous newspaper on Twitter by deliberately correcting the words in the headline and subheadline (Diwakar, 2021).
On the other hand, both Al Jazeera and France24 have given a great deal of attention to the case of the Sheikh Jarrah neighborhood and the hashtag movement as they provide articles, posts, and videos showing the real stories of the Palestinian families. For example, Al Jazeera English added a video on Twitter in which Israeli settler attempts to take over Palestinian house.

If you’re not writing the truth about crimes against humanity, you’re culpable in them.
In terms of NGOs, on the StandWithUs website, users can find a factsheet concerning the Sheikh Jarrah neighborhood. For the question about the legal dispute, they answer its sides are Jewish owners and Palestinian tenants being on record because they refuse to pay rent. Later, they mention that extremists from both parts of the conflict try to promote their agendas but it is mostly Hamas. At the end of the factsheet they write about Palestinian teens spreading videos in which they assault Jews yet in the case of Jews, who were also aggressive, they only mention chanting racist slogans and highlight they were far-right (StandWithUs, factsheet, 2021). Hence,
the narrative represented by StandWithUs seems to be biased and in many cases, they marginalize the Palestinian perspective.

Mohammed el-Kurd points out that although he does not believe that posts may bring a change in real life, he “discovered that our first and last battle is one of words, the battle of narratives and the battle of public opinion” (France24, 2021). He adds that the inhabitants of Sheikh Jarrah cannot give up the social media battle because they are always in danger of losing their homes (Ibid). Therefore, the role of pro-Palestinian activist influencers has been crucial in popularizing #SaveSheikhJarrah on social media.

4.5.3. Nakba74

Social media are also helpful in terms of organizing protests that could take place in cyberspace or real life. For instance, in May 2022, there was a spread of posts regarding the Nakba 74 protests in different cities around the world. Lots of them were uploaded by the Palestinian Youth Movement on Instagram as it is a credible account having over 141,000 followers. The posts aimed to encourage people to join rallies or online protests on May 15.

It is important to indicate the role of hashtags in finding this kind of content. For example, by writing #SaveSheikhJarrah in Instagram’s search engine, one could find a post about the Nakba74 protest in Los Angeles appearing in top-rated posts as its caption used various hashtags to boost the reach.
Nevertheless, the posts calling for joining the protests to memorize Nakba concerned various cities around the world. One Instagram picture added by user @doyers42 presents a demonstrator holding a placard that says: “From Palestine to Mexico, all the walls have got to go!” The solidarity with Palestine was, therefore, visible on social media as it took place a year before with the #SaveSheikhJarrah movement.
However, this kind of content was more likely to appear on NGOs’, activist influencers’, or individual users’ social media accounts rather than in legacy media that hardly mention the anniversary. Also, none of the pro-Israeli activist influencers described in this paper posted any related content to Nakba Day.

Nevertheless, it is important to mention Al Jazeera that between May 15 and 16 added 6 posts on Facebook and 7 on Instagram including #Nakba74 despite the fact they cover daily news on topics from all around the world.

On May 15, 2022, the State of Palestine retweeted an official statement from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs concerning Nakba. The message emphasizes that “Nakba is not a fossilized event in history” as “not only the ethnic cleansing of 530 Palestinian villages.” In the document
attached to the post, the State of Palestine refers to Israel as the occupying Power practicing an apartheid regime, which denies Palestinians’ basic rights.

The State of Palestine affirms that the Nakba is not a fossilized event in history. It is not only the 67 words of the illegitimate British Balfour Declaration; it is not only the ethnic cleansing of 700 Palestinian villages and the methodical expulsion of 700,000 Palestinians;

5. Results

This table presents the numbers of mentions, interactions, reach, shares, and likes of popular hashtags concerning the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The data were taken from the platform BrandMentions and it covers the first week of December 2021.
# Pro-Palestinian hashtags | # Pro-Israeli hashtags

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>#SaveSheikhJarrah</strong></th>
<th><strong>#IsraelUnderFire</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mentions: 559</td>
<td>Mentions: 62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interactions: 80,4K</td>
<td>Interactions: 5,7K</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Reach: 627,2K</strong></td>
<td><strong>Reach: 31,7K</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shares: 37,7K</td>
<td>Shares: 1,4K</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Likes: 40,6K</td>
<td>Likes: 3,8K</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>#GazaUnderAttack</strong></th>
<th><strong>#IsraelUnderAttack</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mentions: 557</td>
<td>Mentions: 137</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interactions: 55,2K</td>
<td>Interactions: 26,1K</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Reach: 1,8M</strong></td>
<td><strong>Reach: 30,3K</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shares: 39,5K</td>
<td>Shares: 15,4K</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Likes: 14,5K</td>
<td>Likes: 9,5K</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>#FreePalestine</strong></th>
<th><strong>#StandWithIsrael</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mentions: 552</td>
<td>Mentions: 338</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interactions: 20K</td>
<td>Interactions: 23,1K</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Reach: 701,7K</strong></td>
<td><strong>Reach: 224,2K</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shares: 9,6K</td>
<td>Shares: 1,8K</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Likes: 9,9K</td>
<td>Likes: 19,9K</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>#PalestinianLivesMatter</strong></th>
<th><strong>#IsraeliLivesMatter</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mentions: 553</td>
<td>Mentions: 7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interactions: 16,5K</td>
<td>Interactions: 173</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Reach: 7,5M</strong></td>
<td><strong>Reach: -</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shares: 5,8K</td>
<td>Shares: -</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Likes: 10,3K</td>
<td>Likes: 163</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>#BoycottIsrael</strong></th>
<th><strong>#ProIsrael</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mentions: 565</td>
<td>Mentions: 79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interactions: 25,6K</td>
<td>Interactions: 6,6K</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Reach: 692,4K</strong></td>
<td><strong>Reach: 48,8K</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shares: 4,8K</td>
<td>Shares: 35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Likes: 19,4K</td>
<td>Likes: 6,4K</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*K - thousand; M - million

Regarding the mentions of the hashtags, none of the pro-Israeli ones was mentioned less than 552 times while the pro-Israeli ones (with the exception of #StandWithIsrael) did not exceed 140 mentions.

The pro-Palestinian hashtags also won in terms of interactions, which refers to the number of likes, shares, comments, and saves the user or, in this case, the hashtag received. For instance, #PalestinianLivesMatter received 16,500 interactions in comparison to #IsraeliLivesMatter, with which users interacted only 173 times. However, #IsraelUnderAttack...
had higher number of interactions than #FreePalestine, #PalestinianLivesMatter, and #BoycottIsrael.

As for reach, which is an important indicator in fighting for public opinion as it shows how many people saw the content, the results prove that pro-Palestinian hashtags target many more people. For example, in the case of #GazaUnderAttack and #IsraelUnderAttack, the pro-Palestinian hashtag reached about 60 times more users than the pro-Israeli one. Furthermore, while #PalestinianLivesMatter reached around 7.5 million people, the BrandMentions did not provide the number of reach for #IsraeliLivesMatter, which could be due to the low popularity of the hashtag, as it received only 7 mentions, 173 interactions, and 163 likes during that period.

The number of shares is also much higher regarding pro-Palestinian hashtags, except #IsraelUnderAttack with 15,400 shares, which surpasses the number of shares of the three last pro-Palestinian hashtags. However, it is still less than #GazaUnderAttack which was shared more than twice as much as #IsraelUnderAttack.

Also, none of the pro-Palestinian hashtags have less than 9,000 likes, while only #IsraelUnderAttack and #StandWithIsrael surpasses this number. Yet #StandWithIsrael received more likes than each of the Pro-Palestinian hashtags except for #SaveSheikhJarrah.

Since #Nakba74 became popular only last month, May 2022, it was not included in the table. However, new data from the last 30 days show that the hashtag was mentioned around 6,400 times, it has 479,700 interactions, 20,600 shares, and 449,200 likes. Furthermore, it reached approximately 24.6 million users, which is a much higher number than in the case of the above-mentioned hashtags. Yet, the hype of #Nakba74 was visible on May 16, one day after the anniversary and demonstrations held across the world to document the events (BrandMentions, 2022).
Nevertheless, the analytics of #SaveSheikhJarrah has also increased in numbers despite the fact the protests started in May 2021. Currently, the hashtag has about 5,400 mentions, 616,000 interactions, 309 shares, and 600,000 likes. It reaches around 1.3 million users, which is more than twice as much as in December 2021 (Ibid).
6. Discussion

After comparing four social media players in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, one may observe that their perspectives and narratives differ from each other. To start with, the coverage of legacy media with examples of The Guardian and The New York Times tends to be more formal as their journalists need to follow the guidelines. However, both newspapers gained criticism concerning the lack of key information in their headlines or adding more content about one side of the crisis over another. The crucial difference between these two is that Pro-Israelis have usually criticized The Guardian for focusing more on Palestinians while the New York Times is accused of anti-Palestinian narrative and marginalizing facts concerning Palestine. That would suggest that American newspapers still tend to support Israel whereas the British outlet has adopted a different approach from its US counterpart.

In that sense, the Guardian is closer to the counter-hegemonic media described in this paper. Both Al Jazeera and France24 have been considered pro-Palestinian and since they target a global audience, they might deliberately distinguish themselves from the previous western narrative to win public opinion from different parts of the world.

The third group which includes NGOs and activist influencers represents a personal perspective. Although the majority of activists are also journalists, they are still allowed to express their own opinion and use biased yet direct language. At the same time, their posts can be more persuasive for the public as they are related to one side of the conflict. However, their content might be also controversial, which gets more popularity and attention on social media. Also, pro-Israeli activist influencers tend to be less popular and active than pro-Palestinian ones. It suggests that users are more interested in Palestinian perspectives and that Palestinian activist influencers have taken advantage of social media and its qualities more than Israeli ones.

Finally, the official government accounts run by the authorities of Israel and Palestine can also raise controversy. The Palestinian accounts fight for public opinion and Palestinian rights keeping their followers updated by adding tweets regularly, yet, all of them present anti-Israeli messages and show Palestinian as victims without mentioning Hamas. The narration used by Israeli accounts constantly undermine the Palestinian perspective portraying the other side as criminals. Although it is understandable that they are biased and defend their perspective while
blaming the other side of the conflict, the language used by them in social media content has the power to fuel the conflict and trigger hate speech.

As for the hashtag battle, taking into consideration all of the results, one may observe that pro-Palestinian hashtags seem to win the hashtag battle over pro-Israeli content as they reach more people and their hype lasts longer.

To sum up, social media is mostly a game-changer for Palestinians as their perspective has finally stopped being marginalized. Perhaps, that could be a lesson for pro-Israeli activists, NGOs, and news platforms to improve their online engagement and narratives. However, as the majority of protests concern Palestinians who are oppressed by Israeli forces, pro-Palestinian media players are more encouraged to stay active and raise their voices.

**Conclusions**

The popularity of social media as a tool used for capturing the conflicts and fighting for public attention has undoubtedly become an advantage for Palestinians whose perspective was previously marginalized by legacy media. Nowadays, they tend to win the hashtag battle and, at the same time, gain more support from users from around the world. Despite the incidents of censorship and suspension of accounts or posts showing, for instance, demonstrations taking place in Sheikh Jarrah, social media still provides more freedom than the legacy media. The controversial content and direct language used by social media players catch public attention and allow users to take part in it, hence, the number of NGOs and activist influencers is still growing. At the same time, these organizations and individuals very often point out the flaws of legacy media in covering the crisis. Therefore, if the traditional news outlets such as the New York Times and the Guardian want to keep their audience and have equal chances in the battle for the public opinion, they ought to be careful with the words used in the headlines and respect all key information concerning both sides of the conflict.
Limitations

Due to the language barrier, the sources used in the paper were accessed in English versions. Presumably, including articles or news channels in Arab or Hebrew would provide different results and more diverse perspectives. For instance, the paper looked into the content of Al Jazeera English instead of Al Jazeera Arabic which is the original one.

Moreover, some of the events such as the death of Abu Akleh and the Nakba74 protests are too fresh to get enough reliable sources. In terms of Nakba74, it was not popular among the legacy media and the online coverage mostly appeared on NGOs’ or activist influencers’ social media accounts.

Also, it was impossible to include all of the key news channels as the paper looked into four different media outlets, therefore, the choice of media players was limited to the main, most popular digital channels and accounts.
Reference List


