

# The Role of Instagram Live in Palestinian Mobilization: A Quantitative Analysis

## Introduction

My research aims to understand how Instagram Live has been used to connect Palestinians across apartheid walls and forced exile. Every Ramadan since Israel occupied East Jerusalem, the Israeli government has increased the violence inflicted on prayers at the Aqsa mosque. The IDF (Israeli Defense Force) attacks civilians with rubber bullets and tear gas bombs, adds more restrictive measures and security, and sprays them with skunk water, all to prevent Palestinians from observing the holy month in peace [\[1\]](#). In this environment of high Israeli violence, a movement (some call it the Third Intifada) emerged. People across the globe marched in support of Palestinian human rights, but equally importantly, the Palestinian people were more united than ever, despite borders, checkpoints, and the mosaic of legal documents. I believe that Instagram has played a major role in connecting Palestinians and helping them mobilize, and I hope my findings will start a conversation.

A reel on Instagram posted by @muna.kurd15 went viral in early May 2021 [\[2\]](#). The video is of Muna el-Kurd, a

Palestinian journalist from East Jerusalem, talking to the American settler who lives in her house. The reel went viral across social media and newspapers because of how absurd Muna's reality was. The Kurd family is one of many Palestinian families that are facing forceful evictions from their homes. In 2011, half of the Kurd's family house was annexed by Zionist settlers [\[3\]](#). Since then, the family has been relentlessly telling the story of Sheikh Jarrah (the neighborhood) online and pursuing legal actions to stay in their home. Muna and her twin brother have made videos when they were young telling their story, and have been active since then. Yet, Sheikh Jarrah became part of the global consciousness only in the summer of 2021.

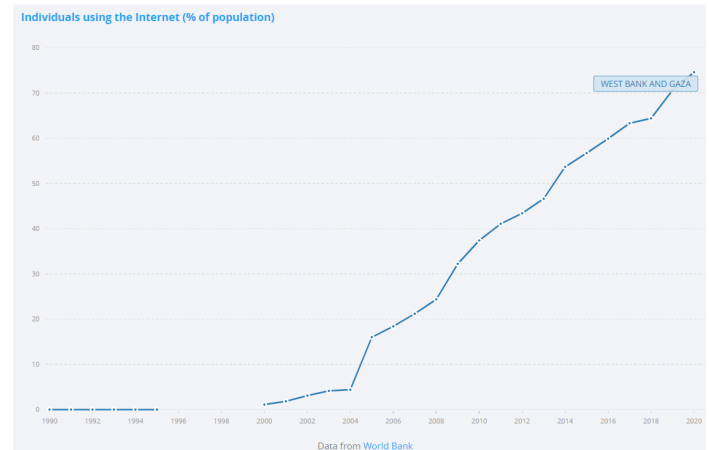
The video is not the only force that played into pushing Palestinians and international communities to protest. Ramadan in 2021 was in May, and the IDF was inflicting extreme violence on prayers, as it always does. Hamas has threatened that if attacks continued, it would launch an attack on Israel. The IDF double downed and intensified its violence. The last mass murder of Palestinians was in May of 2018, and it had gained little to no attention globally. During that summer, Hamas did

not react or attack. This time Hamas launched homemade rockets onto Israel, killing 2 people on May 11. Israel in return showered Gaza with American-made airstrikes killing over 300 Palestinians. Palestinian activists pushed to expose false narratives and passive voices when covering Israeli war crimes and overplaying the power of Hamas airstrikes. Media coverage and Israel's war crimes are not the topics of this research, but they play an important role in why many people were invested in the movement. May 21 marked the "official" of the ceasefire. Israel continues to make crimes against humanity. Currently, they have been launching airstrikes on Gaza. I dedicate this research paper, albeit small in importance, to the people whose lives were stolen in May 2021, may they rest in power.

## Literature

Many researchers consider FaceBook to have played a large role in the Arab Spring to mobilize and connect people. The mention of the Arab Spring has been consistent in the literature I reviewed, however, Palestine wasn't in the Arab Spring, and its last mass movement (the second Intifada) was in 2005. As Figure 1 shows, only 16% of Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza used the Internet in 2005 [4].

Since the internet wasn't widely used, the internet didn't play a significant role in the second Intifada.

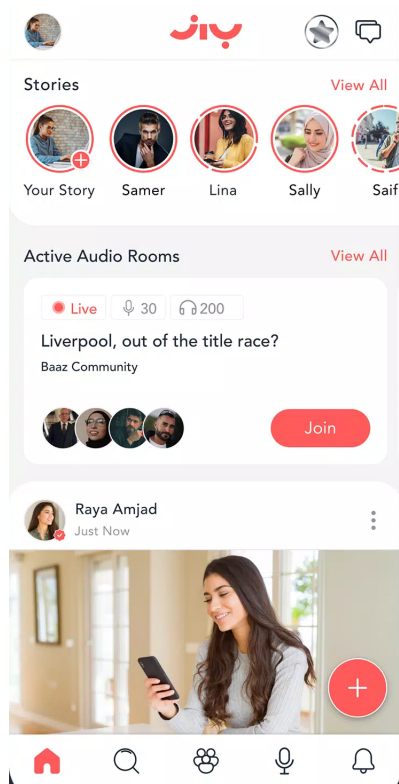


In the article "The Intifada Will Be Instagramed: How Social Media Enflamed The Latest Israel-Palestine Conflict" published in 2017, Jay Michaelson argues that Instagram has been used to encourage violence *on both sides* [5]. He argued that images of violent attacks by Palestinians or Israelis insight more violence. Thomas Zeizoff agrees with Michaelson's assessment in an article written in 2016 titled "Does Social Media Influence Conflict? Evidence From the 2012 Gaza Conflict" [6]. Zeizoff argues that social media escalated violence in the 2012 war on Gaza. While some might want to inflict violence just like they saw on the internet, this is hardly the case. There is a lot of mental turmoil before individuals commit acts of terror. In fact, Michaelson doesn't

seem to believe that the state is the initiator of violence, not civilians. He starts his article by stating “[t]he news from Israel and Palestine feels tragically familiar: horrifying Palestinian acts of terrorism, followed by horrifying Israeli acts of state violence.” Palestinian activists have used social media to disprove such claims. People in the West got most of their news on Palestine through major Western media that ignores the fact that *the occupation is violent* and puts the blame on Palestinians. Just like Michaelson thinks, the media narratives always start with “Palestinian acts of terror.” Working in that framework, it is easy to fall for the “social media escalates violence,” rather than it exposing Israeli human rights violations and the unsafe and unpredictable reality many Palestinians live in.

Michaelson, however, was correct in his prediction. The so-called third Intifada was Instagrammed in both the sense that it was recorded and uploaded to Instagram and that Instagram played a huge role in it. A research paper published in 2022 in the *Journal of Theoretical and Applied Information Technology* attempts to understand how Palestinian activists navigate Instagram and the censorship they deal with. In “The Resistance of Social Media Activists in the Struggle For Freedom

of Expression on Instagram Towards Israel’s Occupation in Palestine,” the researchers reason their interest in Instagram because it “is the most used platform that consists of various features to facilitate individuals to communicate and convey their messages” [7]. In my data collection stage, I came across different types of content on Instagram published by activists: images, long videos, reels, stories, and lives. During the movement, Baaz, an Arab-developed social media app advertised itself as a safe place for activists to talk about Palestine [8]. The layout of Baaz is extremely similar to Instagram, as shown in Figure 2, but despite many large activists such as Muna el-Kurd supporting it, it didn’t take off and many people continued to use Instagram [9].



I think this is because of the multi-purpose nature of Instagram, where people share art, travel vlogs, and political lives all on the same platform. Because Instagram has a wider audience and is more accessible, I chose Instagram over Twitch to study Live Streams about Palestine.

## Research Methodology

Ethnographic research involves a more robust qualitative analysis such as surveys and interviews. Unfortunately, I am in the early stages of the research and most of my methodology is quantitative rather than qualitative. I have made a survey, but only 12 people participated, so I will briefly

mention it but I won't draw any conclusions from a tiny poll. In the future, I hope to have a larger survey pool to understand people's perspectives beyond data.

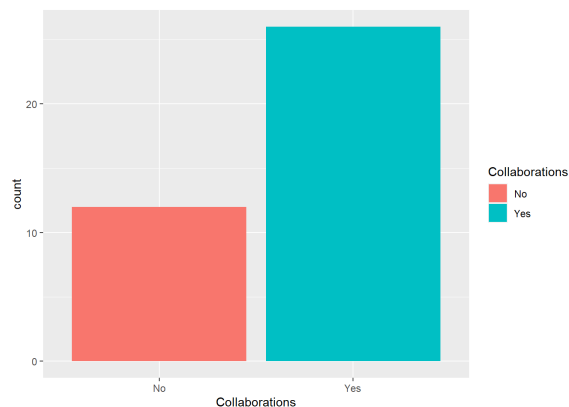
Tracking Instagram Lives has been tricky because most of the Lives I later analyze are no longer on the Instagram pages of the people who hosted them. I used YouTube to collect them, but that leaves a large position of Instagram Lives that have not been recorded. For example, I remember watching an Instagram Live of Muna el-Kurd and a lawyer from the '48 territories giving advice and encouraging Palestinians with Israeli documents to strike. Unfortunately, I couldn't find the Live and so I can't analyze it in my work.

Another difficulty I faced while collecting data is the number of views. For the Lives that are reposted on the main page, I could only see the total number of views and not the number of views during the stream. As a result, I had gaps in my Views variable in the dataset and couldn't use it as a result. I will, however, identify patterns of when views increase in the Data Analysis section. In addition to Instagram Live data collection, I used Google Trends to track a few keywords in Israel, Palestine, and Worldwide to see the trends.

## Data Analysis

I have collected data from 38 Instagram Lives. The dataset tracks the live host, date, the views (if possible) during the Live, the topic if there are collaborations, and if there is violence depicted in the Live. Additionally, the data also includes my personal notes about each live and major events that took place during it.

The first finding is that most of the lives had collaborators, often from different sides of Palestine/the Arab World, as indicated in Figure 3. 26 out of the 38 Lives in the data had collaborators. In many of these lives, different co-hosts will share updates from where they are.

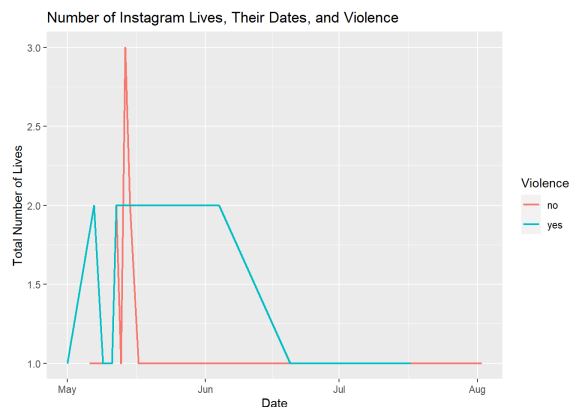


One notable Live was hosted by Muna Hawwa, a Palestinian in the diaspora (Qatar), a Gazan woman named Rina, a Gazan medical staff, and other people who rotate and are in Jerusalem and North America. During the live, Israel launched an airstrike on Gaza. People got to see how

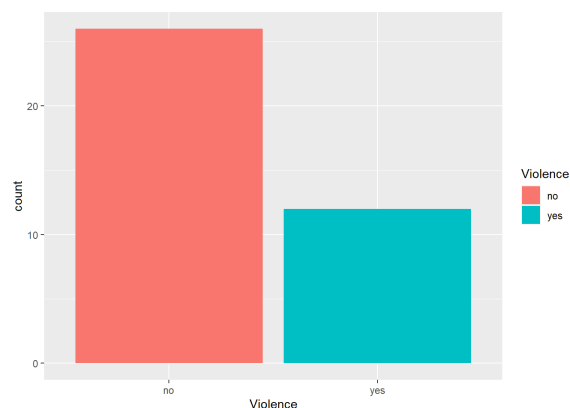
Rina and many other Gazans managed to protect themselves when there is no escape. It is unclear to me if Hawwa disabled the comments or Instagram, but during the attacks, the comments were disabled. The live views increased as the attacks began, going over 33,000 live viewers. Once the attacks calmed down. The live views decreased. Once people were able to comment, @batool5320 commented at minute 52:26 where she could donate her blood for the victims. This shows active communication between viewers and streamers that want to take immediate action and help the victims. The medical staff member was showing the number of ambulances coming and how crowded the hospital was getting. All of this was raw footage. Unless someone is extremely into conspiracy theories, it was hard for anyone to deny the realities these two Gazans lived during the Live. Hawwa has also confronted a woman in her Live during another attack on Gaza, and so did Alaa Hamdan when Israel bombed Burj el-Jawhra, one of the few commercial towers in Gaza.

Figure 4 shows a loose correlation between Lives that include violence and when Gazan attacks took place. This is mostly because Lives also depicted violence in Jerusalem,

mostly inside the compound of the Aqsa mosque.



Most of the Lives didn't include violence as indicated in Figure 5. Rather, most of the Lives were of Palestinians from different regions giving each other updates and trying to mobilize people. In the dataset, a Live can have multiple topics and Figure 6 shows that half of the time, a Live would include Talk Panels and/or Updates. Another type of Live is streaming acts of protests/celebrations. For example, when the ceasefire was agreed upon, people took to the street to celebrate. Muna Hawwa hosted a Live and people in the compound joined her.



The Topics Discussed in the Instagram Lives

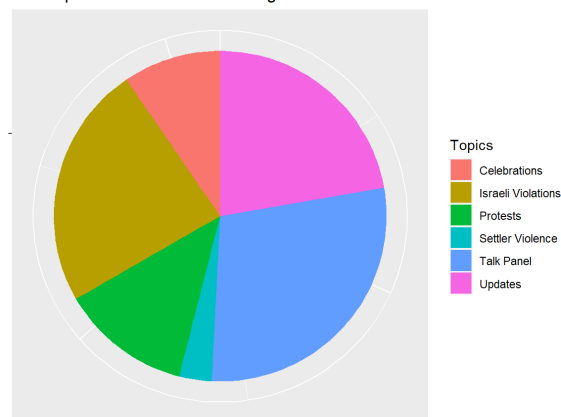
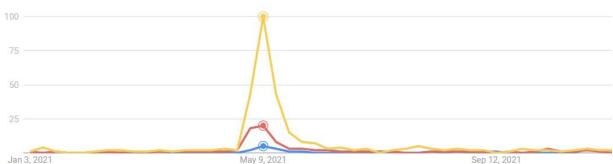
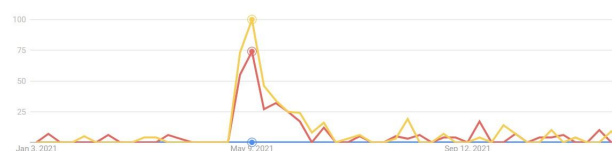
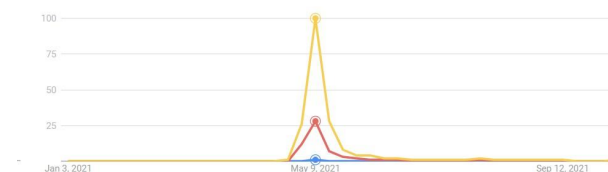


Figure 7 shows the trends of the keyword “Sheikh Jarrah” in 2021, Palestine. The yellow line is for the English search of Sheikh Jarrah, the red line is the same word but in Arabic and the blue line is for Hebrew [10]. Before May, the search trend was very low and it spiked in May and June. The peak is on May 9th. The earliest Live in the dataset is on May 1st. It shows Sheikh Jarrah residents protesting and the IDF attacking them. On May 9th, there are two Lives that educate people about what is going on in Sheikh Jarrah and Jerusalem. In one of the Lives, the host Alaa Hamdan tries to speak English to reach a wider audience. Both Lives had over 30,000 live viewers each, an increase from Hamdan's Live just two days earlier on the 7th which had over 20,000 live viewers. This shows that Palestinians were trying to learn more about the neighbourhood before Hamas launched the first airstrike. This shows that before the

mass violence and murder, social media activists were able to start a dialogue and interests among Palestinians in Palestinian territories. This is also the case for Palestinians inside the '48 lands. The coloring and the period of trends are the same in Figure 8 as in Figure 7 [11]. However, Figure 8 is set for Israel. Search peaked on May 9th in Israel as well. The search in Arabic is higher than in Hebrew, which indicates that Palestinians were engaged with news of Sheikh Jarrah. However, there is a wider gap between English and Arabic searches for Sheikh Jarrah. Interestingly, in Israel, both Arabic and English searches for Sheikh Jarrah were low after the peak. During August, the residents of Sheikh Jarrah had a hearing at the Supreme Court in Jerusalem, yet little to no interest is shown in Figure 8.



Sheikh Jarrah also peaked in the global search engine in the summer of 2021 as indicated in Figure 9 [12].



## Conclusion

In conclusion, this research explores the role of Instagram Live in connecting Palestinians to mobilize. The summer of 2021 has seen unprecedented worldwide and local Palestinian mobilization. Palestinians in Israel went on strike to demand an end to the violence. The court had to push the date of the forced evacuation of the people of Sheikh Jarrah. A Kurd member spoke in front of the UN General Assembly after making videos and writing articles about his reality. I attempted to examine how Instagram has played a major role in this Intifada by unifying the Palestinian struggle. The report provides insights into the ways in which Palestinian activists have used Instagram to navigate censorship and expose false narratives. Instagram and other social media apps have been an integral part of exposing Israeli human rights violations.



It is important to note that this report is limited by its methodology, which is primarily quantitative. It is clear that a larger survey pool and more qualitative analysis are needed to draw more robust conclusions and insights into the role of Instagram Live in connecting Palestinians. Despite its limitations, this report provides valuable insights into the ways in which social media platforms like Instagram can be used to connect people across borders, amplify their voices, facilitate dialogue and mobilize people during times of crisis.

## Bibliography

- [1] BBC News. (2015, September 19). Ramadan: A time of heightened violence for Palestinians. BBC News. <https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-34227609>
- [2] @muna.kurd15. (2021, May 5). This is mine. [Video]. Instagram. [https://www.instagram.com/reel/COX3KPHHx9p/?utm\\_source=ig\\_web\\_copy\\_link&igshid=MzRlODBiNWFlZA==](https://www.instagram.com/reel/COX3KPHHx9p/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igshid=MzRlODBiNWFlZA==)
- [3] Jerusalem Story. (2019, April 9). Home Front: Mohammed El-Kurd. YouTube. <https://www.jerusalemstory.com/en/video/home-front-mohammed-el-kurd>
- [4] Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics. (2005). The Internet in Palestine 2005. International Telecommunication Union. [https://www.itu.int/dms\\_pub/itu-d/opb/ind/D-IND-PA.05.2005-PDF-E.pdf](https://www.itu.int/dms_pub/itu-d/opb/ind/D-IND-PA.05.2005-PDF-E.pdf)
- [5] Michaelson, J. (2017, July 22). The Intifada Will Be Instagrammed: How Social Media Enflamed The Latest Israel-Palestine Conflict. The Daily Beast. <https://www.thedailybeast.com/the-intifada-will-be-instagrammed-how-social-media-has-already-enflamed-the-latest-israel-palestine-conflict>
- [6] Zeizoff, T. (2016). Does Social Media Influence Conflict? Evidence From the 2012 Gaza Conflict. Journal of Conflict Resolution, 60(2), 195–223. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022002714535729>
- [7] Al-Salah, I., & Al-Zoubi, M. (2022). The Resistance of Social Media Activists in the Struggle For Freedom of Expression on Instagram Towards Israel's Occupation in Palestine. Journal of Theoretical and Applied Information Technology, 100(22), 281–291. <http://www.jatit.org/volumes/Vol100No22/14Vol100No22.pdf>
- [8] ArabAd. (2021, June 7). Baaz, a social media platform created in the Arab world for the Arab world, is launched. ArabAd. <https://www.arabadonline.com/en/details/news-in-brief/Baaz-a-social-media-platform-created-in-the-Arab-world-for-the-Arab-world-is-launched>
- [9] Baaz. (n.d.). Baaz - All Your Social Media in One Place. Google Play. Retrieved October 8, 2022, from <https://www.google.com/url?sa=i&url=https://3A%2F%2Fapkpure.com%2Fbaaz%2Fcom.baaz.baazapp&psig=AOvVaw0nO3rgIClzIxosKfm5Lte8&ust=1683774893095000&source=images&cd=vfe&ved=0CBIQjhxqFwoTCOi0lbbk6f4CFQAAAAAdAAAAABAI>
- [10] Google Trends. (n.d.). Sheikh Jarrah - Worldwide, 2021. Google Trends. Retrieved October 8, 2022, from <https://trends.google.com/trends/explore?dat>



[e=2021-01-01](https://trends.google.com/trends/explore?q=שׂיח%20גראף,الشيخ جراح,2022-01-01&geo=PS&hl=en) 2022-01-01&geo=PS&q=שׂיח%20גראף,الشيخ جراح,2022-01-01&geo=PS&hl=en

[11] Google Trends. (n.d.). Sheikh Jarrah - Israel, 2021. Google Trends. Retrieved October 8, 2022, from <https://trends.google.com/trends/explore?q=שׂיח%20גראף,الشيخ جراح,2022-01-01&geo=IL&hl=en>

[12] Google Trends. (n.d.). Sheikh Jarrah - Global, 2021. Google Trends. Retrieved October 8, 2022, from <https://trends.google.com/trends/explore?q=שׂיח%20גראף,الشيخ جراح,2022-01-01&geo=IL&hl=en>