

Palestine Unbound

Published each issue and updated regularly on *Palestine Square* (blog.palestine-studies.org), this section strives to capture the tenor and content of popular conversations related to the Palestinians and the Arab-Israeli conflict. Increasingly, these conversations are held on new and dynamic platforms unbound by traditional media. Therefore, items presented in this section are from a variety of sources and have been selected because they either have gone viral or represent a significant cultural moment or trend.

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Team Palestine at Rio 2016



Palestinian swimmer Mary al-Atrash trains for the Rio Olympics in Beit Sahour. (4 July, Thomas Coex/AFP/Getty Images)

This summer's Olympic Games in Rio de Janeiro featured the largest delegation of Palestinian athletes to compete since Palestine joined the Olympics held in Atlanta in 1996. Two swimmers, two runners, a judoka, and a dressage rider made up the 2016 Palestinian team. While some of the competitors reside in the West Bank and Gaza, others grew up in Germany.

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The trip to Rio was not without hurdles. The team had to compete without the head of their delegation, Issam Qishta, because Israel refused to let him leave Gaza; and had to purchase new equipment in Rio because Israel blocked the delivery of their original equipment to the West Bank months earlier—most of which had been donated by foreign governments.

Social media websites Twitter and Facebook erupted with fan support when the team's flagbearer, marathon runner Mayada al-Sayed, appeared on screen at the 5 August opening ceremony. Many commentators highlighted the unique obstacles Palestinian athletes face in the West Bank and Gaza.

A poignant example of this is Mary al-Atrash, the twenty-two-year-old swimmer. Al-Atrash trained for the games in a twenty-five-meter pool in her home village of Beit Sahour because there are no Olympic-sized pools in the West Bank. Although she lives only a few miles from Jerusalem, where there are numerous fifty-meter Olympic pools, getting to the city to train would be nearly impossible. Al-Atrash would first have to obtain a permit to cross into Jerusalem, then endure what often is an hours-long wait at a checkpoint, and finally, transfer to some form of Israeli ground transportation to reach such a pool. Given the length of time the journey would take, she and other athletes opt to train at facilities in the West Bank so as not to waste valuable practice time.

Similarly, sprinter Mohammed al-Khatib does not have access to trainers, equipment, or a track with a proper surface. He trained for Rio mostly by running in the streets of Hebron, a city fragmented by illegal settlements and a



A Palestinian athlete hurdles over the Israeli separation wall in this cartoon by Khalid Albaih. (4 August, Facebook)



A fan cheers for sprinter Mohammed Abukhousa from Gaza in the first round of the men's 100m competition. (13 August, Twitter)

suffocating Israeli military presence. He occasionally had access to tracks at Birzeit University and at a high school in Ramallah, and turned to videos on YouTube to hone his technique. Despite the challenging conditions, al-Khatib cut his 100m time from fifteen to eleven seconds in three years. As he told Al Jazeera in a 4 March interview: “I know a lot of athletes in Palestine face all these difficulties and at some point they give up. I almost gave up at one stage, but it’s really just about going forward regardless [of whether] I’m crawling, walking, or running.”

The impact of the international Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement was also evident for the first time at the 2016 Summer Olympics. Before the athletes even made it to Rio, Syrian boxer Ala’ Ghasoun forfeited his qualifying match against an Israeli opponent. From then on, many athletes from other Arab states refused to engage with the Israeli delegation. Scheduled to share a bus to the opening ceremony with their Israeli counterparts, the Lebanese delegation refused to allow them to board. Soon after, a Saudi judoka, Joud Fahmy, forfeited her first-round match in order to avoid competing against an Israeli athlete. And in the most talked-about incident, Egyptian judoka Islam el-Shehaby refused to shake the hand of his Israeli opponent. El-Shehaby explained his reasoning after the match: “Shaking the hand of your opponent is not an obligation written in the judo rules. It happens between friends and he’s not my friend.” He added, “I have no problem with Jewish people. . . . But for personal reasons, you can’t ask me to shake the hand of anyone from this State, especially in front of the whole world.” El-Shehaby’s act resulted in his disqualification from the games for poor sportsmanship.

The games have long been a venue for acts of solidarity and political protest. Twenty-five African states withdrew from the 1976 games in Montreal due to the International Olympic Committee’s refusal to bar New Zealand, which had maintained sporting ties with apartheid South Africa despite the international boycott. Similarly, the photo of U.S. sprinters Tommie Smith and John Carlos raising their fists in a Black Power salute on the medal podium at the 1968 games in Mexico City remains one of the most iconic images in sporting history.

Although Palestine did not bring home medals from the Rio games, the delegation’s presence, as well as acts of solidarity by other teams, sparked international conversations about Israel’s unjust treatment of Palestinian athletes and the reality of the occupation.



A viral meme capturing Islam el-Shehaby's refusal to shake his Israeli opponent's hand. (12 August, Imgur)

#PalestinelsHere*

Google prides itself on being all things to all people. And, befitting our globalized times, Google's search pages are localized both linguistically and by web address. Visit Google in Rio de Janeiro and your Brazilian IP address will direct you to google.br rather than the google.com Americans are accustomed to. In France, google.fr; google.tn for Tunisia; and so on.

For Palestinians in the Israeli-occupied West Bank and Gaza Strip, Google set up google.ps but titled the local search page "Palestinian territories." Then in spring 2012, it renamed its banner "Palestine." The change sparked joy in the hearts of Palestinians: the world's most prominent Internet company had recognized Palestine! Almost on cue, Israel protested. Then-Israeli deputy foreign minister Ze'ev Elkin fired off an open letter to CEO Larry Page asserting that Google's recognition of Palestine would "negatively impinge on the efforts of my government to bring about direct negotiations between Israel and the Palestinian Authority." Palestinians, Elkin argued, would only be emboldened by Google to jettison direct negotiations with Israel in favor of "one-sided actions." Elkin's histrionic letter had little, if anything, to do with sincere aspirations for peace, and everything with Israeli opposition to any recognition, official or otherwise, of Palestine. Elkin's words are belied by his outspoken opposition to a Palestinian state and support for Israeli annexation of the occupied Palestinian territories (oPt). Google dismissed Elkin's letter and a spokesman told the BBC that Google takes its cues from "the UN, ICANN [the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers], ISO [International Organization for Standardization], and other international organizations."

Despite the search engine's recognition of Palestine, Google's cartographic service, Google Maps, did not follow suit. In early August, the Palestinian Journalists' Forum released a statement accusing Google of removing Palestine from Google Maps. Online protesters quickly circulated screenshots of the map service alleging that where the West Bank and Gaza had previously been labeled Palestine, now only Israel is labeled and the oPt are just marked by a broken line.



A Google Maps depiction of the area covering the West Bank, Gaza, and Israel. The word "Palestine" appears nowhere.

* An earlier version of this story, written by Khelil Bouarrouj, appeared on *Palestine Square*, the blog of the Institute for Palestine Studies, on 29 August 2016. —Ed.

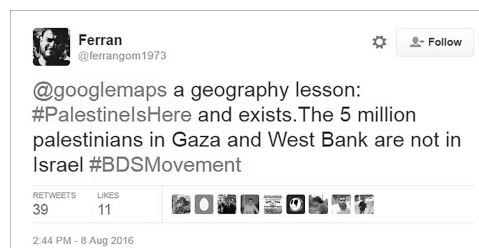
Soon after, a *change.org* online petition from March titled, “GOOGLE: Put Palestine on Your Maps!” went viral. It attracted tens of thousands of digital signatures, and the hashtags #PalestineMap and #PalestineIsHere were trending on Twitter throughout the month of August.

It emerged, however, that Palestine was never erased from Google Maps because it was never there to begin with. A perfect example of Internet hordes getting ahead of the facts? Sure, but the false event raises a serious question: Why isn’t Palestine on Google Maps? After all, Google’s search engine—the heart of the company’s business model—recognizes Palestine.

Such recognition would be in keeping with Google’s aforementioned guidelines of following precedents set by the UN, where 138 nations of the General Assembly granted Palestine the status of nonmember observer state in November 2012. Although a less-than-equal UN member (only a Security Council vote confers full recognition, but Palestine’s path is blocked by the ever-looming U.S. veto), Palestine succeeded in joining the UN Organization for Education, Science and Culture (UNESCO) as a full member in October 2011.

More than 70 percent of the UN’s 193 member states had recognized Palestine by the close of 2015, including China, India, and Brazil, and others in the so-called developing world. Israel frets more about so-called first world countries recognizing Palestine, since Western Europe and the United States are its key trading partners, military suppliers, and diplomatic backers. Still, while lagging behind the rest of the world, Western countries are increasingly recognizing Palestine. Sweden and Iceland have officially done so; the national parliaments of the United Kingdom, France, Greece, Spain, Belgium, and Ireland have passed nonbinding resolutions on the subject; and Italy and Norway have upgraded the Palestinian representative’s office in their respective capitals to a status befitting a sovereign nation. Moreover, the European Parliament has passed its own motion proclaiming “in principle, recognition of Palestinian statehood” by a vote of 498–88. Lastly, the Vatican has also bestowed its blessing on Palestine as a country.

When the Palestinian Authority applied to join the International Criminal Court (ICC) at The Hague in 2015, there was some question as to whether Palestine could qualify for membership, given its less-than-unanimous status as a sovereign state, but the ICC ended up ruling in favor.



A Twitter user reminds Google of the millions of Palestinians living in the oPt. (8 August, Twitter)

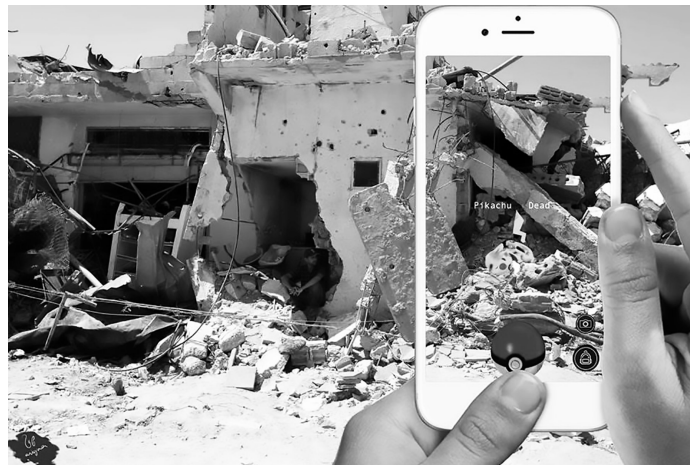


Many social media users provided Google with an annotated map of Israel. (15 August, Twitter)

A free Palestine, of course, remains an aspiration. But unlike, say, Tibet (recognized by no nation) or Abkhazia (recognized only by Russia), Palestine is recognized by most countries around the world, is a member of several international organizations, and is occupied by a power that until recently paid lip service to the idea of a sovereign Palestinian state. Going back to Google: Taiwan shows up on Google Maps despite its lacking a UN seat and despite its international status falling short of Palestine's. And in Google's own backyard, Facebook—the world's largest social media platform—also recognizes Palestine. Facebook's recognition isn't akin to that of, say, the United States, but it isn't a trivial matter either. When the social media behemoth recognized Kosovo in 2013, the New York Times reported, "Kosovo is hailing a grant of legitimacy by a new arbiter of national identity: Facebook."

In other words, what happens online matters, and that is why Israel was so peeved at Google in 2013 and why Palestinians and their allies reacted with alarm to the (false) reports of cartographic erasure. Whenever a major Internet company, the resource of upward of one billion individuals, recognizes Palestine, the idea of a free Palestinian nation gains a little more traction.

Pokémon GO



A photoshopped montage portrays an imaginary game of Pokémon GO in Gaza, in which a player discovers a crushed and battered Pickachu character half-buried in the rubble of a destroyed building. (13 July, Twitter)

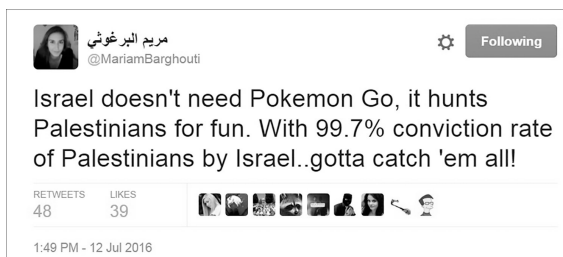
In July 2016, the software development company Niantic released the augmented reality game Pokémon GO. Users of the downloadable mobile app search for and capture Pokémon—virtual creatures—using the geolocation capabilities of their smartphones. Upon the app's release, millions of users around the world roamed their cities and hometowns searching for Pokémon. Although the game was not officially released in the Middle East, users in Israel were able to download it by modifying their phone settings, and it became a sensation. The same was not true for Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza.

Israel severely restricts access to 3G cellular technology in the oPt and while it agreed to allow West Bank Palestinians access to 3G mobile service in November 2015, the agreement has yet to be

implemented. Israeli settlers in the oPt have 3G network access and sometimes Palestinians can pick up the signal if they are in close enough proximity to a settlement. (In Gaza there is no access to such cellular networks at all.) Thus, although it was nearly impossible for them to play the game, Palestinians in the oPt were not deterred from engaging in the Pokémon GO phenomenon.

Both in the West Bank and Gaza, people took to social media to highlight what the game would look like if played under occupation, commenting (often satirically) on issues like movement restrictions, the blockade of Gaza, and militarized policing. Many also pointed out the stark differences between the lives of Palestinians and the lives of Israeli settlers. As Abd Elrahman Salayma of Hebron noted in a Facebook post: “There is a Pokémon down the street in the settlement. . . . How the hell am I going to catch it?” Palestinians also used the game to remind the world of the humanitarian crisis in the Gaza Strip, where much of the infrastructure remains partially or completely destroyed since Israel’s latest military assault on the territory in 2014.

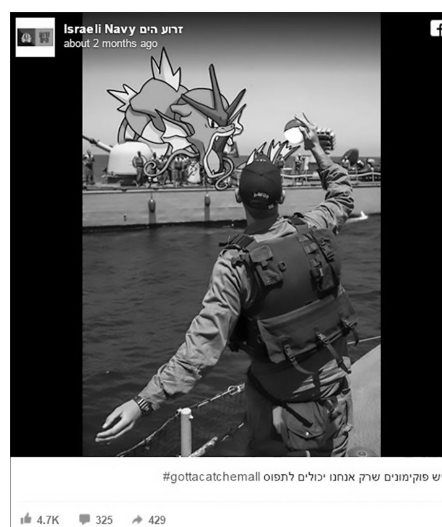
Conversely, members of Israel’s armed forces took full advantage of their exclusive access to areas from which Palestinians are banned. The Israel Defense Forces (IDF), Israeli Navy, and Israeli Home Front Command featured photos of the game on their Facebook pages. However, the IDF’s Information Security Department soon prohibited play on bases because, as the 14 July warning read, “The game is a source for gathering information.”



Palestinian journalist Mariam Barghouti compares Pokémon GO to Israel’s mass incarceration of Palestinians. (12 July, Twitter)



Drawing of a Pokémon looming over the Israeli separation wall that went viral on Facebook and Twitter. (13 July, Twitter)



An Israeli sailor aims a Pokéball at Gyarados, a highly sought water dragon character. The image from the Israeli Navy’s Facebook page was captioned: “There are some Pokémon that only we can get to. #gottacatchemall.” (12 July, Facebook)