

# The Growth of Palestinian Digital Spaces



By Mayss Al Alami

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igital visibility of Palestine and Palestinians has never been stronger than now. After a pandemic that catalyzed the growth of digital and virtual technologies globally, Palestinian

organizations, entrepreneurs, business owners, and activists have capitalized on this moment, using digital and online technologies to showcase their work and identity. Surpassing the stereotypical narratives of mainstream media, Palestinians have created online spaces through which their identity and craft are showcased beyond the occupation under which they live. From online virtual reality (VR) tours, to social media profiles, online stores, and forums, Palestinians are part of the online digital revolution that is expanding the present digital and virtual world.

For many who were displaced from the land decades ago, or who cannot visit Palestine, or who have visited in limited capacity, virtual reality (VR) tools are becoming key to providing as close to a real-life immersive experience as possible. Whether it is touring the streets of Yaffa,<sup>i</sup> the markets of Hebron,<sup>ii</sup> the monuments of Jerusalem,<sup>iii</sup> or the graffiti art walls of Silwan,<sup>iv</sup> video-recorded tours are becoming significant instruments in providing an immersive experience of Palestine. The tours vary in form, ranging from 360-degree videos that can be previewed using VR goggles to walking tours of Palestinian cities. The experience surpasses mere descriptive narratives, providing more sobering and realistic accounts of the lives of Palestinians on the ground. VR tours have been used as tools of activism to showcase the physical and geographical manifestations of occupation, the beautiful landscapes of Palestine, and the tools of resilience, such as art,<sup>v</sup> that Palestinians have adopted as a way to own their struggle and identity.

Online and digital tools have been used as well to create online gathering spaces for Palestinians and allies from all over the world. Two significant

virtual spaces were created this year: 7amleh's Palestine Digital Activism Forum (PDAF)<sup>vi</sup> in March, and The BuildPalestine Summit<sup>vii</sup> in October 2021. Both online summits consisted of a 2- to 3-day itinerary that brought together Palestinian activists, experts, comedians, musicians, and others from around the world, huddled in virtual rooms to meet, connect, and learn about their experiences and craft. These digital summits invite Palestinians and non-Palestinians alike to engage with one another and to learn more about the diverse and multifaceted manifestations of Palestinian identity. In doing so, such digital online

Palestinians have capitalized on the growth of social media tools to share their work, identity, craft, and even cities online. Such users range from small-business owners to journalists, researchers, and activists. Through beautifully crafted profiles, small-business owners, such as the Nöl Collective,<sup>viii</sup> Tatreez and Tea,<sup>ix</sup> and Hilweh market,<sup>x</sup> showcase their Palestinian-made organic clothing, embroidery, and handmade crafts, all made from local resources, using Palestinian ancestral traditions. Most significantly, these businesses not only showcase the beauty of Palestinian tradition and serve as

■ A mural in the neighborhood of Silwan, Jerusalem. Photo courtesy of [https://www.iwitnessilwan.org/](https://www.iwitnesssilwan.org/).



spaces function as community-building tools that transcend the geographic and bureaucratic limitations that minimize accessibility to Palestine and to the work of Palestinians and their allies.

reminders of their ancestral roots and traditions, they also help to revitalize and preserve cultural practices that keep Palestinians connected to their lands, resources, and traditions.

Journalists and activists play a significant role in developing the Palestinian digital space, creating online content that shares the everyday life and experiences of Palestinians, exhibiting aspects of Palestine that surpass the depictions and images put forth by mainstream media. These include profiles of neighborhoods such as Silwan<sup>xi</sup> and Sheikh Jarrah,<sup>xii</sup> and of Palestinians such as Muna El-Kurd and<sup>xiii</sup> Mohammed El-Kurd,<sup>xiv</sup> Tareq Bakri,<sup>xv</sup> and Hareth Yousef.<sup>xvi</sup> The content they share is accessible to a large global audience, serving as both touristic and educational material. Whether it is a bird's-eye view of the beautiful layered landscape of Palestinian olive trees,<sup>xvii</sup> the streets of Silwan, or old Palestinian houses,<sup>xviii</sup> these digital snippets provide a necessary exposure to Palestine in a more expansive and immersive light.

Digital tools have been invaluable in creating opportunities to learn more about Palestine, not just as it is depicted in news headlines but also through exploring its different street corners and neighborhood crevices. While there are boundaries and limitations to digital media, it has nonetheless provided Palestinians with invaluable tools to persevere and share their own narratives. By using and developing digital and virtual tools, Palestinians have taken ownership of their stories, narrating them in their own way, thereby surpassing the stereotypical, passive, and limited narrative often imposed on them or communicated about them. Leveraging these tools has allowed for a revolution of Palestinian storytelling, extending from their ancestral oral traditions to today's sharing, preserving, and owning their diversity, craft, art, and identity.

■ Muna El-Kurd, an activist from East Jerusalem.



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<sup>i</sup> These videos allow a 360-degree view of the surroundings. Please note the circle with arrows in the upper-left corner. A tour of Yaffa is available in this video series: <https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PLHTXa06HVywKH57d2qC8Qwu6JfUvYQAJc>.

<sup>ii</sup> <https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PLHTXa06HVywK51cn4rhHoCiK-bZP114f3>.

<sup>iii</sup> [https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PLHTXa06HVywli1AcqBeP2Td48FOivLMZ\\_](https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PLHTXa06HVywli1AcqBeP2Td48FOivLMZ_)

<sup>iv</sup> <https://youtu.be/KFArIMT1i9k>.

<sup>v</sup> [https://instagram.com/artforces?utm\\_medium=copy\\_link](https://instagram.com/artforces?utm_medium=copy_link).

<sup>vi</sup> <https://pdf.ps/?lang=en>.

<sup>vii</sup> [https://www.buildpalestine.com/summit/?fbclid=IwAR0JFQ600u6nM5XLiIS\\_jPiSiP4cFt3OICelGVQHxRTJq-GWt6iQJYoWW18](https://www.buildpalestine.com/summit/?fbclid=IwAR0JFQ600u6nM5XLiIS_jPiSiP4cFt3OICelGVQHxRTJq-GWt6iQJYoWW18).

<sup>viii</sup> [https://instagram.com/nolcollective?utm\\_medium=copy\\_link](https://instagram.com/nolcollective?utm_medium=copy_link).

<sup>ix</sup> [https://instagram.com/tatreezandtea?utm\\_medium=copy\\_link](https://instagram.com/tatreezandtea?utm_medium=copy_link).

<sup>x</sup> [https://instagram.com/hilwehmarket?utm\\_medium=copy\\_link](https://instagram.com/hilwehmarket?utm_medium=copy_link).

<sup>xi</sup> [https://instagram.com/savesilwan?utm\\_medium=copy\\_link](https://instagram.com/savesilwan?utm_medium=copy_link).

<sup>xii</sup> [https://instagram.com/sheikhjarrahunitsofficial?utm\\_medium=copy\\_link](https://instagram.com/sheikhjarrahunitsofficial?utm_medium=copy_link).

<sup>xiii</sup> [https://instagram.com/muna.kurd15?utm\\_medium=copy\\_link](https://instagram.com/muna.kurd15?utm_medium=copy_link).

<sup>xiv</sup> [https://instagram.com/mohammedelkurd?utm\\_medium=copy\\_link](https://instagram.com/mohammedelkurd?utm_medium=copy_link).

<sup>xv</sup> <http://www.tarekbakri.com/>; [https://instagram.com/tarekbakri?utm\\_medium=copy\\_link](https://instagram.com/tarekbakri?utm_medium=copy_link).

<sup>xvi</sup> [https://instagram.com/hareth\\_palestine?utm\\_medium=copy\\_link](https://instagram.com/hareth_palestine?utm_medium=copy_link).

<sup>xvii</sup> [https://www.instagram.com/reel/CU-Qp-VgL9b/?utm\\_medium=copy\\_link](https://www.instagram.com/reel/CU-Qp-VgL9b/?utm_medium=copy_link).

<sup>xviii</sup> [https://www.instagram.com/p/CCoWDI5pz\\_q/?utm\\_medium=copy\\_link](https://www.instagram.com/p/CCoWDI5pz_q/?utm_medium=copy_link).