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#AL_AQSA_IS_IN_DANGER: THE DIGITAL GATEKEEPERS OF AL-AQSA MOSQUE

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One of the most religiously and nationally contested sites in the asymmetrical conflict between Israelis and Palestinians is al-Aqsa Mosque (Temple Mount)¹. It is a key site and symbol that can mobilize local Palestinian resistance (Pullan, 2014: 168). The current study explores the ways in which social media platforms are being used by East Jerusalem Palestinians to mobilize religious practices and political activism over this site. Palestinians from East Jerusalem are isolated by geo-political barriers from other Palestinian communities in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, and live under Israeli control (Cohen, 2007). Within this political context, we examine the mechanisms through which social media is used as a platform for reconstructing feelings of connectedness and a sense of belonging to a larger national-religious collective narrative (Frosh & Wolfsfeld, 2007).

The study employs the recent emerging approach, introduced by Zizi Papacharissi in her book *Affective Publics* (2015), which emphasizes the potential of social media to become a transformative platform by enabling different groups to tell their own stories. We aim to broaden the discussion on the political and religious mobilization of fragmented, dispersed communities in asymmetric, protracted violent conflict through social media tools (Aouragh & Alexander, 2011; Aouragh, 2012; Wolfsfeld, Segev, & Sheaffer, 2013). Moreover, we consider the role of religious acts as a form of “connective action” (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012) for dispersed communities living in protracted conflict.

The study explores two Facebook pages: *I am from Jerusalem* (انا من القدس) and *Jerusalem city* (مدينة القدس); both are administered by Palestinians from East Jerusalem and focus on al-Aqsa Mosque. The dataset that includes 120 posts and 262 comments has been collected during the month of August 2014. We took manual screen shots

¹ Al-Aqsa mosque is the third holiest place in Islam. It lies in the compound of al-Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount, located in the old city of Jerusalem.
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with Faststone capture software² that enabled us to follow around-the-clock activity on the pages.

We based our analysis on the “Grounded Theory” approach (Glaser & Strauss 1967), which emphasizes the generation of theories based on data derived from the research (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The qualitative analysis process (Berg, 2004) revealed three major thematic categories, showing how a marginalized community in asymmetric conflict uses social media as a platform for expressing its collective narratives and for mobilizing action through religious practices.

1. Creating solidarity through online religious act

I am from Jerusalem writes:

Now it is the time of the evening prayer according to the local time of the holy #al Aqsa mosque. Allah Akbar [...] Allah Akbar [...] the prayer is better than sleeping (8.8.14)

Salient on these pages were posts of the administrators calling to pray. Functioning as an ‘Online Muezzin³’, these calls attempt to create, strengthen, and maintain solidarity and a sense of community through shared religious acts among East Jerusalem Palestinians. The popularity of such posts continues throughout the day, helping to connect the pages’ followers to the intimate act of religion – the prayer. Through its distribution over Facebook, the prayer becomes a form of a connective action (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012), bridging individuals through religious acts. These Facebook pages are not the first electronic media to play the role of Muazzin. Yet what is new here is that followers can comment these posts.

2. Online Protectors of al-Aqsa Mosque

Jerusalem City writes:

Good morning our followers #go_protect_your_Aqsa (17.8.14)

The pages function also as a tool through which followers are called to protect al-Aqsa, while utilizing their physical location as Jerusalemites. The Facebook platform enables people to connect around commonalities such as location and religious acts, thus enhancing and constructing their collective narrative (Papacharissi, 2015: 128). More so, it facilitates the convergence of disparate individuals around common symbols and places (Gerbaudo, 2012, P.14), such as the highly contested site of al-Aqsa.

3. Calling for a religious-political struggle

I am from Jerusalem writes:

² <http://www.faststone.org/>

³ The Muezzin is a person appointed at a mosque to call for prayer, and to recite and lead the prayer.

[...] Go, and stand in front of the soldiers. Do not be afraid. Do not run if they [Israeli military forces] try to do something to you. By being patient, you will be victorious. #pray_in_Alaqsa #Resist #Hang_on #al_aqsa_is_ours (15.8.14)

When media is controlled or inaccessible (Morozov, 2011), as happens in the case study of East Jerusalem Palestinians (Berger, 2013), social media platforms such as Facebook permit individuals to bypass traditional gatekeepers and contribute directly to the production of news (Castells, 2013). The administrators use the alternative communication space of Facebook to provide a continuous stream of events in real time (Papacharissi, 2015), focusing on the political situation in al-Aqsa, while calling directly for action and physical participation in the struggle over the site.

The three themes emerging from our study indicate how expressions and actions of religiosity are used within everyday life's online practices. Furthermore, the findings point at how, in the context of an asymmetric conflict, social media platforms can be used as a mechanism for solidarity and mobilization, with religious acts as a form of connective action (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012). Examining these pages as an alternative space for silenced and dispersed group helps us to understand Facebook as a platform of small-scale grassroots activism, one that both reveals stories and constructs collective narratives (Georgalou, 2015).

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