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**Reshaping the Geography: Palestinian Communities Networks in Europe and the  
New Media**

**Sari Hanafi**

**CEDEJ (Centre d'études et de documentation économiques juridiques et sociales)**

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*Muslim Networks and Transnational Communities in and Across Europe*

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For any query or information, please contact the author(s):

hanafi@p-ol.com

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## Summary

The continuing difficulty of finding a solution to the physical return of the Palestinian Diaspora to the homeland is increasingly being addressed in the digital realm by the rise of *virtual* communities. PALESTA (Palestinian Scientists and Technologists Aboard) established at the end of 1997 in order to “harness the scientific and technological knowledge of expatriate professionals for the benefit of development efforts in Palestine”, has been one of the most important internet-based networks that have been developed to assist this process.

The PALESTA network functions mainly in the form of on-line discussion groups but also offers a database on the community of skilled Palestinians living abroad. Although PALESTA, in its conception, targets all Palestinian communities abroad, its main focus has been Europe and North America, and has thus neglected Palestinian communities in the Arab World.

In a rapidly changing communications sector there are often few opportunities for a distanced critique. Thus, this paper will discuss both the possibilities and the limitations of the PALESTA network. It will in addition examine new media technology and its significant implications in charting diasporic movements across national borders. As Ela Shohat suggested, internet networking does not suggest the ‘end of geography’ but rather a kind of ‘reshaping of geography’. Internet networking accomplishes this “reshaping” by simultaneously connecting various dispersed communities not only to their center but also to each other, periphery to periphery.

This essay will argue that in a process of construction and reconstruction of Palestinian identity that is largely affected by dispersed people with a fragile center of gravity (the Palestinian Territories which remain inaccessible to most dispersed refugee communities), new media can be a very important tool for establishing direct contact between these communities without necessarily bypassing the center.

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## **I. INTRODUCTION**

The dispersion of a people due to forced emigration has traditionally been analyzed as a contributing factor in the creation of transnational networks. In this view, the initiation of a peace process should foster the re-establishment of local and international economic links after a long period of conflict. Using existing ties to the native community, diasporas are also seen as significant influences on the reshaping and emergence of new economic networks. In this respect, however, prevalent discourse about diasporic networks has tended towards overstatement, often to mythic proportions. Little attention has been paid to network absence or to networks ruptured due to structural constraints caused by various factors (such as the impermeability of inter-state borders, the absence of relationships following prolonged separation, etc.).

Analysis of Palestinian communities' networks in their diaspora demonstrate many forms of networking with varying degrees of institutionalization: familial networks often managed by family councils, "village" clubs which continue to be very important in United States, national and nationalistic-religious networks based usually on affiliation with various popular organizations connected to the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) or Hamas and its periphery. In Europe and in North America, however, we find highly active supra-national networks based on Arab or religious affiliation which embrace diverse Arab groups of various national origins.

In my previous work (Hanafi, 2001), I have demonstrated that the value of network analysis lies in its capacity to recognize formal and informal networks while maintaining the distinction between institutional affiliation and network affiliation. Being a member of an institution such as the General Union of Palestine Students in France, for example, does not automatically imply informal social or other ties with fellow members that extend beyond the duration of a political meeting. The epicenters of the national and nationalistic mobilizations in many western countries, in fact, are more a product of infra-national and supra-national networks, such

as village clubs, like the Bethlehem and Birzeit Clubs, as well as Islamic mosque based networks. If the Internet, indeed, constitutes a major new environment based on virtual reality, it has yet to have a noticeable impact in the activation of these networks according to my empirical studies.

This article undertakes a study of the relationship between networking and new media in the context of a somewhat unique internet-based network of connectivity between Palestinian professionals and the Palestinian homeland called PALESTA (Palestinian Scientists and Technologists Abroad). The PALESTA network utilizes cyberspace, embodied by the communications technology of the internet, as its conduit; the internet in this case can be viewed not just as a tool but a distinct and new environment of connectivity between various Palestinian communities in the diaspora and the homeland. As Holmes argues, it is “context which brings about new corporealities and new politics corresponding to new space-worlds and new time-worlds” rather than solely “instruments in the service of pre-given bodies and communities”, (1997: 3).

The magnitude of the migration of scientists and, more widely, professionals has been increasing on a global level in the last three decades.<sup>1</sup> In the Palestinian case, such an outflow must be viewed in the context of the mass exodus of Palestinians since the creation of the Israeli State in 1948. It would be unwise to give an estimate of the volume of Palestinian professionals since verifiable data is unfortunately unavailable. Research I conducted from 1996 to 1999 in many areas of the Palestinian diaspora, however, demonstrates important concentrations of professional communities mainly in the Gulf, the US, Canada and the UK. Recently, new communities have emerged whose size has been increasing rapidly. Such a community can be found in Lilles, France where some 45 Palestinian professionals, mainly scientists and engineers, stayed on following their studies at Lilles universities in the last decade. Such a phenomenon has its origin in professional diaspora networks, especially those involving science and technology professionals.

The difficulty in finding a solution to the physical return of the Palestinian diaspora to the homeland is increasingly addressed by the rise of virtual communities. The crisis of social connectivity with the homeland which began with the installation of the Palestinian National Authority and a paradoxical and parallel physical inaccessibility to the homeland, point to the urgency of a cyberspace connectivity project. In this respect, an internet-based network, PALESTA (Palestinian Scientists and Technologists Aboard), was established at the end of 1997 in order to “harness the scientific and technological knowledge of expatriate professionals for the benefit of development efforts in Palestine”.

Although PALESTA, in its conception, targets all Palestinian communities abroad, its main focus has been Europe and North America and has thus neglected communities in

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<sup>1</sup> - The SESTAT database of the United States National Science Foundation shows that in 1995, 1.4 million of the 12 million science and engineering professionals or who work in technology and engineering occupations in the USA are of foreign origin. Over 72% of these foreign born professionals originate from a developing country. (Meyer and Brown, 1999: 3)

the Arabic World. This network functions as a discussion group as well as a database for information on skilled Palestinians living abroad.

In a communications sector where rapid change and on-going standardization are key, this essay will attempt to preserve a place for a distanced and scientific critique. Thus, this paper will discuss both the possibilities and the limitations of the PALESTA network. It will raise some questions: what are the implications of the new media technologies in charting diasporic movements across national borders? Does the networking through the Internet suggest an 'end of geography' or rather a kind of 'reshaping of geography'?

This essay is based on 54 interviews of Palestinian professionals in France and the UK conducted in 1998, focusing on their economic activities and their connectivity to the homeland. I will also attempt to assess the impact of PALESTA in connecting the Palestinian diaspora in Europe with the homeland. This will be accomplished through analysis of the content of electronic mail messages exchanged between PALESTA's team and Palestinians abroad.<sup>2</sup>

## II. PALESTINIAN COMMUNITIES IN EUROPE: AN OVERVIEW

Unlike mass Palestinian immigration flows in the Middle East, Palestinian immigration into Europe has generally taken the form of a kind of infiltration. These Palestinian communities are relatively recent, except in the UK where some communities have been present since the late 40s in the wake of the creation of the Israeli State. Many members of these communities mainly in the UK, France, Germany, Spain and Italy, came as students and later decided to settle. Consequently, there is a relatively high proportion of professionals within these Palestinian communities. There was also a substantial flow of Palestinians, numbering in the thousands migrated to Denmark, Netherlands, Norway, Sweden and Germany mainly from Lebanon after the Israeli occupation of that country in 1982. This population, however, had few academics and professionals. Poor qualifications, as well as language difficulties, forced members of this group to work in low-level jobs and as a consequence, they were poorly integrated to the labor market. Nearly twenty years later, these Palestinian communities representing some three quarters of the Palestinian population in Denmark, Sweden and Norway, are dependent on a social welfare system.<sup>3</sup> According to several interlocutors I interviewed, feelings of hopelessness are endemic in these communities; one asylum seeker in Denmark declared, "Here we are in early forced retirement. We die slowly while in Lebanon we do it so quickly". The first Intifada was also a factor which influenced German authorities in particular to accept Palestinian asylum seekers. In Berlin, for example, an important community has emerged with origins from Gaza. Palestinian immigrants in Germany tend to be younger than those in Scandinavian states who average 40 years of age. While

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<sup>2</sup> - This study is part of a larger research program that I coordinate in the French research center in Cairo, CEDEJ (Centre d'études et de documentation économiques juridiques et sociales). See Hanafi (1997; 2001).

<sup>3</sup> Interview with a prominent leader of the Palestinian community in Denmark.

a substantial portion of the German group found employment as manual workers, some had the opportunity to study and became skilled workers or qualified professionals.

The second Gulf War<sup>4</sup> was another event which provoked a flow of significant numbers of Palestinians; in this case to the UK and France. As UK universities already contained large numbers of privileged second generation diaspora Palestinians from the Gulf, this country received many of their parents after the second Gulf War in 1990. Though many were in precarious situations, politically and economically, this specific immigration brought new entrepreneurs to the UK, a majority of which were technically trained or educated. Consequently, we find an important concentration of business people in the UK with a pattern of individual entrepreneurship.

In France, the situation differs significantly. There are very few independent Palestinian diasporic entrepreneurs. Skilled and professional Palestinians of this group generally occupy positions as executives in the private or public sector. However, the individual pattern evident in the British model is comparable and even more accentuated: very few Palestinian professionals in France find their first jobs through Palestinian or Arab community networks. Palestinian community life in France is quite weak, lacking institutions or an active association structure which might contribute to the organization of the community.<sup>5</sup> Additionally, the informal network is nominal; community members generally meet only in case of serious concerns in the Palestinian Territories (such as massacres, Intifada, etc.). However, the origin of weak community life for Palestinians in France must be traced, in some part, to the French absorption model, which, in practice, often compels migrants to *assimilate* into French society, even while the official governmental policy is one of *integration*. While an important minority in France is Arab, for example, the Jacobean French public schools do not provide adequate structures for the teaching Arabic. The phenomenon of large scale assimilation of Palestinians seems unique to France in regard to Europe, but there are similar cases in Latin America, where Palestinian immigration has been continuous since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Picard, 1998; Gonzales, 1992).

Overall, connectivity between the Palestinian periphery in Europe and the center of the Palestinian Territories clearly appears to be loose. North American communities, despite their more distant location, are generally better connected. The Palestinian Territories continue to experience economic and political crisis and thus definitive return remains both limited and rare. Concerning, the small population of actual returnees, any discourse concerning Palestinian return has its share of paradox. "Returning" Palestinians, for example, whose point of origin was in the territories which became Israel in 1948, have not realized a return to their native villages or cities; in this case "return" has signified a new migration. Furthermore, the "return movement", in the current political context, is by nature an ephemeral one as Israel still controls immigration to the Palestinian Territories and does not generally grant residency to returnees. Returnees, who possess a foreign

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<sup>4</sup> I refer to the United States led coalition attack on Iraq in 1990 as the second Gulf war to highlight the importance of the previous major war in the gulf between Iraq and Iran which had a far-reaching impact in the region.

<sup>5</sup> - The General Union of Palestine Student (GUPS), as well as the General Union of Palestine Women, to a lesser extent, are active sporadically at the local level. However, the activities of such groups usually concern the political arena rather than the social one.

passport, are considered tourists and are given 3 month visas by air and often only one month visas when traveling across land borders. Even when such returnees are employed in Palestinian areas, the possibility of acquiring a work permit or residency remain minimal and they must repeatedly exit and re-enter the country before the expiration of their visa, in order to obtain a new one. Those who overstay their visa run the danger of being permanently barred entry into Israel and, consequently the Palestinian Territories.

Thus, while connectivity between the diaspora and the homeland is an important factor in fostering physical return, a temporary physical return remains possible for skilled Palestinians, a category whose participation is vital to the construction of the Palestinian entity. In this case, is it possible for a voluntary facilitator role to be assumed by the Palestinian National Authority or the international community to harness this group and facilitate the transmission of expertise by the migrant community towards the homeland? As Meyer et al. (1999) argue, there are two possible policies for developing countries to tap their expatriate professional communities; either through a policy of repatriation (a return option), or a policy of remote mobilization and connection to scientific, technological and cultural programs at home (a diaspora option). These two policies have both been employed in the Palestinian Territories: in the former, through a UNDP program which encourages repatriation called TOKTEN (The Transfer of Knowledge Through Expatriate Nationals), and in the latter through an internet-based network called PALESTA.

### **III. TOKTEN: A TENTATIVE BRAIN GAIN?**

The TOKTEN concept has been an interesting mechanism for tapping national expatriate human resources and mobilizing them to undertake short-term consultancies in their countries of origin. The United Nations Development Program (UNDP), which implemented TOKTEN in order to utilize the expertise of expatriate nationals, demonstrated that specialists (who had migrated to other countries and achieved professional success abroad) were enthusiastic about providing short-term technical assistance to their country of origin. Often these individuals returned and settled permanently. This program has been applied over the past 22 years in some 30 different countries, resulting in the application of thousands of technical assistance missions by expatriate professionals to their home country (UNDP, 1996). One of the main catalysts in the creation of the TOKTEN program was the growing necessity of counteracting the so-called 'brain drain' from developing countries to the first world. The program has created databases of highly trained and experienced expatriate experts and in the 1990's assigned more than 400 of them per annum on a volunteer<sup>6</sup> basis to their countries of origin for periods ranging from one to six months. TOKTEN volunteers have served in governmental, public and private sector, academic and NGO sector capacities.

The TOKTEN program in the Palestinian Territories is considered one of the most successful with more than 178 Palestinian experts who have contributed to Palestinian development under the TOKTEN modality. Palestinian TOKTEN consultants, for example, have helped reform the treatment of kidney disease in Palestinian Territories

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<sup>6</sup> - In the Palestinian Territories, TOKTEN consultant receive \$2,000 US Dollars, if junior, and \$3,000, if senior in addition to paid travel expenses and miscellaneous expenditures.

and have guided the development of macro-economic frameworks and planning. TOKTEN skills also have been brought to bear in the realm of computer and information technology, on city planning, on university curriculum development and academic networking, on the upgrading of film and television capacities, on cultural preservation including the Bethlehem 2000 project. The lack of expertise in some sectors where people have volunteered under TOKTEN has generated some genuine success stories in Palestine, such as the construction and opening of the international airport in Gaza. In this case, 9 TOKTEN consultants have stayed on and presently constitute the backbone of the airport's operations (UNDP, 1999: 1-2).

Some 37% of the consultants have come from Jordan (a country suffering from a severe economic crisis but benefiting from an important Palestinian science and technology community educated mainly at Western universities), 33% from USA (where there is a large and connected West Bank community which keeps close ties to the homeland) and Canada, 17% from Europe (which constitute a small percentage relative to the importance of the Palestinian community there and the relative geographical proximity to Palestinian Territories), and finally 5% from the Gulf (this small percentage is apparently due to unenthusiastic outreach on the part of TOKTEN and better job opportunities for Palestinian communities in this region. See table 1).<sup>7</sup>

However, the success of the TOKTEN program should not be measured solely by increasing demand and efficacy; the experience provided returnee experts with a first-hand taste of life in the homeland and encouraged them to settle (within the limits of Israeli immigration control) in the long term. In fact, some 34 of 160 TOKTEN experts, about a fifth of the total, continued living in the Palestinian Territories after the expiration of their TOKTEN assignment. The TOKTEN returnees have come mainly from Jordan and the US, two countries whose Palestinian community have kept close ties with family networks in the West Bank and Gaza. Such a percentage should be considered quite high for a country like Palestine currently experiencing a difficult political and economic situation (See table 2). In Lebanon, a country in which expatriates do not experience problems in acquiring residency, only 6 of 36, or one sixth, resettled after their mission (Ghattas, 1999).

Though, overall, TOKTEN's program has had a positive impact, this does not mean that it does not have weak points. The beneficiaries of the TOKTEN program have generally been Palestinian Ministries and public institutions, while the effect on private and NGO sectors continues to be marginal. Concerning the selection of candidates, there is not yet a large database capable of identifying expatriates who are willing to volunteer for technical assistance missions, except the emergent one maintained by PALESTA (as will be seen later).

The Palestinian counterpart generally requires the TOKTEN consultant to be available within a specific timeframe, while the consultant also has a specific period of availability. In satisfying the demand of the Palestinian counterpart while ensuring the availability of the consultant, direct dialogue through the internet is instrumental in ensuring expedience and success.

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<sup>7</sup> - The author expresses gratitude to Mr. Mounir Kleibo, a program officer at UNDP, who provided data for this research.



While suspicion of international experts is the rule in Palestine, where foreign consultants are perceived to arrive with the agenda of their own government, consultants from the Palestinian diaspora most often escape this categorization. However, the sensibilities of the local population are often provoked in other ways. Locals and expatriates, for example, often encounter problems when the consultant is neither more qualified nor more experienced than a local counterpart yet earns some 3 to 4 times more for similar work. The problem is exacerbated when some ministries request UNDP TOKTEN experts because budget constraints make the hiring of permanent local employees difficult regardless of the local market's availability of individuals with the necessary expertise.

Finally, the TOKTEN program raises questions concerning the nation-state framework's capacity to deal with issues of brain drain. In an increasingly globalized skill and labor market developing countries are rarely able to compete with developed countries which offer far higher wages. In such a case, TOKTEN can be considered a mechanism by which recipient countries (usually western) compensate countries of origin. In terms of the Palestinian context, such a mechanism can prove vital in a current political and economic situation that will not encourage (and actually bars) the homecoming of refugees and diasporic people and where the outflow of skilled individuals will most likely continue.

#### **IV. PALESTA NETWORK: THE FIRST PHASE**

While the return of skilled and professional individuals has been marginal under TOKTEN's low capacity programs, the ambitious PALESTA network project sought to more directly connect a larger group of professionals in the diaspora to the center. PALESTA (Palestinian Scientists and Technologists Abroad), an internet-based network, has the objective of harnessing the scientific and technological knowledge of Palestinian expatriate professionals for the benefit of development efforts in Palestine. There are two other similar pioneering networks that deal with South Africa and Colombia: *SANSA* (South African Network of Skills Abroad) and *Red Caldas* (the Network of Colombian Technologists and Scientists Abroad) (Meyer, 1999).

PALESTA's network, a hybrid constructed by the Palestinian Ministry of Planning and International Cooperation's (MOPIC) Science and Technology Planning Unit with UNDP support, was launched in 1997. The network includes a database of expatriate Palestinian scientists and engineers and discussion list for the secure discussion among participants as they contribute their technical knowledge and experience in addressing important issues in the development of the Palestinian economy. The network functions as a kind of professional gateway providing current job listings and developments in many public, private and NGOs institutions in the Palestinian Territories as well as workshops and public events. The network has the following objectives:

- To involve expatriate Palestinian scientists and technologists in serious discussions aimed at resolving scientific and technological problems vital to Palestinian economic development.

- To keep expatriate Palestinians informed about developments and programs at home in the areas of science and technology so that they will be prepared to contribute fully when their presence is needed in Palestine.
- To obtain the assistance of these expatriates in identifying and initiating new projects that will contribute to aspects of Palestinian economic development.

PALESTA sought to become a familiar, powerful tool among decision makers in Palestine and expatriate science and technology professional communities. Through ensuring a high level of quality in operation, establishing familiarity among relevant communities, and providing a structure amenable to decentralization, PALESTA sought to continue its development into a viable and sustainable entity capable of making significant contributions to Palestinian development. Despite PALESTA's ambitious objectives, however, current analysis of the project, two and a half years after its launch demonstrates mixed results.<sup>8</sup>

#### *PALESTA members profile: Representative of the Diaspora?*

PALESTA's Database of Expatriate Palestinian Professionals, currently contains 1,300 expatriate Palestinian professionals. However, only one third (some 480 professionals) are active members of PALESTA with updated contact information. According to a PALESTA survey<sup>9</sup>, its active membership is concentrated in the United States (56% of total PALESTA members), while only 17% live in Europe. PALESTA has not apparently been able to make inroads into Europe despite the continent's important geographical proximity to Palestine. The Gulf and Jordan are similarly underrepresented (each representing only 2% of PALESTA membership). The survey shows also shows that PALESTA membership is relatively young; more than 37% of PALESTA members are aged 30-39 and 30% are 20-29. This does not mean, however, that they are not highly educated; 41% of PALESTA members hold a doctorate while 15% possess a masters degree. Women are overwhelmingly under-represented, constituting only 7% of PALESTA members.

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<sup>8</sup> - This article used some findings of a previous evaluation conducted by the author. The methodology of the evaluation was comprised of the following steps: 1- Interviews conducted in January 2000 of the PALESTA staff as well as those involved in the elaboration of the PALESTA project, including the previous manager of PALESTA. Some PALESTA moderators were interviewed and were asked about their feelings and opinions concerning the functioning of the PALESTA network. 2- Review of correspondence between PALESTA members in order to assess the impact of the discussion list. 3- Review of progress reports submitted by the PALESTA staff to the UNDP, as well as the minutes of PALESTA staff meetings. 4- Interviews conducted with PALESTA members abroad and local PALESTA beneficiaries about their feelings and opinions concerning the network's services.

<sup>9</sup> - PALESTA distributed a questionnaire to members concerning their opinion of the PALESTA network in October 1999. Sixty PALESTA subscribers participated in this survey, (a response rate of 18.4%). The survey provided PALESTA with its first opportunity to identify member profiles in terms of academic qualifications, ages, country of residence and so on.

*Discussion Lists: "Who Owns PALESTA?"*

The architecture of this latter phase of the PALESTA system has had significant effects on both the subject matters covered within the network and, more importantly, the construction of the identity of users in relation to the Palestinian homeland.

In light of the relative difficulty of free movement for Palestinians from the diaspora to the Palestinian Territories, the PALESTA discussion list constitutes a very important means of opening dialogue between geographically distant individuals in a cost-effective manner. Despite PALESTA's objective of discussion of technical issues related to Palestinian economic development, however, the analysis of the content of messages posted by professionals residing abroad is more concerned about political and practical issues. The PALESTA forum has been instrumental in raising important discussions regarding social, political and cultural issues such as eventual return or visits by expatriates to their homeland. A discussion concerning the contribution of the diaspora to Palestinian development (in which 121 messages were posted by members), for example, highlights the perception of problems concerning the PNA's mismanagement of the Palestinian economy and its inability to convince Palestinian business people in the diaspora to invest in Palestine. The content furthermore revealed that while the realization of PALESTA's objectives seems reliant on a form of unconditional assistance and participation from the diaspora for the new Palestinian quasi-state, diaspora members for their part were ready to lend this assistance only after matters of "practicality" were discussed. Some messages were concerned with the issue of the second and third generation of the diaspora in Western countries where youth have not always had access to Arabic language education (in this regard, summer camps for young people were suggested). Conversely, for Palestinians residing in Palestine, issues such as second generation diaspora, transnational Palestinian migration and even assimilation of Palestinians were conspicuously absent. Thus while many issues regarding culture, politics, economy, education and health were discussed in far greater depth than the intended topics of strict technical expertise and economic participation, PALESTA seemed incapable of responding to the discourse by altering its objectives and implementation.

One discussion in particular reveals the depth of PALESTA's crisis in the conception of its discussion list. In a discussion entitled 'Who owns the list?', participating members expressed irritation over so-called "editing" carried out by PALESTA staff. Many respondents considered the intervention to be a form of censorship rather than one based on "editing". Moreover, participants voiced their desire to know each other, an option which PALESTA, both in conception and implementation, does not allow: each message is first sent to the network server and subsequently posted without contact information by the network moderator. The intense nature of the discussion convinced PALESTA staff to circulate a questionnaire asking members their opinion about the network in October 1999.

In terms of the stated goal and importance of launching discussion between local and expatriate Palestinians, the discussion also revealed some problems in PALESTA's mode of function and its structure. About 15% of subscribers to PALESTA have withdrawn from the discussion list.

### *The Crisis of the PALESTA model*

The most fundamental criticism directed at PALESTA was that it functioned as an *institution* and not as a *network*; PALESTA sought to connect members to the network without connecting members to each other. This formulation neglected the importance of developing and linking Palestinian communities in each country to one another in order to prevent total assimilation into the host society and ensure the preservation of a Palestinian heritage; such linkage, in turn, facilitates contact with the homeland. Obviously such connectivity is impossible if PALESTA's members are not allowed to know one another's email addresses. The contradiction highlights a paradoxical relationship between PALESTA's trans-geographical network and the content of the initial discourse produced by PALESTA managers concerning a geographically and biologically defined identity: *a Palestinian abroad need only be connected to the center*. Additional issues were raised: How should PALESTA respond to non-Palestinian Arabs desiring to aid in the construction of a Palestinian State? How should PALESTA distinguish between a Jordanian and a Palestinian living in Jordan as the both have the same nationality? Furthermore, from a practical point of view, by centralizing its discussion list, PALESTA may have hindered its most effective method of outreach to the Palestinian community abroad. The PALESTA survey demonstrated that about half of the members discovered PALESTA through their relatives and friends and 85% subsequently attempted to spread this information further.<sup>10</sup> Thus, face to face relationships even in the era of cyberspace, are significant. The virtual community does not spontaneously generate; factors of traditional physical and Cartesian space remain very important.

### **V. PALESTA'S SECOND PHASE: PALESTA A CENTRAL NODE**

Numerous discussions were launched in PALESTA's weekly staff meetings during the first six months of the setup of this project which discussed the idea of centralization of the discussion list. A number of staff members expressed fear that unmitigated discussion groups might violate ethical standards of discourse and codes of conduct and could easily

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<sup>10</sup> - Another critique addressed to PALESTA concerned the centralization of its management. In its second year of operation, PALESTA's director decided to assign sector moderators, who are not necessarily members of the staff. After ten months of the implementation of sector moderators, however, PALESTA's performance has not improved; the moderators have not been sufficiently active enough to make the decentralization efficient. Furthermore, there has been insufficient synergy between PALESTA and the local institutions and ministries from which the moderators originate. This means that the administration did not liberate these moderators from their previous assignment in order to facilitate the work of the moderators for PALESTA. At the same time, PALESTA's management has refused to allow free and direct contact between local specialized institutions and concerned people abroad in the same field. It would be tremendously helpful in the area of international cooperation to provide the Palestinian Ministry of Higher Education and universities the names and the contact information of Palestinian professors and academics residing abroad. Such information would also be valuable in the recruitment of personnel. The same is true for such Palestinian institutions as the Water Authority. PALESTA's staff continue to believe that connecting the diaspora with the Palestinian Territories should only be done by discussion list.

degenerate into school room debates filled with inappropriate language. Such a situation would cause frustration among serious users and eventually discourage use of the discussion list. This argument for centralization, not necessarily as authoritarian as it would seem, held that an unmonitored discussion list was not appropriate in terms of PALESTA's objectives. After its first year in operation, however, it became clear to PALESTA's board that a moderating role raised more problems than it resolved. The board decided instead to impose sanctions against members who violated PALESTA's stated code of ethics. The PALESTA board took into account a common fear among Palestinians abroad as well as those inside Palestine of the centralization of power; the diaspora's negative experiences at the mercy of the political power of Arab regimes made them especially wary of censorship and monitoring. Though more reflective of a generalized phobia rather than a real expectation, this fear expressed by many Palestinians abroad to the board compelled PALESTA to forgo their concerns and open the discussion list to allow contact between various members without facilitation by the PALESTA server.

After two years in operation, PALESTA's electronic communication has given Palestinians abroad a window into the general and, especially, technical, aspects concerning the on-going process of development in the Palestinian Territories. While this has generated great interest in finding a way to use their expertise and skills in the development of the Palestinian Territories, diaspora Palestinians I have interviewed expressed a lack of information about how to become involved. Many also expressed a desire to see PALESTA become less of an institution and more of a network.

In its second phase, PALESTA was successful in encouraging the creation of various global network nodes in order to facilitate contact with and between expatriate Palestinians. Though professionals sometimes demonstrate isolation from their Palestinian community in almost all of the Western countries, the creation of nodes for professional Palestinians has been an important factor for the recruitment of PALESTA members. PALESTA's previous experience, however, reveals a low capacity to recruit new members individually.

PALESTA is unable to function as more than a node (among others) in a network in which there is no center. Thus the perspective of center (the homeland) to periphery (countries of the diaspora) can be replaced by a periphery-periphery relationship, especially in the context of an inaccessible center of gravity constituted by the Palestinian territories, as we will discuss later. There have been numerous conferences in the United States and Europe among periphery-periphery groups which reinforce the dynamic of this perspective.

## **VI. Limits of PALESTA**

The experience of PALESTA demonstrates an increasing focus on Palestinian professional diaspora networks. PALESTA's electronic discussion list has had a positive effect in providing space and form for a new experience of community and a rewarding in-gathering that has been diverse and egalitarian. The network has, in a limited way,

created a tangible social space that has generated a kind of collective self-conscious for a worldwide professional expatriate community. Communication through PALESTA, or another such network, allows mutual identification for actors and allows inferences to be made concerning their associations. (Meyer et al., 1999: 7) However, the virtual community has its limits. A critical examination reveals a tendency, as Willson suggests (1997: 158), of “thinning the complexities of human engagement to the level of a one-dimensional transaction and a detaching of the user from the political and social responsibilities of the real space environment.” Though PALESTA members number more than a thousand, data suggests that only 20% participate regularly in email exchanges. The subject in cyberspace tends to become, to paraphrase Baudrillard, ‘a mere screen for the assimilation of data’ (Cooper, 1997: 100). This technology, however, is not a panacea for the lack of physical connectivity of the Palestinian diaspora. PALESTA’s weak overall effect reflects an over-reliance on a technological approach where connectivity is based mainly in the electronic exchange with very few forms of physical contact or concrete projects launched via the network. As Heidegger noted, function does not necessarily produce activity “Everything is functioning. This exactly is what is so uncanny, that everything is functioning and that the functioning drives us more and more to even further functioning” (Idem.: 98). While the PALESTA network is functioning on the level of electronic connectivity, daily e-mail exchanges will not necessarily generate activity on the individual or collective part of its members.

Furthermore, analysis of new media should be placed within a general theory of communication; advances in the technology of communication are not synonymous with new forms of human communication. Communication manifests in many patterns and these patterns cannot be separated from the larger patterns of socialization in a given society. Communication should not be reduced to technical progress and “progress” can not surpass cultural and social changes. There is certainly a danger that electronic connectivity gives supremacy to technology, which may instrumentalize communication. In such a context it would be difficult to distinguish between inherent values and the interests of actors. The effect of new communication technology cannot be analyzed without being situated in the framework of the society and all theories of communication must take into account the existing bonds of a society. Communication theory necessitates societal theory. (Wolton, 2000).

### *New Media, Homeland and Subjectivity*

As Giddens point out, one of the consequences of the evolution of modernity, via various agents, is the resulting separation of time and space from place, which creates what he calls “disembedded” social systems or the “‘lifting out’ of social relations from local contexts of interaction and their restructuring across indefinite spans of time-space” (1990:21). In this consequent era of globalization, the relationship of the individual to the homeland becomes relative. The idea of homeland, however, remains in some form within the minds of exiled Palestinians—a notion regularly updated by the content of a steady flow of satellite television channels (Al Jazeera, ANN and MBC) beaming daily images from the occupied land. Connectivity with the Palestinian homeland now involves a complex process composed of varying levels of virtual and physical social networks; the difficulty of achieving physical connectivity has given birth to a virtual reality which

now constitutes a distinct form of social integration. Contrary to those who think that the Internet will impose a cosmopolitan identity, cyberspace instead promotes new possibilities of re-anchoring culture and identity in ways that bypass the constraints of society.

PALESTA specifies a discourse oriented towards a group defined not only by a national identity, but a professional one as well. Through mechanisms of connectivity, such as TOKTEN and PALESTA, with the country of origin it is no longer solely the right of return at stake for Palestinians, but the utility of the homeland for them. While the homeland is no longer an abstract idea, Palestinian resources have not been developed to a level that would allow a generous plan of insertion (such as was the case for Jewish immigrants to Israel).

Interviewing PALESTA members who are expatriates or returnees, I was struck by the emergence of the subject in their discourse concerning return. The Palestinian homeland, as symbolic icon of service and sacrifice, no longer supercedes the self but is instead often perceived as a homeland that can be served while the individual pursues a social position within it. It has become clear that service to the homeland need not be separated from the personal desire for a better life. The posture is a clear expression of subjectivity quite different from the predominant discourse of mass media which depicts the Palestinian in diaspora as a refugee intent only on sacrificing for the benefit of the homeland. In this regard, interviewees often expressed having feelings of dissonance before achieving connectivity via new electronic media: subjects felt a measure of guilt for not actively engaging in some activity in benefit of the homeland while concurrently experiencing feelings of commitment to their life in a resident country that did not necessarily allow them freedom of movement to the homeland. It is clear that the PALESTA network is capable of creating a dynamic of fluidity, construction, deconstruction, representation and symbolization. The homeland is no longer synonymous only with Intifada and political alienation, but also job opportunities, scientific and technological development, specialized workshops and so on. Palestinian identity has moved beyond a completely territorialized framework. One can be a Palestinian abroad, connecting and aiding the development of the homeland from cyberspace.

The new medias discussed here encourage individualization; Palestinian actors are no longer necessarily unified in social and political spheres, not because of the elimination of the ideological world, but because human agency has radically changed its spatial, temporal and technological existence. The environment of cyberspace implies highly individualized forms of social bonds with an attendant atomization of populations within the confines of the workstation or the borders of the homepage. In such a context, connectivity through new media cannot be solely conceived of as bringing individuals and groups into contact; it also addresses their differences by amplifying representation of the individual. Networking can enhance subjectivity in an environment where various voices are expressed independently regardless of the relative importance of their respective social positions. In this respect, PALESTA's experience has demonstrated that the electronic exchange of the discussion list is an important new factor in enhancing and expanding concepts of connectivity.

### *A Diaspora with a Weak Center of Gravity*

As we have seen, PALESTA's strength in recruiting members has been its capacity to function in different nodes at the periphery/periphery level. New media allows communication between different communities of a diaspora without a necessary bypassing of the center. I will argue that the weak center of gravity in the Palestinian case would eventually play a deciding role in the decline of *Palestinianness* in the long term; new media will partially compensate for this problem. A classic diaspora is defined by a *center of gravity* which has two functions: it channels the flux of communications between diaspora members at different peripheries, and provides a location where members (especially family) can meet. The first function does not necessarily suggest a physical site; the meeting location might be a service provider or institution such as the National Jewish Fund for world Jewry, the Tunisian Base of the PLO for Palestinians and the PKK in Germany in the Kurdish case. In regard to the second function, a physical geographical location is a necessity and is an important factor for communitarian economic transactions. The studies I conducted with Palestinian business people in the diaspora demonstrated the importance of a physical meeting place. A Palestinian originally from Nazareth, for example, can have a very active economic network based in Nazareth capable of drawing those from Canada, the US or Australia for meetings with remaining Palestinians in Nazareth. In contrast Palestinians originating from Haifa do not have access to such a network due to the quasi-total deportation of the Palestinians from this city after 1948. Such inaccessibility to the territorial reference point effectively hinders the possibility of meeting. A Haifa family dispersed throughout Damascus, Montreal, Amman and Abu Dhabi would find little interest in meeting in Syria where only one member of the family lives. Those in Arabic countries may also find the cost of traveling to Canada or the Gulf prohibitive long before the equally daunting dilemma of acquiring a visa ever enters into the discussion. Thus, the Palestinian Territories would be considered to be the 'natural' center of gravity for Palestinians. A combination of factors, however, have prevented the Territories from assuming this role. The Territories are not accessible to the majority of Palestinians abroad while many in the Palestinian diaspora have lost confidence in the Palestinian Authority's efficacy at state-building, in any case. Though the diaspora has played a major role in the nationalist issue and in supporting the PLO during 50 years of resistance, it consciously refuses to transform its role to one of a Rothschild. Though willing to support the homeland economically and financially, the diaspora also seeks a decision-making role regarding the process of institution building. There is a certain amount of ambivalence and paradox, composed of a positive appreciation and a deleterious suspicion of national commitments, at work in the construction of the diaspora composed.

## **V. CONCLUSION**

The PALESTA network and the diaspora option seem to be a real and workable proposition to turn the negative effects of forced emigration into tangible benefits. Such an approach also concretely addresses the problems that brain drain countermeasures have been unable to solve (Meyer, 1999). PALESTA has undergone three major stages: in the first stage, PALESTA constituted a center, functioning as a server based in



Palestine and connecting to individuals in different peripheries. In the second stage, PALESTA aided in the creation of different nodes in countries where there is a concentration of Palestinian professionals while still remaining at the center of connectivity. The latest discussions within PALESTA indicate that there is a desire to make PALESTA less central, transforming it into a node within a series of nodes. (For these stages see figures 1, 2, 3)

Contrary to the old Asian proverb, ‘falling leaves always return to their roots’, Palestinian professionals are far from a massive return movement. Instead of a physical return, I have endeavored to demonstrate that another form of ‘return’, the virtual one, based on the PALESTA experience, has emerged. In this context, there is a sense of both the possibilities and the limitations of the PALESTA network and the new media technologies. PALESTA, as I have argued, had significant implications for ‘charting diasporic movements across national borders’, as Shohat argued concerning an Iraqi diaspora discussion list (1999: 231). The networking through the internet, as experienced through PALESTA, does not suggest the ‘end of the geography’ but a kind of ‘reshaping of the geography’ by connecting the different dispersed communities not only to the center but also between each other. If the process of construction and reconstruction of Palestinian identity can be largely affected by dispersed people with a fragile center of gravity (the Palestinian Territories) to which almost all of the dispersed refugee communities cannot have access, the new media can be a very important tool for connecting these communities to each other without necessarily bypassing the center.

However, this new media functions both exclusively and inclusively. The target group for the new media is a highly educated sector and, consequently, a most likely upper middle class one as well (at least in the Arabic World) rather than a general cross-section of the entire population. In addition, the target group is narrowed even more significantly because only those highly educated persons who are capable of reading and writing English may make use of it. This may explain why PALESTA not only has few members in Arabic countries but also in France and Germany. Such networks, however, also have a great potential for inclusion, as well, because the connection need not be necessarily based on an official connection between the PNA (or PLO organizations) and the Palestinian communities abroad. One can imagine the creation of multiple networks like PALESTA, representing various unaligned constituencies. Furthermore, cyberspace allows not only the globalization of cultural space but also its personalization; PALESTA like other virtual networks can facilitate democratic forms of interaction (*cyberdemocracy*) as “it puts cultural acts, symbolizations in all forms, in the hands of all participants and thus radically decentralizes the positions of speech, publishing, filmmaking, radio and television broadcasting, in short the apparatuses of cultural production” (Poster, 1997: 234).

The impact of PALESTA on the relationship between Palestinians abroad and the Palestinian Territories, goes beyond the simple effect of serving the homeland and facilitating a future physical return. In a transnational world typified by a process of ‘global circulation of images, sounds, goods’ but not a parallel mobility of people, there has been a complex impact on the concept of communal belonging. We must ask, as Shohat has (1999: 215), what do we make out of the new media’s promise of shaping new identities? Furthermore, from a more radical perspective, will this new form of

international migration modify our perception of the homogeneity of the nation and particularly the relationship between state, nation and territory (Ma Mung et al. 1998 :3) In fact PALESTA's experience demonstrates that a major impact of new electronic media is the *de-sanctification* of the homeland by its de-terrorialization. The homeland is a utopia in Manheim's definition; once we have entered it, it disappears. The Palestinian '*aliya*' to Jerusalem has not necessarily taken place in a geographic location; instead the *aliya* has sought to incorporate itself within nodes of a network where the connectivity to a land of origin can be maintained<sup>11</sup>. I use Jerusalem specifically in this context, precisely because this city has been idealized in two ways: first in the perception of the city as a realm in the 'Kingdom of God' and second the notion that a migration to terrestrial Jerusalem was a step toward an ascension to a celestial Jerusalem. The new media is likewise capable of facilitating a conciliation between the diverse cultural heritages represented in the Palestinian diaspora by existing in the host country while connecting to an inaccessible (and perhaps idealized) homeland. New media may broaden the ontological question 'who am I?' with a kind of topographical identity question: 'where am I?'.

There are, of course, many more political implications to the new media in terms of geographical location, national affiliation, and imagined homelands which go beyond the objective of this paper.

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<sup>11</sup> - In fact, I do not address here the legal or political dimensions of the location of a Palestinian state which includes the West Bank, Gaza and East Jerusalem or the return of Palestinian refugees to their homeland with compensation, but with the sociological issue related to right of choice for Palestinians: to live in the homeland or in the host country.

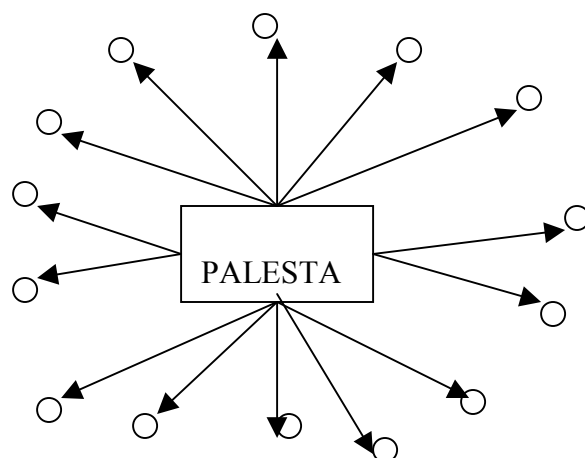
**Table 1**  
**Distribution of TOKTEN consultants by Country of residence**

<b>Country</b>	<b>Percentage of the consultants</b>
Jordan	37%
United Arab Emirates	3%
Saudi Arabia	2%
USA	27%
Canada	6%
France	8%
Germany	5%
UK	4%
Other	8%

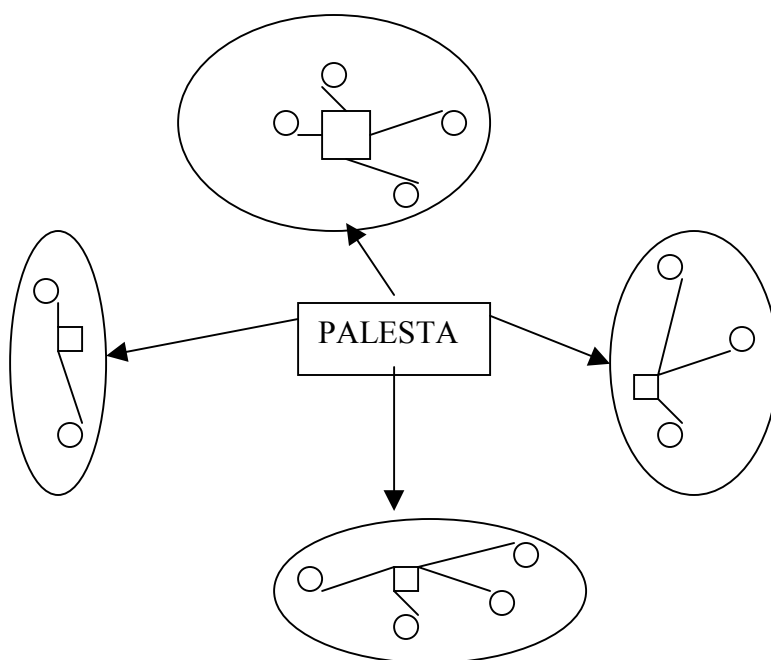
**Table 2**  
**Distribution of the Palestinian returnees after the achievement**

**Of the TOKTEN assignment**

<b>Country</b>	<b>Number of returnees</b>
Jordan	15
USA	12
UK	2
Canada	1
UAE	1
France	2
Saudi Arabia	1
Total	34



**Figure: 1**  
**PALESTA's First Stage: Connectivity to the individuals**



**Figure 2.**  
**PALESTA's Second Stage: Central**  
**with different nodes**

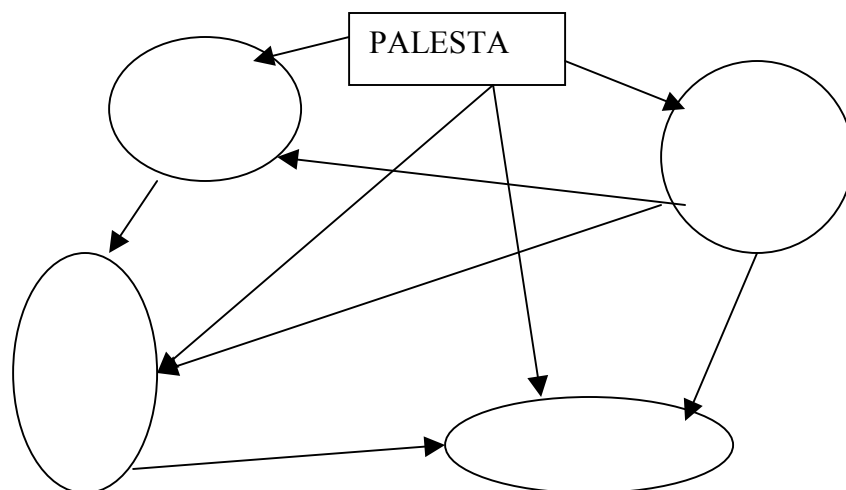


Figure 3  
PALESTA in the dawn of the Third Stage:  
Connectivity without central position

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