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MOBILE PHONES AND THE RISE OF NEO-LIBERAL  
CONSUMER SUBJECTIVITY IN PALESTINE

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## **Abstract**

Despite the abundance of research on Palestine, studies of Palestinian political subjectivity and agency tend to adhere to the dominant analytical frames of Nationalism and/or Islamism. This has led to the neglect of a variety of socio-economic and political developments that do not fit these frameworks. Working against the dominant trend, the present paper hopes to theorize Palestinian politics in relationship to the recent globalisation of neoliberalism by exploring a variety of discourses and struggles that have developed since the late 1990s around the topic of mobile telephony in Palestine. While mobile telephony epitomises a diversity of social processes and ideas that are associated with the globalisation of neo-liberal subjectivity and desire, a study of discursive and concrete developments within this field builds up an image of a Palestinian political subject that is increasingly individualised, hybridised, and irrepresentable within the dominant discourses of nationalism and/or Islamism.

## **Keywords**

Palestine, Israeli-Palestinian conflict, subjectivity, neoliberalism, individualism, mobile phone, globalisation, late-modern colonial occupation, subaltern





## **Introduction\***

Although much research exists on Palestinian politics during the al Aqsa Intifada, studies of Palestinian political subjectivity and agency tend to adhere to the dominant analytical frames of Nationalism and/or Islamism. This is understandable, given the persistence of a colonial conflict between Israel and the Palestinians, which tends to set up the agenda and objectives of research on Palestine and the Middle East conflict. The problem, however, is that an extensive focus on nationalist and Islamic frameworks has led to a severe neglect of a variety of socio-economic and political developments that do not fit these frameworks, but which are also shaping the political landscape in Palestine. As a result, understandings of socio-political processes underlying Palestinian politics, and the analytical framework for the theorisation of Palestinian political subjectivity, remain insufficiently developed.

Instead of taking nationalism and/or Islamism as a given framework for the study of Palestinian politics, this paper hopes to theorize Palestinian politics in relationship to wider socio-economic changes that are associated with globalisation, postcolonialism and late modernity, and particularly the globalisation of neoliberal subjectivities and sensitivities. To what extent, and how, I ask, are neoliberal systems of power translated in the occupied Palestinian territories? And what implications might the encounter with neoliberalism have upon the conditions of possibility of Palestinian political subjectivity, or the prospect of collective struggle?

In order to examine such an elusive set of questions, the paper shall focus on a variety of discourses and struggles that have developed since the late 1990s around the more confined topic of mobile telephony in Palestine. Mobile telephony, it has been argued, epitomises a diversity of social processes and ideas that are associated with late modernity and the globalisation of neo-liberalism. In Palestine, however, mobile telephony and the deterritorialising socioeconomic processes associated with it intersect with an ultraterritorial, colonial occupation, resulting in an improbable and largely unexamined space of multiple and clashing temporalities, specialities and identifications.

Using mobile telephony as a starting point for the study of less examined aspects of social and political processes in Palestine, I argue that there has been a change during the last two decades towards an increasingly consumerised and individualised mode of subjectivity among the Palestinians. Although this change remains largely invisible as long as politics in Palestine is examined exclusively through the analytical framework of nationalism and nationalist struggle, it has nevertheless had a significant impact upon the expression and the constitution of Palestinian politics and resistance. Hence, any understanding of the al Aqsa Intifada, the present dynamics of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, or potentialities for its resolution in the near future depend on our ability to understand the ways in which Palestine is - despite its unique condition as a society suffering from a colonial, territorial occupation - also embedded and entangled in socio-economic and political processes that have become a major concern for postcolonial and 'advanced' industrialised societies.

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## Calling Jawwal

Although the situation in Palestine has become steadily worse ever since the beginning of the Second Intifada in 2000, resulting in the collapse of the most central Palestinian economic, political and cultural institutions, there exists one field within which the development appears to have taken the opposite direction: the field of mobile telephony.

In 2000, few Palestinians owned a mobile phone. Those who owned one called it a 'Pelephone'. Pelephone is the name of an Israeli mobile phone operator, which had such a strong brand and market lead that both Israelis and Palestinians equated mobile phones with it. By summer 2001, however, Palestinians began to use the Arabic word *jawwal* (in English, 'to roam around') in reference to a new, Palestinian cellular operator. During subsequent years, Jawwal took on an increasingly ubiquitous role on Palestinian streets and inside people's homes, becoming one of the most successful and iconic Palestinian companies ever.<sup>1</sup> The importance of Jawwal as a social actor and an indicator of wider transformations within Palestinian society became particularly clear to me in summer 2005, when I was conducting the latter part of my fieldwork on Gaza Beach. As I will describe in the next chapter (see also Junka 2006a and 2006b), all main political factions such as Hamas, Fatah and Islamic Jihad have erected their own public tents on the beach during the summer ever since the outbreak of the al Aqsa Intifada.<sup>2</sup> In doing so, they seek to strengthen their popular base and exhibit their power publicly while offering a variety of summer camps and other activities for enthusiastic beach-goers.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Jawwal acquired a high visibility in the occupied territories in a very short period. My personal impression was that every time I visited Palestine, Jawwal had increased its presence and hold over Palestinian spaces. For example in Palestinian city spaces, Jawwal advertisements and billboard posters appeared all over in newspapers and other media spaces, Jawwal had an equally strong presence as an advertiser; and even in the personal body space, Jawwal was ubiquitous, judging by the number of people on streets literally wearing Jawwal in the form of promotional items such as t-shirts and caps.

<sup>2</sup> I never personally saw tents by Palestinian leftist organizations such as PFLP or DFLP, but according to local informants also these factions also have organised activities on the beach. However, their presence has certainly never obtained visibility similar to that of the three main organizations that I mention in the text. In addition, many NGOs, such as Save the Children, organise summer activities on the beach, but they would usually take advantage of some of the existing holiday infrastructure such as the beach cafes, and rent facilities for their purposes, instead of erecting tents of their own.

**Figure 1: Children and free gifts at a Jawwal summer camp in Gaza. August 2005**



(Photograph by Laura Junka-Aikio).

Since the summer 2005, however, these political parties have had a competitor, for Jawwal began offering summer camps to children and youth. Moreover, compared with the poverty and discipline common to some of the political summer camps, Jawwal was certainly on the winning side.<sup>4</sup> Jawwal camps kicked off with powerful sound systems and Arabic pop music, free gifts, gender-mixed games and activities and a programme of sponsored entertainment and fun, including games such as rope-pulling, musical chairs, and dancing. Everyone attending the camp received a bag full of presents and a t-shirt with a text 'Keep our beaches clean - Jawwal', and was encouraged to pick up rubbish from the beaches surrounding the tent. Apart from building Jawwal's brand which around these times began to stress green responsibility (this is an issue to which I will return at the end of this chapter), the official aim of the summer camp was to train children to take care of the environment and to promote responsible citizenship on the eve of Israeli disengagement from Gaza.<sup>5</sup> Thus, in contrast with the nationalist and Islamist discipline propagated at the other camps, Jawwal's summer camp appeared as

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<sup>4</sup> For example, at one of Islamic Jihad's summer camps children that I visited on the beach of the Nuseirat refugee camp, there was only one small and broken down makeshift shelter, some Islamic Jihad flags, and two supervisors who used wooden sticks to control the crowd of at least 30 unruly boys.

<sup>5</sup> These aims of the environmental campaign on Gaza Beach were described to me by the manager of Jawwal's department of marketing and communication director Irene Saadeh in an interview on September 6, 2009 in Ramallah (see Appendix). It is worth emphasising that apart from Jawwal's own PR strategy shift towards more environmental discourses, the project was related to the larger Israeli 'disengagement' or settlement pullout from Gaza, which took place in the same summer. In the context of the pullout, large sections of the beach, which had formerly been occupied by the settlements, were decolonised and opened to the Palestinians, and many people hoped that the pullout would pave the way for fuller independence and citizenship. The idea of cleaning the beach and enforce environmental responsibility and active citizenship in this way tapped directly into these hopes.

a celebration of what we might call, after Foucault, as the seductive dimension of liberal biopower [Figure 1].

Jawwal's emergence in between politically defined public beach tents in Gaza is indicative of the central and potent role that the company has achieved within Palestinian social and public life. Jawwal might not be an explicitly political entity, nor does it figure in analysis of Palestinian political or social life. But it is emblematic of neoliberal forces that are challenging and transforming Palestinian subjectivity and the dynamics of resistance. The impact of neoliberalism and globalisation - what we might call in temporal terms as late modernity - on Palestinian politics, is an elusive topic, which is rarely touched on within studies of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. While the notion of late modernity in the Palestinian context has acquired some interest during the last few years - particularly in the work of Achille Mbembe (2003), but also in that of other scholars such as Eyal Weizman (2007) - this interest tends to be limited to the study of chiefly *Israeli* regimes of control and government and treats late modernity primarily as a phenomenon linked to the advancement of information, communication and military technologies. Consequently, much effort has been put into the argument that contemporary military high-tech and systems of surveillance are allowing Israel unprecedented control over the Palestinians. In this view, late modern colonial occupation is above all a technologised regime of military colonialism, which has, thanks to its omnipotent power, reduced the scope of Palestinian political resistance to the minimum - to the acts of the suicide bomber.

While I am sympathetic to these efforts to examine the specificities of late modern colonial control, I have argued in chapter three that the end result of this kind of analysis is problematic for two main reasons. On the one hand, such research tends to tie analysis of late modern colonial occupation to Israeli state policies, thus unnecessarily restricting the possible meanings that the term late modern colonial occupation could embrace in the Palestinian territories. Cultural globalisation, the globalisation of capitalism, and the extension and intensification of neoliberal regimes of power are all transformations that are closely associated with the economic, social and political phenomena of late modernity. Thus when intersections between late modernity and the Palestinian struggle are examined, the object of study should be defined much more broadly and should also encompass a variety of forces that are external to or even in contrast with the power of the Israeli state.

On the other hand, in conceiving late modern colonial occupation primarily as a phenomenon that is governed by the Israeli military machine, theorists are limiting themselves voluntarily to the study of power in its disciplinary, even 'necropolitical' (Mbembe 2003) forms. So far, the focus has been largely on the ways in which Israel is able to put down, prevent, and shape Palestinian resistance through new military technologies. However, once the notion of late modern colonial occupation is thought of in wider terms, as indicative of the broader interplay of different forces in Palestine, we are able to appreciate power as a productive force, and to pay attention to a variety of different, and often conflicting systems of subjectification that are competing for ground in Palestine.

During the years of the Oslo Peace Process, both Israeli and Palestinian societies began to undergo rapid economic and cultural liberalisation, and intensive inclusion in the circuits of globalised capitalism. In Palestine, these years paved the way for the multiplication of Western-funded NGOs as central actors of the Palestinian Civil Society, for the consumerisation of culture and, in the case of those who sought to oppose these tendencies, for the increasing seductive power of religious fundamentalism. Once we take account of all these force-relations as part of the analysis of late modern colonial occupation, the image of the political subject in Palestine becomes much richer - and rather different from that of the 'living dead' proposed by Mbembe. Of course, a profound analysis of all these phenomena is beyond the scope of any single study. Here, the main interest lies the ways in which territorial colonial occupation on one hand, and deterritorialising and neoliberal regimes of globalisation on the other, intersect formatively in contemporary Palestine. Looking at the field of Palestinian mobile telephony provides a valuable, albeit limited, starting point for these questions.

## **A Short History of Telecommunications in Palestine**

Building an independent system of telecommunications is one of the many institutional and infrastructural challenges that new postcolonial and independent national states face. In Palestine, the space for a Palestinian telecommunications sector was created on paper, within the confines of the Oslo negotiations. For thirty years preceding the agreements, responsibility for the installation and maintenance of telecommunications infrastructure and networks on the West Bank and Gaza Strip rested with the Israeli Civil Administration. This changed in 1995. Article 36 of the Oslo Interim Agreements stipulated that the PA was legally permitted to build and operate separate and independent communications systems and infrastructures, including telecommunication networks, in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.<sup>6</sup> Soon after signing the document, the PA decided to delegate the task to the private sector. The Palestinian Telecommunications Company, Paltel, was established the same year, in cooperation with the PA and three larger investors.<sup>7</sup>

At this point, telecommunications in Palestine remained relatively underdeveloped, and the existing infrastructure inherited from the occupying authorities was very poor. In the mid-nineties, traditional phone lines, rather than mobiles, were still the principal type of telecommunications all over the world, but in the Palestinian territories, access to the landlines was well behind the level of neighbouring Middle Eastern societies.<sup>8</sup> Sam Bahour (1998) argues that the main reason for this discrepancy was Israel's 'security concern', which has dominated Israeli policies in the Occupied Palestinian Territories. Throughout the years of direct occupation, Israel was unwilling to provide Palestinians with telecommunication services. According to Bahour, the inactivity was caused mainly by Israeli government's desire to prevent the emergence and consolidation of a Palestinian public sphere and connections to the outside world. In fact, in the late 1980s the Israeli government even prohibited Palestinian use of facsimile machines, which had gained wide currency in the organisation of the First Intifada. 'All of these facts, caused a build up of over 120,00 waiting list in the West Bank and Gaza Strip for basic telephony, with some applications for service over 20 years old!' [sic] Bahour concludes.

Within a few years of its establishment, Paltel improved the Palestinian telephone network significantly: the number of Palestinian subscribers to landlines nearly tripled, the number of towns with landlines increased six-fold, and the waiting list for a connection to a phone service dwindled to almost nothing. At the same time, apart from consolidating the fixed line network, Paltel expended effort and resources in building an infrastructure for all main digital communications technologies, including internet and mobile telephony. Four years after Paltel was established, activities in the rapidly expanding and demanding mobile telephony were handed over to a subsidiary company. The first Palestinian Cellular Phone Company, Jawwal, was established in the 1999, and the first Jawwal services were made available in the same year.

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<sup>6</sup> Article 36 of the Israeli-Palestinian Interim Agreement on the West Bank and Gaza Strip, Washington D.C., September 23, 1995. Available online at <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Peace/iaannex3.html#app-36> (Retrieved on 12.11.2008)

<sup>7</sup> According to Sam Bahour (1998) the decision to privatise telecommunications was based on the wider global trend towards privatisation in the 1990s, and the assessment that running telecommunications would be too challenging for the Palestinian Authority which was dealing with several other 'independence' projects simultaneously. However, the Palestinian Ministry of Post and Communication (today the Ministry of Telecommunications and Information Technologies or MTIT) did retain the role of the regulator for Palestinian telecommunications.

<sup>8</sup> The teledensity (number of telephone lines per 100 inhabitants) in the West Bank and Gaza was approximately 3.14%, well below the regional average and dramatically lower than that of the Palestinians' Israeli counterparts, who benefited from a 30% teledensity (Bahour, 1998).

## **Jawwal: a Marker of an *almost* Postcolonial National Space.**

From the start, Jawwal has occupied an interesting role at the intersection of Palestinian nation building, Israeli occupation, and the expansion of globalised capitalism into the occupied Palestinian territories. Although Paltel and Jawwal are private companies, they have strong links to the national project of the Palestinian Authority. When Paltel was established, it was celebrated as one of the first functioning national institutions. The occasion itself was a media event, with televised images of Arafat making the very first Paltel call, declaring it implicitly to be the dawn of a new era in Palestinian history. The existence of an independent telecommunications sector also allowed Palestinians to receive a country code of their own, 970, instead of having to use the Israeli one, 972. All this carried extensive symbolic value for many Palestinians for whom these signs, which replicated similar developments in postcolonial states all over the world, appeared as signs of a definite movement toward an actual statehood and national independence.

However, the broken sovereignty promised by the Oslo Interim Accords ensured that, like every other Palestinian field or endeavour, the decolonisation of Palestinian telecommunications did not bring a full independence from the former occupier where telecommunication was concerned. On paper, the Oslo Interim Accords were unambiguous about the Palestinians' right to independent telecommunications and a full disengagement from the Israeli system.<sup>9</sup> In the field of mobile telephony, this implied that any company wishing to sell services to Palestinians would need a license from the PA, and would have to pay taxes to it. When Jawwal was established, many Palestinians were already using cellular services offered by Israeli companies such as Pelephone, Cellcom, and Orange. Once Jawwal's services were made available, these companies should, in the spirit of the Oslo Interim Accords, have withdrawn from the Palestinian market or sought licenses and tax accountability from the PA.

But that never happened. At this writing, Israeli companies continued to sell services to Palestinians while failing to meet any economic, social and environmental responsibilities to the Palestinian Authority (Rossotto et al., 2008; Bahour, 2004). This breach of the Oslo Accords originates primarily in Israel's policy of settlement expansion. In addition to granting Palestinians a right to disengage from the Israeli sector and to build a market of their own, Oslo secured Israel the right to provide necessary telecommunications services for settlers living in the Palestinian territories. In practice, this has enabled Israeli companies to install and maintain transmission towers in strategic locations throughout the West Bank and Gaza.<sup>10</sup> Since settlements are often located on hilltops and adjacent to Palestinian residential areas, obtaining a high level of coverage throughout the West Bank and Gaza has not even been very difficult. According to Jawwal's own estimates, Israeli companies are today able to cover up to 80 percent of the Palestinian territories (Rossotto et al., 2008, p.6). In fact, since many settlements host only a handful of settlers, it is questionable whether the maintenance of expensive infrastructure in some of these settlements would be profitable at all without the simultaneous capture of the Palestinian market.

Curiously, apart from profiting from the Israeli policy of settlement expansion, in some cases Israeli cell phone companies have also encouraged further construction of entirely new settlements. As indicated by Eyal Weizman (2007, p.1-6), the Israeli hilltop settlement of Migron, which was established in 2001 on Palestinian farmers' land near Ramallah, is a case in point. According to Weizman, a group of settlers first complained to the military that their mobile phone reception would

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<sup>9</sup> Article 36 stated that 'Operators and providers of services, presently and in the future, in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip shall be required to obtain the necessary approvals from the Palestinian side' and 'Both sides shall refrain from any action that interferes with the communication and broadcasting systems and infrastructures of the other side'. Available online at <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Peace/iaannex3.html#app-36> (Retrieved on 12.11.2008).

<sup>10</sup> Israel withdrew from Gaza settlements in summer 2005. However, the Gaza Strip is geographically very narrow and therefore transmission towers that are placed near the Israel-Gaza border are still able to provide extensive coverage in Gaza.

cut out on a bend on a highway from Jerusalem to the settlements. The Israeli mobile operator Orange agreed to build a new antenna on a hilltop overlooking the bend,<sup>11</sup> and other companies came along to supply electricity and water to the construction site. Once the tower was built, it had to be manned permanently by a guard, who moved onto the site in a trailer with his wife and children, fenced the hilltop off, and connected their home to electricity and sewage. The next year, five more settler families moved in, and a nursery and a synagogue were built on the site. By mid-2006, Migron had turned into a substantial settlement, with 150 people living in 60 trailers placed on the hilltop around the antenna. In this case, the colonisation of Palestinian airwaves and the telecommunications sector was not only an outcome of the inadequacies of the Oslo Interim Accords, but a driving force behind further territorial conquest.

## **Deterritorialisation and Occupation**

That mobile telephony might have proved to be a battleground of nation-statist agendas and a tool for territorial occupation appears to be a contradiction of those qualities that are usually linked to mobile telecommunications. In the wider research context, this field, which liberal techno-enthusiasts have celebrated as ‘a fundamental pillar of modern-day individualism’ and ‘a manifestation of individual freedom in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century’ (Chaoul, 2006, p. 50) is associated with new, technology-driven forms of capitalism that encourage deterritorialising processes.<sup>12</sup> Above all, mobiles phones are seen as emblematic of neo-liberal, consumerised desires, which value mobility, fluidity and connection, but also individual control and competition. For instance media philosopher George Myerson sees mobile phones as embodiments of the contemporary spirit of a ‘changing environment’. ‘If you want to assure yourself that you belong to the new century,’ Myerson writes, ‘this is the object to have in your hands’ (Myerson, 2001, p. 3). For Myerson, the appeal of the mobile phone draws largely on our desire for personal freedom, but he emphasises that this notion of freedom is essentially neo-liberal in kind. It is freedom understood not in terms of collective potential or creative becoming, but in terms of individualised control.

Mobile phones are also associated with a certain democratising promise: like the internet, it is seen as a medium that can evade centralised government and give rise to spontaneous and non-hierarchic political movements, swarms or ‘smart mobs’ such as those described by Howard Rheingold in *Smart Mobs: The Next Social Revolution* (2002). According to Rheingold, mediation and the instant connection offered by mobile technologies allow people to cooperate despite the absence of physical or real-term encounters, thus encouraging entirely new forms of collective human action. Similarly, Manuel Castells (2004) has suggested that the networked and rhizomatic quality of mobile-enabled communication can produce new possibilities for non-hierarchic and spontaneous political protests. Naturally, the democratising potential of the mobile phone depends on the particular uses to which it is put. As a potent harbinger of globalised capitalism it is always already part of a neoliberal biopolitics, and it has been harnessed by states and terrorist movements such as al Qaida - a point that Rheingold is particularly keen to make (Rheingold, 2002, p. xviii-xxii). This, however, does not contradict the idea that mobile telephony is strongly predisposed towards deterritorialising and decentralising tendencies which challenge previous systems of power and control - systems which Deleuze and Guattari (2004) would call ‘molar’ or ‘arborescent’.

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<sup>11</sup> Weitzman writes that the hilltop had already been the site of previous, unsuccessful settlement attempts. Although the hilltop was owned and cultivated by Palestinians farmers in the nearby village, Israeli deemed the construction of the antenna as a security issue, and therefore justified.

<sup>12</sup> The word deterritorialising refers here to the work of Deleuze and Guattari (2004) as well as to the ways in which Hardt and Negri (2000) have appropriated the word in their account of the Empire. Although deterritorialisation is linked to resistance to a centralised and territorialised power, it does not equate with resistance to power *per se*. Capitalism, and in particular the present stage of globalised, neoliberal capitalism, works through deterritorialisation, and through the decoding of meaning.

What makes mobile telephony in Palestine particularly interesting, however, is the fact that there such deterritorialising tendencies meet with a manifestly ultraterritorialising colonial occupation. What roles, meanings and effects do deterritorialising processes associated with new communication technologies acquire in such a context? One of the most important things to consider here are the ways and contexts in which Palestinians themselves might have appropriated the mobile phone. The rise of the mobile phone in Palestine coincided largely with the end of the Oslo negotiations and the beginning of the Second Intifada. Jawwal was established just one year before the intifada broke out, and its most rapid growth period took place during the first years of the new millennium. Despite the shrinking of the Palestinian economy as the result of the closure and other punitive measures, these years saw the number of Palestinian mobile subscribers soar almost exponentially, turning Palestinian cellular market into one of the most promising in the whole Middle East region.

Why did the mobile phone become a success in Palestine at the height of political crisis and economic hardship? As has already been pointed out, mobiles are intermittently seductive in a world in which mobility, individual control and consumption are highly appreciated. This is particularly true for Palestinians whose daily existence is trapped by colonial occupation and incarceration within besieged villages and towns. Mobile phones present Palestinians a rare opportunity to get hold of something that is connected strongly to ideas of high and late modernity, mobility, progress, individual freedom and personal success. Indeed, the occupation might even have intensified Palestinian desires for mobile telephony in exactly these terms. For Palestinians a feeling that they, too, are taking part in the narrative of technological advancement and globalisation is probably even more tempting than for those who live in the world's metropolitan, liberal and 'smooth' centers. A few years ago, an internet Gallup poll, conducted by Jawwal and published upon the release on Jawwal's website (<http://www.jawwal.ps>), revealed that instead of functionality, reliability or economic costs, an overwhelming majority of Palestinian respondents considered special features and looks as the most desirable qualities in a mobile phone. Mobiles are seen as essential commodities for individual self-fashioning. Despite their persistent condition as an occupied and colonised people, Palestinians are not immune to such temptations.

The occupation has also increased those contexts and situations in which mobile communication as such has become particularly useful. According to a fairly recent report on mobile phone use in the Middle East, war and conflict might actually increase people's needs for mobiles, and thus be conducive to a thriving mobile telephone sector (Schellen & el Zein eds., 2006). This is evident above all in Iraq, where the boom in mobile telephony has been, all things considered, at least as striking as that in Palestine.<sup>13</sup> Although the general infrastructure in Iraq, including fixed-line telephony, was devastated by the US invasion and has been very slow to recover, mobile operators have been quick to establish coverage throughout the shattered country and today represent one of the most vital business sectors there. Abdulilah Dewachi (2006) argues that this is best explained by the increasing need of ordinary Iraqis to stay connected to family, loved ones and the place of work during times of violence and insecurity.<sup>14</sup> A survey by Baghdad University has found that many Iraqi middle-class people are paying an astounding 25 to 50 percent of their monthly family income (average 150 US dollars) for cellular services (See Zorpette 2006). Nearly all urbanised Iraqis have appropriated the mobile phone, and there is almost no correlation between one's social and economic circumstances and access to a mobile phone (Yatzbeck 2006).

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<sup>13</sup> During the year 2004, the year following the US invasion of Iraq, the number of Iraqi subscribers rose from practically from zero to 1.3 million, and by the end of the next year, the number was estimated at around 3.5 million, with almost a 12,5 % penetration rate (Dewachi, 2006, p. 75).

<sup>14</sup> According to Dewachi, '[T]he mobile phone has emerged as an essential security gadget for families checking on the safety of their members, especially school and university students, when they are outside their homes or late in returning after curfew hours' (Dewachi, 2006, p. 76).



In Palestine, too, the high demand for mobile telephony is linked to war and occupation. Perhaps most important here is the way in which the Israeli policy of closure and siege has placed struggles over space and basic mobility into the centre of Palestinian everyday life. Alongside the wider legal, bureaucratic and military machinery, the closure consists of fences, checkpoints, roadblocks, curfews, settlements and, more recently, of the massive West Bank separation wall. The resulting 'matrix of control' (Halper 2000) has virtually incarcerated Palestinians in their cities and villages, turning the occupied territories into something like large open-air 'prisons' (Mbembe 2003). Moreover, as Azulay and Ophif (2005) argue, the closure is filling Palestinian territories with visible signs of occupation, thus contributing to a wider Israeli military strategy of 'suspended violence', the aim of which is to sustain a state of psychological submission among the Palestinians through the continuous display of overwhelming power and an architecture of control. Thus, it is in more than one way that the occupied West Bank and the Gaza Strip have become Deleuze and Guattari's (2004) striated spaces *par excellence*.

In such a context, mobile phones have actually become indispensable tools for daily attempts at evading the blockade and mitigating its impacts on everyday life.<sup>15</sup> For example on the West Bank, Palestinian areas are fragmented by an extensive network of Israeli settlements, by roads that are reserved for settlers only, and by permanent as well as temporary, 'flying', checkpoints. The extent, location and level of the closure are never predictable, and the map of the siege can change by the hour. In response, for instance Palestinian taxi drivers have appropriated the mobile phone to enquire about, and keep others informed of the precise location of roadblocks, soldiers and alternative routes. Mohammed Najib, a taxi driver from Nablus whom I interviewed in Ramallah in September 2006, has plenty of experience of this sort of manoeuvring. According to Najib, every morning the first taxi to begin the journey from Nablus to Ramallah informs colleagues about the situation on the road. The practice continues throughout the day, and during particularly heavy closure it is common for drivers to spend most of their time with one hand on the steering wheel, and the other on the phone. Although using the phone is very expensive, and takes up a large part of the drivers' meagre salary (Najib earns some forty or fifty shekels (about 13 US dollars) a day, and spends around 25 shekels of that sum on mobile telephony alone), no driver could operate without one. 'If you are a taxi driver, you *must* have a phone', Mohammed Najib explains.<sup>16</sup> Thus, in Palestine, the mobile phone is working as an agent of deterritorialisation in a very concrete sense.

Phones are also used to keep in touch with family and friends one cannot reach physically, and to organise everyday life under the unpredictable conditions of the siege. Even Palestinian prisoners are using smuggled mobile phones to break their illegal isolation in Israeli cells.<sup>17</sup> Iain Guest (2004, p.31) describes the situation succinctly when he writes that 'Mobile phones have become a necessity rather than a luxury in a country where even ambulances and pregnant women can be delayed at checkpoints for hours, and where suspects are summarily detained.' Actions such as these might not amount to strategic resistance against the occupation, but they do sustain a spontaneous flow of Palestinian bodies (and in the case of the prison, of ideas and images) against attempts by the Israeli military to demobilise life in the West Bank and Gaza. Palestinians who evade the closure collectively are thus exemplary of Rheingold's 'smart mobs', swarms who use mobile technology '*to act together in new ways and in new situations where collective action was not possible before*' (Rheingold, 2002, p. xviii, emphasis original).

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<sup>15</sup> Of course, the same can be said of Palestinian use of the Internet, which has become, in the hands of Palestinians, an important means of communication within and across the borders of the occupied territories (Haddad 2003). However, while the internet may facilitate the flow of information, data and ideas in the West Bank and Gaza, the mobile phone has become a technological tool that actually aids the movement and mobility of Palestinian bodies and goods.

<sup>16</sup> Interview with Muhammed Najib, 18.8.2006 in Ramallah.

<sup>17</sup> Although phones are strictly forbidden, detainees bribe prison guards or smuggle phones in, for a chance to exchange text and photo messages with family, friends, lawyers, political networks and fellow prisoners. See the report by IslamOnline.net at <http://www.islamonline.org/English/News/2004-12/31/article01.shtml> [Accessed 4.9.2010].

But let us not forget the notion of late modern colonial occupation that we began with. So far, I have pitted the notions of territoriality and deterritorialisation against one another in ways that correspond largely with the territorialising power of the occupation and the deterritorialising quality of Palestinian resistance. Such a juxtaposition carries some obvious risks, one of which is that of simplifying the relationship between power and deterritorialisation or equating deterritorialisation with resistance per se. This point is particularly important once we remember that apart from appropriations of the mobile phone by Israel and the Palestinians along the lines of mutual antagonism, the mobile phone stands as a symbol of other, distinctly neo-liberal forms of power that are also gaining hold in Palestine. Such tendencies are much harder to locate within the text of the conflict, and it is precisely this dimension of the mobile phone that is of most interest for the present study.

The rest of this chapter examines the relationship between Palestinians and the first Palestinian mobile phone operator Jawwal. I suggest that during its ten years of existence, Jawwal's standing within Palestinian society has undergone significant changes. These changes reflect the emergence and consolidation of a neo-liberal and consumerised mode of subjectivity within the Palestinian territories, as well as the rise of resistances and struggles that are not only specific to this context, but also largely invisible to inquiries that limit Palestinian politics to the analytical frame of national struggle. The processes that I describe are in many ways detrimental to the emergence of a consistent political strategy or a collective, hegemonic national front among the Palestinians. Their political value derives from the problematic that I have described in reference to Lyotard's notion of *differend*: from a demand to rethink the political aesthetics of late modern subjects of colonial occupation.

### **The Nationalist Strategy: One Voice, One Jawwal**

Although war and occupation have actually contributed to the mobile phone boom in Palestine, the fact that this boom should have profited Jawwal to the extent that it has done could not be taken for granted. When Jawwal was established, Israeli operators already dominated the Palestinian mobile telephone sector and Orange, Cellcom Pelephone and Mirsa enjoyed a firm hold on the growing markets in the West Bank and Gaza. Thousands of Palestinians were subscribers to these companies, and prepaid scratch cards and other Israeli cellular products could be purchased with ease in most grocery shops throughout the Palestinian territories. In this context, Jawwal needed a marketing strategy that would be powerful enough to seduce new customers as well as prompt those who already held an Israeli phone to switch to Jawwal.

During the first years, the answer was nationalism. The nationalist marketing strategy was masterminded by Jawwal's first CEO Hakam Kanfani, who sought to distinguish Jawwal clearly from its Israeli competitors on national grounds. Kanafani assumed leadership of the company in December 2000, and his first move was to have Jawwal's logo redesigned into one that corresponded with the Palestinian flag. The company's first logo, used for the first one and half years of its existence, had been blue in color, resembling closely Paltel's designs and brand. This logo was created before the company had consolidated administrative and strategic structures of its own and separate from those of Paltel.<sup>18</sup> Instead of blue, which many Palestinians associated with the color of the Israeli flag, the new logo used the Palestinian national colors (black, red and green on a white surface), a pronounced image of a mobile phone, and a text, which portrayed the company name printed in both Arabic and English [figure 2].

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<sup>18</sup> Interview with Irene Saadeh, September 6, 2006, Ramallah.

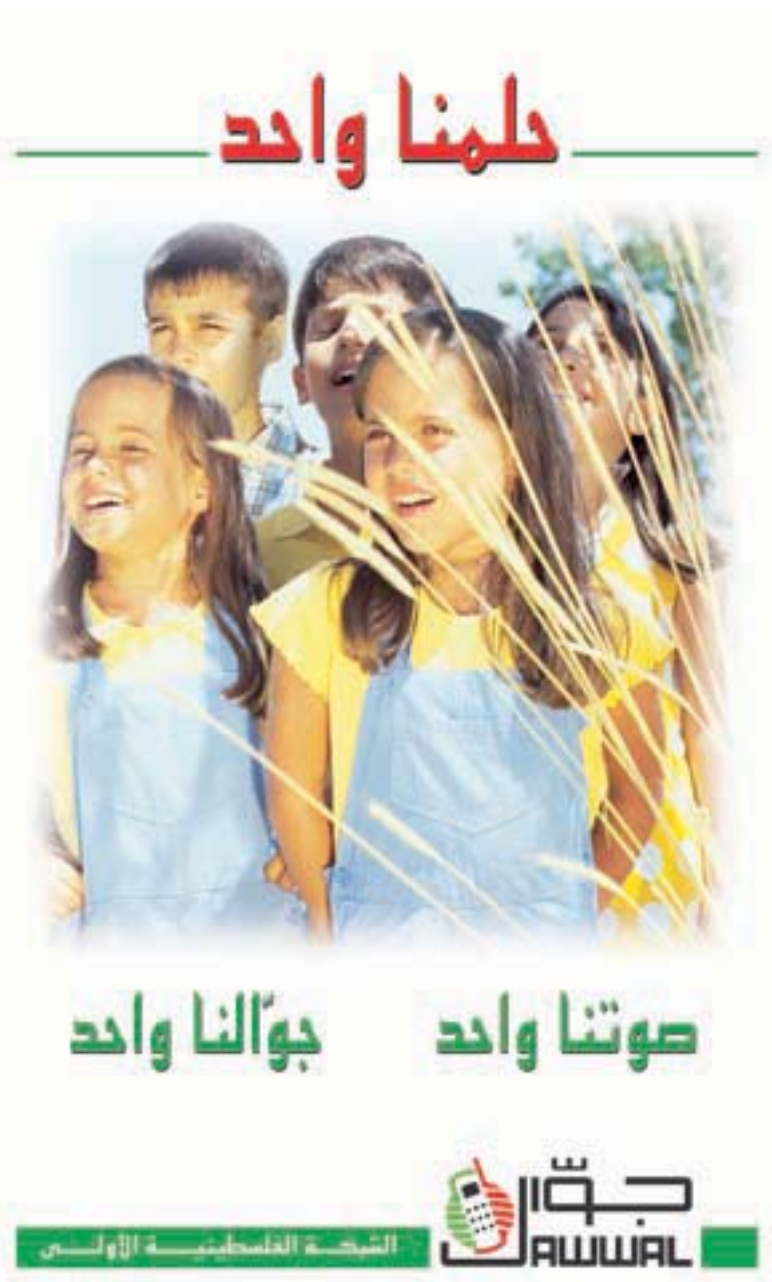
**Figure 2: Jawwal's 'nationalist' logo released in 2000**



(courtesy of Jawwal)

The nationalist campaign coincided with the start of the al Aqsa Intifada. As the urgency of resistance against Israel returned, the issue of national unity also became an increasingly central concern for the Palestinians. In 2001, Jawwal directly harnessed on these anxieties by launching a powerful advertising campaign centred on the slogan 'One Voice, One Jawwal' [figure 3]. The campaign, which stressed the importance of Palestinian unity and resolve, was massive. In addition to domestic press and TV, *One Voice, One Jawwal* was broadcast through satellite TV channels including regional networks like al Jazeera, Abu Dhabi TV and CNN, making Jawwal the first Palestinian company ever to buy advertising space globally on Arab and international networks. These efforts were no waste: the campaign attracted the public both in Palestine and elsewhere in the Middle East instantly, and it was even awarded the precious Golden Award as the Best TV advertisement in the Middle East for the year 2001. On the ground, the al Aqsa Intifada and the idea of a collective, strategic national struggle was disintegrating. On the level of ideas of how the intifada should proceed, however, the desire for national unity was strong. 'One Voice, One Jawwal', was effective precisely because it managed to tap on such hopes and link ideas of national unity to the company's own brand.

Figure 3:  
An example of the advertisement campaign ‘One voice, One Jawwal’ from the year 2001



(courtesy of Jawwal)

### War of Frequencies: Israel Strikes Back

How did the Israeli state react to the rise of Jawwal, and the thriving of a genuinely Palestinian mobile communications sector? In just two years under Kanafani's rule, Jawwal became one of the most successful Palestinian companies. During the year 2001 only, the number of Palestinian subscribers increased from 80 000 to 200 000, and the company reported net profits of 5.8 million US dollars.

This might not be entirely surprising: after all, information and communications technology, including mobile telephony, are readily understood as an economic sector that has most chances of success in the physically strangling conditions of Israeli occupation. While traditional phone lines presume an extensive network of telephone wires which are expensive to build and maintain, infrastructure for mobile telephony does not require uninterrupted territorial continuity to function; moreover, it is easier to defend or replace after aggression, thus providing an economic sector that is particularly adaptable for unstable and volatile political spaces.

But there are limits to this potential. By the time that the company was gaining a record number of subscribers and Israeli companies operating in the territories were rapidly losing their customer base, the IDF instituted measures that would cause significant damage to Jawwal's development and services. The principal such measure was Israel's decision in the late 2001 to prevent Jawwal from importing goods and equipment that were vital to Jawwal's functions. The Oslo interim accords granted Israel the opportunity to control all the borders of the Palestinian territories and, most importantly, channel all imports to the Palestinian territories via Israeli ports and airports. Although in principle the same agreements stipulated a 'right' for the Palestinians to import and export freely, in practice Israel was granted a position to control at will which goods and objects could enter the Palestinian territories, and which could not.<sup>19</sup>

In October 2001, Jawwal as well as several other Palestinian IT and telecommunications companies, received from the Israeli Ministry of Defence a military order retracting their licence to import equipment. At the same time, the IDF confiscated the technological imports that were already on the way, placed them in large storage facilities, and later even charged Palestinian companies high rents for this storage space. Jawwal alone was forced to pay half a million dollars in storage fees for the storing of confiscated equipment. Among the confiscated items were technological devices that were not only very expensive but central to Jawwal's continued ability to provide services to its expanding customer base, for example, 60 transmission antennas.

The situation sparked anger and frustration within the Palestinian business community. In their Urgent Appeal for Action, released jointly by Paltel, Pita (Palestinian IT Association for Companies), Paltrade (Palestine Trade Center) and Jawwal, the incident was described in following terms:

'Both the Telecommunication and IT sectors have been brought to a standstill due to their inability to clear products held at Israeli ports. The seized goods comprise telephone exchange systems, faxes, cellular base stations, telephone sets, cellular telephone terminals, data switches, routers, modems, videoconferencing systems, and ADSL equipment; all indispensable for providing Palestinians with communication tools with advanced technological compatibility.

The crux of the problem lies in the seizure of equipment that is normally traded and utilized by Israeli and international companies, with the only difference that it would serve the Palestinian private sector.'<sup>20</sup>

Officially, the confiscations were made for security reasons, but both Palestinian and Israeli sources proposed that motivations behind the seizure were manifold. According to Kanfani, Jawwal's imports began getting stuck in Israel precisely around the same time as Jawwal was hitting record growth:

'In 2001, Jawwal managed to regain 60% of the Palestinian subscribers that were on the Israeli networks. That's precisely why on the 29th of October, 2001, the Israeli authorities blocked 7.5 tons of imported cellular stations [...] Taking Jawwal's equipment "commercial hostages" paves the way for the Israeli mobile operators to gain back the market share that Jawwal worked so hard to achieve' (Kanfani, 2002).

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<sup>19</sup> In Gaza, this kind of control has reached the highest levels. With the total siege that Israel has been imposing on Gaza, in particular since the 2006 election of the Islamic Hamas to the Palestinian government, Israel has effectively blocked the import of a variety of goods, including basic foodstuffs and garments.

<sup>20</sup> The appeal is available online at [www.pita.ps/PITA%20files/call%20for%20end%20equipment%20seizure.doc](http://www.pita.ps/PITA%20files/call%20for%20end%20equipment%20seizure.doc)

Whatever the reasons behind the confiscations, they weakened Jawwal and its ability to compete with Israeli cell phone operators. In 2002, a lack of access to necessary equipment prevented Jawwal from expanding its services despite growing demand, and resulted in the company's decision to stop selling any new subscriptions. On the ground, the availability of Jawwal SIM cards dwindled, and those that were available on the second-hand and black market sold for terribly high prices. When I visited the Palestinian territories in the summer 2002, I was unable to purchase a Jawwal SIM card for my phone, and had to buy one instead from the Israeli company Orange.

Meanwhile, Israel launched other measures that disrupted Jawwal's operation, for instance preventing the company from installing transmission antennas in places that would be crucial for sustained coverage throughout the West Bank. Only areas A and B of the West Bank are under full jurisdiction of the Palestinian Authority. In Area C, which consists of large stretches of land between Palestinian villages and towns, permissions for construction projects need to be applied for from Israeli officials. Although Israel has not issued an open policy forbidding Jawwal from installing its equipment in area C, it has been very reluctant to grant such permissions. Another problem is related to frequencies. In the Oslo Interim Accords, Israel was placed in charge of the transmission frequencies and of their allocation to the Palestinians. However, the number of frequencies defined sufficient for the Palestinians at the time has proven to be seriously underestimated. While the 'mobile phone boom', which took off a few years after the accords were signed, has greatly increased the demand on the Palestinian side, Israel has refused to adjust the extent frequency allocation to meet the needs of Palestinian telecommunication sector.<sup>21</sup>

For these reasons, Jawwal was unable to provide uninterrupted coverage on all West Bank roads, or to meet rising demands on its capacity. The situation translated into poor services and unreliable connections, and anyone wishing to enjoy full service on journeys between Palestinian towns had to resort to more than one handset: one by Jawwal, others by Israeli operators. For the Israeli companies, covering Area C is relatively easy thanks to the strategically placed hilltop settlements and as the case of Migron demonstrates, it has even been ready to establish new settlements to meet the needs of Israeli cellular coverage.<sup>22</sup>

### **Expecting Quality, not Equality**

How, then, did ordinary Palestinians, customers of both Jawwal and Israeli companies, react to these problems? Given Jawwal's antagonistic position vis-à-vis Israeli operators, and the fact that it is one of the most established and highly performing Palestinian institutions in Gaza and the West Bank, it would be easy to assume that the troubles faced by the company would only strengthen Palestinian commitment to the national mobile phone operator. At the time, Jawwal's customer services might have appeared worse than the services of its Israeli competitors, but after all most of these problems derived from Israeli aggression and occupation policies against Jawwal. Moreover, Jawwal had become one of the largest employers within the Palestinian territories and, unlike Israeli companies, it carried and fulfilled various social, economic and environmental responsibilities to the Palestinian society. In addition to paying taxes to the Palestinian Authority, Jawwal was involved as a sponsor in a variety of Palestinian educational, sport, charity and other social activities in the West Bank and Gaza. And when West Bank Palestinians endured one of the most aggressive Israeli military incursions for

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<sup>21</sup> The number of frequencies released by Israel was agreed upon in the Oslo Agreements on the condition that Israel would increase the number should there be a growing need on the Palestinian side. However, the level agreed upon in the agreements in no way corresponds with the current needs of the Palestinians. The agreements were signed in the mid-nineties, when no-one could yet predict the massive rise of the 'mobile phone frenzy' at the turn of the millennium. Interview with Sam Bahour, 20.8.2006, in Ramallah.

<sup>22</sup> Another reason for the use of multiple handsets is that since it is cheaper to call from Jawwal to Jawwal, Orange to Orange etc., those who use phones frequently save money by calling to and from phonea with SIM cards from the same operator.

decades in spring 2002, the so-called Operation Defensive Shield, Jawwal stood on the firing line: its offices were looted and destroyed, and staff detained for interrogation.<sup>23</sup>

Despite all this, Israeli disruptions of Jawwal's main functions in 2001 and 2002 did not cause Palestinians to side and identify with the Palestinian mobile phone operator. Instead, problems in Jawwal's services raised widespread discontent with and dismay regarding the company. For many, Jawwal's bad coverage, jammed lines and the lack of special discount schemes that Israeli operators were frequently offering to Palestinians stood above all as proof of Jawwal's incompetence and greed.<sup>24</sup> Just like their own government by the Palestinian Authority, towards which Palestinians had become increasingly resentful during the Oslo interim accords, Jawwal began to be viewed suspiciously as an embodiment of poor service, incompetence and corruption. In several private conversations in the West Bank and Gaza between the years 2003 and 2006, I heard Palestinians express distrust over the ethos and capabilities of the Palestinian mobile phone company, and accuse the company of raking in all profits while offering Palestinians second-class services at expensive prices. Others were skeptical about the political and economic standing of any Palestinian company, due to the dependent relationship of Palestinian territories to Israel, and saw no point in supporting Jawwal on 'nationalist' grounds.<sup>25</sup> Instead of relating to Jawwal as (anticolonial) national subjects who would identify Jawwal's troubles as part of a shared struggle against the occupation, the people whom I talked with related to the company above all as quality-conscious consumers or, alternatively, as skeptics of corporate power in general.

Such feelings were echoed within, and promoted by, the wider Palestinian business community. The loudest opposition has probably come from PITA, the Palestinian IT Association for Companies, which presents itself as the herald of the liberalisation of Palestinian markets.<sup>26</sup> Basing on neoliberal ideas, which stress the importance of free competition for the development of any business or service sector, this community expressed increasing concerns over Jawwal's monopoly position in the Palestinian territories. Another, related problem for them was the fact that Jawwal shared such close links to the Palestinian Authority. The PA had invested and participated in setting up the company, and granted it market exclusivity for the first five years. Moreover, in the absence of an independent regulator, the PA stayed in charge of all matters relating to the telecommunications sector, such as issuing licences to new operators and promoting market competition.<sup>27</sup>

Together, these matters have subjected Jawwal and the PA to harsh criticisms by those Palestinians, who see liberalisation as a key to developing economic, social and political life in the Palestinian territories. For instance Sam Bahour, himself an American-Palestinian businessman and one of Jawwal's founding members and investors who resigned from Jawwal in the year 1999 due to these disputes, has argued persistently for market liberalisation and for an end to Jawwal's monopoly position. According to Bahour (1999 and 2000), the Palestinian community at large would profit from

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<sup>23</sup> During the incursion in Ramallah, the IDF stole, looted and destroyed Jawwal's main offices: 15 soldiers raided the building, detained the staff, and damaged everything they could get hold of for five or six hours, causing considerable economic and operational losses for the company and personal distress for the detained and interrogated staff members.

<sup>24</sup> According to Irene Saadeh, Jawwal's PR manager, the reason that Jawwal was not able to offer similar discount schemes to those offered by the Israeli operators was the confiscation of the equipment which would have allowed Jawwal to manage such billing systems. By 2006, Jawwal received the confiscated technology and was able to launch similar campaigns. Interview with Irene Saadeh in Ramallah 6.9.2006 See Appendix.

<sup>25</sup> As one Palestinian man, Nasir Hazara from the town of Yatta put it, there is no difference whether one contributes money to an Israeli or Palestinian company. 'In the end, all money goes back to Israel anyways', said Hazara, and explained that he used an Israeli company instead of Jawwal because Jawwal's services were so bad. Personal communication with Nasir Hazara, 22.8.2009, Yatta, West Bank.

<sup>26</sup> <http://www.pita.ps/newweb/index.php>

<sup>27</sup> Jawwal maintains that it has never enjoyed market exclusivity due to the illegal presence of Israeli operators, but to the member of PITA Jawwal has simply used this argument as a pretext to close legal competitors out of the market. See the exchange between Hakam Kanafani (2004) and Sam Bahour (2004b).

the opening up of the Palestinian business space to more competition: services would improve, prices would go down, and the management of the business would become more transparent. All this, he writes, would be conducive to a more liberal and investment-friendly space than the one currently dominated by one national mobile telecommunications operator and the incompetent and corrupt leaders of the PA.

If these views are compared with some aspects of postcoloniality examined in chapter six, there are certain similarities between shifts in the Palestinians's relationship to Jawwal and the transformations of political subjectivity that are associated with postcoloniality in the late modern, globalised world: the salient similarities lie in the ways in which earlier narratives of collective liberation have more recently been challenged by neo-liberal ideas of self and society. Neoliberalism assembles society according to the model of atomized, self-interested individuals who relate to each other through the market, relegating extra-capitalist allegiances and loyalties to a secondary role. In practice, the advance of neoliberal ideology has by no means been uncontested in the West nor in the colonised world; the rise of religious fundamentalisms, 'new tribalisms' and ultranationalisms such as that of Jewish settlers are cases in point. Nevertheless, every society today has been touched to some extent by tendencies that are effectively neoliberal in kind, actively as well as re-actively.

### **Remaking the Brand: from Nationalism to Green High-Tech.**

Initially, Jawwal's response to popular criticism was to emphasise Israel's role in creating the crisis, and to position the company side by side with ordinary Palestinians who also suffered from Israeli aggression. At first, in 2002, the company tried to clarify publicly the reasons (i.e. the confiscation of equipment, inability to build new antennas in required locations, etc) that were behind declining service by issuing announcements that explained the situation in detail in local newspapers. Later on, Jawwal launched a sustained advertising campaign in which individual Jawwal employees and their family members, presented as genuine, ordinary Palestinians, declared 'Ana Jawwal' (I am Jawwal), and told about themselves and their relationship to the company [figures 5 & 6]. The obvious aim of the campaign was to emphasise the organic link between Jawwal and Palestinian society and to fight off any negative images that linked Jawwal with corruption, greed, alienation and indifference to the needs of its customers – 'ordinary Palestinians'. Meanwhile, the company had limited success at finding alternative ways in which to improve the company's performance. These ways included splitting frequencies to increase the operator's capacity, and routing part of the services via switches that were actually based in London.<sup>28</sup> By taking these steps, the company was able to recover from the worst impact of the crisis and even to begin sell new subscriptions. However the quality of the services and coverage remained significantly lower than Palestinian customers expected, and the campaign 'Ana Jawwal' did not manage to turn the tide. By the next year Jawwal's sharp growth rates fell sharply and the company's targets were met only half way. Giving the fading appeal of the al Aqsa Intifada and the spiralling processes of social and political fragmentation, it appears as if the Palestinians were not willing to suffer poor services and expensive prices under the guise of national solidarity. At least in relation to the national mobile phone operator, many Palestinians identified themselves first and foremost as customers expecting quality.

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<sup>28</sup> Interview with Jawwal's head of engineering Kamal Ratrouf, 31.8.2006, Ramallah. See Appendix.



**Figures 4 and 5:**  
**Portrayals of Jawwal staff in the advertisement campaign ‘Ana Jawwal!’ -I am Jawwal!**



(courtesy of Jawwal)

### Subaltern Militancy and Corporate Power

Thus far, I have examined the interstices of neoliberal globalisation and late-modern colonial occupation primarily in terms of the rise of a Palestinian consumerist ethos. However, over the last

four years there has been yet another change in the relationship between Jawwal and Palestinian society which is equally interesting from the perspective of this study. Today, one of the main challenges identified by Jawwal does not emanate from Israeli occupation, nor does it come in the form of a consumerised Palestinian subjectivity that places Jawwal on the same level with Israeli companies and judges the company solely upon its performance and pricing policies. Instead, the challenge has developed within the Palestinian society, and in tune with some of the most potent, rising discourses of contemporary transnational politics: discourses of health and environmentalism.

During the early 2000s and especially since the year 2005, there has been an increasing concern among Palestinians about the possible health risks that radiation from the towers might cause to people living near them. This awareness has led to local resistance against Jawwal's transmission towers. In a variety of incidents in Gaza and the West Bank, several towers have been burned or destroyed by shooting at the hands of angry protesters who accuse Jawwal's towers of causing cancer to people living in the area. The first incident took place in 2005 in Yatta, a deprived West Bank town at the outskirts of Hebron. There, Jawwal had placed a tower on a hill right in the middle of the town, in a graveyard next to the main mosque. According to the locals, problems around the tower began to accumulate in 2000, when a young Palestinian man from Yatta was diagnosed with cancer.<sup>29</sup> At that time, there were rumors that the doctor in Bethlehem had suspected exposure to radiation as the cause of the cancer and that he had asked the patient whether he lived near a cellular transmission tower. At that point, the tentative diagnosis did not provoke public anger, but during the next few years there was an increase in the number of cancer cases in Yatta. Many of the diseased were locals living right next to, or very near to the tower, and a significant number of them were young in age. Gradually, people began to link cancer with the tower and in a bid to get rid of it locals approached the company in order to ask for the tower's removal from the city centre.

When there was no response on Jawwal's side, locals began to attack the tower directly by throwing stones, and threats to burn the tower unless it was removed from the site were issued to Jawwal. These actions caused Jawwal to increase security for the tower, and to pay the municipality for an unarmed police night guard at the site.<sup>30</sup> Over time, attacks intensified: stones were swapped for bullets fired from distance and, finally, in 2005, the whole site was burned down. The attack itself was as banal as it was effective. After helping the police officer whose job was to guard the tower to carry his belongings and personal TV set out of the cabin underneath the tower, a group of about six anti-tower activists shot up at the machinery inside the tower base, poured petrol on the site, and set it on fire.<sup>31</sup> Aware of the fact that the incident would be repeated if a new tower were placed on the same site, Jawwal was forced to bend to local demands and engage in direct and open negotiations to identify a new, better place for the transmission tower. In an eight months' time, Jawwal erected a new tower in a relatively long distance from the town, in a place that everyone was happy with – including the landowner who received relatively high compensation for hosting the tower.

After the indisputable success of militant grass-root activism against Jawwal towers in Yatta, similar incidents began to spread to other Palestinian locations, including Qalqilya, Beit Fajar and

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<sup>29</sup> Personal communication with a Palestinian man who identified himself as Merwan (Interviewed in Yatta, West Bank, 22.8.2006). Merwan did not want to have his speech recorded on tape. Accordingly, my records of his account are based on notes only.

<sup>30</sup> The reason the police officer in question, Ashraf Shareef, could not possess a gun was dictated by the fear of Israeli military: if IDF soldiers found him outside in the night time wearing a gun, they would consider him as part of the armed resistance against the Israeli occupation. Interview with Ashraf Shareef's brother Shareef Smerat in Yatta, 22.8.2006.

<sup>31</sup> According to Shareef Smerat (brother of Ashraf Shareef, the policeman who was initially hired to guard the transmission tower in Yatta), Ashraf Shareef was guarding the site when about six men arrived there and asked him whether he wanted the tower to be there. When Shareef replied 'no, but this is my job and I have to be here', the men asked him to come out from the cabin underneath the tower because they wanted to burn it. Shareef asked them to wait for five minutes, so that he could carry his belongings, including the TV, out of the cabin – an appeal to which the men responded positively, even helping him to carry the items out. Interview with Shareef Smerat, Yatta, 22.8.2006.

Idna, where towers were also burned down and destroyed due to fears of radiation. These incidents should not, however, be regarded solely as instances of resistance to cellular transmission towers. Instead, they have been articulated in opposition to, and suspicion of, Jawwal's policies and corporate ethics in a twist that sees the marriage between corporate power and the Palestinian Authority as particularly harmful to the interests of ordinary Palestinians.

For instance in Qalqilya, where a tower was placed on top of a residential building in a densely built area and burned down a little later, residents compared Jawwal's ethics and responsibility to those practiced by Orange, Cellcom and Pelephone – and spoke out in favour of the Israeli companies. Standing on the roof of the building that used to serve as a base for the burned Jawwal tower, one of the residents explained to me that unlike in Palestine, in Israel, the safety and rights of individual citizens were in high regard, and transmission towers were always placed at a safe distance from housing centers. To prove the case, he pointed in the direction of the Israeli border, where we could see an Israeli transmission tower standing alone on a small, green hill. Jawwal, on the other hand, he said, was neglecting safety standards in a bid to find cheapest solutions, and risked public health by constructing towers in densely populated areas. The ultimate responsibility, he argued, lay with the Palestinian Authority, whose poor regulation failed to protect Palestinian citizens from Jawwal's greed. In other words, while Palestinians opposing the towers are drawing on health concerns that are by no means unique to Palestine (debates on the possible risks of cell phone radiation are today common all over the world), in practice these concerns tend to merge with suspicions regarding the morality and greed of domestic economic and governmental institutions, at least when placed in comparison with their Israeli equivalents. In proclaiming this, my host echoed attitudes that are relatively common among Palestinians, namely, the idea that despite the brutality of Israeli policies towards Palestinians, the relationship between Israel and its own citizens is governed by democratic values and respect for citizens' rights. In a broader context, this idea is indicative of the success of the liberal political ethos in producing subjectivities that regard the narrative of liberal democratization as essentially emancipatory and that project regimes that fail to fulfil these standards as backward and totalitarian.

In the matter of just a few years, popular attacks against Jawwal's infrastructure have therefore become a problem that might even exceed the troubles faced by the Palestinian cellular company in the face of Israeli aggression. On the official Jawwal website, the company presents itself today in the following terms:

*'We are Innovative. We innovate new methods to overcome obstacles*

One of the major difficulties Jawwal faces is manifested in the amount of frequency spectrum allocated for its network by the Israeli government. This accounts as one of the major obstacles that Jawwal and perhaps no other telecommunications cellular company around the world encounters. Such obstacles hinder Jawwal's attempts to enhance reception services and expansion strategies in the territories it covers. Jawwal has also been enduring a lot of difficulties manifested in the confiscation of its equipment and information systems, which resulted in the suspension of selling lines to its customers in many different occasions. Jawwal technical staff innovated new creative technological solutions to circumvent such limitations.

One of the major challenges Jawwal faces today is the intense opposition by some communities regarding the building of cellular towers. The cellular towers are constructed to assist in providing better reception services to customers in these communities. However, in the past few years, Jawwal towers were burned and vandalized due to the misconceptions by some that these towers have negative effect on the surrounding environment. Jawwal has been committed to, and still is, the international standards determined by specialized international institutions in this field. Thus, the frequencies transmitted by the towers are much lower than the internationally approved minimum limit, which reduces the impact on the surrounding environment and constitutes no danger whatsoever.'

([http://www.jawwal.ps/index.php?lang=en&page=corporate.about\\_jawwal.company.nabtaker&ptype=sub](http://www.jawwal.ps/index.php?lang=en&page=corporate.about_jawwal.company.nabtaker&ptype=sub) retrieved on February 3<sup>rd</sup> 2009)

Here Jawwal is underlining its Palestinianness by resorting to Palestinian discourses of steadfastness (*sumud*). The company's endurance and ability to 'overcome obstacles' under extreme circumstances are strongly emphasised. However, these hardships are not limited to those caused by the Israeli occupation. Instead, 'vandalism' by 'misconceived' Palestinians is identified as the most acute problem.

There are many reasons that might explain the exceptional force of Palestinian anti-tower militancy. One tentative and highly controversial explanation might be found in the micro politics underlying resistance. Talking in the position of a Jawwal official, Kamal Ratrout, Jawwal's chief engineer, suggested that the problem has only intensified after people realised that Jawwal is paying compensation for the land on which towers are erected. According to Ratrout, resistance to towers has been provoked, at least in part, by groups who are jealous of the beneficiaries, or alternatively, who want to raise the stakes of compensation.<sup>32</sup>

Another explanation is found in the relative collapse of governmental structures in the occupied Palestinian territories during the al Aqsa Intifada. Unlike health- and environment-conscious people in many other parts of the world, Palestinians are shooting and burning the towers down because *they can* do it. They possess the means, and the lack of an effective centralised government, coupled with popular support for the protesters, has meant that thus far, none of the anti-tower militants has been prosecuted. Moreover, although Israeli occupation remains a much more burning political issue in the Palestinian territories, a large proportion of the Palestinians today feel rather pessimistic about their possibilities of doing anything to change the situation due to the physical distance from which the Israeli military machine governs the West Bank and Gaza (through the systems of siege and closure), and due to the sophistication and sheer power of the occupying force. Jawwal, on the other hand, is an institution of power which is within the reach of ordinary Palestinians, and against which effective resistance is still possible, as was proved by the case in Yatta. Against this context, it might not be so surprising that popular resistance against Jawwal's transmission towers has reached such effective proportions.

**Figure 6: The new Jawwal logo and advertisement campaigns that have been released with it emphasise environmental responsibility and excellence in high-tech through abstract, soft designs and the choice of green and blue colors**



Whatever the reasons, finding effective PR strategies for fighting local resistance has become very important. As the last phrase in the quote from Jawwal's website indicates, commitment to international environmental standards has been one of the main discourses through which the company has sought to deal with the crisis.<sup>33</sup> Thus in the spring 2006, at an occasion which coincided with the

<sup>32</sup> Interview with Kamal Ratrout in Ramallah, West Bank, 31.8.2006. Also Irene Saadeh, the head of Jawwal's marketing team, mentioned jealousy as a possible motivator behind the attacks on the transmission towers.

<sup>33</sup> According to Suzan Jarrar from Tellamtam, a Ramallah based Public Relations office in charge of Jawwal's brand management, reconstructing the company's brand as green and environmentally responsible was carried out precisely in response to these problems. Personal conversation with Suzan Jarrar, 3.9.2006, Ramallah.

end of Hakam Kanafani's leadership of Jawwal and the installation of the new CEO Ammar Aker, Jawwal released a new logo which replaced the old, nationalist Palestinian looks with abstract blue and green designs [figure 6]. Irene Saadeh, the head of Jawwal's marketing, explains that the green color aimed at communicating the company's 'continuous responsibility towards the environment'.<sup>34</sup> Blue, in turn, was to symbolise high-tech competence. Whereas highlighting Jawwal's image as a serious high-tech company was important due to the mistrust that the Palestinians had developed in response to Jawwal's technological failures (which according to Jawwal derived from Israeli confiscations), environmental responsibility was crucial in the fight against the rising tide of violence and aggression against Jawwal's transmission towers.<sup>35</sup>

Advertisements might well be regarded as one of the quickest media to respond to changing attitudes and desires of dominant social middle classes. Branding and advertisement campaigns are carefully calculated according to the needs and values of the target group. In Palestine, the changing advertising strategies of the largest Palestinian company, Jawwal, are indicative of a gradual process of fragmentation of Palestinian national subjectivity. Although discourses of nationalism were still appealing enough to Palestinians to be used as marketing devices during the early years of the al Aqsa Intifada, today Jawwal draws primarily on discourses of technological competence and environmental responsibility. These are discourses that appeal to increasingly individualised subjectivities. However, what I argue is that the driving force behind their emergence is the resistance of the 'subaltern' - firstly, resistance against corporate power in Palestine and secondly, resistance against the culture of corruption and greed that many Palestinians link today with the institutionalized power of the Palestinian Authority.

## **Conclusions**

This paper has examined a variety of ways in which mobile communications in Palestine intersect with the Israeli occupation and Palestinian political subjectivity. Palestinian mobile telephony proved to be a fruitful and abundant object of study in its own right, yet the wider rationale behind the research was to explore a set of more elusive phenomena, such as the impact that neoliberal globalisation and ultraterritorial colonial occupation might have upon the constitution of Palestinian political subjectivity.

Although wider research into contemporary information and communication technologies tends to credit advances within this field as being conducive to deterritorialisation, in the context of studies of Palestine technological development is usually connected to the increasing ability of the Israeli state to incarcerate and control Palestinians and prevent any possibility of Palestinian resistance. However, as this research shows, missing from such analyses are ways in which Palestinians, too, are appropriating new technologies, both in the context of day-to-day resistance against the siege and as businesses taking advantage of this sector's deterritorialising qualities.

On the other hand, considerable changes in the ways in which Palestinians relate to the national mobile phone operator, Jawwal, indicate a precarious coexistence of both anticolonial and neoliberal political tendencies in one single space. In a matter of just two or three years, this relationship has shifted from one epitomised by Jawwal's nationalist campaigning in 'One Voice, One Jawwal' to one in which the company is branded primarily as representative of global high-tech excellence and environmental responsibility. Whereas in the first instance Palestinians related to the company through discourses of Palestinian collective national struggle, in the second this relationship is governed

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<sup>34</sup> Interview with Irene Saadeh, 6.9. 2006, Ramallah.

<sup>35</sup> In addition to changing the logo, Saadeh tells that this strategy was carried forward in advertisements and leaflets which highlighted Jawwal's commitment to 'international standards of safety and quality', and in a decision by Jawwal's management to put up a specific PR group responsible for facilitating the construction and placement of new transmission towers, and for negotiating any trouble that might arise from them. See Appendix.

primarily by their identification, above all, as private consumer subjects and as citizens with rights to good health and a clean environment. However, the latter marketing strategy has not, so far, achieved a level of success that would be comparable to the 'nationalist' marketing strategy in the beginning of the Second Intifada, mainly because it has been launched in reaction to the negative associations among Palestinians, many of whom view Jawwal as an embodiment of the marriage between corporate capitalism and the power of the Palestinian 'state'. These identifications both coexist and clash with the reactions by Palestinian business institutions such as PITA, which assert a strong desire to take the Palestinian society to a level that is beyond the discourses of the postcolonial nation state through the liberalisation of Palestinian markets and the undoing of Jawwal's national monopoly.

In conclusion, although the dialectical relationship against Israeli occupation is still a defining aspect of political subject formation in Palestine, any study of Palestinian politics has to take into account also a variety of other forces that are contributing to the conditions of possibility of Palestinian political subjectivity. One of the principal developments to consider is the increasing impact of neo-liberal globalisation on life in the Occupied Palestinian territories and the variety of different struggles that have emerged in response. These struggles are easily hidden from view as long as the political subject in Palestine is considered primarily from within the hegemonic discourses of nationalism and Islamism, yet they are central for Palestinian politics and the dynamics of conflict between Israel and the Palestinians. Insofar as the subaltern is an effect of a complex set of power relations, Palestinians who attack towers cannot be dismissed simply as subjects mistaken in their analyses of power and oppression, or alienated from their true condition as colonial subjects of Israeli occupation; instead, these resistances should be seen as important for the analysis of contemporary power in Palestine. Whether hegemonic discourses of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict are able to see and make sense of these resistances is thus a question that evokes important themes pertaining to the relationship between politics, aesthetics and representation.

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