**Content Regulation in the Digital Age**

**UN Human Rights Council**

*3. Individuals at risk: Do company standards adequately reflect the interests of users who face particular risks on the basis of religious, racial, ethnic, national, gender, sexual orientation or other forms discrimination?*

Surveillance has always been a crucial deployed tactic of the Israeli government to control the lives of Palestinians, who Israel has occupied since 1967. In light of the 21st century’s technological developments, a plethora of new technologies has enabled Israel to surveil its occupied population on a massive and intrusive scale. Moreover, Israel is a world leader in cyber security technologies and is currently home to 27 surveillance companies, the highest number per capita in the world. Additionally, Israel hosts a wide array of tech companies and in particular social media giants, whom the Israeli government and business sector have targeted in political lobbying efforts. Through this, Israel has been able to influence the policies of social media giants to comply with their political agenda, leading to devastating consequences for Palestinian digital rights.

In early September 2016, the Israeli Public Justice Minster, Ayelet Shaked, announced the signing of an agreement with social media giant Facebook, who would assist Israel with coordinated efforts to tackle “incitement” online. This involved the issuing of new Israeli proposed legislation, which would ultimately force social media networks to remove all content that Israel deems “incitement”, to which Facebook seems eager to appease. The term incitement has been very vaguely defined by Israel, but includes discourse and rhetoric that resists Israeli policy. Facebook proved to be extremely responsive to Israeli censorship demands, by granting 95% of Israeli requests to remove content within just the first four months of having signed the agreement.[[1]](#footnote-1) Between January and June 2017, Facebook has granted Israel 77% of requests were met.[[2]](#footnote-2) The agreement subsequently resulted in the arrest of around 400 journalists, editors and activists who are critical of Israeli policies online and to date, 800 Palestinians have been arrested due to posts on social media.[[3]](#footnote-3) Additionally, Facebook’s reports reveal that of all the countries Facebook grants access to user data to governments, Israel is number five.[[4]](#footnote-4) Facebook has therefore not only adopted Israeli terminology in defining “incitement” but is assuming a complicit role in the Israeli government’s strategic goal of censoring Palestinian voices and erasing Palestinian culture, heritage and language.

Facebook claims that “we remove content, disable accounts and work with law enforcement when we believe that there is a genuine risk of physical harm or direct threats to public safety”[[5]](#footnote-5) and that content is removed if content attacks people based on their religion, race, ethnicity or national origin. Research conducted by 7amleh revealed that the number of hateful or inciteful posts uploaded by Israeli’s on social media doubled in 2016 from 280,000 in 2015 to 675,000 in 2016. 675,000 posts were monitored throughout the research and the majority contained the words killing, followed by death and expulsion. A hateful post is uploaded by Israeli’s every 46 seconds, the majority of which are posted on Facebook.[[6]](#footnote-6) Nevertheless, despite heightened Israeli incitement online towards Arab and Palestinian communities, the number of removed posts or Israelis arrested amounted to zero. This may be attributed to the fact that Facebook has granted Zionists the status of a “globally protected group”, according to a Guardian article on Facebook’s manual of credible threats of violence.[[7]](#footnote-7) In other words, Israeli citizens are fully protected by Facebook policies when publishing content online whilst Palestinians, a people from whom basic human rights have already denied, are subject to close monitoring, account removal and arrest. Facebook must ensure that they closely consider the severe implications for Palestinians under the hands of the Israeli authorities when complying with Israeli policy and demands and furthermore, must ensure that policies are in place that deter further discrimination towards Palestinians living under occupation.

Google, being one of the main social media companies hosted by Israel, has come under harsh criticism for its false and biased representation of Palestine in recent years. Despite the fact that most Palestinian villages and towns are visible on Google maps, Google has concealed the names of villages that are officially unrecognized by the state of Israel in Area C of the West Bank and the Naqab desert, thus perpetuating the Israeli government’s refusal to recognize Bedouin ownership of the land. Google also fails to navigate users to Palestinian destinations and prioritizes settlements and settler routes, legitimizing the illegal nature of Jewish settlements in the occupied Palestinian territories, thus allowing users to be put at serious risk as automatically navigating drivers in Palestinian license plates to Israeli settlements or checkpoints can pose a serious threat to their lives. Finally, although Google recognises the names “West Bank” and “Gaza” on their maps, it refuses to visualise the term “Palestine” or even recognize the Palestinian Authority which is seen as legitimate under international law and treaties. Many point to this as a systematic and politically motivated move to falsify history and geography and revoke Palestinians’ right to their homeland.

This raises serious questions about the power of mapping technologies given that Google is the largest source of digital geographic data in the world. Tech companies end up shaping our understanding of the physical world due to the political nature of maps and in this case, Google, by showing complete disregard for international legal frameworks, is playing a key role in forming public opinion that serves the interests of the Israeli government, thus becoming complicit agents in the Israeli occupation of Palestine.

1. The Intercept *Facebook Is Collaborating with the Israeli Government to Determine What Should Be Censored* September 2016. https://theintercept.com/2016/09/12/facebook-is-collaborating-with-the-israeli-government-to-determine-what-should-be-censored/ [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Facebook: https://transparency.facebook.com/country/Israel/2017-H1/ [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Al Shabaka *Surveillance of Palestinians and the Fight for Digital Rights* October 2017 https://al-shabaka.org/briefs/surveillance-palestinians-fight-digital-rights/ [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Facebook: https://transparency.facebook.com/government/about/ [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/communitystandards> [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. 7amleh – The Arab Centre for Social Media Advancement *The Index of Racism and Incitement on Israeli Social Media* 2016 http://7amleh.org/2017/02/07/7amleh-center-publishes-the-index-of-racism-and-incitement-in-the-israeli-social-media-2016/ [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Guardian *Facebook’s Manual on Credible Threats of Violence* May 2017 https://www.theguardian.com/news/gallery/2017/may/21/facebooks-manual-on-credible-threats-of-violence [↑](#footnote-ref-7)