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Mockery as a Tool of Palestinian Resistance on TikTok

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During the last year, the use of the TikTok social media platform has skyrocketed, amassing more than a billion users worldwide. TikTok is a digital platform that allows its users to upload, share, and watch short videos that last between 15 seconds to one minute (depending on the video's format). The videos are uploaded with original or recorded text or music in the background.

Recently, TikTok has become a major instigating factor in recent incidents in Jerusalem and throughout Israel, which led to extensive public discourse about the application's role in the flow of events. For example, videos containing the hashtag #freepalestine garnered 6.6 billion views on TikTok.¹ One video, in which a young Palestinian slaps a young ultra-Orthodox man on a train in Jerusalem went viral, and, to a certain extent, triggered additional cases of Palestinian violence in then city.² During the latest conflict between Israel and Gaza in May, many more videos documenting fighting between Israelis and Palestinians flooded TikTok.

Internet giants such as Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp want us to spend as much time as possible on their platforms, so they provide us with a constant stream of information, which is tailored to our social relationships on the web and our online interests based on our searches. TikTok does the same, tailoring the content it streams to users.

The application's main page, FORYOU, is the central feed through which the algorithm streams videos that are presumed to be highly interesting to the user. With

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¹ [#freepalestine](#), *TikTok*; last accessed 17 June 2021. On the popularity of similar hashtags see: Eitan Leshem, "[The 'TikTok Intifada' Has Become the Moment in which the Palestinian Narrative Wins](#)", *Haaretz*, 25 May 2021 [in Hebrew].

² Gilad Cohen, "[Following a Video on TikTok: Suspect Arrested for Posting Video on Attack of Haredi in Jerusalem](#)", *Ynet*, 16 April 2021 [in Hebrew].

FORYOU, a user does not have to be a network “star” or does not have to have a lot of followers in order to go viral. If a particular video suits the taste of many, then its exposure increases, regardless of the number of followers the uploader has. This makes TikTok particularly addictive, as the videos that the app pushes to the individual user are customized to his personal taste.

The tools that TikTok provides for its users are, in a sense, the secret of its charm and its power. Users are able to quickly and easily upload and edit a video, choosing from a plethora of filters and adding the sound of their choice from original music, to a recorded voice over, or unique music for the video among many other options. This variety of editing options and musical additions differentiates TikTok from Facebook and even Instagram. The editing process is usually done from the camera of a smartphone and is uploaded almost immediately to the platform.

The app also allows for a number of different camera modes which affect the type of documentation. For example, sometimes the phone functions as a hidden camera, while with other settings, it is clear that people are aware of being recorded.

The abovementioned video taken on the Jerusalem train shows that the ultra-Orthodox boy who was slapped did not know that he was being photographed. This video, which has since been removed from the network, prompted me to look again into the content uploaded to TikTok from the viewpoint of the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians.

I discovered several videos that show Israeli policemen or soldiers on their routine patrols, but after being edited, the asymmetrical relationship between occupier and occupied is reversed by mocking the soldiers. Some of the videos also show women soldiers in uniform, which adds an important gender element to our understanding of how Israeli female law enforcement officers are portrayed.

I will refer, in a preliminary analysis, to three videos uploaded during the last round of fighting between Hamas and Israel which was also characterized by riots between Arabs and Jews within Israel during the month of May.

In the first video, soldiers are photographed at a checkpoint³. The video is recorded from the car window where viewers can hear the original conversation between the soldier and the driver. The driver wants to cross the checkpoint to get to work, but the soldiers tell him that it is forbidden and ask him to show his identity card. The video was uploaded to TikTok with the caption “Enough hahaha” in Arabic.



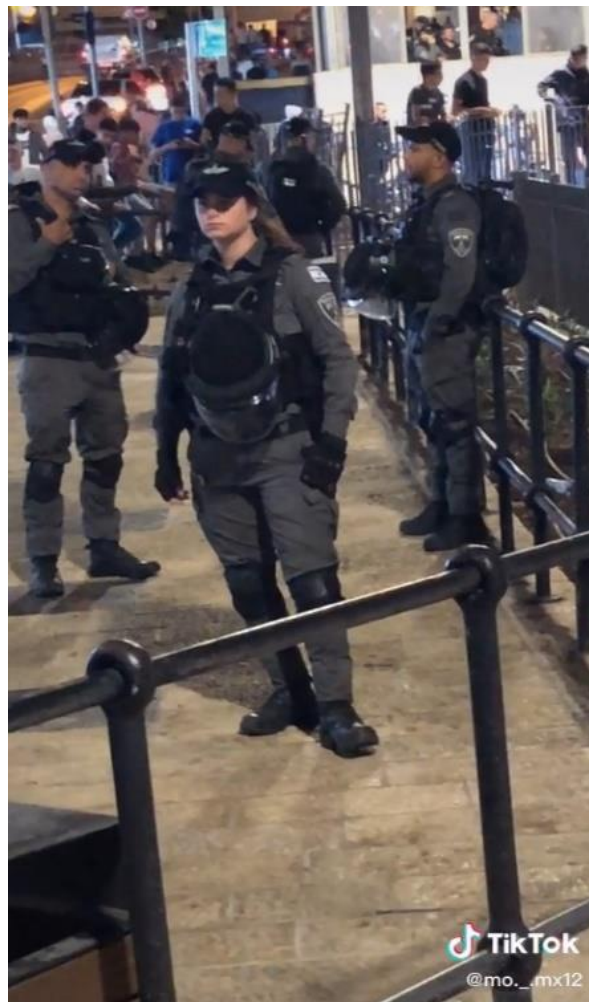
This video garnered over 50,000 likes, but had relatively few comments – only 604. As in the other videos, the reactions can be divided into two categories: support for Palestinians and support for Israel. The mocking element in this video is admittedly

³ [@life_osk](#), *TikTok*; last accessed 13 June 2021.

quite limited, mainly because there is no use of music. However, while the music has little effect, the driver – who is also filming the video – responds to the soldier in a tone that undermines the latter’s authority, thus strengthening the mocking element.

The camera in this case becomes a documentary weapon for the TikTok user in order to tell his/her side of the story. In this case, by uploading this video to TikTok, the individual user has a chance to tell his story of his attempt to get to work that morning. Also, the fact that he films the soldier’s face, making him visible to the public, implies a reversal of the balance of power between the parties.

The second video shows a female Border Policewoman in service, standing by the Damascus Gate in the Old City of Jerusalem.⁴



⁴ [@mo._mx12](#), *TikTok*; last accessed 13 June 2021.

This is a simple video in which the photographer merely follows the soldier with the camera, without any action or visual change in the situation. The voyeuristic element turns the photographer into the dominant party. With a love song in the background, at first glance one might think that there is an element of infatuation here, but when the video is uploaded three laughing emojis with tears are added, and we then realize that this is actually a mockery of the subject being filmed.

The video received 22,400 likes and 1,306 comments. Comments showing support for the Palestinian struggle use laughing emojis and the Palestinian flag symbol. Responses expressing support for Israel were both verbal and visual, using heart emojis and Israeli flags.

The third video shows one female and one male soldier standing at a checkpoint.⁵ It is not clear whether the female soldier knew she was being recorded when she approaches a car to ask for documents.



⁵ [@hamaddawabsheh](#), *TikTok*; last accessed 13 June 2021.

Again, this is a routine situation where the balance of power is predetermined. But when the photographer adds music that produces a different, even humorous, reality and uploads the video to TikTok, the soldier's status and authority is undermined.

This video was less popular than the previous one analyzed. The number of likes stands at 6,462 and the video received only 85 comments, most of which express support for the Palestinian side. This video shows the soldier's face which appears innocent and even puzzled. Combined with a jingle used in a Jordanian advertisement for a sponge, effective and pleasant to use, which had been published during the month of Ramadan,⁶ the situation becomes amusing, if not ridiculous.

An initial analysis of these three videos points to the different ways in which it is possible to document daily life and how, after some editing on TikTok, a situation can be transformed from "routine" into ridiculous, funny, and ironic, with the effect of mocking those who are captured by the eye of the camera.

Furthermore, these videos raise the fundamental issue of privacy in the digital age.⁷ Violating the privacy of the soldiers captured in the videos undermines the balance of power between the parties, with the Palestinian side taking the lead in TikTok, which also reflects in the number of views and comments expressing support for the Palestinian cause.

Will videos such as these, in which Israeli soldiers are photographed, continue to find their way to TikTok? Just as Palestinian Facebook users realized about a decade ago that it is better not to express themselves politically on social media for the risk of facing consequences,⁸ perhaps younger TikTok users are already understanding that the use that is being made of this platform might, likewise, backfire.

Indeed, if we consider the first video mentioned above, the one about the young Palestinian slapping the Jewish ultra-Orthodox boy on the train, the footage of the

⁶ [@zooz karazon](#), *YouTube*, 22 April 2021; last accessed 13 June 2021.

⁷ On the legal issues of such videoclips see: Liran Levi, "['Objectification': District Court Criticizes Judge Who Argued that Policewoman's Videos are 'Flattering'](#)", *Walla News*, 6 June 2021 [in Hebrew]; last accessed 13 June 2021.

⁸ Maya de Vries, Asmahan Simry, and Ifat Maoz, "[Like a bridge over troubled water: Using Facebook to mobilize solidarity among East Jerusalem Palestinians during the 2014 war in Gaza](#)", *International Journal of Communication*, 9 (2015): 28.

incident gained a very high number of views, likes, and expressions of support. Consequently, however, the video itself served as evidence for enforcement authorities, and the slapper was shortly after arrested. This is precisely what restores the balance of power, leaving it intact.

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The Demonstrations on Israel's Borders in Jordan and Lebanon during the "Guardian of the Walls" Military Operation: Grassroots Protests or Premeditated Outbursts of Rage?

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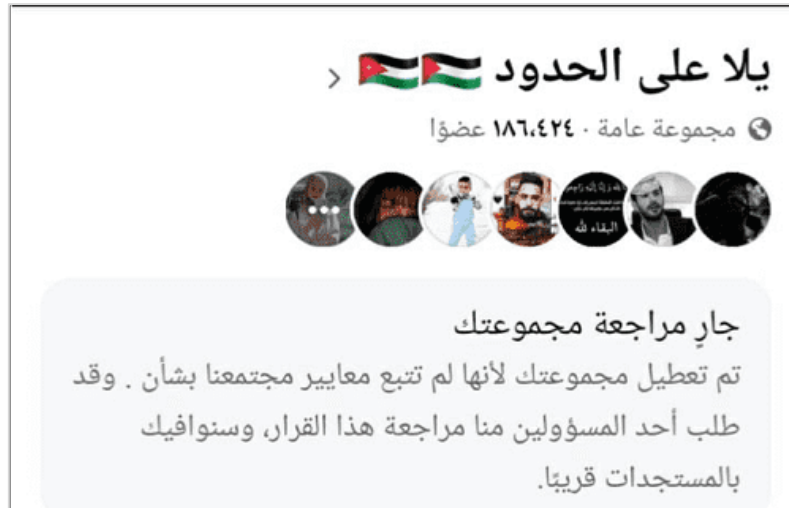
Following several days of violence and civil unrest on the Temple Mount complex and in the Sheikh al-Jarah neighborhood, Hamas fired several rockets at Jerusalem on May 10. This triggered the "Guardian of the Walls" military operation, which similar to Israel's past operations in Gaza, led to an outpouring of concern and condemnation in the international media and on social media platforms, including in the Arab world.

The drastic rise in online activity soon influenced physical manifestations in two of Israel's neighbors: Jordan and Lebanon. The Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan is responsible for the Al-Aqsa Mosque compound, through the activities of the Islamic Waqf and according to the regulations comprised in the 1994 peace treaty with Israel. In the Jordanian social media, the call to "Save Sheikh al-Jarrah" was circulating even prior to the beginning of the Guardian of the Walls military operation, but after it started and toward the first Friday, the social media discourse began to change, calling upon Jordanians to move *en masse* to the border with Israel.

Numerous pages and groups were created on Facebook, and numerous accounts were created on Twitter for promoting and organizing this movement. These groups began to operate approximately between 12-13 May and their activity ceased on 16 May, with a very large number of active members considering Jordanian Standards.¹ A central group to the movement had over 180,000 members (primarily Jordanian), but was shut down by Facebook due to alleged violations of the terms of use.

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¹ "[Facebook Blocked 'Yala ala al-Hudud' Group](#)", *Roya News*, 16 May 2021.



[يلا على الحدود @](#) Group page, Facebook; last accessed 23 June 2021.

In addition to numerous “live updates” of recent events in Gaza, quotes of Israeli media outlets on rocket attacks onto Israel and Israeli attacks on Gaza, these social media groups began to post and disseminate pictures and videos of the official spokesmen of the “Palestinian Resistance” factions, and among them Abu Ubaidah. Abu Ubeidah, the Chief Spokesman of the Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades, quickly became a symbol of the fighting in Gaza for many Palestinians and Arab observers.

These groups also served as a catalyst for mobilizing protests in support of the Palestinians throughout Jordan and primarily in two locations: in front of the Israeli Embassy in Amman and on the border with Israel, specifically next to the monument remembering the 1968 battle of al-Karamah. This monument symbolizes the Jordanian victory over Israeli forces that had invaded Jordanian territory in order to destroy a PLO camp used to launch attacks on Israel in March 1968.



Post on Twitter praising Abu Ubaidah.²

The Jordanian movement in solidarity with Palestinian resistance factions was not limited to Facebook and Twitter. An official Telegram channel was also created to further promote the border protests under the name “Juma‘ah of the Millions: Yallah, to the Border!”³ Over 3,500 users followed this channel in 3 days, which operated unrestrained – supposedly due to Telegram’s comparatively lax terms of service and use.

All of the movement’s platforms were used to disseminate logistical information, such as meeting points for buses to the border, timetables for protests, and so on, and to warn participants that the protests were to be peaceful, to be held without weapons, and that everyone was to stand behind the Hashemite Kingdom.

² @rdoan, *Twitter*, 14 May 2021; last accessed 23 June 2021. English translation of the post: “Oh! Abu Ubaidah the hero! Here we are in the Jordan Valley! Jordanian protestors shouting near the border with Occupied Palestine. More Busses should be here any minute now. #Palestine_Protests”.

³ Telegram Channel, الجمعة المليونية – يلا على الحدود [Al-Juma‘a Al-Milionia – Yala Ala Al-Hudud], *Telegram*; last accessed 10 June 2021.



Message on Telegram with info on the protests.⁴

The calls to gather in protest next to the monument commemorating the Battle of al-Karamah were especially prominent. Hundreds of protesters reached border areas by organized bus transports next to the Allenby Crossing on Friday 14 May. A number of them also attempted to cross the border while crying out jingoistic slogans in praise of Hamas and Abu Ubaidah.

Numerous media outlets called these actions “*unprecedented cases of popular organization*,” in light of the organizational capabilities of the Jordanian public without any clear ties to political groups. Jordanian security forces had no choice but to disperse the protesters with warning shots, in order to prevent them from infiltrating the border.⁵

⁴ @M970Y, Telegram, 13 May 2021; last accessed 10 June 2021. English translation of the message: “Bus stops for driving towards the border and instructions from the organizers – Protesters should be under 18 years old; Everyone should have Identification Papers; Every protester should bring water and food; Weapons are restricted; The protest is not connected to any organization or party; The protest is peaceful and is going to happen in front of the heroes of Jordanian army and borders police; The protesters support the Hashemite Leaders.”

⁵ Dana Jibril, “‘Yala Ala al-Hudud’: Jordanians Moving Towards Palestine”, *7iber*, 15 May 2021.

Wide swathes of the Jordanian public took part in the demonstrations, including tribesmen, Palestinians, representatives of political parties, and others. These protesters called on the King of Jordan, Abdallah II, to open the border with Israel, to renege on the peace treaty, and to declare Jihad against Israel.⁶ Despite their support for the Hashemite regime and the Palestinian society in Jerusalem, these protests may have served as an alternate channel for the Jordanian public to pressure the Hashemite regime under the guise of supporting the Palestinians *in lieu* of pursuing a domestic protest movement that could have been more easily repressed by the regime.

Jerusalem played a central role also in Lebanon during the “Guardian of the Walls” military operation and the events that led up to it despite the country’s domestic crises. Many protesters in Lebanon quickly assembled on the border with Israel to protest, but in a different fashion than in Jordan. Protesters organized and held protests in al-Adayseh, Maroun al-Ras, Kfar Kila and other places on the border, but in many cases these protesters waved Hezbollah flags. Numerous other Lebanese political parties and organizations as well took part in the protests. At times, outbursts of violence also took place, in contrast to the events in Jordan, and in some occasions protesters attempted to climb the border fence seeking to destroy surveillance cameras. The Lebanese military intervened and thwarted confrontations with the Israeli army.

Numerous organizations in Lebanon, both local and national, took part in organizing these border protests; these include: the Amal movement (a Shia political party and ally of Hezbollah); the Syrian National Socialist Party (a pro-Greater Syria Syrian political party active in both Lebanon and Syria since the 1930s); the *al-Murabitoun* organization (a Nasserist organization); the *Jema‘ah al-Islamiyah* (the Muslim Brotherhood branch in Lebanon); and even the *al-Mustakbal* (Future Movement, led by Saad al-Hariri) all took part in organizing the protests.

The central event in these demonstrations was the death of an “innocent” Lebanese protester on 14 May. The protester, a Shia young man named Muhammad Tahhan, from the town of Adalon in southern Lebanon, was killed by Israeli soldiers after

⁶ “[Yala ‘a al-Hudud’ Advances and Takes the Lead: In the Karame Area](#)”, *Al-Quds Al-Arabi*, 15 May 2021.

he attempted to cross the border into Israel during a particularly violent protest. From the social media and news outlets coverage of the event, it appears that Tahhan was in fact a Hezbollah operative – Hezbollah organized the funeral, the coffin was wrapped in a Hezbollah flag, and a representative of Hezbollah spoke at the ceremony.⁷



[@Huda28mirza](#), Twitter, 15 May 2021; last accessed 23 June 2021.

Nothing occurs in South Lebanon without Hezbollah knowing about it. Numerous news outlets later published further details about Hezbollah’s goals, maintaining that Hezbollah was uninterested in escalating the conflict with Israel, especially after Tahhan’s death.⁸ Tahhan’s affiliation with Hezbollah was later corroborated when Hezbollah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah stated that his death would be added to Hezbollah’s list of claims for revenge in a future conflict with Israel. This list began in July 2020, after Ali Kamel Mohsen was killed in Syria by an airstrike attributed to Israel.

⁷ “[Hezbollah Victim Dies Near the Border Between Lebanon and Israel: No Escalation](#)”, *Al-Arabiya*, 15 May 2021; “[Israeli Fire Victim in South Lebanon is Affiliate to Hezbollah](#)”, *A-Sharq Al-Awsat*, 14 May 2021.

⁸ Ali Mantach, “[The Message of the Popular Initiatives near the Border: Does Hezbollah Intend to Escalate?](#)”, *Lebanon24*, 15 May 2021; “[Hezbollah Is Not in a Situation that Allows It to Escalate Against Israel](#)”, *Middle East Online*, 19 May 2021.

Social media platforms in Lebanon experienced an uptick in activity following Nasrallah's statement on Tahhan. Hezbollah defined him as a "*Martyr [Shahid] on the road to Jerusalem*" who was killed in an attempt to cross the border and, thus, joined numerous other martyrs who were killed in the defense of Jerusalem. The hashtag "*Border-Crossing Shahid*"⁹ began to trend in the days following Tahhan's death.¹⁰



[@Ftounifatima](#), Twitter, 14 May 2021; last accessed 23 June 2021.

At a first glance, in both Lebanon and Jordan, a "popular" movement spontaneously formed in solidarity with the Palestinian struggle against Israel. In Jordan, there have been similar movements in the past, such as the "Global Jerusalem March" of June 2014 in the area of the Jordan Valley, during which representatives of 80 countries and the Jordanian Islamic Movement held a large rally in defense of Jerusalem. In Lebanon, similar events are the border protests on the annual "Nakba" day, such as the protests of May 2011 on Lebanon's southern border, in which hundreds of protesters approached the border in solidarity with Palestinians against the Israeli occupation of all of Palestine.

A closer examination of these apparently "grassroots" movements reveal some clear differences between the two countries. In Jordan, the movement genuinely formed "bottom up," with only minor input and cooperation from political parties and organizations.

⁹ [#شهيدالعبور](#), Twitter, last accessed 23 June 2021.

¹⁰ "[Mohammad Tahhan: The Border Crossing Martyr](#)", *Al-Modon*, 14 May 2021.

In Lebanon, on the contrary, a large number of political parties and organizations played key roles in organizing and holding the border protests – this can be attributed to a number of factors, including the desire of these actors to create distractions from Lebanon's own domestic issues. Furthermore, in Jordan both the government and the public responded publicly and aggressively to the Israeli military operation, whereas in Lebanon, the issue was less discussed by the wider public and even less in the government.

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