Chapter 7

Virtual and Real Returns

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

The objective of this chapter is to evaluate the volume of the "return" to the Palestinian territory since the Oslo process began, and then to assess the contribution of expatriates to the development of the Palestinian territory since the Oslo agreements in terms of know-how and expertise. The focus will be on a UNDP program that encourages repatriation called TOKTEN (The Transfer of Knowledge Through Expatriate Nationals) combined with an analysis of an internet-based network, PALESTA (Palestinian Scientists and Technologists Aboard), which connects Palestinian scientists and professional expatriates to the Palestinian territory. The new media (like the Internet) facilitate the connectivity of the diaspora with the place of origin and the concept of the homeland, so that virtual returns may be as significant as real ones.
I. The “Real” Return: Mass of Different Socio-Economic Categories

Some lessons can be learned from the experience of “returnees” to the Palestinian territory during the Oslo period. This return took the form of a collective influx during two distinct periods, as opposed to an organized or planned individual return. The first, forced movement was provoked by the outbreak of the Gulf War and entailed the emigration of some 350,000 Palestinians from Kuwait and other Gulf countries (Hanafi 1997; ESCWA 1993). However, only 37,000 of those, who had preserved their rights as permanent residents in the West Bank and Gaza, returned to this territory (Isotalo 2002). The second period followed the launch of the peace process and involved a return migration from Arab countries such as Egypt and Jordan, as well as Tunisia. Palestinians with a precarious legal status or those who benefited from a quota agreed upon between Israel and the Palestinian National Authority (PNA) comprised the majority in this latter period.1 Cases of individual return from various countries were also observed.2 These migrants, belonging to different socio-professional categories, were often qualified university graduates possessing technical skills acquired in the host countries (Zureik 1997).

Although there are no reliable estimates of the number of returnees residing in the Palestinian territory, there are some indicators. According to the 1997 census by

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1 Those who returned with the PLO were mostly PLO members and their families. They returned in the beginning of 1994 to be involved in building the institutions of the PNA. There came to be tens of thousands of people on the state payroll (if one includes the security services). They were among the higher rank of the PNA administration. Roger Heacock described their weight as following: “In the ministries, the directors general are 460 in number according to the archivist of the presidential office, in fact, more like 1000. Up to 65 percent are returnees, depending on sources. The same goes for the perhaps 2000 directors in the ministries. They dominate the executive branch. On the other hand, the inside heavily dominates the Palestinian Legislative Council or parliament elected in 1996. Although the numbers vary depending on the number of years of exile which define a person as a returnee rather than a local, there are by all counts well over fifty locals in the 88-member body. But its head, speaker Ahmad Qrei’, a returnee who was elected to the PLC from Jerusalem, in turn heavily dominates that body” (Heacock 2002).

2 Some were admitted in accordance with family reunification or temporary visitor visas. The latter have remained despite their irregular status vis-à-vis Israeli regulations.
the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS), the total number of returnees was 267,355, constituting 10.5 percent of the total population (Malki and Shalabi 2000). Interviews with representatives of the PLO’s Department of Refugee Affairs indicate that at least 200,000 of those may have returned during the Oslo process. According to surveys by Shaml (see chapter 1) and the Birzeit University Households (Giacaman and Johnson 2002) returnees are more highly educated than non-returnees. They also have more members in civil service employment and less in the private sector. Indeed, the government, UNRWA, and/or NGOs employ 57 percent of returnees.

Any discourse concerning Palestinian return to the West Bank and Gaza Strip incorporates its share of paradox. “Returning” Palestinians who hail from areas that became Israel in 1948 have not realized a return to their native villages or cities; in their cases, “return” signifies a new migration. Furthermore, the “return movement” remains ephemeral as Israel still controls immigration to the territory and rarely grants residency to returnees: returnees, who generally possess a foreign passport, are considered tourists and are given three-month visas or often only one month visas when traveling across land borders. Even when they work in Palestinian areas, they can rarely acquire a work permit or residency and they must repeatedly exit and re-enter the country before the expiration of their visa in order to obtain a new one. Those who overstay their visa risk being permanently barred entry into Israel and, consequently, the territory.

These above distinctions are important not least because they will have an impact on the character of any eventual Palestinian state. As Roger Heacock has

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3 Generally, refugees in the Palestinian territory have higher levels of education than non-refugees. Fewer refugees are illiterate or with elementary skills (23 percent) compared to non-refugees (25 percent) and have more secondary education (17 percent) compared to non-refugees (15 percent) and more post-secondary education (11 percent) compared to non-refugees (8 percent). This confirms the importance of UNRWA support for refugees; education and perhaps the refugee population’s ambition to seek educational capital where other forms of capital do not exist. (Giacaman and Johnson 2002: 12)
noted, if the return is to a “remembered” land (the West Bank and Gaza Strip) and not to the historical one (pre-1948 Palestine), then it is not a returnee state, but a settler state. The case of Bosnia-Herzegovina demonstrates that a state based on a merely livable experience (and this at the expense of history) is not necessarily a successful one; in contrast, Israel, with its half-century of existence based on a discontinuous memory and reconstructed history, has undoubtedly been a successful case of settler state-building (1999:57).

The return to the Palestinian territory pre-dates the Oslo process, and, if anything, was sparked by the Iraq-Kuwait War (1990-91). However, three quarters of those who responded to the Shaml survey indicated a post-Oslo return.\(^4\) Half of those interviewed returned with the PNA while 13 percent were beneficiaries of the family reunification policy. What is important here is that around a quarter of the returnees lack proper papers as they came as visitors and Israel has not permitted the renewal of stays in the Palestinian territory since the beginning of the second intifada in 2000. Return seems to have taken place in consultation with their families (81 percent); in only 10 percent of the cases did the family oppose a return, mainly because of spousal commitments abroad. In one case, the family accepted the decision of the father, but the women imposed the condition that they not take Palestinian IDs and keep their status as foreigners. It also appears that the opposition to return migration was not generally from spouses but mainly from the older children, who did not want to return.

According to the Shaml survey, returnees’ situation improved after their return, although the nature of their jobs changed. While half previously worked as employees, 80 percent did so upon their return. Three quarters declared themselves

\(^4\) The Shaml survey is described in the introduction to chapter 1 in this book.
satisfied with their work and only one quarter said their economic situation had worsened. These percentages should be read in the context of the general instability as a result of the intifada. Only a third received help from family members when they moved, largely because the majority were not originally from the West Bank or the Gaza Strip; therefore, they did not have family members there or a family who financially was able to help them.

Overall, three quarters declared that they were satisfied with their return, despite the difficulties. Older people were more satisfied than young people. The latter complained particularly about the level of health services, housing, and the quality of education. Two-thirds still rent their apartments ten years after arrival.

Most importantly, even though two-thirds had expectations about the ‘homeland’ ("al-watan") which were different from what they encountered, this did not hinder 95 percent of them to advise others to come to the territory. Homeland becomes not just a ‘natural’ place of return or a symbol of the Intifada and political alienation, but a real place, where there are job opportunities and scientific and technological development. One female returnee called it the “country of interest and of love… the last refuge for people after the tiring exile in countries that did not respect refugee rights.” Many came to the homeland even if they were originally from historical Palestine. “It is not the homeland I had dreamed of and not my people to whom I thought I belonged,” said one frustrated man, who returned on the PLO list after 1993.

Even if returnees are satisfied, the return experience was and will be problematic. Many have said that the local population did not welcome them or

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5 65 percent of the returnees interviewed spoke of encountering difficulties, mainly social ones, during their initial time. Around 41 percent said health services in the Palestinian territory were poor and only 22 percent said they were good. Many returnees complained about Palestinian universities as too commercial but more than the half expressed satisfaction with their children’s schools.
seemed not to want their return, especially on the West Bank. They saw the economic advantage of returning but viewed it as difficult to adapt socially to Palestinian society. An employee with the PNA administration stated, “We are different in culture and mode of thinking.” Nonetheless, most respondents, especially in Gaza, viewed the return phenomenon as providing important advantages, including an increase in the number of educated people and intellectuals, the presence of multiple cultures in Palestine, and a revival of Islamic values. It is curious that in an overcrowded Gaza, return migration was seen as a way to increase the Palestinian population in the territory, an argument not made by Western Bankers.

After dealing generally with all socio-economic categories of the Palestinian returnees, one should take into account that the movements of the professionals are more complicated and follow a different logic which imbricates both local and global levels. The magnitude of the (forced and voluntary) migration of scientists and, more widely, professionals has been increasing on a global level in the last three decades. In the Palestinian case, such an outflow must be viewed in the context of the mass exodus of Palestinians since the creation of the Israeli state in 1948. It would be unwise to give an estimate of how great is the volume of Palestinian professionals since verifiable data is unfortunately unavailable. Research I conducted from 1996 to 1999 in many areas of the Palestinian diaspora, however, demonstrates important concentrations of professionals mainly in the Gulf, the US, Canada and the UK. Recently, new clusters have emerged whose size has been increasing rapidly. Such a community can be found in Lille (France) where some 45 Palestinian professionals, mainly scientists and engineers, stayed on following their studies at Lille universities.

6 The SESTAT database of the United States National Science Foundation shows that in 1995, 1.4 million of the 12 million science and engineering professionals who work in technology and engineering occupations in the USA are of foreign origin. Over 72 percent of these foreign-born professionals originate from developing countries (Meyer and Brown, 1999: 3).
in the last decade. Such a phenomenon has its origin in professional diaspora networks, especially those involving science and technology professionals.

Virtual Communities

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

Although PALESTA targets all Palestinian communities abroad, its main focus has been Europe and North America and it has thus neglected communities in the Arab world. The network functions as a discussion group as well as a database for information on skilled Palestinians living abroad.

While connectivity between the diaspora and the ‘homeland’ is an important factor in fostering physical return, a temporary physical return also remains possible for skilled Palestinians, a category whose participation is vital to the construction of the Palestinian entity. In this case, is it possible for a voluntary facilitator role to be assumed by the Palestinian National Authority or the international community to harness this group and facilitate the transmission of expertise from the migrant community to the ‘homeland’? There are two possible policies for developing

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7 For more information about this network, see (http://www.palesta.gov.ps/).
countries to tap their expatriate professional communities; either through a policy of repatriation \((a \ return\ option)\), or through a policy of remote mobilization and connection to scientific, technological and cultural programs at home \((a\ diaspora\ option)\). These two policies have both been employed in the Palestinian territory, the former through a UNDP program that encourages repatriation called \textit{TOKTEN (The Transfer of Knowledge Through Expatriate Nationals)}, and the latter through \textit{PALESTA}. In this section we will focus only on the diaspora option. The study of the trajectory of \textit{PALESTA}, as well as its strong and weak points, is very important to avoid the mistakes that have left \textit{PALESTA} currently out of service in case it should be resumed in the future.\(^8\)

**II. TOKTEN: A Tentative Step to Brain Gain?\(^9\)**

The \textit{TOKTEN} concept is an interesting mechanism for tapping into national expatriate human resources and mobilizing them to undertake short-term consultancy work in their countries of origin. The UNDP, which founded it, created the program to utilize the expertise of expatriate nationals. Among other things, the program demonstrated that specialists abroad (who had migrated to other countries and achieved professional success there) were enthusiastic about providing short-term technical assistance to their country of origin, and might even be persuaded to return and resettle. The program has been applied over the last 22 years in 30 different countries, resulting in thousands of technical assistance missions by expatriate

\(^8\) This study is based on much empirical and theatrical research including 54 interviews of Palestinian professionals in France and the UK conducted in 1998, focusing on their economic activities and their connectivity to the homeland. For an assessment of the impact of \textit{PALESTA} in connecting the Palestinian diaspora (especially in Europe) with the Palestinian territory, I will use an evaluation of the \textit{PALESTA} network in 2000, which was compiled through analysis of the content of electronic mail messages exchanged between \textit{PALESTA}’s team and Palestinians abroad.

\(^9\) The author expresses his gratitude to Mounir Kleibo, program officer in UNDP, and Abeer Nusseibeh who provided information about \textit{TOKTEN} for this study.
professionals to their home countries. Historically, the catalyst for TOKTEN was the "brain drain" from developing countries. The program created a database of highly trained and experienced expatriates and in the 1990s and 2000s assigned more than 500 of them, on a semi-volunteer\textsuperscript{10} basis, to their countries of origin for anything from 1 month to 6 months. They have served governments, the public and private sector, universities, and NGOs.\textsuperscript{11} Palestinian TOKTEN consultants, for example, have helped reform the treatment of kidney disease in the Palestinian territory and have guided the development of macro-economic frameworks and planning. TOKTEN skills have also made significant progress in areas of computerization and information technology, on city planning, on university curriculum development and academic networking, on the upgrading of film and television capacities, and on cultural preservation, including the Bethlehem 2000 project.

The distribution of TOKTEN’s experts from 1994 to 2001 by sector shows a major focus on strategic planning with around 43 percent. Other sectors include IT (14 percent), agriculture and water (12 percent), and health (10 percent) (www.tokten.org/images/cross.gif). The lack of expertise in some sectors where people have volunteered under TOKTEN has generated some real success stories in Palestine, such as the construction and opening of the international airport in Gaza, planned by TOKTEN consultants, nine of whom stayed on and formed the backbone of the airport’s operations (UNDP 1999:1-2). Later the major focus of TOKTEN placements became PNA reform.

\textsuperscript{10} In the Palestinian territory, a TOKTEN consultant receives $3,000 if senior and $2,000 if junior plus travel expenses and miscellaneous costs.

\textsuperscript{11} In 1994, the Government of Norway contributed US$350,000 to launch the TOKTEN Palestinian program and in 1996 the Government of France contributed US$50,000 to place French speaking Palestinian expatriate professionals under the TOKTEN scheme. UNDP/PAPP also contributed US$250,000 (core funds) for the TOKTEN program (bridging funds). Overall, the government of Japan has been the major contributor to the TOKTEN Palestinian program with a total of $4.2 million since 1996 (www.tokten.org).
Some 50 percent of the consultants come from Jordan (a country suffering from its own economic crisis but benefiting from an important science and technology community that graduated mainly from Western universities). Twenty percent come from the USA (where there is a large West Bank community that has close ties with the homeland) and Canada. Fifteen percent come from Europe (which constitutes a small percentage of the Palestinian community there, especially considering its relative geographical proximity to the Palestinian territory), and finally another fifteen percent come from the Gulf region (this small percentage is due to the fact that knowledge of the program there is limited and the Palestinian community profits from good job opportunities already). These numbers are all from 2001. The picture now is quite different as the Israeli authority no longer allows professionals born in Arab countries to enter under the TOKTEN program. Thus the percentage of people from Jordan has become less significant.

The TOKTEN program in fact attracts more young experts than older ones. According to Mounir Kleibo (personal communication), around 80 percent of the experts are between 25 to 35 years old. Two conclusions can be drawn from that: first, the age-group is a more mobile one, and secondly, the money offered is not sufficient to attract people with vaster experience. Furthermore, younger people are more likely to be able to adapt to the trying circumstances pertaining in the Palestinian territory. The ability to adapt is a very important quality with Israeli checkpoints and closures making the environment very hard for those less dynamic and mobile. Kleibo also argues that the failure of some missions under the program is due mainly to the Palestinian institutions on the ground and not the TOKTEN experts.

However, the success of the TOKTEN program should not only be measured by an increase in demand or the results of the specific consultancies. The program
provided these experts an opportunity to experience first-hand life in their native countries and encouraged them to settle there long-term.

In fact, the survey I conducted at the beginning of the 2000 intifada shows that about 21 percent of TOKTEN experts, or 34 out of 160, still live in the Palestinian territory after their TOKTEN assignment expired. The returnees came mainly from Jordan and the USA, two countries where the Palestinian community has maintained close links with their families in the West Bank and Gaza. It is a very high percentage for a country like Palestine where the political and economic situation is very difficult (see Table 3). Only Lebanon is comparable, where 16 percent (six out of 36) of TOKTEN experts settled after their mission was completed, and there these expatriates do not have any residency difficulties (Ghattas 1999). This percentage dropped to 12% in 2006 because of the intifada context (Kleibo 2007).

Table 3: Distribution of Returnees by Country of Origin

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Number of returnees</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jordan</td>
<td>15</td>
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<tr>
<td>USA</td>
<td>12</td>
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<tr>
<td>UK</td>
<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>UAE</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>France</td>
<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Saudi Arabia</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>34</strong></td>
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</table>
The TOKTEN Palestinian program seems to have been very positive. It has been thoroughly reviewed by a mission from UNV headquarters conducted by Ms. Eva Ditmar, the conclusions of which supported the overall modality and its implementation in the West Bank and Gaza. The Sixth International TOKTEN Conference held in Beijing China over the period 7 -11 May 2000 recognized the TOKTEN Palestinian program as the model for successful TOKTEN programs everywhere (See <www.tokten.org>). However, the program does have some weaknesses. Firstly, in the first 3 years the beneficiaries of the TOKTEN program were mainly Palestinian ministries and public institutions, and the private sector and NGO’s share of this expertise continues to be marginal. Since 1999, the TOKTEN management has been reconsidering its allocation to the NGO sector. Secondly, the selection of qualified candidates is problematic as there is not yet a large enough database capable of identifying expatriates willing to volunteer for technical assistance missions, except the one established by PALESTA that will be discussed later. In addition, the timing of the missions can be problematic, as TOKTEN experts need to be available when the recipient institution requires help. Direct dialogue through the internet of the three parties concerned is instrumental in ensuring expediency and success.

In some countries where international experts are employed there are often suspicions that these experts are following the agenda of their governments, but experts from the Palestinian diaspora do not appear to suffer from this problem. However, difficulties did arise when locals felt the “experts” had neither greater experience nor better qualifications yet were paid up to three times as much. This became even more problematic when some ministries, despite their limited budgets,
asked the UNDP for TOKTEN experts when they discovered that they could not recruit permanent local employees with the right expertise.

Finally, the TOKTEN program raised the issue of whether the concept of “brain drain” could be tackled in the framework of the nation-state. With the process of globalization, the labor market has become increasingly internationalized and the question has arisen as to whether developing countries can compete with developed countries where wages are far higher. This situation seems to disadvantage these countries. For instance, the experience of India in terms of the globalization of Indian knowledge workers shows that it has not been very gainful to that country. According to Khadria (1999:150-156), in spite of the fact that remittances have been quite significant, especially in relation to the balance of payments problem, "...the payments made by developing countries to developed countries on technology account would be in the vicinity of U.S. $10 billion per annum, canceling at one stroke a major part of the total aid flow from the latter to the former," as the remittances are considered as returns on capital invested for training.

TOKTEN could provide a mechanism whereby the recipient countries of migration (usually Western countries) can compensate the country of emigration. Some Western governments have given grants to their migrant communities so that they can explore the possibility of returning to their homeland. For example, the German government subsidized two missions of a Palestinian-German medical delegation. One of these missions allowed two Palestinian doctors to settle back in Palestine after it was over. However, these mechanisms are not sufficient and the international community has to find a more radical solution, for example by regulating the global skills market in order to control the disastrous effects of this globalization of labor on developing countries. In its report of 1999, the World Bank
(2000) advised regulation of the global skills market, but no proper measures have yet been taken.

III. PALESTA Network: A Virtual Return

This section undertakes a study of the relationship between networking and new media (especially the internet) in the context of a unique internet-based network of connectivity among Palestinian professionals and the Palestinian entity called PALESTA (Palestinian Scientists and Technologists Abroad).

The PALESTA network utilizes cyberspace, embodied by the communications technology of the internet, as its conduit; the internet in this case can be viewed not just as a tool but a distinct and new environment of connectivity between various Palestinian communities in the diaspora and the homeland. As Holmes argues, it is “context which brings about new corporealities and new politics corresponding to new space-worlds and new time-worlds” rather than solely “instruments in the service of pre-given bodies and communities” (1997: 4).

PALESTA has undergone two major stages: in the first stage, PALESTA constituted a center, functioning as a server based in Palestine and connecting to individuals in different peripheries. In the second stage, PALESTA aided in the creation of different nodes in countries where there is a concentration of Palestinian professionals while still remaining at the center of connectivity. The latest discussions within PALESTA indicate that there is a desire to make PALESTA less central, transforming it into a node within a series of nodes. (For these stages see figures 1 and 2.) However, since 2001, PALESTA has been hibernating for different reasons, mainly related to lack of funding.
A. PALESTA Network’s first phase: a centralized model

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

PALESTA’s network, a hybrid constructed by the Palestinian Ministry of Planning and International Cooperation’s (MOPIC) Science and Technology Planning Unit with UNDP support, was launched in 1997. The network includes a database of expatriate Palestinian scientists and professionals and a discussion forum for participants to contribute their technical knowledge and experience in addressing important issues in the development of the Palestinian economy. The network functions as a kind of professional gateway providing current job listings and developments in many public, private, and NGO institutions in the Palestinian territory as well as workshops and public events. The network has set itself three objectives. The first is to involve expatriate Palestinian scientists and technologists in serious discussions aimed at resolving scientific and technological problems vital to Palestinian economic development. The second objective is to keep expatriate Palestinians informed about developments and programs at home in the areas of science and technology so that they will be prepared to contribute fully when their presence is needed in Palestine. The final objective is to obtain the assistance of these
expatriates in identifying and initiating new projects that will contribute to aspects of Palestinian economic development.

PALESTA sought to become a familiar, powerful tool among decision makers in Palestine and expatriate science and technology professional communities. By ensuring a high level of quality in operation, establishing familiarity among relevant communities, and providing a structure amenable to decentralization, PALESTA sought to continue its development into a viable and sustainable entity capable of making significant contributions to Palestinian development. Despite PALESTA’s ambitious objectives, however, current analysis of the network demonstrates mixed results. Following its launch in 1997, PALESTA had two stages: first as a centralized institution (1997-1999) and then as decentralized network allowing connectivity between periphery/periphery (1999-2001), before entering hibernation.

Profile of PALESTA members: representative of the diaspora?

PALESTA’s Database of Expatriate Palestinian Professionals contained 1,300 expatriate Palestinian professionals two years after being launched. However, only a third (some 480 professionals) are active members of PALESTA with updated contact information. According to a PALESTA survey, its active membership is concentrated in the United States (56 percent of total PALESTA members), while

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12 This section uses findings from a previous evaluation conducted by the author. The methodology of the evaluation was comprised of the following steps: 1. Interviews conducted in January 2000 of PALESTA staff as well as those involved in the elaboration of the PALESTA project, including the previous manager of PALESTA. Some PALESTA moderators were interviewed and were asked about their feelings and opinions concerning the functioning of the PALESTA network. 2. A review of correspondence between PALESTA members in order to assess the impact of the discussion forum. 3. A review of progress reports submitted by PALESTA staff to the UNDP, as well as minutes of PALESTA staff meetings. 4. Interviews conducted with PALESTA members abroad and local PALESTA beneficiaries about their feelings and opinions concerning the network’s services.

13 PALESTA distributed a questionnaire to members concerning their opinion on the PALESTA network in October 1999. Sixty PALESTA subscribers participated in the survey, (a response rate of 18.4 percent). The survey provided PALESTA with its first opportunity to identify member profiles in terms of academic qualifications, ages, country of residence and so on.
only 17 percent live in Europe. PALESTA has not apparently been able to make inroads into Europe despite the continent's geographical proximity to Palestine. Its popularity in United State compared to Europe is probably due to the fact that Palestinian-American migrants mostly originate from the Palestinian territory, where PALESTA is based, while the Palestinians in Europe generally originate from historical Palestine. The Gulf and Jordan are similarly underrepresented (each representing only 2 percent of PALESTA membership). The survey shows also shows that PALESTA membership is relatively young: more than 37 percent of PALESTA members are between the ages of 30-39 and 30 percent are 20-29. This does not mean, however, that they are not highly educated; 41 percent of PALESTA members hold a doctorate while 15 percent possess a master degree. Women are overwhelmingly underrepresented, constituting only 7 percent of PALESTA members.

“Who owns PALESTA?”

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

In light of the serious difficulty of free movement for Palestinians from the diaspora to the Palestinian territory, the PALESTA discussion forum constitutes a very important means of opening dialogue between geographically distant individuals in a cost-effective manner. Despite PALESTA’s objective of discussing technical issues related to Palestinian economic development, however, the analysis of the content of messages posted by professionals residing abroad is more concerned with political and practical issues. The PALESTA forum has been instrumental in raising
important discussions regarding social, political, and cultural issues such as eventual return or visits by expatriates to the Palestinian territory. A discussion concerning the contribution of the diaspora to Palestinian development (in which 121 messages were posted by members), for example, highlights the perception of problems concerning the PNA’s mismanagement of the Palestinian economy and its inability to convince Palestinian entrepreneurs in the diaspora to invest in the Palestinian territory. The content furthermore revealed that while the realization of PALESTA’s objectives seems reliant on a form of unconditional assistance and participation from the diaspora for the new Palestinian quasi-state, diaspora members for their part were ready to lend this assistance only after matters of “practicality” were discussed.

Some messages were concerned with the issue of the second and third generation of the diaspora in Western counties where youth have not always had access to Arabic language education (in this regard, summer camps for young people were suggested). Conversely, for Palestinians residing in the Palestinian territory, issues such as second generation diaspora, transnational Palestinian migration, and even assimilation of some groups abroad in the host countries were conspicuously absent. Thus, while many issues regarding culture, politics, economy, education, and health were discussed in far greater depth than the intended topics of strict technical expertise and economic participation, PALESTA seemed incapable of taking into consideration its members’ expectations by altering its objectives and the mode of their implementation.

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

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

The problem with the PALESTA model

The most fundamental criticism one can direct at PALESTA was that it functioned as
an institution and not as a network. An institution is a hierarchical model of
connectivity while the concept of network requires a horizontal one. PALESTA
sought to connect members to the network without connecting members to each other.
This formulation neglected the importance of developing and linking Palestinian
communities in each country to one another. Such a network would have as an
objective to prevent the total assimilation into host societies and ensure the
preservation of a Palestinian heritage; such linkage, in turn, could facilitate contact
with the Palestinian territory. Obviously such connectivity is impossible if
PALESTA’s members are not allowed to know one another’s email addresses. The
contradiction highlights a paradoxical relationship between PALESTA’s trans-
geographical network and the content of the initial discourse produced by PALESTA
managers concerning a geographically and biologically defined identity: a Palestinian abroad need only be connected to the center.

Additional issues were raised: how should PALESTA respond to non-Palestinian Arabs desiring to aid in the construction of a Palestinian state? How should PALESTA distinguish between a Jordanian and a Palestinian living in Jordan as both have the same nationality? Furthermore, from a practical point of view, by centralizing its discussion list, PALESTA may have hindered its most effective method of outreach to the Palestinian community abroad. The PALESTA survey demonstrated that about half of the members discovered PALESTA through their relatives and friends and 85 percent subsequently attempted to spread this information further. Thus, face-to-face relationships even in the era of cyberspace are significant. The virtual community does not spontaneously generate; factors of traditional physical and Cartesian space remain very important.

B. PALESTA’s second phase: PALESTA as a central node

Though PALESTA members number more than a thousand, data suggests that only 20 percent participate regularly in email exchanges. Numerous discussions were launched in PALESTA’s weekly staff meetings during the first six months of setup about the centralization of the discussion list. A number of team members expressed fear that unmitigated discussion groups might violate ethical standards of discourse and codes of conduct and could easily degenerate into school room debates filled with inappropriate language. Such a situation would cause frustration among serious users and eventually discourage use of the discussion list. This argument for centralization was not conceived necessarily as authoritarian; rather it held that an unmonitored discussion list was not appropriate in terms of PALESTA’s objectives. After its first
year in operation (1998), however, it became clear to PALESTA’s board that a moderating role raised more problems than it resolved. The board decided instead to impose sanctions against members who violated PALESTA’s stated code of ethics. The PALESTA board took into account a common fear of the centralization of power among Palestinians abroad as well as those inside Palestine; the diaspora’s negative experiences at the mercy of the political power of Arab regimes made them especially wary of censorship and monitoring. Though more reflective of a generalized phobia rather than a real expectation, this fear expressed by many Palestinians abroad to the board compelled PALESTA to forgo their concerns and open the discussion list to allow contact between various members without facilitation by the PALESTA server. This change in the mode of operation after two years of operation (1999) is fundamental. PALESTA’s new mode of connectivity has finally given Palestinians abroad a window for reconnecting people inside of each community but also enabled users to bring about more substantial discussions (technical and general one) about the contribution of the Palestinian diaspora to the development of the Palestinian territory. PALESTA also became an important medium for recruiting Palestinian experts for different projects of development. The TOKTEN program, for instance, has extensively used the PALESTA database to identify competent people, instead of a selection based on clientelism or nepotism. Many discussions were even useful for the orientation of development projects without participants having to come to the Palestinian territory. While this has generated great interest in PALESTA, the members I interviewed expressed again a lack of information about how to become involved. Many also expressed a desire to see PALESTA become even less centralized (less an institution and more of a network).
In its second phase, PALESTA was successful in encouraging the creation of various global network nodes in order to facilitate contact with and between expatriate Palestinians. Though professionals sometimes appear isolated from their Palestinian communities in almost all Western countries, the creation of nodes for professional Palestinians has been an important factor for the recruitment of PALESTA members. During 1999, there were numerous Palestinian community conferences and activities in the United States and Europe among periphery-periphery groups that reinforce the dynamic of this perspective. The first meeting of the Palestinian Canadian Professional Association in 1999 was one example, whereby the benefit of the openness of the PALESTA mailing list was evident. In Europe, a meeting of the Palestinian engineers and professionals was held in the offices of UNESCO (Paris) in March 1999 under the auspice of PALESTA.

PALESTA’s previous experience, however, reveals a low capacity to recruit new members individually. In fact, many factors related to the persistence of a centralized management of PALESTA have generated inertia. Thus, in spite of the relative openness of its mailing list, PALESTA continued to privilege a mode of connectivity of center (the homeland) to periphery (countries of the diaspora) and hinder the full blossoming of periphery-periphery relationships. This issue among other internal ones led to PALESTA suspending operations in 2001, less than two years after the beginning of the second phase, due to organizational and funding reasons. This does not mean that the project has failed as we must take into account the consequences of the intifada that have been so detrimental to the functioning of all PNA ministries and administrations.
C. Output and limits of PALESTA

The experience of PALESTA demonstrates the increasing importance of Palestinian professional diaspora networks. PALESTA’s electronic discussion list has had a positive and direct effect in providing space and form to help the PNA in its state construction phase. Typically this would happen with the moderator proposing to the mailing list in general (or specific PALESTA member belonging to certain sectors) to address various problems directly. After a month of discussion, a suitable expert, paid or on a voluntary basis, was identified and s/he came to the Palestinian territory to resolve the particular problem. This happened many times and beneficiaries were sometimes from the private and industrial sectors. Advertised job vacancies in the Palestinian territory also allowed many of PALESTA’s members to apply when abroad. Some of them now have contracts thanks to these ads. Indeed, many Palestinian universities have hired teachers through PALESTA.

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

Furthermore, communication should not be reduced to technical progress and “progress” cannot surpass cultural and social changes. There is certainly a danger that electronic connectivity gives supremacy to technology, which may instrumentalize communication. In such a context it would be difficult to distinguish between inherent value and the interests of actors. The effect of new communication technology cannot be analyzed without being situated in the framework of the society and all theories of communication must take into account the existing bonds of a society. Communication theory necessitates societal theory.
Figure 1
PALESTA’s First Stage: Connectivity to the individuals
Figure 2.
PALESTA’s Second Stage: Central with different nodes
D. New Media and Reshaping the Palestinian Identity

After presenting the limits and the potentials of PALESTA, it is very important to question its impact on the perception and the position of the homeland for the diasporic communities.

New Media, Homeland and Subjectivity

As Giddens points out, one of the consequences of the evolution of modernity is the resulting separation of time and space from place, which creates what he calls ‘disembedded’ social systems or the ‘lifting out’ of social relations from local contexts of interaction and their ‘restructuring across indefinite spans of time–space’ (1990: 21). In this era of globalization, the relationship of the individual to the homeland becomes relative. Nevertheless, the idea of ‘the homeland’ remains in some form within the minds of exiled Palestinians—a notion regularly updated by the content of a steady flow of satellite television channels (Al Jazeera, al-Arabiyya, and MBC) beaming daily images from the occupied land. Connectivity with the Palestinian homeland now involves a complex process composed of varying levels of virtual and physical social networks; the difficulty of achieving physical connectivity has given birth to a virtual reality, which now constitutes a new form of social relationship. Contrary to those who think that the Internet will impose a cosmopolitan identity, cyberspace instead promotes new possibilities of re-anchoring culture and identity in the local, thereby reinforcing ethnic identity and always in ways that bypass the constraints of society.

PALESTA specifies a discourse oriented towards a group defined not only by a national identity, but by a professional one as well. The homeland is expected to
offer at the same time both national and professional inspiration. Through mechanisms of connectivity, such as TOKTEN and PALESTA, what becomes important is not only the right of return, but also the utility of the homeland for the diaspora. While the homeland is no longer an abstract idea, Palestinian resources have not been developed to a level that would allow a generous plan of insertion, such as has been the case for Jewish diaspora and immigrants vis-à-vis Israel).

Interviewing PALESTA members who are expatriates or returnees, I was struck by the emergence of the subject of return in their discourse. The Palestinian homeland, as a symbolic icon of service and sacrifice, no longer supersedes the self but is instead often perceived as a homeland that can be served while the individual pursues a social position within it. It has become clear that service to the homeland need not be separated from the personal desire for a better life. The posture is a clear expression of subjectivity quite different from the predominant discourse of mass media, which depicts the Palestinians in the diaspora as refugees intending only to sacrifice for the benefit of the homeland. In this regard, interviewees often express feelings of dissonance before achieving connectivity via new electronic media. They had felt before a level of guilt for not actively engaging in some activity for the benefit of the homeland while concurrently experiencing feelings of commitment to their life in a host country that did not necessarily allow them freedom of movement to the homeland. While the physical mobility of the diasporic Palestinians is completely hindered, the circulation of ideas, feelings and expertise through PALESTA has become very important. This circulation touches everything: development in Palestine, the kind of infrastructure that the Palestinian society should have for receiving the children born in the diaspora, issues of democracy and multiculturalism, etc. In spite of the physicality of geography, the virtual connectivity
has impacted on the identity construction of both the population in the Palestinian territory and in the diaspora. The PALESTA network seemed capable of creating a fluid dynamic of construction, deconstruction, representations, and symbols. The homeland is no longer synonymous only with Intifada and political alienation, but also with job opportunities, scientific and technological development, specialist conferences, and so on. Palestinian identity has moved beyond a completely territorialized framework. One can be a Palestinian abroad, connecting with and aiding the development of the homeland in cyberspace.

The new media technologies discussed here seem to encourage individualization. Palestinian actors are no longer necessarily united in the social and political spheres, not because of the elimination of the ideological world, but because human agency has radically changed its spatial, temporal, and technological existence. The environment of cyberspace implies highly individualized forms of social bonds with an attendant atomization of populations within the confines of the workstation or the borders of the homepage. In such a context, connectivity through new media cannot be solely conceived of as bringing individuals and groups into contact; it also addresses their differences by amplifying representations of the individual. Networking can enhance subjectivity in an environment where various voices are expressed independently regardless of the relative importance of their respective social positions. It is interesting to note the fault line of divergence between PALESTA members concerning a discussion of the role of the Palestinian government in development. It is not shaped by the habitual discussion where the actors position themselves as loyal to the Palestinian National Authority (favoring the dominant fraction, Fatah) or as an ally of the opposition (the other political fractions),
but where they shape their position through their experience as an individual acquired in the host country.

**A diaspora with a weak center of gravity**

If PALESTA’s strength in recruiting members has been its capacity to function in different nodes at the periphery–periphery level (but always with a tendency to keep a center), it seems that it was able to connect different parts of the Palestinian diaspora even though the structure of this diaspora is very problematic because of its weak center of gravity (Hanafi 2003). What are the meanings and implications of a diaspora with a weak center of gravity? I will argue that the weak center of gravity in the Palestinian case would eventually play a deciding role in the decline of *Palestiniananness* in the long term, but new media will partially compensate for this problem.

A classic diaspora is defined by a *center of gravity* which has two functions: it channels the flow of communications between diaspora members in different peripheries, while it also provides a location where members (especially family) can meet. The first function does not necessarily require a physical site; the meeting location might be a service provider or institution such as the National Jewish Fund for world Jewry, the Tunisian base of the PLO for Palestinians, and the PKK in Germany in the Kurdish case. In regard to the second function, a physical geographical location is a necessity and an important factor for community economic transactions. Thus the center of gravity has nothing to do with the symbolic weight of a mythical or real *homeland*. It is a center for connecting members of the diaspora who belong to the same economic and social networks. In this respect, historical
Palestine continues to fill an important role in the imagination of the Palestinian diaspora, although not necessarily playing a role for everybody living abroad.

My research on Palestinian entrepreneurs in the diaspora demonstrates the importance of a physical meeting place. A Palestinian originally from Nazareth (as Nazareth kept its Arab population), for example, can have a very active economic network based in Nazareth capable of drawing those from Canada, the US, or Australia for meetings with the remaining Palestinians in the town. In contrast, Palestinians originating from Haifa (an example of a city in which virtually all the Arab population was deported by Israeli forces in 1948) do not have access to such a network due to the absence of any relatives there. Such inaccessibility to the territorial reference point effectively hinders the possibility of meeting. A Haifa family dispersed throughout Damascus, Montreal, Amman, and Abu Dhabi would have little interest in meeting in Syria where only one member of the family lives. Those in Arabic countries may also find the cost of traveling to Canada or the Gulf prohibitive long before the equally daunting dilemma of acquiring a visa ever enters into the discussion. These torn networks, due to the absence of territorial reference, are not exclusive to the Palestinians. They have also been noted in the case of Gypsies who migrated from Paris to New York; Williams (1987) reports that only a few years after this migration the family relationships broke down.

The total inaccessibility of historical Palestine makes it impossible for it to function as a center of gravity. Since this is the case, might the Post-Oslo Palestinian territory play this role? This territory would be considered as the ‘natural’ center of gravity for Palestinians. A combination of factors, however, has prevented the territory from assuming this role. The territory is not accessible to the majority of Palestinians abroad, while in addition many members in the Palestinian diaspora have
lost confidence in the Palestinian National Authority’s efficacy for state-building. Though the diaspora has played a major role in the national issue and in supporting the PLO during fifty years of resistance, it has consciously refused to transform its role into that of ‘a Rothschild’. Though willing to support the homeland economically and financially, the diaspora also seeks a decision-making role regarding the process of institution-building.

In this context of a weak center of gravity, the new media like PALESTA can partially compensate by allowing communication between different communities of a diaspora without this communication necessarily going through the center. However, as already argued, such functioning was burdened by the team of PALESTA who wanted to keep the role of the center as the most important.

IV. Conclusion

There are paradoxes and serious problems when the relationship between diaspora and place of origin is reduced to cyberspace networking without genuine efforts of promotion activities. Encouraged by the new information technologies, Manuel Castells described the network society as a shift from social groups to social networks. But these networks are neither obvious nor neutral (Latour 1999). In his seminal book *Liquid Love*, Zygmunt Bauman (2003) noticed that people speak ever more often of connections, of connecting and being connected, rather than reporting their experiences and prospects in terms of relating and relationships. Instead of talking about partners, they prefer to speak of networks. Unlike relationships and partnerships, which stand for mutual engagement over disengagement, network stands for a matrix for simultaneously connecting and disconnecting. In a network, connecting and disconnecting are equally legitimate choices and carry the same
importance. Network suggests moments of "being in touch" interspersed with periods of free roaming. In a network, connections are entered on demand, and can be broken at will. Does that constitute a summary of the history of PALESTA?

The PALESTA network and the diaspora option (the policy of remote mobilization and connection to scientific, technological and cultural programs at home) seem to be a real and workable proposition for turning the negative effects of forced emigration into tangible benefits. Such an approach also concretely addresses the problems that brain drain countermeasures have been unable to address (Meyer et al. 1999). PALESTA has undergone two major stages. In the first stage, PALESTA constituted a center, functioning as a server based in Palestine and connecting to individuals in different peripheries. In the second stage, PALESTA aided in the creation of different nodes in countries where there is a concentration of Palestinian professionals, while still remaining at the center of connectivity. Discussions within PALESTA indicated that there was a desire to make PALESTA less centralized and transforming it into a node within in a series of nodes. These discussions are in abeyance as the network is suspended.

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

Yet this new medium functions both exclusively and inclusively. There is a risk of exclusiveness as the target group for the new media is highly educated and most likely middle-class (rather than a general cross-section of the entire population). In addition, the target group is narrowed even more significantly because only those highly educated persons who are capable of reading and writing English may make use of it. This may explain why PALESTA not only has few members in Arabic countries but also in France and Germany. Such networks, however, also have a great potential for inclusion because the connection need not be necessarily based on an official connection between the PNA (or PLO popular organizations) and the Palestinian communities abroad. One can imagine the creation of multiple networks like PALESTA, representing various unaligned constituencies. Furthermore, cyberspace allows not only the globalization of cultural space but also its personalization; PALESTA, like other virtual networks, can facilitate democratic forms of interaction (‘cyberdemocracy’) as “it puts cultural acts, symbolizations in all forms, in the hands of all participants and thus radically decentralizes the positions of speech, publishing, filmmaking, radio and television broadcasting, in short the apparatuses of cultural production” (Poster 1997: 234).
The impact of PALESTA on the relation between Palestinians abroad and the Palestinian Territory goes beyond the simple effect of serving the *homeland* and facilitating a future physical return. In a transnational world typified by a process of global circulation of images, sounds and goods but not by a parallel free mobility of people, there has been a complex impact on the concept of communal belonging. We must ask, as Shohat has (1999: 215), what do we make out of the new media’s promise of shaping new identities? Furthermore, from a more radical perspective, will this new form of international migration alter our perception of the homogeneity of the nation and particularly the relationship between state, nation, and territory (Mung *et al.* 1998: 3)? In fact PALESTA’s experience demonstrates that it contributes to the *de-sanctification* of the *homeland* by its de-territorialization. PALESTA members do not look for a ‘holy land’ of ancestors but for a land where they find a place that fits their profession and their expertise.

*Homeland* is a utopia in Mannheim’s definition: once we have entered it, it disappears. The Palestinian return to Palestine has not necessarily taken place in a geographic location; instead the return has sought to incorporate itself within nodes of a network where the connectivity to a land of origin can be maintained. The new media are likewise capable of facilitating conciliation between the diverse cultural heritages represented in the Palestinian diaspora by living in the host country while connecting to an inaccessible (and perhaps idealized) *homeland*. New media may broaden the ontological question ‘Who am I?’ with a kind of topographical identity question: ‘Where am I?’

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16 In fact, here I do not address the legal or political dimensions of the location of a Palestinian state, which includes the West Bank, Gaza, and East Jerusalem, or the return of Palestinian refugees to their *homeland* with compensation. I am concerned with the sociological issue related to the right of choice for Palestinians: to live in the place of origin or in the host country.
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