



## Facebook Blocks Hamas News Website and Palestinians Rejoice at Social Media Outage

October 17, 2021

### Overview

- ▶ On October 12, 2021, Facebook announced that it had blocked the Hamas-affiliated Shehab News Agency Facebook page. It was the second time in recent months. It had blocked the page in July 2021 on the grounds that Shehab had repeatedly violated the rules of the Facebook community regarding hate speech and the promotion of violence.
- ▶ For some time Facebook has been trying to combat the pages of Palestinians who post content encouraging incitement and terrorism, especially those affiliated with Hamas. According to the Access Now,<sup>1</sup> during Operation Guardian of the Walls (May 2021) Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and TikTok deleted hundreds of Palestinian posts.
- ▶ On October 8, 2021, Human Rights Watch criticized Facebook and its affiliated applications for censoring Palestinian content. According to the organization, during Operation Guardian of the Walls Palestinian posts and campaigns giving prominence to Palestinian human rights were censored. Human Rights Watch claimed Facebook had removed pictures and videos of residential buildings in the Gaza Strip that had been attacked (by the IDF). According to al-Jazeera, during the same period Facebook censored content related to al-Aqsa mosque. Facebook apologized and promised to rectify the situation. According to Human Rights Watch, the situation was not fundamentally changed (aljazeera.net, October 8, 2021).
- ▶ Palestinian and pro-Palestinian Facebook users around the globe were severely critical of Facebook, claiming the company was helping Israel's public discourse and preventing the advancement of the Palestinian narrative, which was, according to the users, "a policy of discrimination and hypocrisy." Therefore, the global outage of the social media on October 4, 2021, was widely applauded by the Palestinians and received with unconcealed joy and satisfaction, especially in the Gaza Strip.

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<sup>1</sup> **Access Now** is a non-profit founded in 2009 with a mission to defend and extend the digital civil rights of people around the world. Access Now supports programs including an annual conference on Human Rights, an index of internet shutdowns, and providing exit nodes for Tor network. Wikipedia

## Facebook Blocks Shehab News Agency Website

► For the second time in recent months, Facebook announced it was blocking the Hamas-affiliated Shehab News Agency page, accusing it of violating Facebook's community standards against promoting violence, despite having been notified. Shehab then posted a notice claiming that this time **Majed Faraj, the head of Palestinian Authority (PA) General Intelligence**, had been involved in blocking its site. Shehab accused him because it had posted several uncomplimentary items about Faraj's part in the diplomatic crisis between the PA and Turkey and the death of Palestinian political activist Nizar Banat. According to Shehab, Faraj appealed to PA Prime Minister Muhammad Shtayyeh to call Facebook and request they block the Shehab page (Shehab, October 9, 2021). Shehab then changed its Twitter profile picture, adding an announcement criticizing Facebook.



**Shehab blasts Facebook over blocking. Left: Facebook blocks Shehab News Agency as part of its war against Palestinian content. Center: Quote from Facebook stating that the page violated its criteria (Shehab Twitter account, October 13, 2021).**

► On **the morning of October 13, 2021**, shortly after the account had been blocked, Shehab, whose offices are in the Gaza Strip, opened a new account with a different address. Initially there was little traffic on it, compared with the many tweets on its official Twitter page (Shehab Facebook page, October 13, 2021).



**Shehab's new Facebook page, which bears a different address  
(Shehab Facebook page, October 13, 2021).**

- ▶ In July 2021 Facebook blocked Shehab's page after accusing it of repeatedly violating the site's community standards against promoting violence. Hamas condemned the act, calling it "an unfair decision and an attack on the freedom of the media and expression."
- ▶ Facebook has a long history of problems with Palestinian users who post content which includes hate speech and incitement to violence, especially Palestinians affiliated with Hamas. According to an Access Now report, hundreds of Palestinian posts were deleted from Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and TikTok during Operation Guardian of the Walls (May 2021). On October 8, 2021, al-Jazeera reported that the New York-based organization Human Rights Watch had renewed its accusations against Facebook and its subsidiary applications, such as Instagram, for blocking Palestinian content. The organization claimed that during the most recent hostilities in the Gaza Strip [Operation Guardian of the Walls] Palestinian posts and campaigns which gave public prominence to the Palestinians human rights' issues were deleted. Facebook was accused of deleting pictures and videos of residential structures attacked by the IDF. Al-Jazeera claimed that during the same period posts relating to al-Aqsa mosque were deleted. Facebook apologized and claimed the situation had been rectified. Human Rights Watch claimed no substantial measures had been taken (aljazeera.net, October 8, 2021).

## Global Facebook Outage

▶ Given the frequent blocking of Palestinian content by the social networks, when a global outage of Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp occurred on October 4, 2021,<sup>2</sup> preventing millions of people from using the services, many Palestinians, especially in the Gaza Strip, reacted. The posts dealt with a number of aspects.

- ◆ **The general aspect:** Posts criticized the great general dependence of the users on the applications.
- ◆ **The religious aspect:** Palestinians who were more religiously observant exploited the event to emphasize the importance of religion compared to the "emptiness" of the social networks.
- ◆ **Schadenfreude:** Many users expressed joy and satisfaction at the global Facebook malfunction in light of the many times it had blocked pro-Palestinian content uploaded to the social networks. Many users also exploited the opportunity to call on their followers to abandon Facebook and move to Twitter.

▶ For example:

- ◆ Regarding the religious aspect, **Mahmoud al-Hasanat** is a popular preacher with a large Palestinian following, especially among Hamas supporters in the Gaza Strip. He currently resides in Turkey, after having left the Gaza Strip and wandered from country to country. He tweeted, "To those of you who left the [Facebook] social media, welcome to Twitter." On another occasion he tweeted, "Is this not proof for you that this is most pleasant and best way to maintain contact, of all the possibilities the world provides, which doesn't stall and doesn't crash? The book of Allah [i.e., the Qur'an] is everyone's best friend and there is nothing more intoxicating than looking at its pages and passages."

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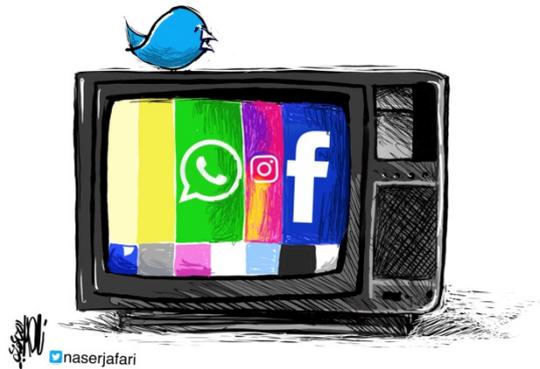
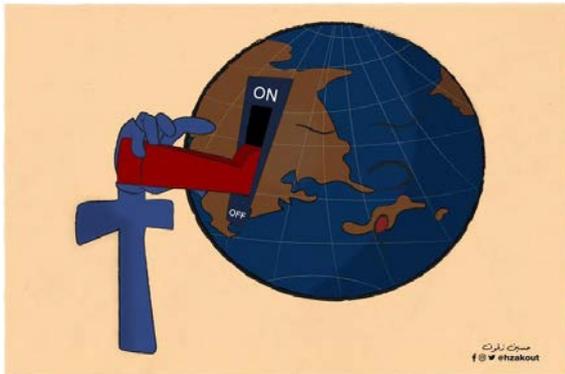
<sup>2</sup> On the evening of October 4, 2021, there was a global malfunction of the social networks owned by Facebook, lasting for several hours.



◆ Another person to react was **Jihad Hilles** from the Gaza Strip, who has more than 260,000 followers and describes himself as "politically independent." At the end of September 2021 Facebook closed his account, which had more than 400,000 followers. He responded by tweeting, "The Bloomberg Agency: the fortune of Facebook owner Mark Zuckerberg has fallen by seven billion dollars, so far, the result of a malfunction of Facebook's applications. I am so happy I am thinking of going out into the street and distributing candy to everyone I meet" [the distribution of candy in the Gaza Strip is usually reserved for terrorist attacks against Israel]. On another occasion he tweeted, "If there is anything to learn from digital viruses, it's that [they give you] an opportunity to get rid of the garbage on [Internet] websites, leave your prison, take control of your time again and rearrange your priorities."



- ▶ The Palestinian and Arab media published cartoons mocking Facebook.



Right: (al-Quds, October 5, 2021). Left: (Palestinian cartoonists' Facebook page, October 6, 2021).



The global Facebook malfunction (al-Quds al-Arabi, October 8, 2021).