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MIDDLE EAST CONFLICT 2.0

ISRAELIS AND PALESTINIANS BETWEEN VIRTUAL CONFLICT AND ONLINE PEACE

Judith Daemberg

The ongoing conflict between Israel and the Palestinians is increasingly being played out in parallel on the internet. Recently, a great deal of media attention has been devoted to a series of spectacular hacker attacks that caused dozens of Israeli and Palestinian websites to crash, including those of the secret service agencies Mossad and Shin Bet.¹ However, for Israelis and Palestinians who are willing to participate in dialogue, the internet also offers much needed opportunities for contact and the peaceful exchange of ideas. In many cases, this is actually the only possible means of contact between representatives of both sides.

THE ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN CONFLICT: NO PROSPECT OF PEACE

Ever since the former Mandated Territory of Palestine fell totally under Israeli control after the Six Day War, the Palestinians have been fighting for their own state, which they believe should include the Israeli-occupied West Bank, including East Jerusalem, and the Gaza Strip. Amongst the most controversial issues in the dispute are questions relating to 'final status': where the future borders between the two states will lie, the status of Jerusalem, the future for the Jewish settlements in the occupied territories, and

1 | Cf. Peter Münch, "Cyberkrieg zwischen israelischen und arabischen Hackern", *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 22 Jan 2012, <http://sueddeutsche.de/1.1263402> (accessed 3 Aug 2012); Hans-Christian Rössler, "Israelisch-arabischer Datenkrieg: Auge um Auge, Byte um Byte", *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 18 Jan 2012, <http://faz.net/aktuell/politik/arabische-welt/israelisch-arabischer-datenkrieg-auge-um-auge-byte-um-byte-11612671.html> (accessed 3 Aug 2012).

the Palestinian demand that Palestinian refugees should have the right to return.² Israeli and Palestinian hopes of a peaceful settlement were to be dashed with the collapse of the negotiations at Camp David in the summer of 2000 and the subsequent beginning of the Second Intifada. Pre-conditions on both sides such as Israel's demand that the Palestinians recognise the Jewish state and the Palestinian leadership's insistence that the Israelis stop the expansion of settlements are now making the resumption of negotiations much more difficult. Israel also refuses to negotiate with any Palestinian unity government that includes Hamas, as the charter of this Islamist movement still calls for the destruction of Israel.³

In order to make some progress with the process of creating a Palestinian state and to end the current situation, the Palestinians took their campaign to the international stage in September 2011. However, their application to have Palestine recognised as a full member of the United Nations was rejected by Israel and the USA. The Israelis believed that this unilateral move by the Palestinians would undermine the principles that had been agreed for reaching an amicable solution to the conflict.

U.S. president Barack Obama also made it clear that a Palestinian state would only be achieved through negotiation, not through UN declarations or resolutions. There is little prospect of reconciliation between Israeli security interests and the Palestinians' desire for independence in the foreseeable future. As a result, cyberspace is becoming an increasingly important virtual arena for playing out the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

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- 2 | Cf. Muriel Asseburg, "Israelisch-Palästinensische Streitfragen", German Federal Agency for Civic Education (Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, bpb), 28 May 2008, <http://bpb.de/izpb/9609/israelisch-palaestinensische-streitfragen> (accessed 3 Aug 2012).
- 3 | Cf. Margret Johannsen, "Dossier Innerstaatliche Konflikte: Nahost", bpb, 14 Nov 2011, <http://bpb.de/internationales/weltweit/innerstaatliche-konflikte/54655/nahost> (accessed 3 Aug 2012).

CONTINUING THE CONFLICT IN CYBERSPACE

Today, the political tensions between Israelis and Palestinians and the frustrations over the lack of a solution to the conflict are being reflected in cyberspace in many different ways. If we search online for information on these issues, we find numerous websites that purport to be neutral but that in fact take a very one-sided view of the conflict. There has also been a noticeable increase in aggressive behaviour on the internet. The main social networks are home to heated debates about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict on an almost daily basis. These sites are increasingly being used for the purposes of political mobilisation and to organise demonstrations. Meanwhile, cyber attacks from both sides have crippled both Israeli and Palestinian websites and infrastructures.

“WIKI WARFARE” AND THE BATTLE FOR PUBLIC OPINION

In this era of the internet and Web 2.0, the business of shaping political opinion is increasingly taking place online. Websites and applications with user-generated content such as Wikipedia, Google Earth or YouTube offer cost-effective ways of communicating political viewpoints to a wide audience, providing alternative sources of information or influencing the public's perception of the conflict in a particular direction. It is therefore no surprise that these websites have developed into one of the most hotly-contested arenas of the Middle East conflict.

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None of the key players in the conflict can afford to ignore the digital battle for public opinion. For years now, even the Israeli army has had its own YouTube channel, which it uses to document its military activities and to try to mobilise international support. During the Gaza offensive in winter 2009, more than 30,000 clips were aired on the site, including videos of Israeli airstrikes. Some clips were downloaded hundreds of thousands of times.⁴

4 | Cf. Abeer Najjar, “Othering the Self: Palestinian Narrating the War on Gaza in the Social Media”, Research Paper, American University of Sharjah, n. d.; Gili Izikovich, “IDF clips of Gaza offensive are fourth biggest hit on YouTube”, *Haaretz*, 12 Jan 2009, <http://haaretz.com/1.267927> (accessed 3 Aug 2012).

The role of Wikipedia in the ongoing conflict between Israelis and Palestinians goes far beyond that of a mere online encyclopedia. Entries on issues and disputes relating to the conflict are written and rewritten with great zeal, and attempts are regularly made to remove any unwelcome criticism of a particular author's point of view. As a result, the online encyclopedia's information on the conflict is being controlled and monitored by a wide range of different Israeli and Palestinian interest groups. Even the umbrella organisation for Jewish settlers in Judea and Samaria, the Yesha Council, has recognised the potential of Wikipedia in influencing public opinion and has launched an initiative to promote its use by national religious and settler groups. The principles of how to use the online encyclopedia are taught in special training courses, from how to register to how to write your own articles in both Hebrew and English. The aim is to create a more positive image of the settler movement and to ensure that the settlers' views are better represented in discussions on the conflict.⁵ However, the Yesha Council faces fierce opposition from the Palestinian camp. The head of the Palestinian Journalists Syndicate, Abdul Nasser Najjar, has publicly called for each Israeli PR move to be met with a digital counter-offensive and to ensure that the content on Wikipedia remains pro-Palestinian.⁶ The result of this Wiki Warfare is a distorted picture of facts and historical events in precisely that place where internet users are looking for neutral and balanced information.⁷

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POLITICAL POLARISATION AND MOBILISATION IN SOCIAL NETWORKS

It is not only websites with user-generated content that are playing host to heated debates on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This is also happening on popular social media

- 5 | Cf. Nir Hasson, "The right's latest weapon: 'Zionist editing' on Wikipedia", *Haaretz*, 18 Aug 2010, <http://haaretz.com/1.308667> (accessed 3 Aug 2012).
- 6 | Cf. Avi Issacharoff, "Palestinians prepare to battle 'Zionist editing' on Wikipedia", *Haaretz*, 29 Aug 2010, <http://haaretz.com/1.310836> (accessed 3 Aug 2012).
- 7 | Cf. Andre Oboler, "Wiki-Warfare: Battle for the on-line encyclopedia", *The Jerusalem Post*, 13 May 2008, <http://www.jpost.com/Opinion/Op-EdContributors/Article.aspx?id=101037> (accessed 3 Aug 2012).

sites such as Facebook, where a large number of polarising and extremist opinions are expressed. Only a small minority of Facebook groups dedicated to the conflict can be said to belong to the peace camp and seeking to promote positive intergroup contact.⁸

Inspired by the Arab Spring, both pro-Israeli and pro-Palestinian members of the social network are using the site for political mobilisation and to coordinate protests, often with extremely negative consequences for the real-life conflict. A good example is the Facebook group The Third Intifada, whose profile page states: "Palestine will be freed and we will free it." There is also

The Facebook group The Third Intifada called on Palestinian refugees in neighbouring Arab countries to march towards Palestine on 15 May 2011 and free it from Israel.

the image of a clenched fist in the colours of the Palestinian flag and a stylised olive tree symbolising the bond between the Palestinians and their land. The Third Intifada called on Palestinian refugees in neighbouring Arab countries to march towards Palestine on 15 May 2011 and free it from Israel. The day chosen for storming Israel's borders was the day that Palestinians normally commemorate the *Nakba* (catastrophe), when Palestinians remember their flight and expulsion from Palestine following the Israeli declaration of independence. More than 340,000 Facebook members "liked" the Facebook page in a very short space of time. More and more comments glorifying violence were posted as awareness of the group grew and ultimately led to calls for violence against Jews and Israelis. The group's page was only removed after the Israeli government wrote a letter to Facebook's management.⁹ Despite this, thousands heeded the call to storm Israel's borders. There were violent clashes with the Israeli army when the demonstrators tried to cross the border and many Palestinians ended up being killed or wounded.¹⁰

8 | Cf. Michelle Ruesch, "A peaceful Net? Intergroup contact and communicative conflict resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict on Facebook", paper presented at the First Global Conference on Communication and Conflict, Prag, 2011.

9 | Cf. "Facebook removes page calling for a Third Palestinian Intifada", *Haaretz*, 29 Mar 2011, <http://haaretz.com/1.352623> (accessed 3 Aug 2012).

10 | Cf. "Tote und Verletzte an Israels Grenzen", *Die Zeit*, 15 May 2011, <http://zeit.de/politik/ausland/2011-05/israel-palaestina-nakba> (accessed 3 Aug 2012).

CAUGHT IN A SPIRAL OF VIRTUAL VIOLENCE: CYBER ATTACKS AND COMPUTER ACTIVISM

Cyber attacks are becoming ever more significant as a virtual way of playing out the Israeli-Palestinian conflict without the need for bloodshed. Many of these attacks represent a direct response to something that actually happened in the real world of the conflict and are often accompanied by political demands. International hacker collectives and computer activists all over the world are enthusiastic supporters of both Israeli and Palestinian hackers. DDoS attacks – deliberately overloading a website by flooding it from many different external sources – is a favourite method employed by the hackers. Another is defacement, where the home page of a website is altered by the inclusion of new text or graphics. A significant number of cyber attacks are carried out with the help of so-called exploits. These are programs that exploit security vulnerabilities or other defective functions in operating systems in order to gain access to these systems.

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One of the best known digital responses to a real political incident happened in November 2011, after the Israeli navy prevented two ships with pro-Palestinian activists on board from reaching the Gaza Strip. The international hacker group Anonymous responded with a video message directed at Israel on YouTube, in which they threatened reprisals and retribution for the boarding of the Gaza solidarity ships should the sea blockade of the Gaza Strip be continued.¹¹ Shortly afterwards, the websites of a number of Israeli ministries and institutions went offline, including the websites of the foreign intelligence service Mossad, the internal security agency Shin Bet and the Israeli army. Israel denied reports that the blackouts were caused by cyber attacks and said that the problems had been traced to a technical fault. However, experts suggested that such a comprehensive blackout would be highly unlikely without some form of attack.¹²

11 | "An open letter from Anonymous to the Government of Israel", YouTube, 4 Nov 2011, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QNxi2lV0UM0> (accessed 3 Aug 2012).

12 | Cf. Anshel Pfeffer and Oded Yaron, "Israel government, security services websites down in suspected cyber attack", *Haaretz*, 6 Nov 2011, <http://haaretz.com/1.394042> (accessed 3 Aug 2012).

Hamas spokesman Sami Abu Zuhri said that attacking Israeli websites was a new form of resistance and the beginning of cyber war.

Particularly over the last few years, there has been a significant increase in the number of politically motivated cyber attacks against Israeli and Palestinian websites. The battle between hackers and their supporters on both sides has recently escalated with the appearance of the Saudi hacker OxOmar. He claimed to be in possession of the credit card details of 400,000 Israelis and published tens of thousands of them on the internet. With his help, the websites of the stock exchange in Tel Aviv and the Israeli airline El Al were attacked and rendered inaccessible for hours. Shortly beforehand, Hamas in the Gaza Strip had called on Palestinians and Arabs to step up cyber attacks on Israel. In a press statement, Hamas spokesman Sami Abu Zuhri said that attacking Israeli websites was a new form of resistance and the beginning of cyber war.¹³

So far, the Israelis have responded to every cyber attack on the Arab side with attacks of their own. However, it is not always possible to trace attacks back to their source. After one particularly serious attack on the Palestinian communications network in November 2011, all the telephone and internet connections in the Palestinian territories were down for several hours. Just one day earlier, Palestine had – against Israel’s express wishes – been accepted as a full member of UNESCO, leading the Palestinian Minister of Telecommunications and IT, Mashhour Abu Daqqa, to suspect that the Israeli state had been behind the attack. However it remained impossible to prove this allegation.¹⁴

THE INTERNET – AN INSTRUMENT OF PEACE?

The many risks and dangers inherent in using cyberspace means that its positive potential is sometimes forgotten. The internet has brought the world closer in a revolutionary way. The online magazine Wired, which in 2010 recommended that the internet be awarded the Nobel Peace

13 | Cf. “Hacker bring down Israeli websites”, *Aljazeera*, 17 Jan 2012, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2012/01/20121171536991286.html> (accessed 3 Aug 2013).

14 | Cf. Elizabeth Flock, “Palestinians say hackers have taken down phone and Internet services”, *The Washington Post*, 11 Jan 2011, http://washingtonpost.com/blogs/blogpost/post/palestinians-say-hackers-have-taken-down-phone-and-internet-services/2011/11/01/gIQATnSwcM_blog.html (accessed 3 Aug 2012).

Prize, claimed that "contact with others is always the most effective way of combating hatred and resolving conflict. For this reason, the internet should be seen as an instrument of peace."¹⁵ This sentiment is also reflected in what is happening in Israel and the Palestinian territories, where the internet is growing in importance not just as a virtual arena for playing out the conflict, but also because it offers an opportunity for peaceful contact and the exchange of ideas. This is desperately needed, because opportunities are still limited for the two sides to come together in real life, even seven years after the end of the Second Intifada. The lack of an ongoing peace process makes it more likely that the Israelis and Palestinians will become increasingly isolated from each other, with little personal interaction other than during military security checks.

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Promoting dialogue is considered one of the most important ways of countering the growing sense of alienation between Israelis and Palestinians and to help improve relations in the long term. This is a reasonable expectation, based on the principles of the contact hypothesis. According to this hypothesis, contact can help to reduce prejudice and can ultimately lead to more positive attitudes towards the opposing group as a whole.¹⁶ However, the number of Israelis and Palestinians who are actually interested in having some form of contact with the other side is still small.¹⁷ There are also a great many obstacles facing those who try to bring together the few representatives and peace activists that are willing to talk to each other. Two of the biggest hurdles are the lack of free movement between Israel and the Palestinian territories, and the growing influence of the Palestinian anti-normalisation movement.

15 | Quoted in: "Friedensnobelpreis: Internet als Kandidat bestätigt", *Focus*, 12 Mar 2010, http://focus.de/digital/internet/friedensnobelpreis-internet-als-kandidat-bestaetigt_aid_489024.html (accessed 3 Aug 2012).

16 | Cf. Thomas F. Pettigrew, "Intergroup contact theory", in: *Annual Review of Psychology*, 49, 1998, 65-85.

17 | Cf. Ophir Bar-Zohar, "Peace activists are sick of talking about soccer", *Haaretz*, 25 Apr 2012, <http://haaretz.com/1.426396> (accessed 3 Aug 2012).



Border fence in Gaza: Limited freedom of movement between Israel and Palestinian territories prevent contact between those willing to talk on both sides. | Source: Rianne Van Doevern (CC BY-ND).

Physical barriers, including a tight network of checkpoints and roadblocks and the construction of a 700-kilometre-long barrier, have significantly limited the Palestinians' freedom of movement and now prevent them from travelling to East Jerusalem or into Israel without a permit from the Israeli Civil Administration.¹⁸ Palestinians from the West Bank find it very difficult to get such a permit, but for those living in the Hamas-controlled Gaza Strip it is nigh to impossible. Even Israeli citizens have to apply for a permit from the Israeli Civil Administration if they want to go to a town or city that is under the control of the Palestinian Authority. Particularly Palestinians who are prepared to talk to Israelis find themselves faced with enormous social pressures, largely because of the Palestinian anti-normalisation movement. The latter's supporters demand that all state and civil society cooperation between Palestinians and Israelis should be halted while the Israeli occupation continues and while Israel refuses to recognise the Palestinian people's right to self-determination. They refuse to meet with Israelis because they believe this just helps to maintain the status quo and distract the Palestinians' focus away from their real goals. The anti-normalisation

18 | Cf. United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA), "Movement and Access in the West Bank: September 2011", http://ochaopt.org/documents/ocha_opt_MovementandAccess_FactSheet_September_2011.pdf (accessed 3 Aug 2012).

movement threatens to discredit and impose sanctions on any Palestinian peace activists who wish to have meetings with Israelis, or even the hotels that do no more than offer their facilities for these meetings. Not many are willing or even in a position to take such a risk. As a result, the number of Palestinians taking part in dialogue initiatives is on a downward spiral.¹⁹

Any actions aimed at transforming the conflict have to be adapted to these difficult circumstances. Projects that aim to promote Israeli-Palestinian dialogue can only have relevance for their target groups if they take into account the physical and social obstacles preventing contact between those willing to talk on both sides. This is where the internet comes in.

VIRTUAL DIALOGUE PLATFORMS: NEW POSSIBILITIES FOR CONTACT AND THE EXCHANGE OF IDEAS

For some years now, a small but growing number of creative projects have looked at the possibilities offered by the internet as a means of creating virtual platforms for discussion and initiating a peaceful exchange of ideas between Israelis and Palestinians.²⁰ The potential for using internet technology within the framework of civil conflict management has so far been largely ignored by experts. However, initial single case studies have produced positive results in terms of its effectiveness and have reported some significant changes to project participants' positions on particular issues. There appears to be a consensus that, within the context of ongoing conflicts, the internet offers many potential advantages that would make it more attractive

The potential for using internet technology within the framework of civil conflict management has so far been largely ignored by experts.

19 | Cf. Dan Goldenblatt, "On anti-normalization: Joint Israeli-Palestinian activism must continue", *+972 Magazine*, 26 Feb 2012, <http://972mag.com/on-anti-normalization-joint-israeli-palestinian-activism-must-not-be-stopped/35524> (accessed 3 Aug 2012); Aziz Abu Sarah, "What is normal about normalization?", *+972 Magazine*, 26.12.2011, <http://972mag.com/what-is-normal-about-normalization/31262> (accessed 3 Aug 2012).

20 | Cf. Donald G. Ellis and Ifat Maoz, "Online Argument Between Israeli Jews and Palestinians", *Human Communication Research*, 33, 2007, 293.

for a more intensive and better use within the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.²¹

Thanks to the internet, it is possible to make contact with groups that are difficult to reach, such as Palestinians in the Gaza Strip or the Israeli and Palestinian diaspora. Anyone who is interested in making contact with people from the other side can do this without having to worry about having a travel permit. All they need is access to a computer or a smart phone with an internet connection. Web-based dialogue projects are benefiting from the ease and openness with which young people make contact and develop friendships via the internet. It is possible to make contact with others in a much freer and less restricted way in the safety of one's own home than it is in real life, and if required it can even be done under the cloak of full anonymity. Participants can also decide for themselves at any time just how much and precisely what information they want to reveal. Any natural concerns they may have about making an initial contact or about the reaction of people in their own social circles are significantly reduced.²²

THE SUCCESS OF YALA-YOUNG LEADERS

Currently, one of the most successful web-based dialogue platforms is YaLa-Young Leaders. The project describes itself as an online movement that uses Facebook as a platform to allow young people from Israel, the Palestinian territories and the rest of the Arab world to talk to each other. The movement was founded in May 2011 with support from the Israeli Peres Center for Peace and already has 165,000 members. This makes YaLa-Young Leaders the fastest growing peace movement in the Middle East. It takes its inspiration from the uprisings of the Arab Spring and from the Israeli movement for social justice.²³ This spirit is reflected in the name. The Arab word *yala*

21 | Cf. Yaacov B. Yablon, "Feeling close from a distance: Peace encounters via Internet technology", *New Directions for Youth Development*, 116, 2007, 99-107; Katelyn Y. A. McKenna, Tal Samuel Azran and Natalie Sutton Balaban, "Virtual Meetings in the Middle East: Implementing the Contact Hypothesis on the Internet", *Israel Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 1, 2009, 63-86.

22 | Ibid.

23 | Cf. YaLa Young Leaders, <http://yalayoungleaders.org> (accessed 3 Aug 2012).

is a much-used expression that means something like “onward” or “let’s go!” It has even found its way into the Hebrew language because of its frequent use. The stated goal of YaLa-Young Leaders is to try to imbue the peace process with the same spirit of optimism and change that is being seen throughout the region, to rekindle talks and to help create a better long-term future for the Middle East. In order to mobilise support and bring YaLa-Young Leaders’ vision to a wider audience, the movement has also set up its own YouTube channel with video messages and it uses the micro-blogging service Twitter. Responsibility for the movement lies with an administration committee made up of twelve young men and women, including four Israelis and four Palestinians, who regularly meet online.²⁴ Other committee members hail from Egypt, Jordan, the Persian Gulf and the Maghreb. The make-up of the committee is based on the belief that a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is the key to peace and security in the whole region and that a comprehensive peace between Israel and the rest of the Arab world is not possible without a resolution of the Palestine issue.

The leadership of the movement are of course well aware that simply clicking the “like” button is not enough to bring about peace. If they really want to bring about change, the supporters of YaLa-Young Leaders will also have to be prepared to get up from their computers and actively promote understanding and peaceful conflict resolution out in the real world. In order to prepare activists for this task, a pilot programme entered its first test phase in September 2012: an online academy. This virtual training portal is designed to provide young people with the knowledge and tools they will need to exert an effective influence on society and policymakers. The programme is made up of interactive lectures and seminars on issues such as governance, economics, communications and negotiating skills. A number of top universities have signalled a willingness to enter into a partnership with the YaLa Academy, including Princeton, Stanford

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24 | Cf. Florian Mebes, “Israel und Palästina: Friedensbemühungen auf Facebook”, *Spiegel Online*, 26 Feb 2012, <http://spiegel.de/netzwelt/web/israel-und-palaestina-friedensbemuehungen-auf-facebook-a-814373.html> (accessed 3 Aug 2012).

and Harvard. Companies such as Facebook, Microsoft and Hewlett Packard are also planning to offer a range of training courses, and a virtual campus is being developed. Students will be able to use avatars in order to meet, discuss issues openly and establish contacts without any form of mediation. In the long term, the plan is for the Academy to develop into an online university that will be free to anybody who shares the YaLa-Young Leaders' vision.²⁵ It remains to be seen, of course, whether this concept will be successful, but it should be said that the online movement's activities so far have indeed enjoyed some impressive successes.



YaLa-Young Leaders, the fastest growing peace movement in the Middle East, started on Facebook. | Source: KAS.

Without doubt, the most important YaLa event to date was its first online conference to promote peace and economic cooperation in the MENA region, which took place in January 2012. This meeting was made possible by a special Facebook application which allowed a high degree of interaction between participants and speakers.²⁶ High-ranking

25 | Cf. "Our Flagship Project: the YaLa-Young Leaders Online Academy (YLOA)", http://yalayoungleaders.org/index.php?en_online-academy (accessed 3 Aug 2012).

26 | Cf. Ruth Eglash, "Online movement tackles barriers to Mideast peace", *The Jerusalem Post*, 24 May 2012, <http://www.jpost.com/DiplomacyAndPolitics/Article.aspx?id=271389> (accessed 3 Aug 2012).

politicians such as the Israeli President Shimon Peres, the Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas and the U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton declared their support by addressing YaLa members via video messages. One outcome of the conference was the creation of an agenda for the future of the Middle East. In addition to a declaration of basic principles and a code of conduct, this included a precise definition of the movement's goals and a clear call to action directed at young people. According to the event organisers, a total of 40,000 participants took part in the two-day online conference.²⁷ If these figures are correct, this could make it the best-attended peace conference in history.

FINAL THOUGHTS

The YaLa-Young Leaders project is a symbol of hope that combines the potential of the internet with the desires of a new generation of Israeli and Palestinian peace activists. The virtual platform offers them the necessary freedom to meet each other openly and to exchange ideas. The success of the online movement is an important and desperately needed ray of light, not just for the peace activists, but for civil conflict management in its quest for meaningful new ways of promoting dialogue between Israelis and Palestinians. However, we have to ask ourselves how long it will be before peace activists come up against the same old opponents, even on the internet, and what impact this kind of encounter might have on their safety and security. If a hacker were to publish the personal details of people using the virtual dialogue platforms, this would place them in difficulties.

The success of the online movement is a ray of light for the peace activists and for civil conflict management in its quest for meaningful new ways of promoting dialogue between Israelis and Palestinians.

The dark side of the internet cannot be simply pushed aside, and it is to be assumed that cyberspace will continue to grow in importance as a virtual arena for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. If it proves impossible to breathe new life into the peace process and to find a solution to the conflict, there is a danger that this virtual arena will simply remain a mirror of the disagreements and tensions between Israelis and Palestinians, with the inherent potential of actually

27 | Cf. Mebes, n. 25.

escalating the conflict. Further cyber attacks are likely to ensure that cyber security will remain an important element of the Middle East's security policy for many years to come.