

The experience of the Palestinians

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Introduction

The current crisis in Palestine has impacted the local economy in a drastic way, many businesses have closed or physically destroyed by the Israeli occupation army, unemployment and poverty have substantially increased. However, IT business and activities have increased; the number of internet users has reached 8% of the total population when it was 2.5% just before the Intifada has started two years and half ago. Businesses, universities and even some schools and individuals have relied on the internet and other IT tools to overcome physical barriers, curfews and nonexistence of postal services. The Palestinian universities helped by expatriate Palestinian communities and individuals have lead the way to utilise IT technologies to connect and communicate with outside world. Young and well educated Palestinian professionals have established their own IT businesses to fill the existing needs of a young and educated population. The IT business community is very flexible and was easily adaptable to the Palestinian situation.

Below is a review of what we had or had not and the current situation:

The situation prior to 1994

- No faxes were allowed
- No leased lines were allowed
- Phone lines ... 10 years waiting line
- No banks or capital funds
- Major universities closed down
- Educated persons going out

After the establishment of the Palestinian National Authority in 1994

- International IT companies
- Growing wealth of skilled HR
- Palestinian Diaspora tapping home
- Total digital telecom network
- IT companies @ high rate of growth
- Opening up to Regional & Intl Markets (Arab, US, EU)

Telecommunications

- Fully privatized telecom sector
- Fully 100% digital network
- Newly established country code 970 opens up the world to Palestine
- State-of-the-art communications network being installed

Current situation

Weak central authority, no plans and no strategic plans

Long period of no movement (curfew)

Disruption of communications, water and power

Theft and destruction

Slow economic life (lack of finances)

Restrictions on high tech imports and narrow Internet bandwidth

IT is used to connect people together during times of curfews and confinement

Availability of mobile telephones and Modems

Video conferencing facilities are available in major cities

The IT main players in Palestine

- PITA
- Universities
- Volunteer mailing list ITSIG, connecting local, expatriates Palestinian
- Internet Society Palestine Chapter
- UNDP and other International donor organizations, first to introduce internet communication to Palestinian territory and linked Palestinian universities with the Internet.
- Paltel and Jawwal (communications carriers)

THE OUTLOOK

The Palestinians are facing a challenge, the central authority is weak, we have no strategic plans for IT development but a collective efforts by individuals and organizations have been the prime mover for IT progress, IT is used as essential tool to solve the ordinary citizen problems and has become as important as water, electricity and even as food.

Universities have built student/lecture portals as communication tool to come over long period of curfews and army road blocks (RITAG at Birzeit University is an example). Paltel and Jawwal both have installed e-service and e-bill to come over to postal services disruption, banks have installed internet banking service to allow people make financial transactions during curfews and siege. All major Palestinian universities have established IT colleges, student enrolment on IT disciplines is comparatively high.

Another novel idea utilising IT tools which was developed by universities and marketed by NGOs is to link various Palestinian refugee camps doted across the region. The refugees use community centres within the camps which are served with PCs and internet lines, to communicate with each other to track relatives and share experiences.

We need to open the telecommunication market for more competition, there are 14 ISPs working in the Palestinian territories, but one fixed line telecommunication carrier and one cellular communication company (under pressure from Israeli companies unfairly competing in the Palestinian areas).

Under security pretexts, Palestinian companies are not allowed to directly import communications equipment including high speed modems, routers, network cards and ADSL equipment.

All international communications line connecting Palestine with the outside world must go through Israel.

Un-arranged alliance of all the main players in IT has served as a strong lobby for IT issues and IT development in Palestine, the alliance brought and still bringing critical IT issues for discussion in a well organised and moderated volunteer mailing list in which Palestinian expatriates are making effective impact.

The private sector view

The role of government in providing a favorable regulatory environment to enable the development and deployment of a competitive underlying Information and Communications Technology (ICT) infrastructure

Education, both basic and in the use of information and communication technology products and applications

Awareness of the potential benefits of applications to improve the lives of citizens, specifically e-government (God willing, when we have a government), e-health and e-learning

In conclusion

To go forward and to achieve sustainable development of the information society there is a need for effective government-private sector collaboration. The theme should focus on open markets, infrastructure development/deployment, education, and applications such as e-Learning, e-Health and e-Government because:

- Without an educated population any deployed infrastructure will be a lost investment;
- An educated population without the infrastructure will not be able to engage in the information society; and
- Without applications so that citizens can experience the benefits of the information society and the resulting societal benefits, there will not be sufficient demand to sustain an information society for the long-term.