

3G void limits West Bank's smartphone revolution

July 24 2013, by John Davison

Like many young Palestinians, Amir was excited to get his first smartphone, despite the heavy price tag. But he did not keep it long after realising the lack of 3G network meant its applications were largely unusable.

"I sold my iPhone because I just couldn't use it when I was out and about," said the Internet cafe worker, who asked to be given a pseudonym.

"It's expensive to buy a [smartphone](#), so without the full benefits there's no point having one," he added.

With the latest Samsung Galaxy or iPhone costing \$400 (300 euros) it is a considerable investment, but for those keeping pace with developments on Twitter and Facebook, a smartphone has become the tool of choice.

As [telecom companies](#) in the Middle East prepare to launch the next generation of high-speed mobile [phone](#) Internet services, commonly known as 4G, the Palestinian territories still have no access to 3G, meaning they are unable to fully use their smartphones on the go.

As a result, most mobile phone owners simply do not use 3G. And many feel the cost of a smartphone is hardly worthwhile.

"I can't get 3G with a Palestinian provider, so I have to have two contracts, one Palestinian and one Israeli, which is cumbersome and

expensive," said 27-year-old Jeryes, who runs a bookshop in Ramallah.

Israel's refusal to give Palestinian mobile companies access to the necessary frequencies for 3G means West Bank residents must sign up with an Israeli company to get mobile Internet, but calling rates are more expensive in the territories.

Palestinian [mobile operators](#) do not include the price of a phone in their monthly packages, adding to the expense.

Sabri Saidam, telecommunications adviser to Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas, said Israel had repeatedly refused to grant 3G access to Palestinian phone companies for "security" reasons.

"Over the past few years several requests have been made and have been denied" to import the technology and get access to the frequencies needed for 3G, he said.

"Israel persistently refuses the application for 3G on the basis of security," Saidam told AFP.

"This is even though there are Israeli companies illegally operating in the Palestinian territories providing 3G for their customers," he said, referring to the more than 500,000 Israeli settlers living in the West Bank and annexed east Jerusalem.

'If you're disconnected you're half-dead'

But despite being a nuisance for those who want to use 3G, the issue for most Palestinians is primarily political.

Mobile phone shop worker Alaa Qawasmi, 27, said he was more angry about what the Israeli stranglehold on 3G represented.

"The main reason we don't have 3G is because of the occupation," he said. "Meanwhile, the technology Israeli phone users have is far better, and there are so many services we can't use."

But the obstacle can be overcome, thanks to wireless technology.

"It doesn't affect me much," said Omar, an IT worker in hospitals who did not wish to give his real name.

"Almost everywhere has wireless Internet."

Mobile users can sit in cafes or at home, using connections there to have full access to their smartphone features—though some such as digital maps are not updated for West Bank residents, meaning the usefulness of the smartphone is limited, said Omar.

3G "would be nice to have, but we have more important problems here", he said.

A campaign launched by an IT expert during a visit by US President Barack Obama in March to draw attention to the lack of 3G in Ramallah was dismissed by some commentators as potentially overshadowing more crucial political issues.

Ruba Abu Roqqti, visiting her local phone shop, said what was more important was having Internet access at all, let alone on the move.

"If you're disconnected from the web it means you're half-dead," she joked—before asking what 3G actually was.

"If it were available, that would be good," she said, "but it's not a big problem, I hadn't even heard of it."

Hamdi Awad, a teenage student, said it could be "good for flirting with girls" in real time.

"You could add them on Facebook and go from there," he laughed.

Though the 3G issue looks far from being sorted, the Palestinians did celebrate a more significant web-based victory in May, as Internet giant Google recognised their upgraded UN status, placing the name "Palestine" on its search engine instead of "Palestinian Territories".

Posters on the way into Ramallah from the Israeli-controlled Qalandia checkpoint in the West Bank urged Internet users to "log on" to Google.ps and support the Palestinian cause of achieving full independent statehood.

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