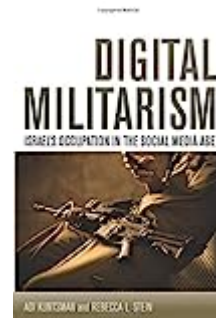


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Adi Kuntsman, Rebecca L. Stein. *Digital Militarism: Israel's Occupation in the Social Media Age.* Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015. 192 pp. \$65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8047-8567-9; \$21.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8047-9490-9.



Reviewed by Kenny Kolander

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The importance of social media and digital warfare to international relations seems to grow every day. Cyberattacks from places like China and North Korea have become almost commonplace, while the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (commonly known as ISIS) continues to use social media and a strong online presence to bolster recruitment and promote its agenda. Therefore this thought-provoking book, which explores digital militarism in twenty-first-century Israel, is timely.

Adi Kuntsman, a social anthropologist with emphasis on culture and gender, and Rebecca Stein, a cultural anthropologist, have both published extensively about cultural in the digital age, and especially in the Middle East. Kuntsman and Stein define digital militarism as “the process by which digital communication platforms and consumer practices have, over the course of the first two decades of the twenty-first century, become militarized tools in the hands of state and nonstate actors, both in the field of military operations and in civilian frameworks” (p. 6). The authors argue in their work that digital militarism has facilitated and contributed to a “public secret” within Israeli society about the occupation of Palestinian lands. Rather than acknowledge the ongoing occupation, Israeli society has developed a strategy of “knowing what not to know” in order “to account for the normative Is-

raeli fantasy of a missing occupation” (p. 15). The authors observe this public secret in the everyday uses of social media by Israeli citizens, and discuss how the Israeli public has redefined the idea of militarism and put new spins on old narratives, such as “a land without people for a people without land” (p. 15).

The work begins by charting the evolution of digital militarism in Israel during the first two decades of the twenty-first century. Following the failure of the Camp David talks in 2000, Israeli youths hacked the websites of Hamas and Hezbollah, which was followed by Palestinian hacking of the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF), Israeli parliament, as well as American and Israeli financial institutions. Hacking gave way to more nuanced uses of digital media in an effort to wage psychological warfare. The 2006 war between Israel and Hezbollah was a watershed: it “represented the first instance in the history of the Arab-Israeli conflict in which virtual and real battle spaces were actively conjoined” (p. 25). For the authors, the 2006 war was a turning point because critics in Israel argued that Hezbollah won the digital battle against the military and state of Israel by more effectively delivering its political message in cyberspace. The next conflict, which was the 2008-09 Gaza war, featured Israel’s first coordinated effort to win the cyberspace war. The

IDF launched a YouTube channel, and political officials used Twitter to get out its message. Not coincidentally, Israeli online communities first became militarized on a massive scale during the 2008-2009 military incursion in the Gaza Strip (p. 26). After the Israeli military attacked the Freedom Flotilla in 2010, a humanitarian ship taking aid and activists to break the Israeli blockade of the Gaza Strip, the IDF released manipulated photos and audio recordings to tell the state's story, an affront for which it publicly apologized. When Israel launched Pillar of Defense, a 2012 invasion of Gaza, the state had refined its uses of social media and digital warfare and was applauded for improving the efficacy, scale, and timing of its social media engagement (p. 33). Importantly, social media sites had become dominated by right-wing groups who chided antiwar traitors.

Kuntsman and Stein are particularly interested in the experiences of ordinary Israeli citizens and their uses of social media. When Israeli bloggers discovered Eden Abergil's Facebook account, which contained degrading pictures of bound and blindfolded Palestinian men from her time with IDF, the photos became a national scandal. Yet the typical Israeli response portrayed Abergil, rather than the Palestinians, as the real victim. Rather than discuss the photos within the context of an ongoing occupation, many Israeli concerns centered on digital and information privacy, and in the case of Peace Now, the impact of the occupation on Israeli soldiers and Israeli society (p. 46). Others voiced concern over how Israel's international reputation had been harmed. The Abergil scandal illustrated how the Israeli military occupation has functioned as the nation's public secret, a normative structure of agreeing not to know that which everyone knows about the violent terms of Israel's military rule even as it highlights the central role of social media in secrecy prevention in the digital age (p. 43).

Perhaps the best chapter of the book is "Palestinians Who Never Die," which explores how Israeli digital militarism has perpetuated a narrative about the inauthenticity of Palestinian claims. The authors note that the Israeli right has long mobilized suspicion as a means of refusing various Palestinian political and historical claims: indigeneity, land ownership, histories of Israeli violence (p. 57). A similar mentality has emerged within Israeli

digital militarism, which the authors believe has been dominated by militant patriots. When images of Palestinian deaths or injuries appear in the digital world, the typical response is to question the authenticity of the images. Rather than discuss or even acknowledge the legitimacy of violent acts against Palestinians, many Israelis scrutinize the evidence in order to avoid the main issues, and thereby conveniently not-know. In the estimation of suspicious readers, say the authors, image manipulation became the real war crime, and social media became the court in which the crime was tried (p. 70). The recent actions contribute to an ongoing narrative of fraudulent Palestinian claims, based on Israeli portrayals of Arabs as liars and cheats, which has made its way into the technological age—giving the old colonial story a new digital guise (p. 69).

There is much to like about this book, but one has to wonder if too much emphasis is placed on the Israeli political Right. The authors note that in recent years, racist, anti-Palestinian sentiment once relegated to Israeli right-wing margins moved to the center of mainstream political discourse (p. 10). How has the political Left resisted this trend? Perhaps by using digital media to redefine former arguments in favor of conciliation and recognition of authentic Palestinian claims and grievances? It would also be nice to get more analysis about the interactions between hawks and doves in the digital realm. There is plenty of room for such a discussion, considering the book numbers only ninety-eight pages, afterword included.

Regardless, the book is an impressive scholarly contribution. Many recent works have explored how digital media contributed to democratization efforts associated with the Arab Spring. But Kuntsman and Stein make a valuable point by noting that digital media is not always a democratizing tool of the masses; it has also been a tool of dictators, authoritarian rulers, and patriotic militants. For the authors, digital media has been a vehicle for the perpetuation of several national narratives about the Israeli occupation, which dismiss the rights of Palestinians and reflect a desire to willingly ignore what Israelis all recognize—the troubling and ongoing occupation of Palestinian lands.

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