

# “It’s About Business not Politics”: Software Development Between Palestinians and Israelis

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**Abstract** This paper focuses on the collaboration in an Israeli-Palestinian tech start-up company. We investigate the strategies enacted by the IT developers for managing the political dynamics and making collaboration possible under the highly challenging political conditions. We found that one of the key strategies was explicitly separating the work domain of software development from the domain of politics. We argue that the IT developers manage to collaborate by displacing the political conflict through strategies of non-confrontation instead of engaging in translating conflicting agendas against each other. By insisting on keeping politics outside of the workspace, the IT developers adopt a strategy of keeping the collaboration *together* by keeping politics and work *apart*. However, we found that despite the attempts to manage the sub-group dynamics, politics constantly invade the workspace and challenge the collaboration. Significant resources are invested into managing the regimes of differentiated identity cards, permits, and checkpoints, all of which have consequences on the employees’ freedom or restriction of mobility. Thus, we argue that the IT development domain is inseparable from and deeply dependent upon the political domain.

## Introduction

Politics, power, and conflict in collaborative work have always been of interest to CSCW researchers (Suchman 1994). In 2014, we had the unique opportunity to study collaboration in a tech start-up company located in the geographical region

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where the political conflict between Israel and Palestine is pertinent. The company, Alpha Corporation (a pseudonym) was the first joint Israeli-Palestinian venture tech start-up founded in 2006 by two entrepreneurs: An Israeli and a Palestinian. While Alpha no longer exists as a company, its former employees continue to work in new constellations. In our ethnographic work, we focus on the Palestinian IT developers and on their experiences of collaboration in Alpha.

Alpha received a considerable amount of attention in local and international media, as well as investments from international organizations. The aim of the company was to develop a virtual operating system, an innovative idea introduced before the cloud-computing era. The company had two teams located in two cities 13 miles away from each other. Getting from one office to the other is a mere 20-min ride; however, the two cities—one in Palestine and one in Israel—are separated by an 800-km wall and several checkpoints. According to B'Tselem—the Israeli Information Center for Human Rights in the Occupied Territories—there are 96 fixed checkpoints, 57 internal checkpoints, and 361 flying checkpoints in the West Bank (B'Tselem 2015). Thus, movement between these two offices is challenging, and so is the task of finding a meeting place that permits entry to staff from both teams. Alpha employees encountered challenging circumstances created by various discontinuities (Watson-Manheim et al. 2002), such as ethnicity, religion, history, geography, language, etc. However, we found that despite the challenging conditions, Alpha employees managed to preserve a meaningful collaboration and develop an innovative web solution.

We set out to investigate how Alpha employees manage the collaboration despite the alignment in participants' demographic attributes (e.g., discontinuities in ethnicity, geography, religion, etc.), which typically increases the risk of sub-group dynamics across sub-groups counterproductive to collaboration (Cramton and Hinds 2005). This led to the formulation of the following research question: What strategies do the employees enact to reduce the risk of sub-group dynamics, making collaboration possible even under the highly challenging political conditions? This investigation was made possible by the access we had to Ramallah and to the Palestinian IT developers from Alpha. In addition, the strong press coverage about Alpha allowed us to trace the challenges of the organizational setup in this politicized context. In contrast to other ethnographies that focus solely on work practices, our study focuses on the wider socio-political matters and the underlying beliefs through which work practice is mediated.

We found that the political dynamics in Alpha are managed in practice through the IT developers' resilience to the political situation and the determination to make the collaboration work despite the demographic differences and discontinuities. This determination is articulated in the motto that working at Alpha "*is about business, and not politics*"—a view repeatedly emphasized by the Palestinian IT developers. However, despite the various attempts of the IT developers to separate politics from business, politics constantly invade the workspace and utterly challenge the collaboration. These challenges necessitate workarounds, which have become a normal natural troubles encountered when running a business in that region, particularly when a company has offices and employees spread

across two different jurisdictions and authorities, and where the one authority maintains de facto military control over the other. In prior research where discontinuities are strongly embedded within the collaborative effort, we have seen how the basic nature of articulation work was transformed (Matthiesen et al. 2014). Understanding the complex organizational setup and the impact on articulation work raises a number of questions. First, what motivated the co-founders to establish a start-up with such a complex organizational setup? Second, what motivated the IT developers to invest so much effort into dealing with the challenges resulting from the longstanding political conflict? We argue that the driving force for making this collaboration work is the sincere thirst that the Palestinian IT developers have for acquiring international experience and working with global businesses. Due to the Palestinian industry’s financial dependency on Israel (Tawil-Souri 2011), Palestinian IT developers who want to obtain experience working *globally* need to collaborate *locally* with Israeli entrepreneurs. However, in the eyes of the Palestinian developers, *collaborating (working) with* Israel is not equivalent to *supporting* Israel (i.e., its policies and the occupation), but rather it is a *necessity* if they wish to develop further the IT sector in Palestine and build global relations.

This paper is structured as follows: We lay out the theoretical foundation for the paper by drawing from literature on discontinuities and sub-group dynamics within geographically dispersed teams, and from literature about the political situation in Israel and Palestine. We then introduce the case and the political context surrounding it, followed by a section about the method and the multi-sited ethnographic approach we apply. We present our results unpacking strategies, identity, and mobility. This is followed by a discussion and a conclusion.

## Discontinuities and Dynamics

Investigating the strategies deployed by Alpha employees for managing the political dynamics, we draw upon one set of literature containing concepts related to the complexities of the collaborative work practice, and another set which introduces literature related to the political situation in Israel and Palestine.

### *Discontinuities, Sub-groups, and Common Ground*

Collaborating within complex organizational setups, for example, across different geography, time zones, and languages, is often referred to as collaboration across discontinuities. Discontinuities are gaps or lack of coherence in work (Cramton and Hinds 2005) often arising in situations where participants must collaborate despite differences in, for example, age, organizational culture, and professions. The purpose of theorizing about collaborative setups in terms of discontinuities is

to move beyond the dichotomous perspective that contrasts collocated and distributed work to a more nuanced hybrid conceptualization of what makes the collaboration difficult (Cramton and Hinds 2014). We bring the discontinuity framework to our case to better understand and identify what may otherwise seem like paradoxical differences in how team members respond to boundaries created by the local political circumstances present in our case.

However, before we can look into the strategies by which the participants manage the paradoxical and complex collaboration, we need to identify the boundaries that are produced, as well as the types of discontinuities that are pertinent in the collaboration between the Alpha employees. Unpacking the possible discontinuities points to the demographic attributes of the different IT developers, including for example, geographic location, language, ethnicity, age, religion, etc. All these demographic attributes are fundamental parts of the identity of the employees, and these can be viewed as possible sources of discontinuities that arise and which employees need to address, negotiating boundaries to make the collaboration function in practice. Alignment of demographic attributes risks introducing sub-group dynamics (Cramton and Hinds 2005), especially in situations where communication breakdowns experienced in practice are not grounded in the work practices but rather related to the fundamental value schemes and beliefs of the participants (Bjørn and Ngwenyama 2009). Earlier work on conflicts in teams with participants from diverse cultures identified a tendency to use ‘culture’ as a rhetoric move, covering up coordination or communication challenges (Jensen and Nardi 2014). Clearly it is far more difficult to cross boundaries produced by fundamental societal structures, which are socialized to the public through constant rehearsing of history and the past (Pilecki and Hammack 2014). Thus, to understand the strategies applied by Alpha employees to manage the political dynamics, we identify the pertinent discontinuities serving as boundaries, which participants negotiate and cross in order to make the collaboration work.

Crossing boundaries across cultural discontinuities is difficult (Boden et al. 2009), and organizations risk forgetting cultural circumstances and other boundaries in attempts to focus on the remote and the foreign culture. When collaborating across discontinuities, we forget how we are to adjust ourselves, not only in terms of trying to change the “other,” but also in terms of taking into account our cultural blind spots (Matthiesen et al. 2014). We need language to articulate the changes in our own work practices and in the collaborative relations with the other in order to have common ground. Establishing common ground is critical for collaborative practice (Olson and Olson 2014), as we need to know the knowledge we have in common, and know we have in common (Olson and Olson 2000). Two aspects of common ground have been identified as problematic in collaborative situations of software development, namely, common ground related to process (Bjørn et al. 2014) and common ground related to domain-specific language (Jensen and Bjørn 2012). When investigating the strategies for managing the political dynamics in our cases, we will look into the kinds of common ground practices that emerge to determine whether we can apply existing conceptualizations or whether these need to be revisited.

## ***Political Situation Between Israel and Palestine***

Within CSCW there is an increased interest in the role that different technologies might play in the context of Palestine. In a study by Aal et al. (2014), the concept of computer clubs—used in German neighbourhoods with migrant populations to foster social learning and integration—is introduced to a Palestinian refugee camp. Comparing the two settings allows the authors to identify fundamental cultural, social, and political differences (*ibid.*). Another central study by Wulf et al. (2013) analyzes the use of social media by activists in a Palestinian village. They explain how these activists do not make any effort to distinguish between the personal and the political, because the political activities are an integral part of the personal life. Thus, the two are deeply interwoven and cannot be kept apart. Recently, there have been a few studies that focus on the influence of the political situation on the Palestinian IT industry. For instance, Grace C. Koury, of Birzeit University, has written extensively about the topic from a business management and organizational behavior approach (Khoury and Khoury 2014), and has, among others, studied Palestinian business leaders (Muna and Khoury 2012). Both studies unpack the harsh economic realities and challenging conditions that Palestinian entrepreneurs and industry confront with resilience.

Key topics across the literature about Palestine centered around negotiated spaces and practices of political resistance and resilience that Palestinians deploy as a mechanism to live with the occupation (Hass 2002; Tawil-Souri 2011). For instance, Hage (2013) describes the “practices of resilience” that Palestinians exercise to “preserve their own being” within the existing colonial order of domination. The endurance becomes a “strategic foreclosure” because it is “something that the body has been trained to do unconsciously but at appropriate times and for appropriate durations” (*ibid.*, p. 5). Resilience as strategic foreclosure takes a paradoxical form, as it is both necessary and impossible. Foreclosure, Hage (2013) explains, should not be understood as a permanent state of being, but rather as a socially and historically acquired capacity to deploy and produce strategies efficient to deal with particular circumstances. “The colonized cannot permanently forget, they have to negotiate the difficulty of both needing to forget (resilience) and needing not to forget (resistance)” (*ibid.*, p. 6).

The Palestinian high-tech industry exists under very specific sociopolitical and economic conditions. After the Oslo Accords, the occupied territories were divided into zones of Palestinian and Israeli control, and this was viewed as a demographic separation without meaningful political separation (Hass 2002). Furthermore, the telecommunications sector was handed over to the Palestinian Authority (PA). However, just like Palestine is still seeking national independence and sovereignty while Israel maintains *de facto* military control in the territories, Palestinian economic dependence on Israel has been deepening throughout the years. Palestinians are faced with ongoing limitations on the telecommunications sector and Internet infrastructure, resulting in what has been labeled “digital occupation” (Tawil-Souri 2012). This marks a shift from a traditional military occupation toward a high-tech

one, characterized by increasing surveillance and control enabling new enclosure mechanisms. These mechanisms are added on top of existing *visible* bordering mechanisms (e.g., borders, walls, gates, fences, and checkpoints) by forming *less visible* mechanisms for regulation of telephones, TV channels, and other forms of low-tech restrictions, such as the ID card (Tawil-Souri 2011). Similar to other infrastructures in Palestine (e.g., sewage, population registries, water, transportation), the high-tech industry has been subjected to various constraints imposed by Israeli policies and hampered in its ability to build an independent system (Tawil-Souri 2011). Thus, geographic mobility, economic growth, and digital flows are contained and controlled by Israeli politics. In addition, these infrastructures are unstable, as they are constantly exposed to new policies and political conditions. These are the political conditions surrounding the Alpha project, where the Israeli and Palestinian developers need to collaborate in order to develop their cloud-computing software.

## Case Description and the Political Context

In 2006, an Israeli and a Palestinian entrepreneur founded Alpha, which built the first virtual web operating system, providing users with a working environment over the Internet that mimics the classic desktop operating systems. As the Israeli CEO explained it in a presentation at the Web 2.0 Summit, the idea was “*Getting rid of walls, allowing you to free your data*”. The company had two offices. The first was located in the Palestinian city of Ramallah, with more than 35 (80 at the peak period) Palestinian software developers and designers responsible for research, development, and programming. Ramallah is central city in the West Bank, hosting almost all governmental headquarters of the PA and Beir Zeit University (the oldest university in Palestine). It is known for being liberal yet politically conscious city. The Israeli team (5 staff) was located in an office in the Israeli town of Modiin, only 21 km away from Ramallah. Modiin is a very young city, formed in 2003 and located in Israel’s 1967 borders. There are several checkpoints between the two Alpha offices. Qalandiya is the main route out of the West Bank for Palestinians and is known for its humiliating and lengthy security screening (B’Tselem 2014), and Hizma (located a few kilometers to the south) which typically has a little more friendly screening and less traffic jams.

Alpha received a lot of media attention and press coverage because of its technology, but primarily because of its political set up. The technology was unique enough to attract investors and venture capitalists. The political dimension was unique as it was the first joint web start-up between Palestinians and Israelis. This was emphasized when Alpha had their official launch in 2009, near the wall in the West Bank. The launch was attended by former UK Prime Minister Tony Blair and other key political players in the Middle East (e.g., Ahmad Tibi, a key Arab-Israeli politician and member of the Israeli Parliament). In March 2010, Alpha announced that it would be closing its services to all users. The company cited “changes in the marketplace” as the main reason behind its closure.

## Multi-sited Ethnography

To investigate the strategies deployed by the IT developers at Alpha, we applied multi-sited ethnography (Marcus 1995). Multi-sited ethnography is an emergent ethnographic approach in CSCW (Blomberg and Karasti 2013), and is particularly relevant when investigating contemporary local changes in culture and society. In multi-sited ethnography there are no local-global distinctions; instead, the “global” is an emergent dimension of following connections and associations across sites relevant for the domain in question. Thus, in studying Alpha a key part of our work is to identify the relevant sites for investigation. We started in the office, but it quickly became apparent to us that to understand the collaboration in Alpha, we must follow the associations from Alpha outside of the office, including politics, news, economics, history, etc., and investigate their relationship while paying particular attention to the ways in which cultural logics are multiply produced (Marcus 1995). Connections and relationships form the basic building blocks of multi-sited ethnography, and the aim becomes the actual mapping of new objects of study, which emerge during the work. Comparison emerges from formulating questions to an emergent object of study, and through this practice the researchers’ unpacking of the new relationships becomes core and the descriptions of the relations are by themselves contributions.

Applying a multi-sited ethnography enabled us to follow connections and associations from the very practices we encounter in the empirical work to news, histories, online content, and other data sources that make up our empirical case. Thus, analyzing the various news stories on the Alpha project found in Israeli, Palestinian, and international media (e.g., *Haaretz*, the *New York Times*), written in Hebrew, Arabic, and English became pertinent for our ethnographic investigations. We read these articles carefully, as well as the many comments that were written by the readers. We also gained access to the Facebook group made by and for Alpha members. Since two of the authors speak and read both Hebrew and Arabic, we were able to follow Alpha from the different perspectives. We also collected video material (about Alpha) publically available on the Internet and transcribed two video clips from which particular quotes were used in this paper (an interview in Hebrew with the Israeli CEO to the Israeli Channel 10 and a presentation of Alpha by the Israeli CEO to Web 2.0 Summit). The first author travelled twice to Ramallah (June and December, 2014), visiting the city, crossing the checkpoints from Israel, and conducting interviews with former Palestinian Alpha employees. All interviews were conducted in the native language of the interviewee, audio recorded, and partially transcribed and/or summarized, as well as translated by the first and third author.<sup>1</sup> In total, 7 Palestinian developers<sup>2</sup> were interviewed

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<sup>1</sup>The interviews were conducted in July 2014, when the political situation was relatively calm as there were negotiations with Israel about releasing Palestinian prisoners and negotiations within Palestine for a unity government between Hamas and Fatah. A few days after the researcher left Ramallah, three settlers were kidnapped and this led to a military crackdown on the West Bank and to an invasion on the Gaza Strip.

<sup>2</sup>The names of all the informants are pseudonyms in order to preserve their anonymity.

(30–120 min); this includes software developers, designers, marketing managers, project managers, and business analysts. The age of the developers interviewed varied; some were young and began working in Alpha right after graduation, while others were seniors and had more years of experience. Observations were carried out in the offices of the new company established in Ramallah with a similar organizational set up and some of the same people. Finally, in each of the fieldtrips, the first author passed from Tel-Aviv to Ramallah using different check-points, thus subjecting herself to the experience of crossing at Qalandiya versus Hizma.

## Strategies, Identity, and Mobility

Investigating how the IT developers managed the political dynamics influencing their collaboration, we found that a critical part of this effort was linked to a wide range of strategies for leaving politics outside the office space. The Palestinian IT developers repeatedly portrayed politics as a domain that can be separated from the work domain of IT development. Politics were portrayed as a jacket, which could be taken off whenever appropriate and hung temporarily outside the office. This was puzzling, since the Alpha project was portrayed in the local and international media as a political project. How could the IT developers working on such a highly political project situated in a conflict zone label their collaboration as “apolitical”? When the developers refer to their offices as “politically-free-space,” they do not mean that politics were forgotten or accepted. On the contrary, politics are *not* simplified nor made unproblematic, but they are temporarily put aside in the Alpha office. As Tawfik explains, he neither forgets, nor is at peace with, the political situation. Rather, the IT developers deploy various strategies for placing politics temporarily aside.

Shutting off any political discussion that occurs in the office is one way in which politics are put aside. When working and living in societies with a deep and longstanding political conflict, countless incidents take place outside of the office (e.g., siege on Gaza, losing a family member), leading inevitably to adversities and tensions among the employees, who may be unable to avoid discussing these incidents in the office space. However, in the effort to keep politics outside of the workspace, it was necessary for the IT developers to shut down any heated, emotional, or controversial discussions. Thus, stopping others from opening such discussions was an “obvious” yet unwritten rule that employees subscribe to, willingly or unwillingly. This practice was a pragmatic necessity required to enable the collaboration between the IT developers situated within a longstanding historical, religious, and political conflict.

Balancing the language is important to enable the collaboration, and one approach is to avoid political categories and apply neutral ones in everyday interactions. For example, the Israeli CEO is often referred to as British, as he carries British citizenship. The IT developers strived to avoid the political categories,



which were present and constant reminders of the political situation. The Israeli colonization and the ongoing conflict make it somewhat “easier” for the Palestinian developers to relate to a British entrepreneur than to relate to an Israeli CEO—even though both categories refer to the same person. Furthermore, when referring to the different offices, the IT developers consciously avoid mentioning Israel or Palestine. Instead, they refer to the “Modiin office” and the “Ramallah office,” using the names of the cities. As explained by Ibrahim, “*We don’t mention Israel. We try to avoid these things. We look at it as one team.*” Introducing these politically neutral categories removes, to a certain extent, the political tensions that other labels may connote. The professionalism that results from stripping away political dimensions from people and locations is emphasized in the collaboration, and in this shift, politics become linked to private and personal matters, which do not belong to the professional business context. As explained by Tawfik:

It is personal. It’s not that I don’t care, but this is business. [...] I can’t pretend that I’m friendly with Israelis. We each stand on our own side. When there were discussions, these would be closed down. It damages the relationships...It’s not that I cancel my identity or forget it, but I need to continue with my life and do something for my city. Life goes on in the end.

Similarly, Mustafa, another young Palestinian developer, explains that he cannot blame the Israeli team for the political situation.

When I used to go to my aunt’s house in Israel, I used to see Jews. I then I realized that I’m seeing the other party, and I don’t think of them as monsters. I have the ability—when looking at Jews—not to imagine the Palestinian kid that was killed by them. I know that killing him was not right and it’s not forgiven. At the same time, I can’t go to Noam [the Israeli CEO] and ask why his people killed that Palestinian kid. Similarly, Noam can’t blame me for my previous classmate who killed Jews in a settlement.

In the above quote, the IT developer explains how he sees the human in his Israeli colleagues; he sees them as individual people who cannot be (directly) responsible for the consequences of the military occupation and the ongoing war (e.g., the killing of a Palestinian kid or Israeli settlers). He explains how neither him, nor the Israeli team, can blame each other for these events grounded in the 70-year colonial history of the region and the contemporary political conflict. By separating politics and the contemporary adverse events that take place outside the workplace from the activities that take place inside the office, they enact a mechanism of survival that allows them to cope with the current situation.

### *Separate but Mixed Identities*

To a certain extent, the organizational structure of Alpha is similar to an outsourcing software project, except that all participants are geographically located within the same region, with only 13 miles of distance between the offices. Still, the IT developers live and work under different conditions and salaries. However, Israelis and Palestinians have been living side by side for many generations. Thus, there are many

similarities across the cultures located within the same geographical area. Examining what it means to have two distinctly separate *yet already mixed* cultures creates certain conditions for the collaboration not seen elsewhere in outsourcing setups.

The mixture of cultures within the same geographical area is especially applicable to those living in Jerusalem, as it is known for being a mixed city, with Israelis and Palestinians living side by side. George, who lives in Jerusalem, points out, “*We’re living in the same 10-mile radius.*” Similarly, Tawfik explains: “*I live in Jerusalem so I interact with them ... although Jerusalem is divided, we still meet.*” Due to the financial dependency of Palestinians on Israel, many Palestinians grew up either working in Israel or having their families work in Israel. They would travel on a daily basis from Palestine to work in Israel, and are therefore familiar with the Israeli culture. However, this situation has changed after the second intifada (in 2000), as the number of permits issued to allow Palestinians to work in Israel has decreased dramatically (B’Tselem 2015). Therefore, in the eyes of the Palestinian IT developers, Palestinians and Israelis are very similar.

They [the Israelis] are not totally ‘fremd’ [in german; foreigner]. We are not starting from scratch, like working with the Indians, whom we don’t know anything about. We know a lot of things [about them]. There is a strong interaction between us and them. [...] We know for instance their holidays [...] we know...that Saturday is a sacred day.

George explains above how the cultural differences between Israelis and Indians are larger than between Israelis and Palestinians. Similarly, Elias explains that prior to Alpha he worked for Siemens in Ramallah and collaborated with IT developers in Germany. While he experienced this collaboration as very formal and highly structured, collaborating with Israelis, he explains, is much more casual and informal. “Our accent in English is close, and we understand each other very well,” he says. Furthermore, several developers emphasize how the two cultures are similar and exposed to the same things. George clarifies: “*there are many similarities between the two cultures. There is great resemblance between the two languages. We almost look alike. [...] We dress the same and you can’t tell us apart*”. Several IT developers emphasize how the two cultures are exposed to the same things, wearing the same cloths, and eating the same food. After all, “*we both like Houmous*” said George while laughing.

We found that depicting the collaboration in Alpha as constitutive of two distinct cultures is rather imprecise and simplistic. The Alpha team constitutes a wide variety of nationalities, including British, American, Jordanian, Kuwaiti, Salvadorian, Egyptian, Israeli, and Palestinian. While the Israeli team lives in Israel, the Palestinian team is scattered across both Israel (mostly Jerusalem) and Palestine. Furthermore, the team includes a rich variety of different religions, including both religious and secular Jews, Muslims, Christians, humanists, atheists, and some who view themselves as being part of the geek community.

Still, important differences exist and these have a major impact on the collaboration. The Israeli team does not speak Arabic, and most of the Palestinian team does not speak Hebrew. They depend on English as the common language. Thus, although they know about each other’s culture, the familiarity is still limited due the highly politicized circumstance. As explained by George:

We know a lot of things; there is a strong interaction between us and them. Still, on the personal level we don’t know anything about them. We watch them on TV in the news, we pass by them in the Machsom [checkpoint in Hebrew]; that’s it. And they- what do they hear? They have their own news; they don’t enter Ramallah and the only interaction that we have is through the soldiers in the Machsom.

Most interaction between Palestinians and Israelis is with soldiers at the checkpoints. The knowledge about each other is mediated by the local news in different languages, where each party is depicted in a negative manner. It can be said that the mediascape within the region is differentiated by audience, language, and political agendas, keeping the two cultures alienated. Alpha has given the IT developers the opportunity to get to know each other on an individual level. This is true particularly for the Israeli team. In one of the interviews for the Israeli Channel 10, the Israeli CEO admits that Alpha gave him the opportunity to meet Palestinians for the *first* time. The opportunity to meet each other influences the knowledge they gradually acquire about each other.

### ***Complex Identities and Work Relationships***

Maintaining the separation between politics and work is not easy. Politics keep sneaking in despite the repetitive attempts to block them and keep them out of the office. Mustafa tells about a barbeque gathering at the home of the Israeli CEO, saying: “*We don’t feel anything special when we are at [Noam’s] home. But we feel awkward when we are walking together in the streets.*” There have been several situations where politics constantly clashed with business. Ibrahim recalls when there were resignations from the Palestinian team during one of the sieges on Gaza when the political situation was particularly tense. He explains: “*One girl came and said I can’t continue.*” When approached by her team leader, she said “*she could no longer work with Jews. It was enough.*” This incident illustrates how the strategy of separating politics from business is challenging, as it is impossible to completely detach politics from the professional work domain.

I don’t know if I can articulate that...but sometimes I feel that what I’m doing [working with Israelis] is wrong. But again, I repeat and tell you that we never felt that what we’re doing is going the wrong direction. But sometimes...one feels ah...perhaps, for example, [I wonder] if I worked in a different place, if it would have been different. But there were no other opportunities. This was a very good [job] opportunity, both financially and experience wise. At that time, there weren’t so many companies working with these things [software development]...now the situation might be different. (Shadi)

As can be seen from above, the Palestinian IT developers face perplexing and conflicting positions. On the one hand, they feel they need to *work with* Israel if they wish to develop further the IT sector in Palestine and build global relations. On the other hand, they fear that *working with* Israel would be confused with *supporting* Israel and its policies, as there have been situations where they were accused for subscribing to normalization discourse (عربطت), thus accepting the

Israeli occupation and various forms of discrimination and oppression against the Palestinians (Palestinian Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel 2007<sup>3</sup>). While feeling uncomfortable with the current political situation, they still must work, be professional, and treat work as “pure business.” This introduces paradoxical situations, as the below incident illustrates:

There was a Jewish employee called Yaki at the company that I have worked with for several months. Once, I went with Noam [the Israeli CEO] to our office in Jerusalem. That time, Yaki wasn't working as he was called for a military service. During the working day, Yaki dropped by the office wearing his military uniform. Here, I was shocked; this guy that I know and worked with is entering the office with that uniform. I worked with him a lot and...I didn't care about his religion...When we used to go to work together, we talked about a lot of human things. But, when he entered [the office] with the uniform, I couldn't accept it. Here, you feel those people who we see at checkpoints and humiliate us, they have the same uniform.

When the Israeli employee enters the office wearing the military uniform, this contradicts the unwritten yet agreed upon norms of keeping politics outside the workspace. While most of the employees adhere to this unwritten norm, the particular societal circumstances (i.e., the ongoing war resulting in enlisting Israeli employees to the military) impose certain contradictory conditions affecting the common ground for work.

### ***Freedom and Restriction of Mobility***

In a TV interview to the Israeli Channel 10, the Israeli CEO explains how “Israelis are not permitted entry [into Ramallah]” and “how he is maybe the only CEO in the world who cannot visit his main office”. Indeed, the Israeli government bans Israelis from entering Palestinian areas (so-called Areas A, according to the Oslo agreements). But, when the topic of mobility was raised during our interviews, most informants viewed themselves as free to move across geographical locations and viewed this topic initially as non-problematic. Ibrahim explained how the Israeli CEO can visit the Ramallah office whenever is needed.

No, it's not easy [for the Israeli CEO to enter Palestine]. You [the researcher] don't know everything [about the political situation]. But we know and understand the subject. He can actually drive with any car [with an Israeli yellow plate]; he can get in; no one will speak to him. So it's soooo easy. And then, it was Ibrahim [a Palestinian developer] who went to pick him up [with his Palestinian green-plated car], so it's not a problem.

Thus, what might seem as problematic from the outside, the politics of movement, is worked around and managed differently in practice. Most informants tell repeatedly that entering Israel is not a problem. For example, Tawfik explains that “*the only problem is the checkpoint; Qalandiya. But I don't pass through it that*

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<sup>3</sup><http://www.pacbi.org/atemplate.php?id=100>.

*often...I go through Hizma instead...After a while it becomes a routine. You get used to it.* The 96 fixed checkpoints in the West Bank and 57 internal checkpoints (B’Tselem 2015) are an integral part of the everyday practices, and so is the practice of applying various workarounds to manage the political contextual situation of the day. What from the outside seems an exception is seen from the perspective of the Palestinian IT developers as part of the normal natural troubles encountered when working at Alpha.

These workaround practices include, for example, calculating additional time to pass through checkpoints. Driving between Jerusalem and Ramallah takes merely 30 min, but the Palestinian developers always estimate additional time, typically amounting to an hour, depending on who is in the car. For example, driving with Palestinians from the West Bank makes it more difficult, since they are not permitted to pass through Hizma—the checkpoint with less traffic and smoother screening. In the daily planning of the work, precision is not required and a 30-min delay is tolerated to accommodate mobility challenges. If the Palestinian IT developers on particular days are not given permits to travel to Israel, they can “*always Skype*” explains Tawfik.

Permits are essential, as they determine the mobility of the IT developers. While the Palestinian developers who hold Jerusalem IDs can choose to pass through Hizma, the majority of Palestinian developers do not have this choice. George explains, “*to get the whole team to the other side, it might take a couple of hours [...] once the event is done, you have to hurry up and leave because there is a time limit on the permits.*” Different Palestinian employees have different time limits to their permits, which reduces their flexibility, especially when most of the time is spent on waiting at the checkpoint. These mobility restrictions impose high overhead costs for Alpha. Managing the Palestinian IT developers’ movement requires good contact with the Israeli authorities issuing permits. One of the informants mentioned that the Israeli CEO has internal contacts with the Israeli authorities, making the process of issuing permits a little smoother.

Mobility is also complicated by the sophisticated regimes of differentiated colorful identify cards and permits. Each color of an ID card permits the residents particular mobility to limited geographical locations, often for a limited time period. There are three colors of ID cards. A blue ID card is given to Jewish residents granting them freedom of movement. A blue ID card is also given to Palestinians residing in Israel (such as the one carried by the first author); and although it officially has no limitations, it has constantly been subject to threats of being withdrawn (Tawil-Souri 2011). The green ID card is given to Palestinians residing in the West Bank, and the orange ID card is given to those residing in the Gaza Strip. Each of these ID cards permits movement to particular areas. For instance, residents of East Jerusalem typically carry either an Israeli travel permit or a temporary Jordanian passport/travel permit, which must be renewed if leaving the city for an extended period of time. Residents of parts of the West Bank typically carry a PA passport, a Jordanian temporary passport, or a travel document. The Palestinian developers in Alpha reside in many different places on both sides of the wall. Thus, there are different restrictions on movement and various types of permits that need to be

issued each time the two teams need to meet face-to-face. Consequently, it is utterly challenging for the Ramallah office to meet the Modiin office. One challenge is related to the element of unpredictability when issuing permits. Not knowing if an employee may attend the event or not makes it difficult to plan events. Getting a permit is done through faxing information to the Israeli authorities. There have been several situations at Alpha where Palestinian developers were rejected permits, and there is one employee who never gets a permit because he is banned from entering Israel, allegedly for political reasons. When the teams need to meet face-to-face, they travel to a gas station located near Jericho, a neutral geographical place, which permits entry to both teams. Some of the job interviews conducted by the Israeli CEO with the Palestinian developers took place at this remote gas station.

When it comes to freedom of movement outside of the Territories, the Palestinian IT developers adopt similar non-problematic attitudes. Tawfik explains that when he needs to travel outside the country, he simply passes through Jordan, instead of Israel. The extra effort required for travelling is experienced as a regular routine, as part of the normal natural troubles encountered when being a Palestinian and living in the region. Elias explains that if he has to travel to Europe, he will normally pass through Jordan. Since he cannot predict exactly how much time it will take to pass the check-point, he will normally arrive in Jordan a day before his flight to Europe. He points out how this unavoidably ends up being very costly for the company, because one needs to factor in an extra day before and after the travel. There is a certain irony for some of the Palestinian employees, as the restrictions imposed on their mobility change when they leave their country. Consider the following story by George:

I have a Salvadorian passport. The last trip I did we had an urgent business meeting. I booked a flight the second day. I arrived there and I booked a car while on my way. I did 8 trips in five days...I travelled England from Manchester to London by car. Communicating with my wife, via Facetime, she is asking me where are you now. I was in Manchester; then I had lunch in Birmingham, I slept the night in London [and] I woke up in Stansted [...] every time I got hungry I drop in a gas station. Every time I spoke to my wife I was in a different location. She then told me, apparently you can go wherever you wish, drive wherever you want, but you can't drive to your own home in Jerusalem. This is because, I have a Palestinian ID and my wife has an Israeli ID and we both live in Jerusalem. My Palestinian driving license isn't valid there and I can't drive to my own home. I feel free in the whole world but not in my own city.

As can be seen from above, George sees himself as a free man outside of his own country, where his Salvadorian passport gives him the possibility to travel and drive freely. Paradoxically, his native Palestinian ID prohibits him from travelling to certain areas and restricts his movement in his own country.

## **Strategies for Managing Political Dynamics**

What are the strategies enacted by Alpha employees to manage political dynamics and enable a meaningful collaboration in such complex political conditions? We found that the political dynamics in Alpha are managed in practice through the

employees’ dedicated effort to making the collaboration function despite the demographic differences and discontinuities (Watson-Manheim et al. 2012; Cramton and Hinds 2014). The most pertinent boundaries we identified relate to the ways in which *identity and mobility were produced*. Unpacking the demographic differences it is clear that the distinction between “Israeli” and “Palestinian” as separate classifications exists but is not nuanced enough to capture the complex collaborative situations. The two *distinct* and *separate* classifications are not clear-cut entities, as they are *similar* in some ways and are already somewhat *mixed*. It was clear from our data that even if the employees within Alpha wanted to put these categories aside and concentrate on software development, this was not always possible. Working at Alpha required utmost attention to the complex classifications of citizens in the region. It includes the enormous efforts required for transporting Alpha employees through the checkpoints between the offices and managing the regime of colourful ID cards restricting the movement of the Palestinian IT developers. The nuances in the categories of Israeli and Palestinian only serve as a first type of descriptive category of movement, and then the distinct attributes (e.g., place of birth, home town, etc.) serve as modifiers determining which checkpoints can legally be crossed, when, how, and for how long. Thus, while the demographic attributes of location and ethnicity are aligned within the sub-group of Palestinian, it does not mean that the Palestinian developers share religion or ID cards. The production of the Palestinian or Israeli identity thus becomes pertinent in the collaborative work, as it determines the mobility of the employees across the two offices. When employees were prohibited from passing a checkpoint due to a certain classification, workarounds were developed to accommodate these challenges.

Moving away from the streets and checkpoints and into the Alpha offices, the main strategy applied by employees was to keep politics out. Previous CSCW work in Palestine found out that it was impossible for political activists to separate between their political lives and their personal lives. Politics were such a dominant part of their lives that they could not keep the two apart (Wulf et al. 2013). In our case, however, the IT developers insisted on keeping politics outside of the work, and in this way applied a strategy of keeping things together (the collaboration across discontinuities) by keeping things apart (politics and work as separated). Thus, in the Palestinian developers’ view, their collaboration through Alpha is *about business, and not politics*. This does not mean that they accept the political situation. On the contrary, several Palestinian developers resist the occupation, and have reflected upon the perplexing, paradoxical, and conflicting position they encounter when working with Israelis. To understand this paradox it is important to remember that most of the IT developers have never lived under different circumstances (without occupation). The occupation is a forming force of the lives and work of the Palestinians (Hage 2013). Thus, we see the strategies of collaborating with the Israelis at Alpha as an attempt to construct a form of normality by carving out a space—preserving a sense of existence—that is not governed by colonialism or by resistance to it. For this to happen, practices of resilience are crucial; that is, practices of forgetting and “of absenting the occupation and any preoccupation with the occupation” (Hage p. 5).

Earlier work on conflicts in cross-cultural teams with power imbalance (as is typically found in outsourcing companies purchasing cheaper services) found the use of rhetoric moves to reframe experienced coordination and communication challenges as ‘clashes among cultures’ (Jensen and Nardi 2014). The case in Alpha was different. Instead of using culture to reframe coordination challenges, Alpha employees dedicated major efforts to create a ‘new common culture’—the ‘Alpha culture’—one that does not refer to ethnic categories but rather refers to the profession of software development and provides space for all categories. We illustrated the different strategies used by the IT developers for managing the political dynamics by creating politically neutral categories when referring to the collaborative situations. This was manifested in the way they referred to the Israeli CEO as British rather than Israeli/Jewish, and to the offices as Modiin or Ramallah rather than referring to the countries hosting the offices. The production of politically neutral language developed to separate the politics from the work practices can be seen as an approach for creating common ground (Olson and Olson 200). The IT developers construct a language they share and know they share consisting of politically neutral categories. However, this language is not only about the work practices (Jensen and Bjørn 2012), it is *common ground characterized by a different nature*. The IT developers implicitly (through strategies of silence, putting politics aside, and avoiding discussing politics) and explicitly (by shutting down political discussions) *avoid applying political language* and only use the politically neutral language. The process of grounding in communication is usually seen as a process where participants develop a shared language through interaction and engagement (Clark and Brennan 1991). However, we found that the grounding process in our highly politicized collaborative setting was dedicated to developing a revised shared language of politically neutral categories. The grounding process included redefining shared concepts as well as negotiating which concepts to avoid even though they were already shared. Reframing a collaborative situation by redefining concepts is an effective strategy in conflict situations (Jensen and Nardi 2014; Bjørn and Ngwenyama 2009). In this way, the common ground, which existed prior to the project in Alpha as a result of the years of living side-by-side, was re-negotiated. Similar strategies have been reported in studies of post-conflict societies, for example, Rwanda (Yoo et al. 2013); however, in our case, the colonial context and the conflict still exist, and the tech start-up community that started at Alpha continues to exist under contemporary political conditions.

In this way, Alpha employees manage to work within a paradoxical context. They mix what *cannot* be mixed—like oil and water—by displacing the inner paradox through strategies of non-confrontation instead of engaging in translating conflicting agendas. However, despite the sincere attempts to keep politics out of the office, the political conflict continues to impact the workplace. At times, these politics of exclusion (e.g., prohibiting an employee to enter Israel) are worked around by finding politically neutral ground (e.g., the gas station). Other times, the political situation becomes too unbearable, leading to resignations. Thus, although the employees do not actively engage in political discussion, they are constantly reminded of the political conflict.



Our data demonstrate that collaboration within Alpha requires additional efforts outside what CSCW researchers normally would refer to as articulation work in software development (Boden et al. 2014). We know that working across geographical boundaries changes the nature of work for IT developers, requiring them to engage in additional articulation work when compared to collocated work (Matthiesen et al. 2014). The Alpha project challenges the ways we in CSCW think about articulation work. The justification for incurring the overhead cost of articulation work and thus the reason for the emergence of cooperative work formations is that participants could not accomplish their tasks if they were to do them individually (Schmidt and Bannon 1992, p. 14). However, the complex organizational setup in Alpha requires a new category of articulation work addressing the emergent obstacles and the workarounds imposed by the political conflict. This raises the question of what motivates the two teams to invest so much effort into dealing with obstacles imposed by the longstanding political conflict.

From the Israeli perspective, the financial benefit is one explanation. Employing Palestinian IT developers based in Ramallah results in considerable saving on wages. As for the Palestinian employees, they view working with Israel as a necessity due to the limited alternative options within the high-tech industry in Palestine. Thus, geographic mobility and economic growth are contained and controlled by Israeli politics (Tawil-Souri 2011), leading to a demographic separation without meaningful political separation (Hass 2002) and financial independence. This financial dependency results in few options for Palestinian IT developers. To achieve international work experience they must collaborate locally with Israeli entrepreneurs. Thus, working at Alpha has given the Palestinian developers an opportunity to acquire experience in global business. It is the thirst for these unique and international experiences, for technological progress and innovation, that was the driving force for making this collaboration work. After all, these unique experiences turned the Palestinian developers who used to work at Alpha into highly attractive and competitive hires after the company was shut down. Thus, in spite of the challenges imposed by the different political dynamics (e.g., being accused of subscribing to normalization discourse), the Palestinian IT developers did manage to create and apply strategies reducing the risk of sub-group dynamics while supporting meaningful collaboration.

## Conclusion

We found that the political dynamics at Alpha are managed in practice by the employees dedicated efforts to making the collaboration work despite the demographic discontinuities. Strategies include cautious consideration of using politically neutral categories when referring to the offices and the collaborative situations, putting politics temporarily aside, shutting down political discussion, and, finally, insisting that politics are personal and therefore should not interfere with the business domain. We argue that Alpha employees manage to work in a

paradoxical context by displacing the inner paradox through strategies of non-confrontation instead of engaging in translating conflicting agendas. Thus, the IT developers applied a strategy of keeping the collaboration across discontinuities together, by keeping politics and work apart. Tony Blair, who attended the official launch of Alpha, called for more partnerships across the Israeli-Palestinian divide, while emphasizing that “*we need a political solution, but we also know it’s not just about politics. It’s about business*” (Associated Press 2009). However, we argue that the business domain is deeply dependent upon the political domain. Thus, despite the sincere efforts invested by the IT developers, politics keep sneaking into the office, utterly challenging the possibility of getting access to politically neutral ground.

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