

# **Israel/Palestine Conflict: Strategic Narratives and the Battle of Frames**

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## **Abstract**

Using Entman's framing model and Miskimmon's strategic narrative approach, this paper will provide an analysis of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This analysis will illustrate how these contesting strategic narratives and frames can be used to inform an effective public diplomacy strategy for the Palestinian leadership to target a US audience; this paper also explores the ICC probe into Israel using Entman's framing model.

## **Introduction**

Narratives may act as conceptual frameworks. They allow humans to connect apparently unconnected phenomena around some causal transformation (Miskimmons et al, 2013, p.7). Structurally, narratives are composed of actors, events, plots and time, as well as setting and space. Narratives can be used effectively and strategically in the field of Public diplomacy, which is defined as the "official communication with foreign publics" and nonstate groups in other countries (Miskimmons et al, 2013, p.214). Another model that intersects with using narratives in the field of public diplomacy is Entman's framing model.

Entman defines framing as the act of "selecting and highlighting some facets of events or issues, and making connections among them so to promote a particular interpretation, evaluation, and/or solution." Entman also continues to suggest that frames contribute to a construction of shared meanings, as emphasized above; the narrative gives meaning to the connection of components within itself. In sociological theory, narratives are essential components of establishing symbolic interactionism in forging identities while building on assumptions, concepts, and images (Serpe and Stryker, 2011).

Strategic narratives, are a means for political actors to construct a shared meaning of the past, present, and future of international relations in order to shape the opinions and behavior of actors at home and overseas. (Miskimmons et al, 2013, p.248) They are frameworks constructed-over time- for individuals and groups to make meaning of their realities. Narratives are instrumental in understanding and forging global order while also shaping perceptions of power and interests. Consider, for example, an alliance: how do those inside attempt to shape its preferred policies? How do those outside of said alliance interrupt the coalition's policies or,

further, to disintegrate the validity of the alliance? This strategic narrative steps ahead, observing how identities and global order structure specific policies, agendas, or goals.

System narratives are about the nature of the structure of international affairs; Roberts argues that narratives help explain how structures “emerge and are sustained, changed and transformed over time” (Miskimmons *et al*, 2013, p.10). Identity narratives focus on the identities of actors within international affairs, constantly in a process of negotiation and contestation (10). Issue narratives shape the terrain where policy and agenda discussions occur expanding on the prior elements, thus strengthening the resonance among the three (10). Subotić’s (2016) ideas about the manipulation of narratives for political purposes overlap with the ideas of Miskimmon *et al*. (2013) on strategic narratives.

### **The role of social media and information technology in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict**

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is a prime example of how contrasting strategic and identity narratives are formed, reflected, and how different frames are disseminated and contested. Generally, the Israeli national narrative of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict dominated in the international arena vis-à-vis the traditional media environment (mainstream media). However, the continued rise of social media has shaken the environment in which foreign policy issues are framed and has enabled more actors to exert influence through framing (Manor, 2018, p.372).

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is one of the global issues that were directly impacted by the rise of social media where these online platforms were employed as strategic tools to disseminate frames and counter-frames related to the conflict. Like other ministries of foreign affairs (MFAs) around the world, the Israeli and Palestinian MFAs had to adapt to this new information ecosystem and enter the world of digital diplomacy. Even though both politicians and government institutions embraced digital diplomacy and adopted new mediums of information, there are some implications as social media platforms are contested framing environments in which numerous actors vie for audience attention, including traditional media outlets, new media outlets, citizen journalists and a plethora of diplomatic actors (Manor, 2016, p.371). Despite the important insights of Entman’s model, framing research often remains focused on traditional media given the perceived hegemony of the newsroom elite. However, the

development of social media has changed the environment in which foreign policy issues are framed and has enabled more actors to exert influence through framing. (Manor, 2018, p.372).

Even though the communication tools have changed, the salient narratives in each country remain the same. Using Miskimmon’s model I analyze Israeli and Palestinian identity, system, and issue narratives:

|               | Identity Narratives  | System Narratives   | Issue Narratives  |
|---------------|--|---|---|
| <b>Israel</b> | Israel has the right to defend itself.                                 | Military presence in the West Bank and near Gaza is necessary for Israel’s security.              | The 2014 Israel-Gaza war was necessary to stop Hamas rocket attacks.          |
|               | Israel has the right to exist as a Jewish State.                       | Israel is not part of the ICC, Palestine is not a state thus it cannot be under ICC jurisdiction. | ICC probe to investigate war crimes is antisemitic and politically motivated. |
|               | Jews have a historical connection to Judea and Samaria (the West Bank) | Israeli settlements in the West Bank are under the supervision of the Supreme Court of Israel     | Israelis have the right to settle in Judea and Samaria (the West Bank)        |
|               | The IDF is the most moral army in the world.                           | Israel’s enemies must be met with force.  | Hamas hides within civilian structures. (inevitable collateral damage)        |
|               | Never again – (the holocaust)  | Israel will not tolerate bullying from other countries, whether                                   |   |

|  |  |  |  |
|--|--|--|--|
|  |  | militarily or through multilateral organizations | Knesset outlines bill to defend Israel from ICC probe (prison sentences on any Israelis or Israeli institutions who hand information to ICC without approval.) |
|--|--|--|--|

For this part I am only including unifying identity and system narratives amongst Palestinians. There are however contesting narratives (both identity and system) between the two dominant Palestinian political factions Hamas (which *de facto* governs the Gaza Strip) and Fatah (which *de fact* governs the West Bank).

|  | Identity Narrative   | System Narrative   | Issue Narrative   |
|--|--|--|---|
|  | <p>Palestinians live under brutal military occupation.</p> <p>An ongoing Nakba (theft of Palestinian land)</p> | <p>Israeli army must be held accountable for war crimes.</p> <p>Respect for international law</p> <p>The resistance of the Palestinian people is legitimate.</p> | <p>Palestinians welcome ICC ruling, positive step towards accountability.</p> <p>Israeli settlements are illegal under international law.</p> |

|                         |  |   |   |
|-------------------------|--|---|---|
| <p><b>Palestine</b></p> | <p>Legitimate resisters of a foreign military occupation.</p> <p>Palestinian civilians are victims of Israeli occupation</p> | <p>Palestinian civilians must be protected.</p> | <p>The international community should not accept settler colonialism.</p> <p>The 2014 war was a 'victory for the resistance.'</p> <p>Israel killed 1500 civilians in the 2014 war with no accountability.</p> |
|-------------------------|--|---|---|

When it comes to the ICC probe the competing strategic narratives put forward by Israeli and Palestinian leaderships play a critical role in shaping both policy and media response to the ICC probe. To further analyze these narratives, I use Entman’s model to expand on Israel and Palestine’s divergent strategic narratives regarding the ICC probe.

**Palestinian Narrative**

In a statement, the Palestinian Authority’s foreign ministry welcomed the ICC investigation and considered it a “long-awaited step that serves Palestine’s tireless pursuit of justice and accountability.” Hamas, a Gaza-based militant group, also welcomed the decision, though they, too, are under investigation. The PA’s messaging over the issue is much less frequent than that of

Israel since the PA doesn't have to disseminate counter narratives because the ICC investigation is consistent with the Palestinian narrative and is considered part of the solution.

| Problem                     | Cause   | Evaluation   | Solution                       |
|-----------------------------|---|--|--------------------------------|
| Israeli human rights abuses | Military occupation and a culture of impunity | An independent ICC investigation is a step-forward towards justice | Accountability through the ICC |

Legal ramifications aside, the ICC probe cuts deep through one of Israel's primary identity narratives which holds that they are the humane actor in this conflict, defending themselves against unprovoked aggression. To accept the ICC probe or cooperate with it in any shape or form would cause dissonance within many of Israel's narratives.

**Israel's narrative – Framing chart**

| Problem   | Cause  | Evaluation  | Solution  |
|-----------|--|---|---|
| ICC probe | Antisemitism/unfairly singling out Israel<br><br>Palestinians politicizing the court | Palestinian Authority is not a state<br><br>Israel is not a member of the court.<br><br>The probe is an affront to Israeli sovereignty. | Not cooperate with the ICC, fight the decision. |

This chart demonstrates how Israel's framing of the ICC probe reinforces its own narrative. The Israeli government has different channels/messengers to disseminate and re-enforce such state narratives. One of its chief messengers is Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

***“The court established to prevent atrocities like the Nazi Holocaust against the Jewish people is now targeting the one state of the Jewish people.***

***–Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu***

In establishing an associative connection with the ICC and the horrors of the Holocaust, Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu invokes one of the key events shaping Israel's master narratives. He condemns the ICC probe, calling it “undiluted antisemitism” and vows to fight the decision. By invoking such an emotionally evocative frame, Netanyahu not only targets foreign publics but also domestic Israeli audiences, framing his image as the protector of Israel against a hostile world.

The Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs, on the other hand, tackles the issue using a legal framework, citing the fact that Israel is not a member of the court and that the Palestinian Authority is not a state to de-legitimize the probe. This defense differs from the former (Netanyahu's) because it acknowledges that the emotional frame is not itself enough to defend against a robust legal argument. The two approaches have different purposes but intersect over the issue of Israel's right to a state and state sovereignty. Rather than act as isolated incidents and narratives, they interact in an interplay which reinforces the aversion of the ICC probe.

### **Dissonance between the US and Israeli narratives.**

In May 2020 the Trump administration warned the ICC against asserting jurisdiction over Israel, saying the US will “exact consequences” for any “illegitimate” investigations. This threat materialized in September 2020 when the Trump administration sanctioned ICC senior officials<sup>1</sup> including chief prosecutor Fatou Bensouda, accusing the court of “illegitimate attempts” to

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<sup>1</sup> “International Criminal Court Officials Sanctioned by US,” BBC News (BBC, September 2, 2020), <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-54003527>.



subject Americans to its jurisdiction. The US has traditionally treated Israel as a strategic partner, aligning itself with the narrative that frames Israel as a victim rather than an aggressor.

The Biden administration inherited this issue and maintained Trump's opposition to the ICC probe into Israeli actions in the West Bank and Gaza. Unlike the Trump administration, however, current U.S. President Joe Biden has vowed to make human rights and multilateralism central to his approach to international affairs. This stance made it difficult for the Biden administration to oppose the ICC as aggressively as Trump because sanctioning a court responsible for investigating human rights abuses is inconsistent with the US identity narrative that promotes human rights as a pillar of U.S. foreign policy.

### **Biden's Dilemma**

The existence of two contradictory narratives presents a challenge for the Biden administration. While the US has framed itself as an ally of Israel committed to upholding the country's sovereignty, it does not want to appear as if it is coercing an international court to not investigate human rights abuses. For the time being, Biden tries to take a middle road, publishing a press release [opposing the ICC investigation](#) but ending the Trump era sanctions against the ICC.

In the end, the case of the ICC probe leaves the Biden administration trying to reconcile policy that is not inconsistent with its current identity narrative. As the State Department stated in its [announcement](#) ending sanctions against ICC personnel, "We believe...that our concerns about these cases would be addressed through engagement with all stakeholders in the ICC process rather than through the imposition of sanctions."

Although tangible, studies show that monolithic narratives of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict play the strongest roles in moving towards accepting or rejecting a two-state solution (Hagai and Zurbriggen, 2019). However, in contrast to monolithic conceptualization of the conflict and its solutions, the Biden administration showcases the variations across actors, positionality, and changing social orders/structures.

What is observed in this instance with Biden post-Trump, and in the insertion of the USA in Palestinian-Israeli affairs is an illustration of how narratives require an opposing image to build

itself against. It is less direct and more across a continuum. The Biden administration is forging not a single narrative, but a set of narratives that are evoked and employed differently across time and context. On the one hand, for example, Biden's administration necessarily upholds a commitment to Israel as a strategic ally in the Middle East, but also because of the deeply rooted historical connections between the USA, American Jewry and Israel.<sup>2</sup> More than this, the Biden administration is caught not only between conflicting narratives, but also its own as a State upholding global order, diplomacy, and justice. In this way, the Biden administration sways between promoting rights but also remaining strategic in its alliances especially in light of increased opposition to global powers in the past decade (including the USA's own witnessing of mass scale rebellions against racial discrimination and social hierarchies).

### **Framing Palestine as a progressive issue – a threat to bipartisan support to Israel?**

The framing of Palestine either through victimhood or vilification has caused an either/or dichotomy. The dichotomization of identities allows for simpler understandings of "other" but it also allows for more effective positioning of different identities against one another. Contrastively, the re-framing of Palestine as a progressive issue has allowed for the amplification of the Palestinian narrative beyond the identity of Palestinians and entwined it with the approach of human rights and global justice. It becomes framed as the issue which progressive diplomats and political leadership adopts as an emblem of reform and transformative changes. In this way, the Palestinian narrative transcends Palestine and acts as a tool to re-frame America's own internal socioeconomic and political fissures.

In the last five years, the USA has seen a shift in leadership. This is not only in regards to incorporation of women and people of color in congressional positions (see for example Alexandra-Ocasio Cortez (AOC), Ilhan Omar, and Rashida Tlaib), but also for the insertion of a new narrative which connects American interests for racial equality, healthcare, and gun control with the context of Palestine, not as an external issue but one reflective of American realities. This may threaten bipartisan support for Israel as it removes the exceptionalism of the

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<sup>2</sup> For more see, Lipka, 2016 (PEW research) <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/03/16/a-closer-look-at-jewish-identity-in-israel-and-the-u-s/>

Palestinian-Israeli conflict to mirror global affairs. In essence, the revised discourse of Rashida Tlaib, Ilhan Omar, and AOC shows confrontation towards racism, anti-Semitism, gender discrimination, and social hierarchies which exclude various segments of American society. More than this it allows for the muddling of *both* the Palestinian and Israeli narratives beyond the single and linear narratives that are often disseminated on mainstream and alternative media. Moreover, the diversity of the leadership which exchanges narratives on Palestine and Israel allow for showcasing conflicting and layered approaches to the conflict. This, in social psychology, is examined to show that expansive differences of public opinion on a specific issue prods a recalibration of interactions, modes of exchange, and the extent of tolerating differences in more equitable ways.

More than this, the different backgrounds of leaders employing similar trends in their narrative on Palestine allows for observing the dimensionality of perceptions, attitudes and narrative.

**Discussion: How can the Palestinian leadership use salient progressive narratives in the US to rally support for the Palestinian cause?**

How is it that the Palestinian leadership can use such salient progressive narratives in the US to rally support for the Palestinian cause? Rather, what is it that Palestinian leadership should take into consideration in light of the changes in political realities in the USA, but also in light of the changes happening especially with the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement and the protest against racial and ethnic discrimination?

The conversations of Tlaib, Omar, AOC are ones which emphasize the intersections of America's own social policies and how that holds implications for its foreign policy. During the Trump administration, the USA witnessed the extreme repression of immigrant families to the point of holding children in cages, the violent repression of protestors by police, and the horrifying rise of White supremacy groups such as the KKK across different towns in the USA.

The overlap of internal dynamics with foreign policy requires an understanding of not only inter-group dynamics but intra-group dynamics. The Palestinian leadership is in a position to not just demand solidarity and support, but to offer public critique for the USA's own repressive policies. While this may pose a risk in losing additional support from the USA's presidential administration,

studies showcase that for procuring change approximately only 25 per cent of the target community needs to mobilize to create change. Rather than merely emphasize the discourse of human rights and multilateralism, the emphasis can be in weakening the stronghold of the USA on the politics of Palestine-Israel.

For instance, when Adams and Dressler examined perceptions of injustice in the Black community in 1998 they found that there are three dimensions “responses to personal discrimination, perceptions of political structures, and perceptions of major social institutions” (3). In this way, the perceptions and narratives of Palestinian leadership has often been directed at other leaders; however American leadership is also bound to its own communities and social structures. For this reason, Palestinian leadership is already facing backlash from global leadership, however the expansion to target average citizens remains to be under-explored.

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