



300 Lollipops: Mainstream Media Coverage of the Gaza Flotilla Raid

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This paper explores the international media coverage of the 2010 Mavi Marmara raid and its implications for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It analyzes samples of Turkish, Israeli, and American mainstream media sources using Gadi Wolfsfeld's (2011) concepts of media access, media effects, and drama-driven coverage. This analysis reveals recurrent episodic frames, which employ both the interpersonal and international drama of the raid, as well as a dependence on the voices of political elites and experts. Ultimately, two predominant and competing frames are present in the samples—one that defends and one that condemns the IDF's actions—neither of which address the complexities of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The author suggests that this drama-driven, detail-oriented coverage undermined the original intentions of the humanitarian activists aboard the Mavi Marmara who hoped to draw international attention to the deteriorating situation in the Gaza Strip.

I. Introduction

On May 31, 2010, commandos of the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) raided the Mavi Marmara. Nine passengers were killed and many more were injured, including IDF forces. The Turkish aid ship, named after the Sea of Marmara, held 581 majority Turkish humanitarian workers and was the largest of six ships that made up the Freedom Flotilla. Together the convoy of ships traveled in an attempt to break Israel's blockade of Gaza. At the time of the raid, Gaza had been under a sea, air, and land blockade since

2006, after Hamas won the Palestinian Authority legislative elections. According to the Human Rights Council Report on the raid, the humanitarian activists intended to “draw international public attention to the situation in the Gaza Strip...to break the blockade; and to deliver human assistance and supplies to Gaza” (Human Rights Council, 2010, p. 20). The raid did get public attention. Within hours, numerous news articles covered the event, #FreedomFlotilla began “trending” on Twitter, Al Jazeera set up a live blog with the “latest updates,” and the IDF’s office of public relations and media uploaded several videos of the attack to YouTube, prompting many videos in response (Al Hussaini, 2010; Carlstron, 2010).

In the introduction to his collection, *Midnight on the Mavi Marmara*, scholar and journalist Moustafa Bayoumi (2010) argues that the flotilla raid will “probably be understood as this generation’s ‘anti-1967’ moment for Israel,” implying the reversal of Israel’s international image from one of a “scrappy underdog beating the odds” during the 1967 war to a hyper-aggressive power in the Middle East (p. 8). Bayoumi (2010) concludes his introduction with a hopeful statement: “What the Gaza Freedom Flotilla and actions like it show is that ordinary people may be the ones who are finally going to push the conflict to a resolution, one that guarantees justice for everyone” (p. 15). Bayoumi’s (2010) collection focuses on the witnesses’ episodic accounts of the event rather than the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, though he asserts that the raid will affect the larger conflict.

Three years later, however, despite the diligence and commitment of the activists, the Gaza blockade continues, and the conflict is far from a resolution. I argue that the media frenzy over the raid actually undermined the efforts of the activists due to the production of drama-driven coverage focused on details of violence. Two predominant and competing frames formed out of this coverage—one that defends and one that condemns the IDF’s actions—neither of which address the complexities of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In their recent study on this subject, Fahmy and Eakin (2013) analyze 156 news stories in an effort to explore this incident and the larger Israeli-Palestinian conflict through a peace/war journalism perspective. In this paper, like Fahmy and Eakin (2013), I look at international news stories of the raid. I apply Gadi Wolfsfeld’s (2011) concepts of media access, media effects, and drama-driven coverage to analyze news samples.

I examine six news stories from Turkish, Israeli and American mainstream media (MSM) (*Today's Zaman*, *Hürriyet Daily News*, *Haaretz*, *The Jerusalem Post*, *The New York Times*, and *CNN*), to explore a relative range of national interests and mainstream audiences. All of the articles were published online within the first 15 days after the raid in the acute stage of coverage. I begin with a discussion of infotainment and drama, both interpersonal and international, followed by an examination of the voices heard in this coverage. Finally, I analyze the competing frames represented by the various sources, including self-defense, political provocation, law, and human interest.

II. Infotainment and the Premium on Drama in Mainstream Media Coverage

In *Making Sense of Media & Politics*, Gadi Wolfsfeld (2011) explains, “the media are dedicated more than anything else to telling a good story and this can often have a major impact on the political process” (p. 72). This goal encourages an increased desire for attention-grabbing material that often sacrifices context and analysis. The resulting coverage places a premium on drama that can act more as “infotainment” (both and between entertainment and information) than news (Wolfsfeld, 2011, p. 4). The news media were quick to recognize the dramatic potential of the Mavi Marmara incident. As illustrated by the articles I examined, the coverage involved several dramatic narratives, which can be distinguished into two types: interpersonal and international.

The interpersonal stories described and debated the experiences of the IDF commandos, the humanitarian volunteers aboard the ship, and their families. *Hürriyet Daily News* released an article on day of the raid titled, “Families of those attacked on the Turkey aid ship devastated” (Songün, 2010). The article included interviews with family members who had yet to hear from their loved ones. The wife of one of the activists is featured: “my son is 4 years old and my daughter is 6. They packed 300 lollipops for their father to take to Palestinian children in Gaza,’ she said through tears” (Songün, 2010, para. 6). A later *CNN* article employs the same interpersonal drama in a discussion of the raid victims’ autopsies, using the rhetoric of a detective story: “The autopsy results gave clues about how the violence unfolded after the Israeli commandos stormed the Turkish ship in the pre-dawn hours” (Watson and Kayali, 2010, para. 2). The article continues with

graphic details of the bullets used and types of injuries suffered by activists, concluding with a description of the mourning people gathered at a Mosque in Istanbul who, “despite tears and sobbing...called this week a ‘victory,’ because it brought international attention to Israel’s 3-year blockade of Gaza” (Watson and Kayali, 2010, para. 17). Ironically, this final statement is the only time that the Gaza blockade is mentioned in the entirety of the story, illustrating the preference for episodic drama over thematic, contextually intelligent coverage.

The international narratives, framed the Mavi Marmara incident as an international diplomatic crisis. Three of the articles I sampled employed this frame, specifically focusing on the international condemnation faced by Israel in the aftermath of the incident. *Today’s Zaman* article, “UN experts: Israel flotilla raid broke int’l law” exemplifies this trend in its title alone (2010). The article repeatedly cites the 56-page UN Human Rights Council report, which “lists a series of alleged crimes committed by Israeli forces” (2010, para. 2). Upon further investigation, this article was published with nearly the same wording by numerous other periodicals (*Jerusalem Post*, *NBC*, *Lexis Nexis*, and *Arkansas Online*), emphasizing the popularity of this dramatic frame.

Instead of featuring individuals or even spokespeople, the actors in the above-mentioned article are countries personified. “Israel indicated early on” and “Israel says its troops opened fire” begin paragraphs in the article that demonstrate the international scale of the drama (“UN experts,” 2010, para. 10 & para. 12). With this phrasing, the entire diverse country of Israel becomes one voice, silencing Israelis who condemn the raid, including the 6,000 who protested on the streets of Tel Aviv (Levinson, *Haaretz*, 2010). In the *New York Times* article “Deadly Israeli Raid Draws Condemnation,” journalist Isabel Kershner also characterizes nations. “Turkey, Israel’s most important friend in the Muslim world,” Kershner writes, “recalled its ambassador and canceled planned military exercises with Israel as the countries’ already tense relations soured even further” (2010, para. 2). By personifying the nations of Turkey and Israel, Kershner dramatizes the international, diplomatic conflict in an effort to tell a good story, while homogenizing the distinct voices within those nations.

III. Experts and Political Elites: Front Door Access to Articles on Mavi Marmara

Another aspect to consider in the coverage of the Mavi Marmara incident is media access. Wolfsfeld (2011) argues that political power translates to power over the media. Political elites, therefore, are granted “front door” access to news coverage (p. 12). This reliance on elite sources pertains to media coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and affects the political landscape, as exemplified by Khalil Rinnawi’s 2007 study. Rinnawi (2007) looked at Israeli print media coverage of Palestinian populations in Israel and the West Bank during the Al Aqsa Intifada and found a significant dependence on elite sources, which “prompts the press to accept a security paradigm for understanding societal factors” and avoid deeper issues of context and oppression (2007, p. 155). This trend is also prevalent in the articles on Mavi Marmara discussed in the previous section. Almost all of the articles offer a direct quotation by a politically elite figure. Significantly, the Turkish source, *Today’s Zaman*, devotes an entire article to summarizing the statements made by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. Netanyahu defends the IDF’s actions, and though, given the source, the audience likely disagrees with his defense, that article’s lack of alternative voices, responding opinions, and context, attest to Netanyahu’s front door access to the media and position as a political elite. The article did not include any oppositional statements to rebuff those of Netanyahu. Alternative voices might include those of the civilians in Gaza, the Israeli commandoes or the Israeli citizens who protested the raid in Tel Aviv, the activists aboard the flotilla, or other civilians involved in the conflict.

The other recurring characters who are often granted front door access to the news are so-called experts who often lack their supposed expertise. Edward Said (1997) discusses the dubiousness of expertise in Middle East representations in his book *Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts Determine How we See the Rest of the World*. Said (1997) offers numerous examples of “experts” on the Middle East and Islam who do not even speak Arabic, among other missing qualifications. Additionally, the title of “expert” denotes a level of objectivity, an assumption that Said argues against. This assumed objectivity is prevalent in the “UN experts” article mentioned above, the popularity of which can be explained by the official nature of the human rights experts’ opinion. The national background and individual histories of these experts are not deemed important, neither are

the political opinions of either the civilians in Gaza or the humanitarian activists who actually experienced the IDF's actions first hand.

IV. Competing Frames of the Raid in MSM Sources

In the media frenzy that followed the Mavi Marmara incident, frames were employed as narrative and political strategy. According to Wolfsfeld (2011), “every news medium uses frames as organizing devices to create a coherent story” (p. 99). Fahmy and Eakin (2013) emphasize the power of frames in their examination of peace versus war journalism. They argue that “frames, and thus certain understandings, become embedded within media coverage” conducive to mindsets that contribute to war, or alternatively, peace (Fahmy and Eakin, 2013, p. 5). Context, they explain, is vital to peace journalism, as is thematic coverage rather than episodic.

In the articles I have studied, two competing types of frames can be identified that employed similar tactics. The first type includes frames that defend the IDF's actions and the second includes frames that condemn the attack. The frames that defend the IDF's actions often employ the trope of self-defense, not only for the IDF commandos who faced “hundreds of people on board that beat, clubbed and stabbed soldiers” and “forced soldiers to attack,” but also for the nation of Israel as a whole (“Netanyahu,” 2010, para. 3). Under the frame of self-defense, media in support of Israel evoke fear by discussing Hamas and terrorism. Israeli Defense Minister Ehud Barak is quoted in a *Jerusalem Post* article saying that the Turkish members of the NGO responsible for the flotilla are “extremist supporters of terror” (Katz, 2010, para. 6). With the threat of terror, this frame indicates, Israel cannot allow a flotilla to break its blockade and potentially deliver weapons in support of Palestinian terrorists.

The *Jerusalem Post* article quoted furthers this depiction by including an image of very large knives, chains, and clubs with the caption: “Weapons from ‘Mavi Marmara’” (Katz, 2010). The article describes in detail the struggle on board the ship, implying self-defense without being explicit:

[The IDF commandos] immediately encountered fierce resistance as they were attacked by activists armed with bats, knives and metal pipes...the commandos first responded to the violence with crowd dispersion measures, and after almost an hour of scuffles, during which a number of soldiers were

wounded—some of them stabbed or shot—the commandos were given permission to use live fire. At one point, activists succeeded in stealing a handgun from one of the soldiers, leading to an escalation in violence. (Katz, 2010, para. 2-3)

As is evident, the article blames the activists for fighting back and not complying with the commandos. There is no discussion of whether the commandos should have boarded the ship in the first place; the rhetoric of this self-defense frame distracts from the greater issue at stake.

Another frame that defends the IDF argues that the flotilla was an act of political provocation and a cheap ploy for media attention. The *Jerusalem Post* article cites the Israeli Defense Minister's use of this argument twice, urging readers and Palestinian and Arab leaders “not to let this ‘provocation by irresponsible people’ ruin progress made in proximity peace talks” (Katz, 2010, para. 3). Yet the fact that the act was one of provocation cannot be disputed; many of the volunteers aboard the ship said so themselves in the Human Rights Council Report that one of their goals was to “draw international public attention” (2010, p. 20). Gideon Levy responds to this frame in his essay, “Ship of Fools,” featured in Bayoumi's (2010) collection; Levy (2010) writes, “Yes, this flotilla is indeed a political provocation, and what is protest action if not political provocation?” (2010, p. 76). It is not the statement that is refutable but rather the implications of statement: the activists do not really care about the situation and instead are carelessly trying to vilify Israel without being sensitive to the reasons behind the blockade. Under the accusation of political provocation, however, these implications are not addressed.

A framing device that is utilized by both those defending and those condemning the raid is that of law. According to Levy (2010), Israeli Foreign Ministry spokesman Yossi Levy argued that the flotilla was a violation of international law. According to many other articles, however, the raid was illegal. The UN experts featured in the *Zaman* article repeatedly discuss the raid's intricate violations of international law, as do the other articles that cover the Human Rights Council Report. This frame, like those mentioned above, neglected to provide any context or even consequence for the incident.

A central frame presented by sources condemning the raid was human interest oriented, that of the victims and their families. The Mavi Marmara

incident left victims and hundreds of witnesses. Numerous accounts full of the drama necessary for attention-grabbing news stories presented the humanitarian volunteers as innocent family members and the IDF commandos as ruthless enemies. The quotation mentioned in the *Hürriyet* article describing the teary-eyed mother and the 300 lollipops meant for the children in Gaza and obstructed by the raid perfectly exemplifies media's often-blatant elicitation of sympathy from its audience. Representations like this one work to distract from the political motivations and provocations of the Freedom Flotilla, while simultaneously encouraging readers to support the activists in their political agitations. Though this frame may seem more people-oriented, it simplifies the situation into a black and white dichotomy of good and bad players and neglects to cover the people who the activists intended to help originally: the civilians in Gaza.

V. Conclusion

At this point, more than three years after the Mavi Marmara incident and over six years after its initiation, the blockade of Gaza still exists. While Israeli sources claim to have eased the siege, the Gaza Strip nevertheless faces a “dire fuel and power crisis” according to a recent (non-Mainstream media) article (“Rights groups,” 2013). In response to these dire conditions, activists from around the world continue their efforts to break the barrier and protest the blockade. Most recently, the “Sumud and Justice Flotilla” carried hundreds of activists along the Gaza coast to protest Israel's economically stifling fishing limitations (“Protest at sea,” 2013). Whether or not Bayoumi's claim that the Mavi Marmara will change the Israeli-Palestinian conflict forever remains to be seen.

More definitively, the media effects employed by MSM after the 2010 raid did not contribute to a greater awareness of the Gaza blockade and the Israeli occupation in general. This is because dramatic, episodic, detail-oriented coverage overshadowed the more complex thematic stories at the core of the conflict. In this way, the news media value the audience's understanding and awareness of the conflict far less than they value their attention. Both of the framing types and all of the sampled news stories neglected to cover the plight of the Gazan civilians whose aid was intercepted and whose lives remain contained within an oppressive blockade.

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