Part Three

Social Media Management and Public Opinion Control

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Comparative analysis of Israeli and PLO diplomacy practices during the May 2021 Israeli attacks against Gaza

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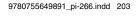
Introduction

On 7 May 2021, a fresh round of military clashes broke out between Israel and the Palestinian group Hamas in Gaza after weeks of rising tensions in East Jerusalem, which started with an Israeli court ruling sanctioning the forceful eviction of several Palestinian families from their homes in the Sheikh Jarrah area of the city. The neighbourhood had become the symbol of a protracted struggle against what Palestinians call new practices of 'ethnic cleansing' since Israel's annexation of East Jerusalem in 1980 (Al-Sharif, 2021). During the eleven days of Israeli military strikes against Gaza, 240 Palestinians, mostly women and children, were killed and 12 Israelis were killed by rockets launched by the Palestinian group Hamas, which controls Gaza, before an Egyptian-brokered ceasefire on 21 May 2021 stopped the hostilities.

During the period of military actions, Israel used Twitter and other social media platforms to legitimize its military action in Gaza and win international support, as part of its persistent public diplomacy campaign to construct and manage its self-constructed image as a state defending its right to exist. In contrast, the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), which nominally represents all Palestinians, used its official Twitter feed to communicate an alternative narrative of the conflict, focusing more on the violence and the suffering the military attacks subjected Palestinians in Gaza to as well as on persistent Israeli settler-colonial practices in the occupied Palestinian territories. What was particularly remarkable, however, was the exponential rise in digital activism by ordinary Palestinians and activists on the ground, who used digital platforms to disseminate largely unmediated images of collapsed homes, casualties and displaced families in Gaza and tell alternative narratives of lived experiences during the hostilities, thus challenging the Israeli self-constructed narrative of its right to defend itself against what it calls terrorist actions by Hamas and the PLO's lukewarm approach to public diplomacy.

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This chapter discusses the Israeli and PLO's digital practices as part of their diverse strategic public diplomacy campaigns that have become more sophisticated since the 11 September 2001 attacks in New York and since the monumental expansion of digital platforms that have enhanced the opportunities for new players to be involved in the battle over publics. Broadly speaking, public diplomacy is often discussed as a necessary taken-for-granted political practice that states instrumentalize to communicate their aims and ideologies to foreign audiences. Scholarly work on public diplomacy across a variety of disciplines – politics, political communication, war studies and international relations – often uses the term in instrumentalist and functional sense, such as its effect on public opinion and whether or how it could lead to an intended political outcome. As an ill-defined term and practice, public diplomacy is sometimes confused or used interchangeably with the concept of soft power, which has been used to refer to any established state's efforts to influence international publics through the communication of compelling narratives, or with the concept of propaganda defined as the dissemination of biased ideas or as a form of misinformation and deception. In addition, public diplomacy has been conflated with the concept of strategic communications, defined by Holtzhausen and Zerfass as 'the practice of deliberate and purposive communication that a communication agent enacts in the public sphere on behalf of a communicative entity to reach set goals' (2013: 74) or, more precisely, strategic political communication which incorporates the use of sophisticated knowledge of attributes of human behaviour, such as attitude, cultural tendencies and media-use patterns.

Within the field of international relations and political communication studies, Alister Miskimmon, Ben O'Loughlin and Laura Roselle (2013) suggest public diplomacy can be better understood by paying attention to what they call 'strategic narratives' – or the storytelling aspects of public diplomacy, soft power or strategic communication. For them, strategic narratives are the means for 'political actors to shape the behavior of domestic and international actors … . [They] are a tool for political actors to extend their influence, manage expectations and change the discursive environment in which they operate. They are narratives about both states and the system itself … the point of strategic narratives is to influence the behavior of others' (2013: 2). In their argument, the authors make three central claims concerning the importance of narratives in global politics. First, they argue that 'narratives are central to human relations' (ibid: 1) as they constrain and enable behaviour. Second, that people and political actors use narratives in strategic ways, and third, that the communication environment affects how narratives are communicated and what effects they have (ibid).

In the digital age, what is increasingly evident is the fact that public diplomacy, understood broadly as comprising official (state or non-state) discursive and visual communicative practices disseminated in diverse platforms and spaces, is increasingly being challenged by diverse local/national, regional and transnational actors seeking to tell their own narratives and gain public recognition of their claims. Such challenges have only served to underline the fault lines in public diplomacy's ability to construct 'monological views', particularly of contemporary conflicts, (Kaempf, 2013: 601) and exposed the 'continual risk of stray images emerging from the battlefield, which may shape public opinion both at home and among the population in the war zone' (Hoskins and O'Loughlin, 2010: 12). Furthermore, as Philip Seib (2012) has argued, the

challenges posed by the digital era require a shift in diplomatic practice that matches the pace of real-time events and, as such, contemporary digital diplomatic practices must speak to the ordinary public, not only to elite government leaders, since 'power *can* emanate from the public, and so developing and maintaining ties with publics around the world is an essential element of foreign policy' (Seib, 2012: 8).

While debates continue around the digital divide and who can say to whom, there is a consensus that an ultra-saturated media and communication environment and the easy access to social media platforms provide ample opportunities for activists to resist, to exert their agency, to self-represent themselves and to defy structural constraints. Focusing more closely on the structural characteristics of Twitter to overcome such constraints, Zizi Papacharissi and Maria de Fatima Oliveira (2012) detail how the platform had changed the ways information is circulated because of its ability to enable what they call a 'collaborative construction of events' that brings together media outlets and online users during real-time events (ibid: 2), resulting in some dependence on members of the public for updates on events (Hoskins and O'Loughlin, 2010). Arguably, as more publics become producers and consumers of news, it becomes difficult for established states to control or influence public opinion through using discursive and visual communication or strategic narratives aimed at constructing a particular image of these states and securing them support. However, the debates on whether these narratives change public opinion and secure support remain unresolved, particularly in the contexts of prolonged and unequal conflicts as well as the changing sociopolitical conditions which would also determine what is said and who says it.

With this brief conceptual background, this chapter now offers a brief overview of public diplomacy practices by Israel and the PLO before turning to a comparative analysis of their official Twitter feed in the May 2021 armed conflict in which Israel repeatedly attacked Gaza and its people. It acknowledges from the outset that any comparative analysis of public diplomacy practices must take into account the broader aspects of the asymmetrical conflict between Israel and the Palestinian people and must acknowledge the fact that the entities under study here are different – Israel is an internationally recognized state and the PLO is a non-state actor still seeking to establish an independent state. This asymmetry has implications for the location of these actors in global power structures and their ability to act and reach out to a global audience, an asymmetry magnified by Israel's superior material, economic and symbolic power and its continuous occupation of Palestinian territory. As the superior power and as an established state, Israel not only holds, and has access, to significant military and institutional resources as well as foreign support, but also controls and limits the PLO resources as well as the Palestinian subjects under its settler-colonial regime.

Israeli, Palestinian public diplomacy in an asymmetrical conflict

Since its creation, Israel has used strategic and intentional public diplomacy as part of its constant campaign to dominate local and global politics and secure international legitimacy for its actions. This campaign is popularly known as *Hasbara*
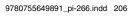
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(literally meaning to explain), a practice through which strategic information and communication has been tied to the strategic objectives of the Israeli state – namely, to cultivate a positive image and achieve legitimacy for its actions in its permanent war against the Palestinians (Khalidi, 2019). Following its 2006 war in Lebanon and Operation Cast Lead in Gaza in 2008, both of which seriously damaged Israel's reputation, Israel shifted to what Miriyam Aouragh calls Hasbara 2.0 (2016), which can be described as an assertive digital diplomacy campaign in social media platforms and involving several state entities, including the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) and the Israeli Ministry of Strategic Affairs established in 2008 to reach regional and international audiences.

The term *Hasbara* has been discussed as soft propaganda, public relations, government advocacy and public diplomacy (Aouragh, 2016; Shenhav, Sheafer and Gabay, 2010) or as persuasive strategic communication that the Jewish state has used to manage and control its image since even before its creation in 1948. Indeed, as historian Ilan Pappe has argued in his book *The Idea of Israel* (2016), Israel has been instrumentalizing Zionist ideology in politics, the education system, the media and film to construct its public image since even before the state's foundation in 1948. Jonathan Cummings (2016), too, provides a detailed account of what he terms the Israeli state's information apparatus in the early stages of its formation, and its concern with international legitimacy through constructing a positive and progressive image that contrasts with the negative and regressive image of Palestinians. For Cummings, the emergence of *Hasbara* before the formation of the state of Israel in 1948 is a reactive and defensive concept of political persuasion, rooted in Jewish culture. As such, *Hasbara* has often been used as referring to public diplomacy. However, Shaul R. Shenhav and others (2010) distinguish what they see as Israel's public diplomacy practices that incorporate media and public opinion into policymaking from *Hasbara* which, for them, 'assumes a tactical, rather than a strategic, approach aiming to explain actions and policy' (2010: 145). For them, public diplomacy incorporates reactive, proactive and relationship building, which applies to Israel's practices in the twenty-first century as well.

Some other scholars see the deliberate attempts of Israel to manage news narratives and media representations to construct its self-image as actions that are *in response* to what it claims to be an existential threat. This line of reasoning is sufficiently argued in Lisa-Maria Kretschmer's 2017 study of Israel's tweets in the 2012 Gaza war, in which she shows Israel's emphasis on the inevitable use of military for self-defence to legitimize its actions, and, as such, is a defensive action, rather than actively proposing political solutions or seeking to build relations with others. The study also demonstrates Israel's reliance on conventional pre-Cold War hard power, which Joseph Nye (2004) defines as the use of economic or military power to influence other actors, as opposed to the more benign soft power which relies on diplomacy, values and culture. What is more relevant to note, however, are the specific contexts under which Israel produces its self-image. Indeed, as Aouragh (2016) rightly notes, *Hasbara* has emerged within Israel's settler-colonial practices which, she argues, fundamentally contradict the concept and practice of public diplomacy because Israel 'attempts to construct consensus through persuasion about its right to occupy and repress Palestinians. Yet, it does so

while executing military campaigns in the oPt (occupied Palestinian territories) and maintaining segregationist policies for Palestinians inside Israel' (2016: 9).

While many studies have considered Israel's long-standing and persistent efforts to manage its public image and achieve international legitimacy, few studies have discussed the PLO's efforts to manage its image over time and particularly since the signing of the Oslo agreements in 1993. A notable exception is Paul Chamberlin's book *The Global Offensive* (2016) which discussed the PLO's public diplomacy moves on the international stage between 1967 and 1975 and the US response to these moves. The lack of scholarship on this important aspect of the PLO's political communication practices can be attributed to the fact that the PLO had been seen and discussed in the mainstream international relations literature as a terrorist non-state actor up until the Oslo agreement in 1993, as well as the fact that since the signing of the accords, the PLO lost some of its roles, ceding some administrative responsibilities and control to the Palestinian Authority (PA). Since the peace agreement, the PLO, as an umbrella organization founded in 1964 to represent all Palestinians, has maintained some official duties and responsibilities particularly with regard to international relations and negotiations with Israel.

The PA, established in May 1994, discernibly overlapped, and in fact overshadowed, the shrunk PLO in terms of their respective executive powers and international support. While officially, the PLO has remained the top national institution, representing the Palestinian people at large, and perhaps in a nominal fashion, the PA's jurisdiction was confined to the occupied Palestinian territories and the Palestinian population assigned to it by consecutive agreements with Israel. However, Israeli-Palestinian negotiations and agreements were all conducted and signed by the PLO, not the PA. Both the PLO and the PA remained dominated by Fatah, despite attempts by both the late president Yasser Arafat and his successor Mahmoud Abbas to distance its senior members from key positions preferring to rely on the bureaucratic system, including the security services, elevating themselves above factional differences.

Despite the signing of the Oslo accords, the relationship between Israel and the PLO/PA continues to be defined by structural asymmetry at all levels, most starkly evident in Israel's highly advanced military apparatus and technologies of control that have impacted Palestinian lives, particularly Palestinians in Gaza. Despite the accords, there is no official Palestinian representation in Israel and there are limited opportunities for Palestinian diplomats to engage with Israeli citizens. It is against this backdrop of limited diplomatic recognition that the Palestinian government in the West Bank launched the Palestine in Hebrew Facebook page in 2015, which posts content solely in Hebrew and which is managed by the PLO's Committee for Interaction with Israeli Society (Manor and Holmes, 2018). Furthermore, the diplomatic isolation of Gaza since 2007 when Hamas took over the Gaza Strip following its rupture with the PA has been strengthened by Israel's maintenance of a strict blockade and restrictions on its population, rendering Gaza into an open prison and stripping its inhabitants of their rights. These restrictions have extended to the banning since 2014 of Hamas's Twitter account after Hamas's classification by the United States and Europe as a terrorist organization. In the attacks in May 2021, Israel completely or partially destroyed – as it has in previous assaults – some of Gaza's infrastructure including homes, schools,

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health facilities, businesses, factories, roads and government offices, resulting in significantly higher war victims and casualties than the Iron Dome-shielded Israel.

Israeli Twitter feeds: Seeking legitimacy

This chapter offers a comparative analysis of Israel's and the PLO's public diplomacy efforts during the May 2021 attacks. It focuses on forty tweets, purposely selected randomly, of each of the official Twitter accounts of the PLO (@nadplo) and Israel's PM (@IsraeliPM) posted from 7 May to 21 May 2021. In making the comparison, the content analysis of these tweets was conducted using the online All My Tweets platform (allmytweets.net), which helped display all the tweets posted on each of the accounts on one page. Certain repetitive phrases in the tweets were captured and tracked before using thematic analysis of the tweets which was conducted by grouping central recurrent narratives of both accounts under themes discussed in the analysis given later in the text. Although analysing the online engagement with these tweets was beyond the scope of this chapter, it was noticed that the tweets by the Israeli prime minister's office attracted more public engagement than the PLO's, underlining Israel's advanced internet use illustrated earlier and its ability to drive online activity. It was also noted that the official Israeli prime minister's account posted a significantly higher number of tweets than the less active Palestinian account during the war.

Based on the analysis, Israel's attempts to dominate and control the digital sphere during the attacks, this chapter suggests, are intended to suppress Palestinian voices and de-legitimize Palestinian narratives in diverse spaces, including digital platforms. Israel's use of the internet as a technology of power and a tool of occupation is well documented in several studies. For example, Helga Tawil-Souri (2012) uses the term digital occupation to suggest that Israel's control over Gaza, in particular, continues and increasingly includes the high-tech real, while Gil Hochberg (2015) argues that Israeli occupation of Palestine is driven by the unequal access to visual rights, or the right to control what can be seen, how and from which position. Israel maintains this unequal balance by erasing the history and denying the existence of Palestinians, and by carefully concealing its own militarization. Israeli surveillance of Palestinians, combined with the militarized gaze of Israeli soldiers at places like roadside checkpoints, also serve as tools of dominance.

As part of Israel's continuous quest to control what Palestinians say in order to control international public opinion and legitimize its image, the state has also started to target Arab audiences through the use of Arabic to communicate its ideology and self-constructed image to a wider audience in the Arab world where hostility to Israel's policies is pervasive. Along with Arabic language newspapers, radio and broadcasting, Israel has created several Arabic-language Twitter accounts, including the virtual Twitter embassy, @IsraelintheGulf dedicated to fostering dialogue with people in the Gulf and @IsraelArabic, which has almost 500,000 followers. Any analysis of Israel's public diplomacy as discursive practices that are intentional requires a detailed analysis of all its communicative practices, which is beyond the scope of this study. Given our focus in this chapter, we limit the analysis to addressing the Twitter feed of

the Israeli prime minister's account @IsraeliPM, which tweets in English, during the May hostilities. A total of forty tweets were collected between 7 May and 21 May 2021, the period of the latest round of military attacks. Thematic analysis was used to address the main themes emerging from the tweets before relating them to the sociopolitical contexts.

The first finding in the analysis is that despite the constant use of Twitter, which invites dialogical and multi-flow communication, Israel's official tweets are unidirectional, suggesting a one-to-many mode of communication by elite and power sources. In fact, the tweets analysed mainly comprised quotes and video speeches by then prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu and other senior officials. The analysis also showed that the mode of delivery was formal rather than informal, with the tweets delivered in a format reminiscent of formal official TV addresses by state actors and elites who were popular before the digital age and specifically used to appeal to international audiences. Importantly, some of the tweets referred to Netanyahu in the third person, thus further hindering dialogic communication, interactivity and responses from the intended audiences, and, as such, appeared to be similar to communicative formats familiar in the 1990s when television was the main mass medium. The finding is interesting because it not only seeks to add credibility and legitimacy to the language used in the tweets, but also reflects Israel's bid to control the narrative through controlling the sources and the information provided and limiting criticism or challenging through dialogic communication.

In the thematic analysis, a key theme repeatedly emerging in the tweets communicated to about 950,000 followers was the discourse about Israel's power as the most advanced military force in the region and the use of this force for self-defence, thus repeating the defensive/reactive approach that has been at the core of Israel's *Hasbara* for years. The theme came across clearly in the repetition of words and categories associated with military power and with the use of this power against enemies, as in the reference to Hamas (63 times), security (38 times), attacks (37 times), IDF (36 times), rockets (35 times), terrorists (34 times) and defence (31 times), all of which convey an image of Israel as a powerful actor with military means (Hadari and Turgeman, 2018). For example, a tweet published on 14 May 2021 specifically emphasized Israel's military power and control of the battleground by repeating phrases such as Hamas was 'paying a heavy price for attacking the state', while accusing Hamas of using civilians as 'human shields', a term repeated six times (@IsraeliPM, 17 May). At the end of the war, Netanyahu was quoted saying that 'we regret every loss of life, but I can tell you categorically, there is no army in the world that acts in a more moral fashion than the army of Israel' (@IsraeliPM, 21 May). His language underscored Israel's use of strategic public diplomacy narratives to gain international support by linking 'military successes of counterterrorist operations' instead of 'the presentation of peace-oriented policies' (Kretschmer, 2017: 20).

In addition, in multiple tweets, Netanyahu deployed a strategic narrative justifying force as a form of self-defence and/or protection of its civilians from Hamas rockets, a narrative Israel has used repeatedly to present itself and its people as victims of violence. This is a narrative used by 'political actors to shape the behavior of domestic and international actors … . [They] are a tool for political actors to extend their

influence, manage expectations and change the discursive environment in which they operate. They are narratives about both states and the system itself … the point of strategic narratives is to influence the behavior of others" (Miskimmon, O'Loughlin and Roselle, 2013: 2). Indeed, the tweets communicated in English along with the videos of Netanyahu speaking in Hebrew with English subtitles sought to portray the war against Hamas as a war against terror, which neatly fit the Western narrative of the US-led global war against terrorism. Importantly, these tweets were largely aimed at Western elites, particularly those who have been supportive of the Jewish state, thus sidelining foreign publics with limited knowledge of the Israeli-Palestinian issue, as well as Jewish opponents of the state's military practices.

Israeli tweets also instrumentalized historical narratives that emphasized its inherent right to land, a dynamic made possible by world powers, including the Ottoman and European occupation and the British mandate, which facilitated Israel's occupation of Palestine in 1948 (Tawil-Souri, 2015). This was evident in Israel's first tweets about Al Aqsa clashes on 9 May, two days after violence began, portraying Israel as a democratic state with Jerusalem as its capital, and a state that had the right to defend and build itself 'just as every people builds its capital' (@IsraeliPM, 9 May). In another tweet, Netanyahu was quoted as saying 'Jerusalem has been the capital of the Jewish people for thousands of years. Our roots in Jerusalem go back to Biblical times' (@IsraeliPM, 9 May). In the same thread, Netanyahu adopted a threatening tone to 'terrorist organizations', vowing that 'Israel will respond powerfully to any act of aggression' (@IsraeliPM, 9 May), a threat that was repeated throughout the war. Reminding online users of Israel's historical roots and vowing aggressive responses against its enemies target Western states who support Israel's status as a democratic state in the Middle East., this narrative is established further by showcasing Western support in tweets that report phone calls with US and European leaders. By the end of the war, Netanyahu was shown hosting European foreign ministers, showing them a wing of an Iranian UAV that Israel shot down as proof that Iran supported Hamas (@IsraeliPM, 20 May).

Israel's militarized language was accompanied by indirect dehumanization of Palestinians who were injured or killed during the war. In fact, Netanyahu's occasional acknowledgement of loss of life in Gaza was mostly blamed on Hamas with the Jewish state repeatedly portraying the strikes in Gaza as part of the state's right to defend itself and restore calm, while the casualties were Hamas's doing. In a video, Israel portrayed a rocket misfired by Hamas into Gaza in a bid to attribute human casualties to Hamas who was committing a 'double war crime' by using its civilians as human shields (@IsraeliPM, 19 May 2021). Besides demonstrating a defensive approach, this narrative dehumanized Gaza's civilians, while the stories of Israeli casualties were repeatedly mentioned. In a tweet depicting Netanyahu's hospital visit to check on a wounded Israeli girl, he is quoted as saying: 'Next to her (the wounded girl) is a boy from Gaza being cared for', as an example of the 'difference between civilized people and the forces of darkness' (@IsraeliPM, 12 May 2021). The Palestinian boy, however, was not acknowledged in the image. Meanwhile, the word 'Palestinians' was mentioned only 5 times, compared to the words Israel or Israelis, which were highlighted 129 times. Palestinians are not given a name, let alone a face; in stark contrast, Netanyahu offers

condolences to the family of a Jewish man killed in a riot, mentioning Yigal Yehoshua by name (@IsraeliPM, 17 May).

These narratives, however, were challenged by unmediated images and videos of civilian suffering circulating on social media platforms. Among the online videos that went viral is one that shows a ten-year-old child crying over his father's dead body (Aldroubi, 2021). Similarly, journalists posted videos of their arrests by Israeli officers directly challenging Israel's claims of being a democracy. For example, the UK Sky News's correspondent shared a viral video on his Twitter condemning Israeli forces for mistreating CNN crew and sharing similar experiences he faced while reporting the war on ground (@Stone_SkyNews). The bombing of a media building that hosts Al Jazeera and AP was widely shared online, drawing condemnations against Israel which failed to provide evidence that Hamas had operatives there (Federman, 2021).

Our analysis shows that despite a history of past failures in its *Hasbara* project, Israel's public diplomacy continues to follow the same reactive approach while ignoring criticism of its actions. This is evident in the acknowledgement of an expected backlash in Netanyahu's early tweets where he vows that the state will 'not be beholden to the keyboards of Twitter users' or by narratives 'being expressed erroneously and misleadingly in the global media. In the end, truth will win but we must constantly reiterate it' (@IsraeliPM, 10 May). The defensive tone persisted until the end of the war, when Netanyahu hosted foreign ambassadors and explicitly stated that criticizing Israel 'not only is absurd and unjust and untrue … (but) it does enormous damage to democracies … It says you cannot protect yourself' (@IsraeliPM, 19 May). Choosing to follow the same narratives despite expected shortcomings reflects Israel's stagnant approach that makes it fall short of winning the online war of ideas.

Palestinian tweets – culture and affect

Palestinians have been early and enthusiastic adopters of the internet in the early twenty-first century, particularly during and since the Second Intifada (uprising) in 2000. However, the PLO's digital diplomacy efforts have been inconsistent as evidenced by the meagre PLO digital presence in all countries where Palestinian representative offices are based (Manor, 2019). In addition, unlike Israel which employs numerous channels to bridge barriers with Arab counterparts, the PLO has only one virtual Facebook embassy, 'Palestine in Hebrew', through which it aims to foster dialogue with Israelis and promote the two-state solution (Manor and Holmes, 2018). The Palestinian official diplomatic Twitter pages, or pages produced by the PA's governing entities, use English as the main language, thus indicating the bid to reach elite international audiences. These pages include the PA's prime minister's account @PalestinePMO and the PLO's official Twitter account @nadplo, which is the focus of this study. Like the Israeli prime minister's account, most of the tweets communicated on this account reported updates on war events.

The findings in this study show a different picture from that discussed earlier in the analysis of the official Israeli prime minister's Twitter feed. In fact, in stark contrast, it
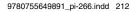
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is noticed that the PLO's Twitter feed relied on unofficial sources, including reports and postings by Palestinian activists and civil society actors as well as media reports and external sources. In addition, unlike Israel's official tweets, the PLO's Twitter feed used graphic images and stories uploaded by what might be called citizen journalists to highlight Israeli atrocities and discredit its narratives. Most of the forty tweets analysed were accompanied by images and videos, the majority of which were amateur videos provided by members of the public or citizen journalists, offering a stark contrast to Israel's use of highly sophisticated formats, such as the video displaying Israeli settlers' attacks on Palestinians in Sheikh Jarrah (@nadplo, 13 May). One video, for example, showed Palestinians banned from entering Al Aqsa Mosque compound, noting that the Israeli state 'continued to attack them with sonic bombs and rubber bullets' and that 'medics and journalists were removed from the gate area' (@nadplo, 10 May). Most tweets contained scenes of Israeli violence against Palestinians, primarily in the Gaza Strip and Sheikh Jarrah.

Such narratives and images are powerful representations of realities on the ground, posted by ordinary people affected by them. However, the PLO's Twitter feed's use of such images and narratives may have undermined its political credentials and its ability to influence the international elitist agenda, particularly because the Twitter feeds also reflected the lack of coordination (and continued infighting) with Hamas and with the PLO's diplomatic missions in global capitals. However, the use of ordinary people's reports of events on the ground also reflected that the PLO was targeting a different audience from that targeted by the Israeli prime minister's Twitter feed, namely global and regional publics (unfamiliar to the Palestinian cause) rather than power elites.

Interestingly, the PLO's Twitter feeds mostly appropriated affective and meaningful symbols and words to emphasize Palestinians' sense of identity as people living under occupation. Such symbols were evident in the repeated use of words such as: 'Palestine' and its derivatives (67 times); 'Gaza' (48 times); 'attack' (36 times), 'occupying', 'occupation' (30 times) and 'Israel' (29 times). In addition, the tweets incorporated affective hashtags to summon a global solidarity community to support Palestinians, such as #HereGaza, #SaveJerusalem #SaveSheikhJarrah and #GazaUnderAttack, underscoring the fact that Israel remains an occupying power, such as in the tweet that affirmed the PLO 'held the occupying power (Israel) fully responsible for the consequences of the dangerous developments in #Jerusalem' (@nadplo, 8 May 2021). Another tweet used a video circulating on social media platforms which showed a Palestinian girl repeatedly pleading with her mother and saying: 'I don't want to die' from the Israeli strikes (@nadplo, 16 May 2021). On the Nakba (catastrophe) anniversary on 15 May, a tweet declared 'Palestine: forever a land with a people', thus underlining the length of and the history of occupation (@nadplo, 15 May 2021), while another video was posted of residents in Sheikh Jarrah chanting a historical anthem called *Mawtini* (My Homeland), which the PLO used during its revolutionary phase in the 1960s and 1970s, to mark the occasion (@nadplo, 16 May 2021). The use of such affective symbols and images, the analysis suggests, is intended to bring together Palestinians as a collective identifying with the *Nakba* (catastrophe) and its effect as well as to elicit solidarity amongst pro-Palestinian groups, underlining the potential

of digital platforms for promoting a Palestinian virtual resistance (Aouragh, 2011). The image and the language used helped define the war's reality as a conflict taking place between a powerful state and disempowered people, contradicting Israel's claims of it being a war on terror and a war to defend itself and underlining the inequalities between the two sides.

Realizing the potential threat to its image from Palestinian grassroots activism in digital spaces, Israel collaborated with social media platforms to censor pro-Palestinian content citing the need to halt hate speech and violence (Cook, 2021). However, despite social media's facilitation of government surveillance, the digital sphere paradoxically empowered online publics during the war who disclosed Facebook and Instagram's algorithmic censorship and shared ways of overcoming them (Abu Sneineh, 2021). Besides revealing increasing collaboration between social media platforms and governments, prompted by the commercial nature of digital companies, the 2021 war demonstrates that today's publics, well-informed and opinionated, require different diplomatic practices to meet their expectations.

Conclusion

This paper addressed the Twitter feeds communicated by the Israeli prime minister's office and the PLO during the May 2021 hostilities between Israel and Hamas in Gaza. The comparative analysis of the Twitter feeds showed different emphases and intentions in the two entities' public diplomacy campaigns during the conflict. In fact, the analysis showed that Israeli tweets were intended to reach foreign elites and maintain Israel's self-constructed image of itself as a nation seeking to defend itself. In contrast, the PLO's official tweet sought to reach regional and global publics to promote solidarity and empathy for Palestinians living under occupation. Furthermore, the comparative analysis demonstrated that Israel continued its military-driven approach that focuses on victory in the battlefield, confirming Ben D. Mor's argument that 'Israel may have won the "war" … but in terms of the political consequences – especially world public opinion – it "lost the peace"' (2006: 171). Israel used the same narratives related to its need to defend itself against attacks, while the PLO relied on ordinary people and activists' digital activism to mobilize support, stir international empathy and encourage diasporic communities to share the Palestinian story. Although the 2021 war ended with both Israel and Hamas declaring victory, it was the Palestinian people and social media users who celebrated mobile phone images, videos and posts that gave voice to an oppressed population.

There is little doubt, however, that public diplomacy efforts by Israel, and to a lesser extent the PLO, were challenged by numerous narratives posted by ordinary people and citizen activists in 2021, further denting the self-image of the Jewish state which had been discussed in several studies. For example, in a study in 2020, Eytan Gilboa showed that younger Americans and liberal Jews are less supportive of Israel's military confrontations in Palestine than previous generations, attributing the diminishing support to anti-Israeli campaigns held in the wake of the Black Lives Matter movement protests that erupted after the brutal murder of George Floyd in the

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United States. At the time, Palestinian activists used social media to compare racial injustice in the United States to Palestine, using the tweaked #PalestinianLivesMatter to raise awareness (Boxerman, 2020), presenting an additional challenge to Israel's diplomatic efforts in the United States where 'public opinion is a significant factor in the formulation and implementation of US foreign policy and in the US-Israel special relationship' (Gilboa, 2020: 106).

That said, while the digital arena allows publics (ordinary people and grassroots activists) to make their voices heard, it is important to avoid a determinist view of the power and potential of technologies in the Palestinian cause particularly given the lack of firm evidence about their effectiveness of grassroots activism in changing hearts and minds. As Papacharissi (2014) writes, there is a need to link online social movements with their offline impact as social media 'help[s] activate latent ties that may be crucial to the mobilization of networked publics' (2014: 3). Aouragh (2011) further suggests that while the internet may have expanded Palestinians' political involvement, it had not replaced offline mobilization. Moreover, if citizens and non-state actors use social media for their own purposes, so do governments. Israel, for example, has recruited tech-savvy university students to promote pro-Israeli sentiments online, especially in anti-Semitic groups (Cook, 2009). It also used algorithms to detect negative filter bubbles before pushing online users into disseminating pro-Israeli content to dismantle negative echo chambers (Manor, 2019). The algorithmic filter bubbles make it difficult for audiences to get exposed to information beyond their own activities and enable a swift spread of misinformation. With all its challenges, the digital sphere can empower ordinary citizens, presenting additional responsibilities for governments to focus on achieving success in the virtual world, in parallel with the offline world.

Like most modern conflicts, the protracted conflict between Israel and the Palestinians is fought on various battlefields and spaces, including the mediated 'image war', in digital platforms. A deeper understanding of the circumstances that allow political actors (both states and non-state actors) to transmit their messages through foreign media could help public diplomacy professionals to better prepare themselves to deal with the image war aspect of asymmetric conflicts and manage successful public diplomacy as a pivotal aspect of today's conflicts. This study, which has used a focused research to address the image war between Israel and the PLO, has some limitations in terms of its scope. However, it offers a microcosm through which to address public diplomacy in asymmetric conflicts and its limitations, particularly when one actor is a recognized state and the other remains a non-state actor seeking to form a state. Furthermore, the study has shown that despite its superior military power, Israel remains concerned with legitimizing its image and securing support, a concern that has been the cornerstone of its political communication strategies and marketing its image since its foundation in 1948. The PLO, on the other hand, remains reluctant or unable to make use of the mediation opportunities digital platforms offer, reflecting a rather inconsistent political communication strategy that has marked its international politics since the Oslo accords. Whether the PLO can harness popular activism to its full potential remains to be seen.

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