

8. Empirics II – Crisis communication and alternative explanations

Chapter 5 has shown that in the conflict in Israel and Palestine the external communication of the Palestinian side is continuously dominated by shaming, while, in contrast, the external communication of the Israeli side is mostly dominated by branding. Only during a few short periods, the Israeli external communication is dominated by shaming, too. It could then be shown in chapters 6 and 7 that this distribution of external communication strategies is shaped by the interests and opportunities of the conflict parties, which are shaped by the conflict structure of the asymmetric conflict. The evidence from this analysis supports the theoretical model presented in chapter 3, that assumes that the conflict structure shapes the selection of strategies of external communication, as matching empirical patterns could be found for all theoretical patterns of the theoretical model. In section 3.5., however, a series of limitations and rebuttals of the theoretical model were discussed from a theoretical perspective. Studying the empirics of the case of the conflict in Israel and Palestine, this current chapter, therefore, discusses these possible limitations and rebuttals from an empirical perspective: Section 8.1. reflects the periods in which the external communication of the Israeli side as topdog is also dominated by shaming and shows that even these exceptions can be explained with the general logic of the theoretical model, that draws on the conflict structure as explanation for the selection of strategies of external communication by the conflict parties. Section 8.2., then, discusses the potential alternative explanations that might be able to explain a selection of strategies of external communication as observed in chapter 5 (which were introduced, from a theoretical perspective, in section 3.5.3.), this shows that all of them can be clearly dismissed. Altogether, this way additional validity is lent to the theoretical thesis that the selection of strategies of external communication of the conflict parties is shaped by the structure of the conflict.

8.1 Routine vs. crisis communication

In section 5.2.2, it was shown that some short stages can be observed during which also the Israeli side predominantly used negative communication. The peaks with an extraordinarily high ratio of posts containing negative messages converge with particular events: the “Operation Pillar of Defense” of IDF in the Gaza Strip in November 2012, the Gaza War in summer 2014 and the climax of the “stabbing intifada” in late 2015. All of these events were perceived by the Israeli side as a “crisis” and/or “emergency”. In comparison to the conditions during “routine” stages of the conflict, which have been described and discussed in chapters 6 and 7, these short “crisis” stages provide different conditions for the external communication of the conflict parties.¹ On the one hand, the crisis stages were characterized by an

1 Indeed, the Israeli practitioners distinguish in their work between “routine” stages and “crisis” or “emergency” stages. The IDF, for example, differs in its strategic planning between three different “military functional situations” as the context for its operations that are all relevant for its efforts to achieve legitimacy (IDF Doctrine 2015: chapter 3, paragraph no. 4): “Routine”, on the one hand, and the efforts during and after “war” or “emergency”, on the other hand. During all these situations „safeguarding Israel’s international status” (Times of Israel 13.08.2015) is a core objective. The differentiation of the IDF between “routine”, on the one hand, and “war” and “emergency”, on the other hand, is based on the intensity of the conflict at a particular moment. In contrast to a “routine” situation, “war” and “emergency” situations describe situations with a particularly high intensity of the conflict and with particularly much international and domestic public attention. The differentiation between “war” and “emergency” further specifies the scale of the operation. In contrast to a “War situation” (IDF Doctrine 2015: chapter 3, paragraph no. 4, section C), according to IDF’s understanding, an “Emergency situation refers to campaigns and limited operations that are not within a war framework” (IDF Doctrine 2015: chapter 3, paragraph no. 4, section B). As incidents like the Lebanon war in 2006 (Gilboa & Shai 2011: 35; Medzini 2012: 8) and the Mavi Marmara incident (Allan & Curtis 2011; Jerusalem Post 04.06.2010; Jerusalem Post 04.07.2013) have shown, wars and emergencies are particular critical moments, in which the image of the IDF and the State of Israel as a whole (abroad as well as in the Israeli population) can be damaged severely. Therefore, in order to prevent such a severe damage, the IDF prepares for such critical situations. The 2015 IDF doctrine aims at anticipating possible implications of the IDF’s handling of war and emergency situations on how the IDF and Israel are perceived publicly and to adapt the planning in a way avoiding damage for the image of the IDF and Israel: “National, public perception, and legal efforts to maintain and improve the legitimacy of the operation will begin already in the preparations stage and will continue during the campaign to maintain and improve the legitimacy of the operation both in Israel and in the international community. Use will be made of domestic and external public perception efforts, as well as efforts in the international arena at the diplomatic level, in the media, and in the legal sphere” (IDF Doctrine 2015: chapter 3, paragraph no. 22). These “Efforts during or after an Emergency or War, accompanying the operation and the efforts after it” (IDF Doctrine 2015: chapter 3, paragraph no. 36, section C) are “directed at having both a short-term impact – advancing legitimacy during the military operation until its completion under

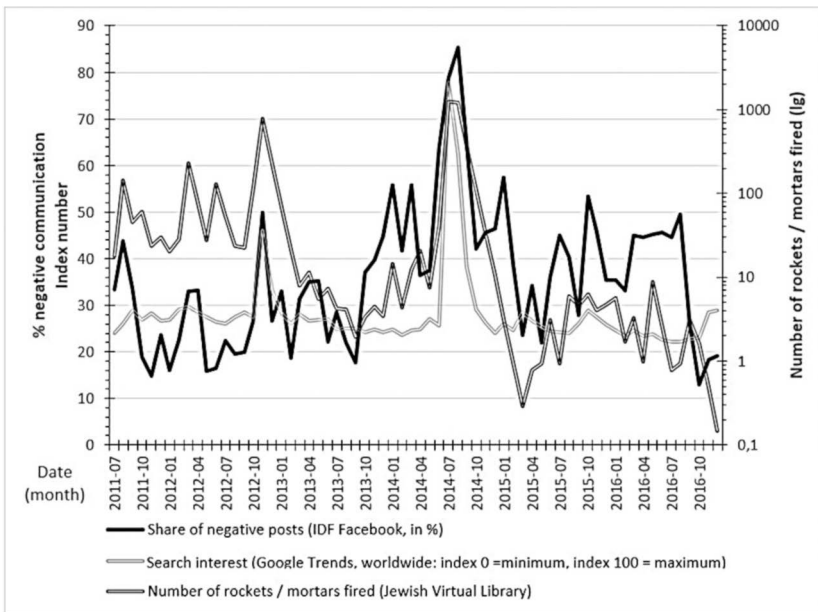
extraordinary intensity of the conflict. On the other hand, each of these events was accompanied by a particularly high international attention toward the conflict:

During the crisis stages, the conflict was particularly intense. On both sides the number of attacks, as well as the number of fatalities and the overall damage resulting from the conflict, was particularly high. From the perspective of the picturability pathway, this matters: as the Israeli side suffers from more damage and fatalities during these high-intensity stages of the conflict than during most of the time of the conflict, it also means that the Israeli side has more opportunities to present corresponding pictures and stories than usual. Having, therefore, more particularly promising pictures and stories for shaming, Israel's opportunities to use shaming increase during these particularly intense stages. Indeed, it can be observed that the share of negative posts in the external communication of the Israeli side was particularly high, when, for instance, the number of rockets and mortars

favorable conditions – as well medium and long term impact – preserving the operation's strategic achievements and freedom of action to use force again in the area when needed" (IDF Doctrine 2015: chapter 3, paragraph no. 36, section C). War and emergency situations, however, are an exception. While the conflict is continuing all the time, most of the time the intensity of the conflict is much lower. The IDF calls this kind of situation a "routine situation". According to the IDF's understanding, a "Routine situation refers to ongoing security, a limited and ongoing confrontation, and the campaign between wars (CBW)" (IDF Doctrine 2015: chapter 3, paragraph no. 4, section A) which describes the IDF's plans and efforts for the time between the most intensive stages of the conflict. While the operational context in these situations is different, the intensity of the conflict and the fighting as well as the attention from international and domestic audiences are lower, the IDF, nevertheless, considers (external) communication and related actions for achieving legitimacy during routine situations as equally important as its efforts during war and emergency situations. The rationale of the IDF's high efforts also during the more peaceful time is to create "legitimacy for Israeli action and deny a legitimate basis for the enemy's action" (IDF Doctrine 2015: chapter 3, paragraph no. 30, section D) in this way. From achieving legitimacy Israel profits not only in the political, diplomatic and economic field but also in the military field, as "Creating legitimacy" enables "Israel to initiate a confrontation, give our forces freedom of operation while depriving the enemy of freedom of operation during Routine, War, and Emergency situations" (IDF Doctrine 2015: chapter 3, paragraph no. 24, section D). The IDF expects this to have a long-term impact: "Effort during Routine is designed to build the ideal conditions for creating legitimacy for the IDF and international support. This effort is fundamental and is meant to have a long-term impact, and changes and improves the IDF's situation and method of operation in light of the challenges posed by the claims of those who want to delegitimize Israel's military action, which are based chiefly on a critical analysis of Israel's actions" (IDF Doctrine 2015: chapter 3, paragraph no. 36, section A). The general efforts aiming at a long-term impact shall be, moreover, complemented by efforts that "are directed toward having a medium-term impact" (IDF Doctrine 2015: chapter 3, paragraph no. 36, section B) and that advance "legitimacy for IDF operational activity in the field during a specific operation and time frame" (IDF Doctrine 2015: chapter 3, paragraph no. 36, section B).

fired (one of the most typical forms of attack of Hamas) by Hamas and other Palestinian combatants on Israel was extraordinarily high (Jewish Virtual Library 2018b; cf. figure 29).

Figure 29: Comparison between the monthly shares of negative posts within the external communication on the English-speaking Facebook page of the IDF and the global search interest for the term “Israel” (according to Google Trends 2019) and the number of rockets and mortars shot on Israel (according to Jewish Virtual Library 2018b). All values are smoothed.² The major peaks of the different variables clearly overlap during crisis stages: the 2012 Gaza War (Nov 2012) and the 2014 Gaza War (Jul/Aug 2014).³



During the crisis stages, the international attention for the conflict was particularly high. The corresponding events (especially the Gaza War in 2014) were top

- 2 Exponential smoothing with the data processing function of Microsoft Excel was applied (<https://support.office.com/en-gb/article/use-the-analysis-toolpak-to-perform-complex-data-analysis-6c67ccfo-f4a9-487c-8dec-bdb5a2cefab6>; last access: 26.07.2019). A smoothing constant of $\alpha = 0.3$ was used.
- 3 The average number of rockets/mortars fired after the 2014 Gaza War is lower than before. An explanation is that in the period after the 2014 Gaza War often stabbing attacks instead of rocket attacks were conducted. The higher shares of negative communication after the 2014 Gaza War coincide with the “stabbing intifada”, a stage with particularly many stabbing attacks.

stories in all news formats and, even abroad, it was hard to avoid hearing about the conflict in Israel and Palestine during these periods. As metric indicators such as the statistics from Google Trends show, the attention online for the conflict was also extraordinarily high during these stages (Google Trends 2019; cf. figure 29). From the perspective of the audience pathway, this made it difficult for Israel, as the topdog, to distract audiences abroad from the conflict and to avoid talking about the crisis situation which was being discussed widely internationally. From the perspective of the prioritization pathway and the Israeli interests, the omnipresence of the conflict in the international news and the abundance of allegations imposed a major risk that Israel's image might suffer severe and long-lasting damage by these harmful, omnipresent allegations, if Israel were not to react. Consequently, Israel was forced by the extraordinary conditions to adapt its strategy of external communication temporarily and to defend itself instead of actively shaping its own image with branding. Indeed, the stages of particularly high attention again converged with the stages, when the share of negative posts in the external communication of the Israeli side was particularly high (cf. figure 29).

Table 12: Overview – Conditions for external communication and strategies of external communication selected by the conflict parties in the conflict in Israel and Palestine (2x2 table)

Type of actor / Type of conflict stage	Routine	Crisis
Topdog (Israel)	Branding	Shaming
Underdog (PLO & PNA / Hamas)	Shaming	Shaming

8.2 Alternative explanations

In chapter 5 it has been shown that in the conflict in Israel and Palestine the external communication of the Palestinian side is continuously dominated by shaming, while, in contrast, the external communication of the Israeli side most of the time is dominated by branding. This distribution complies perfectly with the pre-

dictions of the theoretical model presented in chapter 3, which assumes that the conflict structure shapes the selection of the conflict parties' external communication strategies. Moreover, in chapters 6 and 7 empirical patterns could be found complying with all theoretical patterns of the theoretical model. Following the logic of pattern-matching, this confirms the plausibility of the theoretical model. In section 3.5.3., however, alternative explanations were introduced that might be able to explain the selection of strategies of external communication observed in chapter 5 as well: Either the selection of the conflict parties' strategies of external communication could be influenced by the identities of the conflict parties or it could be the result of a nonreflective diffusion of common communication practices. The following sections, therefore, test both alternative explanations and show that both potential alternative explanations, in contrast to the thesis that the conflict parties act strategically and that the selection is shaped by the conflict structure, do not fit in with the empirical evidence which can be observed when studying the conflict in Israel and Palestine:

8.2.1 External communication as a dysfunctional relict from Jewish history

A possible alternative explanation for the selection of the types of messages in the external communication of the conflict parties observed in chapter 5 could be that the selection is less a strategic decision based on the interests and opportunities shaped by the conflict structure but rather is influenced by the identities of the conflict parties, which subconsciously determine the choice of the conflict parties. According to this alternative explanation, the conflict parties would choose different strategies of external communication because their identities differ. Indeed, Ron Schleifer argues that it is not the structure of the conflict that shapes the Israeli communication but rather that the roots of the Israeli "hasbara"⁴ lay deep in the Jewish history. According to this explanation, Israel's modern strategy of external communication is a relict shaped by the historical experience of pressure toward Jewish communities across the past decades and centuries (Schleifer 2003: 123ff.), which is, according to Schleifer, dysfunctional, as it is from his point of view too "benign" (Schleifer 2003: 145). From this point of view, the selection of messages from the different branches of the Israeli government used for their external communication which focuses on branding is not a rational, well-planned strategic decision but a failure, due to a lack of reflection. Choosing a shaming-dominated strategy from this point of view would be the rational, more efficient

4 "Hasbara" can be translated roughly with the English term "explain". It is the Hebrew term for "external communication". Today the Israeli practitioners rather tend to prefer the term "public diplomacy" instead, as they consider the early Hasbara efforts as too defensive (Isr MFA2: 57, 48; cf. also Kretschmer 2017: 8; Gilboa 2006: 735).

choice. Indeed, it is true that the conflict in Israel and Palestine and the conflict parties involved have a long, eventful, unique history. Hosting the holy sites of several world religions, furthermore, means that strong religious emotions are connected with the conflict area as well. Therefore, the case offers a hard case for showing that not this alternative explanation, but the explanation introduced earlier in this study (cf. chapter 3) explains the selection of external communication by the conflict parties best.

The empirical data collected for this study, however, provides strong evidence against this alternative explanation arguing in favor of the hypothesis and assumptions presented earlier in this study that the conflict parties act strategically and that the conflict structure is the most important factor for explaining the selection of strategies of external communication:

First, section 7.6. has clearly shown that the process of selecting and developing a strategy of external communication is far from nonreflective. In contrast, both sides have evaluation mechanisms with which they constantly control for the success of their external communication. In contrast to the assessment of Schleifer, that using more shaming would be more promising for the Israeli side than using a branding-dominated strategy of external communication, these evaluation mechanisms clearly show that negative communication is less successful for the Israeli side than positive communication, especially when reaching out to the target group the Israeli branches have defined as their core target group: audiences that are so far not yet affiliated with the Israeli side.

The prevalent selection of branding, consequently, is not an emotional decision or a decision made by habit but a calculated, reflected decision. Quite the contrary, the interviews with Israeli practitioners indicate that their use of shaming in posts (and not their use of branding), at least occasionally, might be affectual. When asked about why they still use occasionally shaming, despite acknowledging before that positive communication is the more efficient strategy, practitioners from the Israeli side start to use more emotional argumentation patterns than in the rest of the interview. Referring to an example where the foreign press did not count a Palestinian attacker as a terrorist but as a victim, for instance, a practitioner from the Government Press Office argues, indicating an affective reaction: “Because we, it was our blood. We have to comment on accusation toward the conflict” (Isr GPO: 47). This means that it is not the use of branding that can be characterized as dysfunctional from a strategic perspective but, quite the opposite, the use of shaming. Such emotional reactions and motivations, however, as shown earlier, remain comparatively seldom and are only the exception.

Furthermore, whilst history and culture can be a source of pictures and stories for the external communication (cf. section 7.4.2.), only pictures and stories are selected that fit into the strategic concept (cf. section 7.6.). Other pictures and stories that belong to the history and culture of the conflict parties as well, but which are

not efficient or interesting enough or that even might undermine the strategically shaped message for the external communication, are purposely left out. To achieve the strategic goal to reach out to audiences that are so far not affiliated with one of the conflict parties the Israeli side even goes so far as to even select also content that it expects will appeal with the corresponding target group, even if it might be unpopular amongst Pro-Israeli audiences, i.e., audiences that share a similar historically grown ideological background (Isr IDF: 64f.).

In conclusion, the external communication of the conflict parties in the conflict in Israel and Palestine is clearly reflective and success-oriented and, therefore, adapts to the opportunities and constraints provided by the conflict structure. Aspects of culture, history and identity play only a subordinate role for the selection of the conflict parties' strategies of external communication.

8.2.2 External communication as a result of nonreflective diffusion of typical activism respectively marketing practices

Another possible alternative explanation for the selection of the types of messages in the conflict parties' external communication that could be observed in chapter 5 could be that the selection is less a strategic decision based on the interests and opportunities shaped by the conflict structure but rather the result of a nonreflective diffusion process of typical activism and marketing practices respectively. The practitioners on the Palestinian side often work together with Pro-Palestinian NGOs and activists (cf. e.g. PLO MA: 153, 156-158; Pal UN: 56-58, 63-65; Pal UK: 142). The Israeli government in contrast can afford to work together with marketing⁵ consultants (cf. e.g. ISRAEL21c 20.01.2005⁶), and as a state and full member of the international community, with other governments and administrations as well (cf. section 4.1.2.3.). This means that the different conflict parties are linked to different social contexts: The Palestinian side is mainly linked to the activist community and the Israeli side rather to a professional marketing / diplomacy community. Both communities might describe "best practices", which are mirrored in a nonreflective way by the conflict parties as members of the corresponding communities, regardless of the conflict and the operational context, including the constraints and opportunities it creates. From this point of view, shaming might simply be the strategy of external communication perceived by the activist community as "best

5 Indeed, one interviewee from the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs compares the work of the ministry's Digital Diplomacy Department with the work of an advertising agency: "So, obviously, we are more like an advertising agency, because we are making 'public diplomacy'" (Isr MFA2: 50).

6 Some of the agencies (as it is also the case for the advertising agency mentioned in the cited article) are, however, not motivated by financial interests but offer Israel their services for free.

practice” and that, therefore, without further reflections is the one adopted by the Palestinian side as a member of this community. Branding might be, in contrast, the strategy of external communication perceived by the marketing / diplomacy community as “best practice” and that, therefore, without further reflections is the strategy adopted by the Israeli side as a member of this community.

The empirical data collected for this study, however, provides strong evidence against this alternative explanation and favors the hypothesis and assumptions presented earlier in this study that the conflict parties act strategically and that the conflict structure is the most important factor for explaining the selection of strategies of external communication:

Again, (as previously argued for the other potential alternative explanation described above) section 7.6. has clearly shown that the process of selecting and developing a strategy of external communication is far from nonreflective. Both conflict parties have evaluation mechanisms and control their external communication for success. It is, therefore, reflecting and success-oriented and not nonreflective.

Furthermore, the self-image of the conflict parties also speaks against the hypothesis that the selection of the types of messages in the conflict parties’ external communication is only the result of a nonreflective diffusion process of typical activism and marketing practices respectively. As the conflict parties in the Israel and Palestine conflict were among the first conflict parties to use social media for their external communication at all, they perceive themselves as “pioneers” that have had to be the first ones to develop a strategy for social media warfare (cf. e.g. Isr IDF: 109), as they had, being the first ones, no role model to copy from. Indeed, the IDF Spokesperson’s Unit,⁷ for example, has also been described by major media outlets and other armies as a pioneer and role model in the field of social media warfare (Guardian 31.01.2015; Channel 4 31.01.2015; Huffington Post 16.11.2012).

7 For the unit the pioneering role as “early adopters” (Isr IDF: 109) means to adapt to its environment as good as possible, especially to the operational context (i.e., the conflict setting) and technological developments but also to the specific communication context of different types communication and societal developments. Being pioneers and early adopters means for the IDF to constantly look “to do the interesting stuff” and to “Do it new and do it in an appealing way” (Isr IDF: 109).

