

Graduate Paper #1

Shifting Blame on the High Seas ... and on YouTube:

The Narrative Failure of Israel's Flotilla Cyber-Diplomacy

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Abstract

This paper uses Walter Fisher's narrative paradigm to examine Israel's efforts to shape the narrative of the violent confrontation and loss of life of activists aboard the *Mavi Marmara*, part of the Gaza "Freedom Flotilla," in May 2010. In an exploratory application of Fisher's narrative paradigm to cyber-diplomacy, this research argues that Israel could not shift blame largely because its concerted and sustained YouTube campaign failed the tests of narrative logic: narrative probability and narrative fidelity. Viewed through the lens of narrative logic, Israel's cyber-diplomacy rhetoric failed in three main claims: that there is no humanitarian crisis in Gaza; that acting against the Flotilla was a "last resort"; and that the *Mavi Marmara* was filled with terrorists or "terrorist sympathizers". As a result, Israel's narrative failure may have exacerbated an already damaging public relations crisis, adversely affecting the public support of even its staunchest ally, the United States. This paper demonstrates the value of the narrative paradigm as an effective rhetorical frame for foreign policy crises and public/cyber diplomacy and as an alternative to foreign policy evaluation based solely on rational logic.

Introduction

A nation-state will sometimes undertake a politically hazardous act of foreign policy before it can deploy a public relations effort to accompany or build support for that decision. Sometimes the unannounced act is meant to display bravado. In other instances a strategic operation is undertaken when a nation holds actionable intelligence upon which it must act without warning. Then there is the occasion when a nation will preview an action, but an unintended outcome will force the deployment of a new and altered public diplomacy campaign. This was the case when on May 31, 2010,

Israeli commandos intercepted six ships, the Turkish “Freedom Flotilla”, that were attempting to deliver thousands of tons of humanitarian aid and break Israel’s maritime blockade of Gaza. After a violent confrontation, nine activists died on one of the boarded ships, the *MV Mavi Marmara*, forcing Israel to adjust and deploy a new communications effort.

The rapid sequence of unforeseen events, the gravity of the non-combatant deaths that resulted from the tumultuous mission and the current information environment characterized by rapid, user-generated information flows underscore the hazards Israel faced in crafting its strategic communication following the Flotilla incident. Riley and her colleagues (2008) have defined “strategic communication” as “the study of deliberate programs of messages or arguments that are designed by organizations, institutions or other entities in order to achieve particular goals” (cited in Hollihan & Riley, 2012, p. 60). In the wake of the Flotilla incident, the “particular goal” of Israel’s strategic communication was clear: Israel needed to defend itself from deleterious international and domestic public reaction.

When the goal is to shape public opinion in the hours and days immediately following an event, strategic communication is usually undertaken by senior government officials (Gilboa, 2008). Moreover, one of the most appropriate public diplomacy instruments for communication that is concerned with the immediate aftermath of an incident is cyber public diplomacy, or cyber-diplomacy (Gilboa, 2008, cited in Hollihan & Riley, 2012). Cyber-diplomacy makes use of the Internet and the World Wide Web as primary channel through which to disseminate the strategic communication. Cyber-diplomacy increasingly takes under its purview “public diplomacy 2.0” and social media, which emphasize the user-generated content or participatory Internet usage associated with Web 2.0.

The Israeli Defense Forces (IDF), or the Israeli military, had already posted to its channel on the popular file-sharing, social media site YouTube videos buttressing Israel’s case for intercepting the Turkish Flotilla before the incidents on the Turkish ship occurred. Further, after receiving the unexpected—and highly undesired—news that its commandos had killed nine activists, Israel escalated its cyber-diplomacy campaign. Within hours of the deadly struggle on the *Mavi Marmara*, Israeli authorities had uploaded to YouTube a series of clips in a concerted attempt to shift blame to the activists on the ship.

In order to make a blame-shifting strategy credible, the responses must be cast within a framework that justifies the actions. This justificatory framework is built most effectively through an astutely crafted narrative (Theye, 2008). Given the increasing public skepticism toward top-down generators of information (Cull, 2011), public diplomacy and politics in the global network may become a contest of whose story wins (Arquilla & Ronfeldt, 1999, cited in Hollihan & Riley, 2012).

This paper examines Israel’s cyber-diplomacy effort to shift blame to the activists and construct a narrative that would diffuse negative public perception following the loss of

life on the Turkish ship. Walter Fisher's (1987) narrative paradigm is introduced as a theoretical lens for analyzing Israel's Flotilla cyber-diplomacy. This paper asserts that the narrative paradigm offers insights into why this cyber-diplomacy campaign was widely panned and suggests that instead of helping to mitigate blame, the failure of the strategic narrative may have exacerbated the public diplomacy crisis.

Following this introduction, the first section reviews scholarship on narrative in foreign policy crisis events and the narrative paradigm, along with the paradigm's appropriateness as a theoretical lens for the case study. The second section profiles the May 31 events involving the Gaza flotilla, focusing on Israel's cyber-diplomacy efforts. The third section analyzes the Israeli strategic narrative through the logic of the narrative paradigm's elements of narrative coherence and narrative fidelity.

The Narrative Paradigm

Stories have been called the "most universal means of representing human events" (Bennett and Edelman, 1985, p. 156). Rhetors employ stories to build a narrative—which if crafted well, can "motivate the belief and action of outsiders toward the actors and events caught up in its plot" (Bennett and Edelman, 1985, p. 156). Narrative is meaningful for "persons in particular and in general, across communities as well as cultures, across time and place" (Fisher 1987, pp. 65-66).

In the realm of foreign policy crisis events, scholarly attention to narrative most often takes the form of the war narrative. Campbell and Jamieson (1990) maintain that the validation for military intervention is embodied in a dramatic narrative, which is comprised of arguments. One argument in particular is advanced: the claim that "A threat imperils the nation, indeed civilization itself, which emanates from the acts of an identifiable enemy and which, despite search for an alternate, necessitates forceful, immediate response" (p. 107). The resulting narrative most often reframes the conflict as aggression by the enemy. This both justifies leaders' decisions as necessary actions to defend the nation and exhorts the audience by simplifying and dramatizing the events leading to a decision. Leaders thus justify a use of force by attempting to prove that "military action is or was the only appropriate response to a clear, unavoidable, and fundamental threat" (p. 107). In other words, the military intervention is portrayed as a necessary last resort.

It could be argued that Israel sought to convey the Flotilla's attempted breakage of the blockade and mob attack of its soldiers as an act of war; Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's official speech on the event (as I discuss) has some qualities of war rhetoric. But this is not a fitting theoretical frame. It is beyond dispute that the Flotilla passengers were not soldiers but citizens—even if some were violent activists—whose ranks included journalists, political figures, middle-aged observers and women. Moreover, the war narrative has a focus on the justification of future or impending military intervention, not on the post hoc explanation of an unexpected, isolated act.

Another foreign policy narrative less frequently applied since the end of the Cold War is “crisis” rhetoric. In this framework an international crisis often appears suddenly and does not provide a means to interpret the discursive surroundings. Utterances in response to crisis situations, or perceived crisis situations, are therefore culturally based and historically mandated (Kuypers, 1997). Ivie (1974) held that enduring national images and motifs are the foundation of crisis situation rhetoric. Windt (1973) identified three basic lines of argument that distinguish crisis rhetoric: the obligatory statement of facts, the establishment between good and evil, and the framing of the policy and requested support as moral acts. Windt argues that when confronted with a crisis, a president’s options are limited by three factors—“precedent, tradition, and expediency” (p. 7). The president then asserts that the situation demands he “act decisively” (p. 7). This theoretical framework is also limiting in its application to Israel’s Flotilla narrative; most scholars have viewed “crises” as rhetorical creations of the singular U.S. Executive Branch (Kuypers, 1997). It, too, provides little insight into Israel’s cyber-diplomacy campaign.

What is needed is a framework that allows for the evaluation of disparate elements: international political crisis speech, war rhetoric, public relations media strategy, and consideration of the audience—in other words some of the most crucial elements in any strategic cyber-diplomacy effort. Moreover, Israel’s Flotilla narrative was made up of several types of stories, which must all be considered together. Fisher’s (1987) narrative paradigm allows for exactly this sort of multi-faceted analysis.

The narrative paradigm is a broad, uncomplicated yet powerful mechanism to evaluate human communication. It posits all communication should be “seen as stories—symbolic interpretations of aspects of the world occurring in time and shaped by history, culture, and character” (Fisher, xiii). Simply put, in this view, “The world consists of a set of stories from which people must choose” (Hollihan & Riley, 1987, p. 337).

At the core of Fisher’s (1987) narrative paradigm is narrative rationality. Narrative rationality derives from two main principles. The first is narrative probability or coherence. Narrative probability takes up the internal consistency of the story. To be credible, a narrative must be judged by the audience as probable or consistent; in the eyes of the audience, the elements of the story must sufficiently “hang together” (p. 47). If the elements that comprise the narrative are not perceived to fit well together, that narrative may be summarily discredited and dismissed.

The second principle is narrative fidelity, or the truthfulness of a story. Narrative fidelity does not refer to any absolute, discernible truth or “objective” set of facts. Rather, narrative fidelity concerns truth according to an individual’s prior experience. Crucially, in order for a narrative to be perceived as credible, an audience member not only needs to view the story elements as consistent, but also needs to discern that narrative as true according to the other related stories that have permeated that individual’s consciousness. A story that possesses narrative fidelity will be true according to the other related stories to which an audience member refers to make sense of her world. Thus, from the view of the narrative paradigm, facts and objectivity are far less

determinative of credibility than is narrative logic—narrative probability and truthfulness according to previously considered and processed stories or narratives.

The weight of the narrative paradigm is that it provides a framework to evaluate all communication: literature, entertainment, public address, politics, strategic media campaigns—and public diplomacy. Though largely absent from the policy analysis lexicon, the narrative paradigm can readily be applied to public or cyber-diplomacy. In fact, many aspects of the narrative paradigm are highly suited to the evaluation of strategic public relations and diplomacy. In addition to its consideration of all manner and forms of communication, the narrative paradigm is concerned with public moral argument which is publicized and “made available for wide consumption and persuasion of the polity at large” (Fisher, 1987, p. 71); it is aimed at laypersons; and it takes up “controversy that inherently crosses professional fields” (p. 71). These factors involve some of the very tenets of public diplomacy.

The narrative paradigm, however, does not discount the role of experts. Nor does it obviate their rational expertise. It does maintain that when all the elements of the narrative are taken together, experts and laypeople meet on the common ground of their shared interests; both are subject to the demands of narrative rationality (Fisher, 1987). Thus, when the entire narrative is considered, public evaluation of Israel’s Flotilla strategic narrative is just as important as government officials’. The narrative paradigm, finally, applies best to circumstances of freedom and democracy (Fisher, 1987)—ideals to which both the Israelis and the Flotilla activists laid strong claim.

Case Profile

The case profile first provides an account of the May 2010 Gaza Flotilla that prompted the public diplomacy crisis for Israel. It then examines international reaction and the Israeli cyber-diplomacy effort to construct a strategic narrative for the events.

The Flotilla Incident

On May 22, 2010, the former passenger ferry *MV Mavi Marmara*, owned by the Turkish Humanitarian Relief Foundation (IHH), set sail from Istanbul. The *Mavi Marmara* picked up 500 passengers, joined five other ships near Cyprus and headed for Gaza. These six ships, co-sponsored by the Free Gaza Movement and termed the “Gaza Freedom Flotilla”, carried passengers who openly stated two intentions: to deliver 10,000 tons of humanitarian aid and to break Israel’s three-year-long maritime blockade of Gaza. There were some seven hundred activists from twenty-eight countries on the six boats, including eleven Americans, several European parliamentarians and journalists (Migdalovitz, 2010). Over several days Israeli soldiers issued warnings and offered transfer of the vessels’ cargo by land, but were rebuffed.

Early on the morning of May 31, Israeli soldiers intercepted the flotilla when it was between 80-100 miles from the Israeli coast and still in international waters. Israeli

naval commandos boarded and took over without incident five of the six ships. Activists on the sixth vessel—the *Mavi Marmara*—resisted. Israeli commandos rappelled from Black Hawk helicopters onto the *Mavi Marmara* and were immediately confronted by activists.

Israel Defense Forces (IDF) later released footage showing the activists attacking the soldiers with a variety of improvised weapons. The IDF also maintained the activists had seized a soldier's sidearm. IHH President Bulent Yildirim said that activists had used iron rods, but claimed the activists threw the firearms into the sea. It remains unproven whether the commandos, who carried paintball guns and reportedly used stun grenades, struck first or in response to a violent attack from the passengers. Each side provided very different accounts. As a result of the incident, nine activists were killed (8 Turkish citizens and 1 American), twenty-four were hurt. The IDF reported ten Israeli commandos sustained injuries. The dead activists were all affiliated with IHH, which hailed them as "martyrs" (Migdalovitz, 2010).

The commandeered ships were all taken to the Israeli port of Ashdod. The passengers were detained and the cargo was unloaded, searched and stored for delivery. By June 3, Israel had deported all the activists, except for a few severely wounded passengers who were repatriated a few days later. On June 15, Israel announced that the U.N. would distribute the bulk of the humanitarian aid (Migdalovitz, 2010).

Reaction to the Flotilla Incident

There was immediate and polarized rush-to-judgment over culpability for the bloodshed on board the *Mavi Marmara*. On the day of the incident, May 31, CNN reported, "World reaction to Israel after raid on aid flotilla mostly negative" (2010). Reactions from the Arab world, including Turkey, Egypt, Syria, Turkey, Jordan and the United Arab Emirates condemned the action (CNN, 2010; *Telegraph*, 2010). The U.N. issued a statement criticizing the "counterproductive and unacceptable blockade of Gaza" and several nations including Italy, Greece, France and Sweden summoned their ambassadors to provide information (CNN, 2010).

Several U.S. journalists and analysts, however, initially backed Israel. The day the news broke, Leslie Gelb, former *New York Times* columnist and longtime president of the Council on Foreign Relations, wrote an editorial entitled "Israel Was Right". Gelb maintained, "Israel had every right under international law to stop and board ships bound for the Gaza war zone late Sunday. Only knee-jerk left-wingers and the usual legion of poseurs around the world would dispute this" (2010). In an editorial published the day after the raid, the *New Republic* headlined, "In the Great Flotilla Debate, the Facts Are on Israel's Side" (Peretz, 2010).

Immediate U.S. official response was more muted. White House spokesman Bill Burton said the United States "deeply regrets the loss of life and injuries sustained and is currently working to understand the circumstances surrounding this tragedy" (CNN, 2010). This was one thing nearly all observers of the incident agreed upon: as U.N.

Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon stated tersely from Uganda, "Israel must explain" (CNN, 2010).

Strategy Shifting Blame to the Activists

Soon after the incident on the *Mavi Marmara*, Israel moved an altered public relations strategy into high gear. Minutes after the Israeli commandos landed on the ship, the live satellite broadcasts from the vessel were cut (Lerman, 2010). One British newspaper relates, "From that point on, the Israeli authorities seized almost complete control of how evidence of what was taking place could be made public" (Lerman, 2010). Israel mounted a swift, coordinated and targeted effort to shift blame for the confrontation on the *Mavi Marmara* to the activists on board the vessel. The *Guardian* newspaper highlighted the intensity of Israel's strategic communication:

Video of the last footage broadcast by the journalists on board was immediately available from sources such as al-Jazeera and the IHH, but it showed a very confusing picture: there were badly injured passengers, yet it was impossible to know how they had been injured. What the world has been watching since then is either edited video shot by the Israelis or other video shot by activists, confiscated by the Israelis and subsequently edited and made available through Israeli sources (Lerman, 2010).

In addition to the determination to shape the public discourse on the Flotilla incident, Israel had a substantial body of evidence to back its version of events. Israeli officials claim to have found on the *Mavi Marmara* wood and metal clubs, Molotov cocktails, detonators, rocks, slingshots, large hammers, and sharp metal objects (Migdalovitz, 2010). These claims were corroborated by video footage, as discussed in subsequent sections.

Israel's Flotilla Cyber-Diplomacy

On December 29, 2008, the IDF created a YouTube channel as part of the army's public relations campaign to build international support for Operation Cast Lead, its military operation to weaken Hamas infrastructure in Gaza (Haaretz.com, 2008). Upon launching the YouTube channel, government spokeswoman Major Avital Leibovich told Israeli newspaper *Haaretz*, "The blogosphere and the new media are basically a war zone in a battle for world opinion." She added that the YouTube channel is an important part of Israel's attempt to explain its actions abroad (Haaretz.com, 2008). The IDF has maintained the YouTube channel "featuring operational footage and informational videos" (IDF, 2010)

Before the events on the *Mavi Marmara*, Israel had laid the foundation for a Gaza Flotilla cyber-diplomacy strategy; the IDF had posted two clips related to the Flotilla on its [IDF YouTube channel](#). On May 27, 2010, four days before the deadly clash on the *Mavi Marmara*, the IDF posted a 1:54 minute clip, entitled "[Commander of the Israeli Navy Maj. Gen. Eliezer Marom, Briefing of the Forces](#)" who will participate in the

interception of protest boats on their way to the Gaza Strip.” The IDF also posted an extended summary of the clip’s contents. In the video, General Marom, dressed in fatigues and standing at a podium, informs his men, “We have no intention of harming any one of these people Any provocation that they will create ... we do not respond to these types of actions. We act as professional soldiers do.” At the time of writing, December 13, 2010, the clip had been viewed 68,038 times.

On May 30, the IDF also uploaded a 1:06 minute clip entitled “[IDF Navy Addresses a Ship in the Flotilla and Offers it to Dock in the Ashdod Port.](#)” Two Israeli naval officers are seen radioing the offer to the *Mavi Marmara*. At the end of the clip, viewers can hear the response from the *Mavi Marmara*: “Negative. Our destination is Gaza.” The IDF also provides a summary for this clip, viewed 443,255 times (December 31, 2010).

In the hours following the May 31 predawn clash, the IDF posted to its YouTube channel six more video clips in effort to establish an adjusted strategic narrative. The deaths of the activists necessitated a refocused cyber-diplomacy intervention in attempt to shift blame and mitigate damaging reaction to the events. Three clips portray the Israeli commandos being attacked by activists on the *Mavi Marmara*. One of these, entitled “[Close-Up Footage of Mavi Marmara Passengers Attacking IDF Soldiers](#)” (1:23), shows—incontrovertibly—two Israeli commandos being beaten with poles and chairs immediately upon lowering themselves onto the ship’s deck. At 1,151,724 views (December 13, 2010), this clip had been watched more than twice as many times as any other clip on the IDF Flotilla playlist (2010). Another clip uploaded on May 31 and entitled “[Weapons Found on the Flotilla Ship Mavi Marmara Used by Activists Against IDF Soldiers](#)” (:58) depicts the weapons found aboard the ship. Another provides a commando’s account of the violent incident on the boat, and one shows the activists disembarking at the Israeli port of Ashdod after the *Mavi Marmara* was controlled and towed to the mainland. By June 4, the IDF had uploaded a further six clips on the incident: one presented an “[Unedited Radio Transmission Between Gaza Flotilla and Israeli Navy](#)”, one is titled “[IDF Transfers Humanitarian Aid From Gaza Flotilla to Gaza Strip](#)” and the other four all depict either violence or weapons found on the ship (IDF, 2010).

These fourteen clips, inclusive of the two videos posted prior to the melee, comprise the bulk of Israel’s YouTube cyber-diplomacy program and immediate effort to control the narrative. Seven other clips posted on June 5 to the same Flotilla “playlist” (as it is referenced by the IDF YouTube channel) depict the interception of a seventh ship, not part of the six-vessel convoy commandeered on May 31 (IDF, 2010). These later clips are not analyzed in this research, as they were posted more than a month later. In any case, as a *Financial Times* news report observed at the time of the incident, “Israel is very concerned about the international backlash against its actions ... Israel is determined to control the narrative, to control the images, and to control the version of events that is seeping out” (Buck, 2010).

Analysis: Israel's Cyber-Diplomacy Narrative Strategy

This section analyzes Israel's attempts to construct a strategic narrative that could diffuse the public diplomacy crisis. In looking at the videos posted to YouTube and Netanyahu's first official speech on the matter, it appears that three main claims undergirded Israel's narrative strategy: there is no humanitarian crisis in Gaza; actions against the Flotilla were a "last resort"; and that the *Mavi Marmara* was filled with terrorists or "terrorist sympathizers". This section analyzes those storylines using the logic of narrative rationality, which is comprised of narrative coherence or probability (whether or not a story "hangs together") and fidelity (the truthfulness of a story) (Fisher, 1987, p. 47).

1- No Humanitarian Crisis

Even before the violence on board the *Mavi Marmara*, Israel had cultivated a key part of its ultimate Flotilla narrative: absolute denial of a humanitarian crisis in Gaza. A May 27, 2010, Al Jazeera news clip "[Israel's Gaza PR offensive](#)" begins:

It's a public relations blitz like we haven't seen in years. As a flotilla of boats attempts to sail to Gaza to deliver aid and break the siege, Israel is busy with its own goodwill campaign ... The message was simple: the flotilla is unnecessary because there is no humanitarian crisis in Gaza. [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EbBDNEP6Znw]

The Al Jazeera reporter was one of many journalists taken by the Israeli authorities for a tour around one of the few open terminals into Gaza. The Israeli government press office also sent reporters a Gazan restaurant menu "in a tongue and check effort to prove there is no food shortage." The Al Jazeera reporter notes that according to the restaurant's owner, more than 70% of his supplies are smuggled from Egypt via tunnels. The Israeli media office also sent reporters video of Gazans eating at the restaurant—one of whom was Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas, who at the time of the report had not set foot in Gaza for three years.

As the U.S. congressional report on the Flotilla Incident sets out, "The Israeli government maintains that there is no humanitarian crisis in Gaza, and the IDF issues a detailed 'Weekly Summary of Humanitarian Aid Transferred into Gaza' to support that position" (Migdalovitz, 2010, p. 1).

After the bloodshed that occurred on the *Mavi Marmara*, Israeli prime minister Netanyahu doubled down on this theme. In this first official televised response on June 2 in Jerusalem, Netanyahu stated, "There is no humanitarian crisis in Gaza ... There's no shortage of food ... There's no shortage of medicine ... There's no shortage of other goods" (IMFA, 2010). The statement remains on the Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs website, where nine of the aforementioned Flotilla YouTube clips are also embedded.

According to the narrative rationality of the narrative paradigm, it is irrelevant whether or not Gazans actually face a quantifiable shortage of basic goods as a result of the three-year Israeli blockade. What matters is that Israel's storyline denying the existence of a humanitarian crisis lacks narrative coherence by failing to cohere both with other parts of Israel's strategic narrative and other stories that the public—lay, media, and political (indistinguishable critics in the narrative paradigm)—know about the humanitarian situation in Gaza. Netanyahu's June 2 assertion does not cohere with the IDF YouTube clip entitled: "[IDF Transfers Humanitarian Aid From Gaza Flotilla to Gaza Strip](#)" (uploaded by IDF June 1, 2010). This clip has an edited focus on motor scooters, bath products, toys and stacked boxes. Uniformed Israeli soldiers supervise the transfer of the goods. Despite the highlighting of non-essentials in the video, the audience may venture that Gazans, too, need more than subsistence. Indeed, the clip has the feel of guards readying items for prison distribution. As the *New York Times* noted about Gazans, "The issue is not hunger. It is idleness, uncertainty and despair" (Slackman and Bronner, 2010).

Narrative coherence is further undermined by the video's caption stressing its "humanitarian operations" and the "aid" regularly allowed by Israel into Gaza "in coordination with international organizations," which implies the existence of humanitarian concern. If, as Netanyahu clearly asserted, there is no humanitarian crisis, why would Israel undertake such concerted effort to highlight IDF "humanitarian" operations—especially on YouTube, which can be accessed by any and everyone with an Internet connection? This inconsistency suggests a lack of narrative coherence. The story does not hold together.

Israel's stated position that there is no humanitarian crisis in Gaza also violates narrative fidelity. Factually accurate or not, the widely accepted view is that Gazans are in need of assistance by the U.S. public and policy makers, according to a January 2010 Congressional Research Report (Zanotti, 2010). Even as the U.S. issued its first diplomatic responses to the Flotilla incident, with Secretary of State Hillary Clinton calling for "careful" responses and indicating that the U.S. would not hastily join the international outcry against Israel, Clinton said the Flotilla incident underscored the "unsustainable and unacceptable" situation in Gaza (Quinn, 2010). She added that "Israel's legitimate security needs must be met, just as the Palestinians' legitimate needs for sustained humanitarian assistance and regular access to reconstruction materials must also be assured" (Quinn, 2010).

According to a leaked memo, the conservative Israel Project hired political consultant and Republican pollster Frank Luntz to gauge American opinions on Israel's public diplomacy during and after the Flotilla incident. Luntz found that only 34% of Americans supported the Israeli operation against the Flotilla. More notably, Luntz found it "troubling" that 56% of his American focus group participants agreed with the claim that there is a humanitarian crisis in Gaza and "astonishing" that 43% agreed with the claim that people in Gaza are starving. Most incisive, Luntz wrote that Israel must immediately stop using the argument that there is no humanitarian and hunger crisis in

Gaza. He maintained this “fatally destroys Israel’s credibility in light of the images on the television screens” (Coteret, 2010). These may be the stakes when an element of strategic narrative lacks both narrative coherence and narrative fidelity.

2- The Israeli Flotilla Action Was a Last Resort

In his June 2 statement, Netanyahu also spoke of the decision to intercept the flotilla as if it had been a “last resort”: “On this occasion too, we made several offers—offers to deliver the goods on board the flotilla to Gaza after a security inspection. Egypt made similar offers. And these offers were rejected time and again. So our naval personnel had no choice but to board these vessels” (IMFA, 2010).

“Last resort” is the primary claim that Campbell and Jamieson (1990) find in war narrative: “A threat imperils the nation ... which emanates from the acts of an identifiable enemy and which, despite search for an alternate, necessitates forceful, immediate response” (p. 107). The narrative reframes the conflict as aggression by the enemy—and military action is the “only appropriate response to a clear, unavoidable, and fundamental threat” (p. 107).

On the IDF YouTube playlist, the first two clips uploaded subvert this narrative rationality because they undermine narrative probability. The May 27 clip in which General Marom stands at a podium and readies his command belies the assertion that the Israeli military had no choice but to defend Israel as a last resort; that clip reveals the willful, pre-planned execution of a coordinated military strategy. It depicts action that is strategically poised for the offensive, not defensive. The very next Flotilla YouTube clip uploaded to the channel further undermines this “last resort” argument. It is the clip of the two Israeli naval officers issuing what is presented as a final warning to the *Mavi Marmara* to dock at the port of Ashdod and let its goods be transferred by the Israeli authorities via land. This clip makes clear that it is the Israeli navy that pursues the Flotilla, not the activists seeking engagement. Rather than appearing under attack, both young Israeli officers in the video appear calm inside their ship as one reads the warning from a script while the other looks patiently on. These officers, whom the audience views as representative of the Israeli navy, indeed of Israel itself, are under no immediate threat. Thus, to the viewing audience the impending interception of the activist ship does not appear to be a last resort. Netanyahu’s story that the Israelis “had no choice but to board these vessels” loses narrative probability.

To clarify, the Israelis’ contention that interception was a last resort because they fear the cargo could be used for weapons to supply Hamas might make rational sense from the perspective of established foreign policy. But according to narrative logic, that contention is of no consequence. Rather, the story conveyed by the clips depicting a premeditated Israeli military offensive maneuver, considered with Netanyahu’s dramatic “last resort” war rhetoric, lacks narrative probability, and lacks it badly.

3- Activists are Terrorists

Finally, the Israeli Flotilla cyber-diplomacy and larger strategic narrative appeared to be guided by one more assertion: that the passengers participating in the Flotilla were not activists but terrorists. There is some evidence that indicates some of the activists and the IHH sponsor organization may have been sympathetic to the militant cause. Though unverified, a 2006 report by the Danish Institute for International Studies described the IHH as a front for funding terrorist groups and for sending fighters to countries like Bosnia, Chechnya and Afghanistan (Nebehay, 2010). The IHH also openly supports Hamas, though it is not a U.S. State Department-designated terrorist group (Migdalovitz, 2010). Before the deadly encounter occurred, one of the Flotilla passengers described in no uncertain terms the Flotilla mission as he saw it: “We are now waiting for one of two good things—either to reach Gaza or achieve martyrdom” (Hider, 2010). The *Mavi Marmara*, as Netanyahu said in his June 2 official statement, “was not a Love Boat” (Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2010).

But on June 2 Netanyahu also simplified the narrative, framing the events in stark terms of an Israeli struggle against terrorists and terrorism. He declared that the activists were “members of an extremist group that has supported international terrorist organizations and today support the terrorist organization called Hamas ... These weren't pacifists. These weren't peace activists. These were violent supporters of terrorism” (Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2010).

This simplified classing of all the activists as terrorists undermines narrative rationality, especially when viewed against the Israeli Flotilla cyber-campaign. A May 31 IDF YouTube clip entitled [“Flotilla Activists Disembarking at the Ashdod Port”](#) presents several activists being escorted off what is easily assumed, perhaps erroneously, to be the *Mavi Marmara*. A man and a woman, both late middle age and silver haired, are filmed as Israeli security forces walk them off the boat. As the clip ends the camera focuses on two more women, both Caucasian, one young woman wearing a baseball cap and the other at least sixty, appearing dazed as she walks in the sunlight. By appearance, the images suggest activists rather than terrorists.

Whether or not the activists were actually sympathetic to militancy, it is an unmistakable failure of narrative probability: Netanyahu’s accusation that the activists were “violent supporters of terrorism” simply does not cohere with the IDF clip, in which half of the passengers seen leaving the ship appear over the age of sixty. Nor does Netanyahu’s “terrorist” label fair any better when considered alongside the first clip the IDF uploaded to its Flotilla playlist before any of the ships were intercepted. In that first clip, General Marom reminds his forces, “We have no intention of harming any one of these people Any provocation that they will create ... we do not respond to these types of actions” (IDF, 2010). These are not the directions an audience expects would be given to soldiers readying to confront “violent supporters of terrorism” (Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2010).

Netanyahu's classification of the activists as "terrorists" also fails the test of narrative fidelity. Nearly all media accounts described the activists as originating from many nations, varied in age, with journalists and politicians among their ranks. The official U.S. congressional report notes that activists from 38 countries participated in the expedition, including eleven Americans, European parliamentarians—and Swedish writer Henning Mankell (Migdalovitz, 2010).

As Sky News asked after the clash on the *Mavi Marmara*, "If the Israelis now believe they have a hundred Al Qaida operatives or sympathizers in their hands are they simply going to let them go and deport them?" (Waghorn, 2010). The answer was yes. By June 3 Israel had deported all the detainees, including all alleged perpetrators of the attacks on its military personnel, except for a few severely wounded passengers who were sent home a few days later. (Migdalovitz, 2010).

Indeed, Israel's maintenance of a graphics-heavy, professionally-administered IDF YouTube "channel", with its organized playlists, of which the Flotilla incident is just one, together with Netanyahu's projection of authority, invites a questioning of narrative probability. The audience is led to wonder if it is really possible that a country with a renowned military and high-tech media operation could so easily find—as the edited and uploaded clips depict—its armored soldiers in an uncontrollable situation, subject to the mob attack of untrained activists armed with household items and knives. In essence, the IDF YouTube clip entitled "Close-Up Footage of *Mavi Marmara* Passengers Attacking IDF Soldiers", with its more than 1.1 million views, is juxtaposed against the whole expertly-coordinated Israeli cyber-diplomacy campaign. It is this emergent story that is also subject to international judgment on its narrative probability.

Conclusion

While sources such as the U.S. congressional report on the matter noted a near universal condemnation of Israel's flotilla actions (Migdalovitz, 2010), the harshest criticism was directed at the Israeli public relations after the violence (e.g. Waghorn, 2010 and Ibish, 2010). After Israel's failure to adequately justify its actions, many observers asked when, not if, the Gaza blockade should be eased. Particularly damaging were the rejections of Israel's public diplomacy not just from the U.S. (e.g. Coteret, 2010), but also from within Israel (e.g. Levy, 2010).

Israel's effort to shift blame to the activists on the *Mavi Marmara* did not fail because of a lack of effort on the part of Netanyahu or other officials. I have argued that the Israeli Flotilla public relations campaign, dominated by edited videos and the heavily-trafficked YouTube cyber-diplomacy examined in this research, was largely ineffective because its primary story elements failed both of Fisher's narrative paradigmatic tests of logic: narrative probability and narrative fidelity.

Moreover, the narrative failure of Israel's public diplomacy may have been exacerbated due to a fundamental misunderstanding of the platform YouTube. As Cull (2011)

stresses, in a cyber-diplomacy campaign it is vital to know your audience. Two factors demonstrate an Israeli failure to grasp this crucial dynamic. First, the slickly produced YouTube playlist and channel appear at odds with a social media site best advantaged by “netizens”, not by government media professionals. Thus, the IDF would have been better served by including in the playlist interviews with Israeli citizens, for example, who live under daily fear of rocket attacks. Second, though understandable, the disabling of the comments feature on YouTube eliminates the conversational aspect inherent in social media. Israel would have been wise to allow the posting of comments. Officials could simply have monitored and blocked offensive language and posts; this is the very policy of many media organizations that demonstrate better understanding of the platform. Instead, Israel appeared to conduct a standard public relations offensive and transfer it to YouTube, seemingly without regard for the novel interactive dynamics engendered by Web 2.0.

This research seeks no normative judgment on the Israelis’ or activists’ policy decisions or strategies. Nor does it maintain that Israel’s cyber-diplomacy was the only force behind a vocal and widespread condemnation of its Flotilla actions. It should also be noted that a competing narrative, that of Turkey and the IHH, certainly played a significant role in the public perception of the Flotilla incident. However, it has been established that the Israeli authorities, consistent with ongoing policy, quickly seized control of what evidence could be made public and determined what journalists were allowed access to witnesses (Lerman, 2010; Zanotti et al., 2008, p. 3). Media outlets also certainly played a role in their framing of the evidence. Accounts, however, indicate that reporting by the mainstream media was dominated by Israel’s edited version of events (Lerman, 2010), such as found on the YouTube Flotilla playlist. Finally, I note there is of course a larger regional narrative in which the Flotilla events—and any incident of this kind—are situated: the decades-long dispute between Israel and the Palestinians (and their Arab allies).

Nevertheless, this research shows that the narrative paradigm, precisely because it allows for equal consideration of disparate elements among all audience members, is well suited for evaluating cyber and public diplomacy interventions. Even with the existence of conflicting policy views, the application of narrative logic allows for poignant assessment of communication across cultures and is not limited to the peculiarities of U.S. politics.

Future research should investigate how individual social media platforms, such as YouTube, Facebook or Twitter, uniquely impact the perception of narrative. In addition, online strategic narratives should be contrasted with those found in older media, such as televised crisis speech or official press releases. Finally, media effects researchers should begin to survey audiences in direct response to selected cyber-diplomacy campaigns.

One cannot overstate the importance of narrative in any communication, not just strategic. If, for example, the players in the Holy Land would better understand that many people navigate their lives according to the stories in which they dwell and with

which they identify, there is a chance for constructive dialogue that understands each party's entry point into each and every matter related to the conflict. Figures and statistics, such as number of new settlements built versus those abandoned, number of missiles fired by one side versus those fired by the other, and strict lines of geographic demarcation, may be no more important to consider than symbolic and culture-specific factors that shape the narratives each party so steadfastly clings to. The other, entrenched approach, based solely on rational logic and "expert knowledge" of "correct" and patriotic policy, is more of the same: both sides' dogmatic insistence that its position is absolute truth, largely ignorant of the stories humans employ to make sense of the world.

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