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Media Portrayal of a Foreign State in the Face of Civil Society Action: Israel and BDS in Britain

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Media coverage has important implications for national security, given that a state's international image is constructed in large measure by the media. The research presented here assesses the content of Israel-related mainstream media coverage in Britain, against the background of a civil society campaign that advocates for a boycott of Israel. To what extent has civil society action against Israel featured in Israel-related media coverage in Britain and how has such action been framed? The article examines the coverage of Israel in five mainstream British press outlets in the context of the global civil society Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) campaign that seeks to isolate Israel internationally. Findings are presented on literature relating to media coverage patterns, framing, and reporting on civil society movements and on literature referring specifically to media coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Keywords: media, journalism, civil society, Israeli-Palestinian conflict, activism, NGOs, BDS, UK

Introduction

The media is the principal source for much of what individuals know about the world, and wields particular influence when the audience lacks first-hand experience with an issue (Einwiller, Carroll, & Korn, 2010; Grafström et al., 2015). Given that a nation's image, usually constructed in large part by the media, can over time become part of a national political culture (Grix & Lacroix, 2006), media coverage carries important implications for the state reported on. It is thus not surprising that states invest resources to enhance a favorable image for themselves in the belief that such an image will have a positive influence on their international stature (Avraham & Ketter, 2008).

Recognizing the salience of states' international (or regional) standing is at the base of understanding states' national security as intricately related to multiple factors above and beyond conventional power. Such broad thinking in relation to the elements comprising national security came after a long period—from the end of World War II, through the Cold War era, and until globalization in the 1990s—wherein only matters relating to military force were considered a national security issue, and all other matters were relegated to some form of low politics (Baldwin, 1997; Krause & Williams, 1996). Nowadays, however, it is clear that alongside any military confrontation, states face a battle of ideas in the international arena with repercussions for their national security (Hatuel-Radoshitzky, 2019).

This is particularly true in the current era of globalization and in today's media revolution, which has spurred countries to be more concerned with their international image. It is also evident in instances in which political actors (be they state or non-state) are involved in conflicts where international support or criticism may well influence the conflict's outcome (Van Ham, 2003; Nye & Owens, 1996; Kunczik, 1997; Yarchi, 2016). With this in mind, this article is concerned with how public discourse vis-à-vis a foreign state engaged in conflict is reflected in the mainstream media of another country. Of special interest is the media's reporting on the foreign state, against the background of civil society action aimed at tainting the foreign state's image in the mainstream media.

The choice to incorporate civil society actors, and not only the mainstream media, into a study dealing with state international image is based on the growing understanding that civil society actors play an increasing role in global diplomatic processes (Kelly, 2010). Among other reasons, this is the result of technological innovations that have enabled civil society actors to operate in transnational advocacy networks, taking their cases to the international court of public opinion, and thereby sharing the same spheres of activity as states in the international arena (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998; Plavsak, 2002).

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Despite their growing role, however, mainstream media coverage of civil society actors is limited in scope and skewed, with the most notable pro-government bias pertaining to international and global (as opposed to national and domestic) topics and debates (Bennett, 1990; Wozniak et al., 2017). At the same time, studies have repeatedly cited media coverage as critical to the overall success or failure of these groups, from the civil rights movements of the 1960s onward (Ramos et al., 2007; Thrall, 2006). This is because media attention helps define public understanding of a social movement: who its leaders are, what it wants, and how it seeks to bring about social change. Civil society groups that attract media coverage, therefore, gain an important source of potential influence: they stand to recruit more members and allies, gain legitimacy in the political process, and exert

greater pressure on policymakers (Andrews & Caren, 2010; Thrall, 2006).

Varying narratives by establishment and civil society actors vis-à-vis a given foreign state are communicated by the media through frames. Media frames can be conceptualized as the central idea captured in a news story that is then placed in a broader perspective (Entman, 2004; McCurdy, 2012). While most research points to the inability of media coverage to lead to policy adjustments, the paradigm that media attention along with public support is a necessary condition for pressuring policymakers, and in turn affecting policies, is widely accepted (Tresch & Fischer, 2015).

Building on the literature, this study assesses the content of Israel-related mainstream media coverage in Britain, against the background of a civil society campaign that advocates for a boycott of Israel as a form of Palestinian resistance. Given such civil society efforts, to what extent does civil society action against Israel feature in Israel-related media coverage in Britain, and how is such action framed? To what extent does Israel-related coverage deal with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict exclusively (or primarily), as opposed to covering Israel outside of the conflict? Other questions include how developments vis-à-vis the conflict are contextualized (i.e., what frames are employed in Israel-related reporting), and how and to what extent the civil-society campaign against Israel features in discourse relating to the state.

To address these issues, the article reviews 512 items published in five of Britain's leading daily newspapers. The primary timeframe chosen for the research is 2017, a year with three prominent conflict-related milestones, two of which have particular significance for Britain—the centennial of the Balfour Declaration (1917), and seventy years to UN General Assembly Resolution 181, which called for the partition of British-ruled Palestine into a Jewish state and an Arab state (1947)—and fifty years since the 1967 War. A timeframe filled with symbolic conflict-related milestones enhances the likelihood of

coverage of civil society actors whose mission—to lead an international boycott of Israel—relates to them in one way or another.

The article begins with general background regarding media influence and media coverage of grassroots movements, and context-related background regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement, which advocates against Israel. Following this are sections describing the research methodology used in this study and the research findings. The article concludes with an analysis of the findings.

Mainstream Media: Impact and Social Movements

Over the years, the question of the media's influence on public opinion/consumers has been researched from three approaches. Early research (in the 1950s) conformed to the "hypodermic needle" paradigm postulating that the media affected its consumers uniformly, leading to "immediate and direct responses to media images" (Grix & Lacroix, 2006, p. 375). Later research (in the 1960s and 1970s) perceived media consumers as having greater ability to interpret media messages, with social relations playing an important mediating variable influencing consumers' interpretation of media messages (Williams, 2003, pp. 171-174; Grix & Lacroix, 2006). A third, more recent approach, dubbed the "cultural effects theories," focuses on the importance of cumulative knowledge, ideologies, and life experience in media consumers' interpretation and reception of media messages (Williams, 2003; Street, 2001; Grix & Lacroix, 2006).

This article, like the literature that deals with foreign states' images in other countries (Grix & Lacroix, 2006), perceives the effects of mainstream media as in line with the cultural approach. As such, it assumes that the long-term effects of exposure to national stereotypes vis-à-vis a foreign state can lead to their internalization in the national psyche. It further adopts a constructivist approach, viewing states

as social creatures with motivations to adapt or change policies pursuant to social rewards or punishment. It is in this socially constructed international arena that mainstream media is perceived to play an important role in assisting citizens and policymakers as they encounter and respond to foreign nations and distant states.

As such, this article traces how the mainstream media of a European country (Britain) depicts a foreign country situated in the Middle East (Israel) against the background of an ongoing conflict (the Israeli-Palestinian conflict) and an active international civil society campaign (BDS) operating to erode British-Israeli relations as a form of resistance to Israel's policies vis-à-vis the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In reviewing the relationship between social movements[1] and mainstream media, three takeaways from the relevant literature can be summarized.

First, the media-social movements relationship is tilted in that the latter need the media far more than the media needs social movements. Civil society players need the mainstream media to broaden their outreach to the public they wish to mobilize and to disseminate ideas from one location to the other (Gamson & Wolfsfeld, 1993), and the media is an effective tool to spur national and international policy debates (McCurdy, 2012). In addition, media coverage of civil society action is instrumental for such groups and organizations to acquire financial resources (Andrews & Caren, 2010). This is because donors continue to value media coverage as a platform to learn about non-state actors, as well as a mechanism for measuring their impact on political discourse (Powers, 2016a, 2016b).

A second feature of the relationship between social movements and mainstream media is that the prospects for non-state actors to be covered by the media are slim, and in cases in which movements are covered, they have little control of the media frames used to represent them (Vliegenthart & Walgrave, 2012; Wouters, 2013; Shultziner & Shoshan, 2018). Owing to the

proliferation of NGOs over the last few decades, smaller NGOs have an even lesser chance of being mentioned in comparison to large and well-funded NGOs (Wozniak et al., 2017).[2]

This has resulted in the professionalization of NGO efforts in press and publicity work through the hiring of professional staff, and through the establishment of public relations departments whose primary task is to pursue media coverage (Powers, 2016b). While empirical analyses show that the inclusion of NGO-provided statements in news items remains low (Thrall, Stecula, & Sweet 2014; Wessler et al., 2016; Wozniak et al., 2017), some NGOs have indeed been able to establish themselves as legitimate reference points for journalists (Moyn, 2010; Powers, 2016a).

A third, frequent point is the media's often-negative coverage of social movements. In competing with official state actors for media coverage, civil society groups harness mobilization and protest strategies to serve the media's need for drama and confrontation. It appears that social movements receive coverage through protest tactics especially when these attract many participants or involve violence (Oliver & Maney, 2000; Tresch & Fischer, 2015). According to the phenomenon known as the protest paradigm, such attention is overwhelmingly negative (Andrews & Caren, 2010; McCurdy, 2012).

Nevertheless, literature on frames used by the media to cover civil society groups remains inconclusive. With the professionalization of media teams within social movements, activities such as organizing press conferences or distributing press releases are considered effective for gaining media coverage. Interestingly, recent research comparing local and international social movements on this parameter finds that media coverage of local civil society actors tends to over-represent protest and under-represent the information strategy (as delivered by media events and press releases), whereas, media coverage of international social movements focuses

more on media and information strategies and less on protest (Tresch & Fischer, 2015). At the same time, Powers (2016b) finds that leading human rights NGOs do indeed receive growing prevalence in mainstream news, noting that economic constraints for news outlets, acceptance of NGOs in official circles, and professionalized publicity efforts by leading NGOs can be expected to play a role in this trend.

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The Israeli-Palestinian Conflict: Media Coverage and BDS

Modern conflicts are characterized by an asymmetry among conflict protagonists, and by the increasing media coverage that they attract (Ayalon et al., 2014; Plavsak, 2002). It has thus been posited that modern conflicts are fought not only on the kinetic battleground, but also on the diplomatic, legal, and media fronts, where media coverage impacts on the behavior of political actors, affecting the various fronts (Yarchi, 2016; Tabak & Avraham, 2018).

Seeing as actors can no longer afford to prevail in the military field alone, especially when military victories carry a diplomatic price tag, favorable media coverage becomes a goal. The contest for media attention between rivaling actors in the international arena takes place in an arena saturated with players, including the conflicting adversaries themselves, foreign governments, and the media establishment in the given state—with each actor trying to promote its own framing, and with cultural-political congruence between the two states playing an influential role (Sheafer & Gabay, 2009). Hence, the likelihood of one state influencing foreign policy of a politically and culturally distant state is limited.

As early as 1970, scholars began to examine the media coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the parties involved (Neureiter, 2017). In this respect, a notable development from recent years is the emergence of civil society initiatives in the form of media watchdog groups, dedicated to improving the coverage of rivaling parties. This demonstrates the important role that the media is perceived to play in shaping public opinion or in influencing policy formation; and the central role that international sympathy and support carries for both parties to the conflict.

The ample research regarding Israel's framing in the international media is inconclusive, with some articles citing evidence of pro-Israel bias in the Western media and others asserting a clear anti-Israel bias. There is apparent consensus on two issues, however: one is that there is a difference between the framing of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict between the European and American media, with European media more critical toward Israel (Wolfsfeld, 1997; Hatuel-Radoshitzky, 2015). Another is that Israel's positive media coverage from the initial years of Israel's establishment, when it was widely perceived as a unique democracy built by Jewish refugees amidst challenging political-economic circumstances, has deteriorated to more negative depictions nowadays (and generally following the 1967 War).

This shift is often described as the transition from Israel's image as a David fighting against the Arab Goliath to Israel's becoming the Goliath against its adversaries (Avraham, 2009; Tabak & Avraham, 2018). Developments contributing to this transformation in Israel's international image include the occupation of territories since the 1967 War (primarily the West Bank and Gaza); Israel's 1982 invasion of Lebanon and the consequent establishment of a security buffer zone in the southern part of the country, from which Israel withdrew only 18 years later; two Palestinian popular uprisings (the intifadas); and the escalation of violence between Israel and Hamas in Gaza in multiple deadly rounds

(2009, 2012, 2014, and 2021) and in the Hamas-led March of Return campaigns (2018 onward).

These hard power developments on the ground have been complemented by a proactive and dynamic Palestinian struggle in the diplomatic, legal, and media arenas, demonstrated by the opening of two preliminary examinations against Israel by the International Criminal Court (one of which evolved into an investigation)[3] and Palestinian diplomacy, which, among other achievements, has resulted in the recognition of Palestine by 137 countries across the world;[4] the upgrading of Palestine's status in the UN (from non-member entity to non-member state); and the acceptance of Palestine as a full member in various international organizations and forums. To these one may add the media's tendency to sympathize with the weaker side of an asymmetric conflict (Tabak & Avraham, 2018) and the pro-Palestinian civil society (BDS) campaign for boycotts, divestment, and sanctions on Israel.

The BDS campaign was formally launched in 2005 by a coalition of over 170 pro-Palestinian civil-society organizations and trade unions, and has since been endorsed by activists, academics, and intellectuals, who have united behind the campaign's call to "impose broad boycotts and implement divestment initiatives…embargoes and sanctions against Israel."[5] Since then, the BDS rallying cry has been translated into nine languages, and has been endorsed by numerous Palestine-solidarity movements, which are primarily volunteer-driven (Ananth, 2013; Hatuel-Radoshitzky & Jamal, 2021).

The BDS campaign lacks a rigid structure: ad hoc activists and civil society organizations plug into the global campaign with their local initiatives, often communicating with the Boycott National Committee (BNC), which was established in 2008. The BNC, which comprises a broad coalition of Palestinian civil society organizations, political parties, unions, and networks, thus serves as a focal point for coordinating global BDS campaigns, acting

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as the Palestinian reference point for global BDS activities (Hallward & Shaver, 2012).

Opposing the BDS movement are other civil society activists, academics, and Jewish organizations characterized as being pro-Israel, as well as the Israeli establishment (Cohen & Avraham, 2009). As such, BDS efforts are perceived by different constituencies through very different lenses. Those supporting BDS emphasize the power of the people to work for justice and peace when states fail to do so; the asymmetric nature of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict; the nonviolent nature of BDS tactics; and the alignment of BDS goals with international law and human rights. Opponents note that the campaign's terminology invites violence; there are connections between BDS-supporting organizations and terror-related activity; BDS-supporting rhetoric and action spills into antisemitism; and the movement delegitimizes Israel's right to exist in its current format as the homeland of the Jewish people (Hallward & Shaver, 2012; Hatuel-Radoshitzky, 2017; Ghabra & Hasian, 2018; Nelson, 2019). Moreover, opponents caution that although boycotts, divestment, and sanctions do not incorporate military force, they often involve power politics and can have a debilitating effect on civilian populations. As such, these tools cannot always be classified under nonviolent tactics per se (Hallward & Shaver, 2012).[6]

In considering British media coverage of BDS specifically and of Israel more generally, the wide variety of political standpoints represented by different publications in the

UK's pluralistic media landscape lead to inconclusive findings. Some research shows that anti-Israel bias is most prevalent in the British media over other European countries (Segev & Miesch, 2011); and that Israel is treated unfairly by British media outlets, which omit background information needed to make informed judgements of Israel's actions (Segev & Miesch, 2011; Simmons, 2012; Neureiter, 2017). Sheafer and Gabay (2009) demonstrate that Israel is more successful in promoting its agenda and framing in the United States than in the British media, while the opposite applies to the Palestinian Authority. Simmons (2012) finds that violent acts by Palestinians are downplayed by British reporters, whereas Israeli acts of force are oftentimes exaggerated and taken out of context. On the other hand, Philo & Berry (2004, 2011) find that British media coverage of Israeli motives is comprehensive and facilitates understanding of Israeli actions, whereas background information that would work in favor of the Palestinians is mostly omitted, and voices justifying Israeli actions are more frequently apparent than those of Palestinians.

These inconclusive findings highlight that academics concerned with the loaded issue of media coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict can be expected to display some form of bias. While we do not claim to come to the subject as dispassionate and neutral researchers, this obstacle is addressed in the current article by basing findings on a relatively large open-source database (n=512 items) comprising media items referencing "Israel" in five different daily newspapers, whose content is systematically and comprehensively analyzed through a reliable research design.

Methodology

Five national distribution daily newspapers were reviewed in the study of British mainstream media coverage relating to Israel against the background of BDS civil society action: *The Guardian, The Times, The Daily Mirror, The Sun,* and *Metro.*[7] These publications were chosen for three primary reasons: all publish on and offline; they vary in terms of their political line and target constituencies; and they vary in terms of the form of their distribution (i.e., free or subscription-based).

Our analysis restricts itself to mainstream print and online media for four reasons. First, despite declining print circulation, the print media continues to be of enormous significance both politically and within the broader societal debates (Copeland & Copsey, 2017), primarily because its status overshadows the social media's agenda-setting power (Harder et al., 2017). For example, Powers (2016a, 2016b) notes that despite developing technologies, political officials still tend to obtain the majority of their news from mainstream media, which is their source for learning about advocacy demands. This reinforces perceptions that the most reliable way to capture the attention of government officials is through mainstream media, and that most examples of successful advocacy include mainstream coverage.

Second, content covered in high-profile newspapers is echoed in other media channels, including radio, television, magazines, and other newspapers, creating a multiplier effect. While recent research that factors in technological innovations, including the consumption of online news, illustrates that non-mainstream media outlets also affect other media channels' agendas, legacy media organizations remain important elements both in their print and online form, with established media titles still shaping the news discourse (Vliegenthart & Walgrave, 2008; Meraz, 2011; Harder et al., 2017). In considering publication hours of newspapers versus news websites, newspapers are printed only once a day (after midnight), whereas news sites start publishing in the morning. This time difference enables news websites to start the day by providing a round-up of news stories covered in the newspapers, reaffirming the capacity of news websites to set other media channels' agendas (Harder et al., 2017).

Third, newspapers are one of the most diverse media channels. As such, the sample includes world news from foreign press agencies; local news from the UK; reports by British correspondents stationed in Israel and the Middle East; and commentaries, editorials, opinion pages, and interviews. This is particularly important in considering the article's interest in media coverage of BDS and civil society action targeting Israel, following studies demonstrating that civil society groups are only rarely included in news coverage (Thrall, 2006; Trenz, 2004; Powers, 2016a).

Finally, newspaper articles are easily accessible and provide a compelling sense of both the quantitative and qualitative content of media coverage pertaining to any given issue (Grix & Lacroix, 2006).

One of the most established methods for analyzing how something is represented in the media is the use of content analysis, whereby researchers establish a set of categories and then count the number of instances that fall into each category (Grafström et al., 2015). Accordingly, in the online archives of each of the newspapers sampled we retrieved all items containing the word "Israel." After reading a total of over 800 articles, an initial check was performed to verify that articles indeed covered issues relating to the State of Israel. Articles marginally referring to Israel (for example in a geographical context, mentioning Israel as bordering another country; or as part of a list of countries in the Middle East) were recorded but omitted[8] from the content analysis in which articles' main themes were extracted.[9]

The content analysis was thus performed on a total of 512 articles (n=512), which were read in their entirety. Contents were summarized, main ideas were drafted into bullet points, and articles assigned to categories in a spreadsheet. Like seminal literature based on content analysis such as Harcup & O'Neill's studies on newsworthiness (2001, 2017), the mapping of key points and ideas communicated in the texts included in this research involved some degree

of subjectivity—much like the journalistic process itself. Like earlier research, we too attempt to overcome this obstacle by basing our conclusions on a large enough sample, which we believe provides a basis for at least some tentative conclusions to be drawn.

Findings

The content of Israel-related mainstream media coverage in Britain focuses primarily on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, with 62 percent of the total number of all items (i.e., n=315) reporting on different aspects of the conflict (Figure 1). Naturally, given the difference between the sampled newspapers' characteristics and style, the proportion of articles centering on the conflict in each publication is different, with *The Guardian* leading (71 percent of all published articles relating to Israel covering the conflict) and *The Times* providing a more eclectic view of Israel (with 52 percent of all published articles relating to Israel focusing on the conflict).
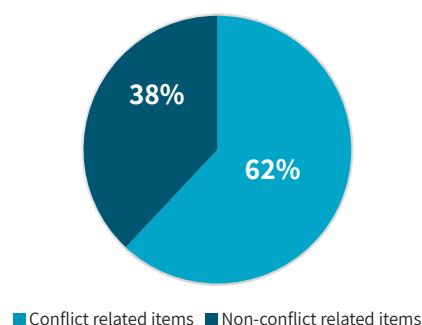

38%   **62%**

■ Conflict related items ■ Non-conflict related items

Figure 1. Percentage of British newspaper articles on Israel dealing with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict

Under the general category of articles dealing with the conflict, items can further be divided according to those relating to conflict-related events on the ground as they evolve, and those dealing with different aspects of the conflict's internationalization (Figure 2).[10]

Conflict on the ground, comprising 35 percent of conflict-related items (i.e., n= 110 items), deals with activity in, around, and relating to Israeli settlements (e.g., "Israel…
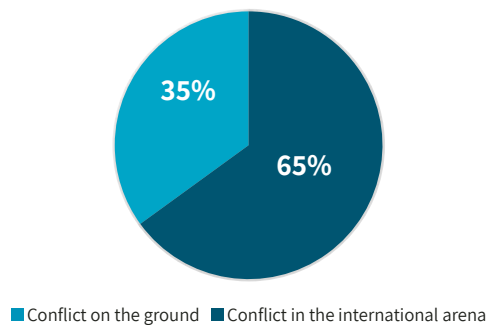
Figure 2. Articles dealing with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict according to two sub-categories

will pursue a unilateral policy of largely unconstrained settlement expansion in the occupied Palestinian territories, as it announced the first new settlement in two decades," Beaumont, 2017a); terror attacks (e.g., "Hannah Bladon, 20, was repeatedly knifed in the chest by a Palestinian man," Charlton, 2017); Palestinian protests against the Israeli government (e.g., "More than 1,000 Palestinians held in Israeli jails have gone on hunger strike," Carlstrom, 2017a); activities carried out by the Israeli military (e.g., "The Israeli army is pushing to dismantle… security measures…that have touched off a week of deadly violence across Israel and the West Bank," Carlstrom, 2017b); and cultural and social aspects of the conflict (e.g., "Dorit Rabinyan's story of an affair across the Israeli-Palestinian divide became a cause célébre," Beaumont, 2017b).

Conflict in the international arena, comprising 65 percent of conflict-related items (i.e., n=205 items), focuses on the conflict from an international dimension. These articles include foreign leaders' statements vis-à-vis Israel against the background of the conflict (e.g. "Justin Welby, the Archbishop of Canterbury, has spoken of his 'profound grief and sorrow' after hearing the testimonies of Palestinians," Sherwood, 2017); policy decisions of foreign governments in relation to the conflict (e.g., Donald Trump today announced the US will recognise Jerusalem as the capital of Israel," Smith, 2017); the involvement of international organizations and NGOs in different aspects of

the conflict (e.g., "The UN's top human rights official has marked the 50th anniversary of Israel's occupation of the Palestinian territories," Beaumont, 2017c); and coverage of the grassroots BDS campaign along with other civil society initiatives involving Israel's boycott (e.g., "Leading arts world figures urge Radiohead to cancel Israel gig," Ellis-Petersen, 2017).

The single issue in conflict-related coverage reported most frequently was the Trump administration's December (2017) announcement that the United States Embassy would relocate from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, and was the only issue reported by all five newspapers reviewed. In fact, 16 percent of all conflict-related items addressed this policy move. The extensive interest that this decision generated can also be demonstrated on a chronological axis, which shows that December has the highest proportion of articles covering Israel from a conflict-related perspective, i.e., 85 percent of all items published about Israel in December covered conflict-related events as opposed to a low point in August, where only 32 percent of all items on Israel incorporated conflict-related reporting (Figure 3). A possible reason for the extensive interest in President Trump's decision is the symbolic recognition of Israeli sovereignty in Jerusalem—a core issue of contention between Israelis and Palestinians.
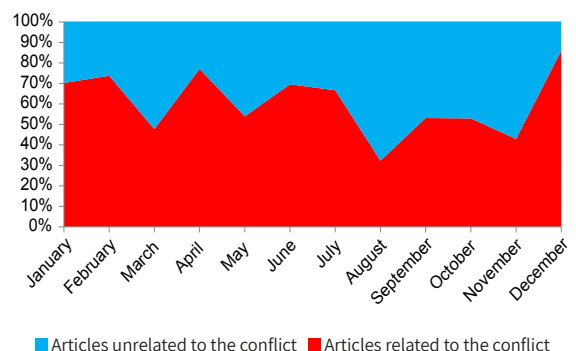

Figure 3. Conflict vs. non-conflict-related coverage on Israel in the British mainstream media by month (2017)

The smaller category of articles not dealing with the conflict (i.e., 38 percent of the total

number of all items examined, Figure 1), cover issues such as domestic Israeli politics, society, culture, and economics (e.g., "The world's oldest man, an Israeli Auschwitz survivor who lost his wife and two children in the Holocaust, passed away," Parker, 2017); Israel's relations with Middle East countries[11] (e.g., "Israel's former nuclear chief has expressed support for the nuclear deal with Iran and criticised the attempts of President Trump and Binyamin Netanyahu," Pfeffer, 2017); and Israel's relations or rivalries with other states—with no mention of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (e.g., "Information which Donald Trump 'shared' with Russia actually came from Israel," Waugh, 2017).

While these articles may incorporate a dimension relating to Israel's international standing or criticize Israel on various aspects (e.g., leadership corruption), common to all is that they refrain from mentioning the conflict—either as a reference point or as an issue within itself.

In looking at the proportion of articles relating to any one of the three milestones that led to the choice of 2017 as the research period, only 2 percent of articles fall into this category, i.e., only 11 items out of the entire sample related to one of the three historical conflict-related milestones. The Balfour Declaration centennial garnered most coverage (e.g., "Theresa May has said that Britain is 'proud of our pioneering role in the creation of the state of Israel'…to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the Balfour declaration," Wintour & Beaumont, 2017), with a total of 8 items relating to this milestone. The 70-year landmark of General Assembly Resolution 181 saw no articles in any of the publications relating to this milestone. The 50-year landmark of the 1967 War generated three items (e.g., "Israel had a top secret plan…if it faced defeat during the 1967 Middle East war, new documents reveal," Lockett, 2017). While media interest relating to all three milestones was clearly insignificant (Figure 4), worth noting is that the timing of this milestone overlapped with the UK general elections in the context of the country's

withdrawal from the European Union (Brexit), which naturally marginalized the space available to cover this external and (chronologically and geographically) distant event.
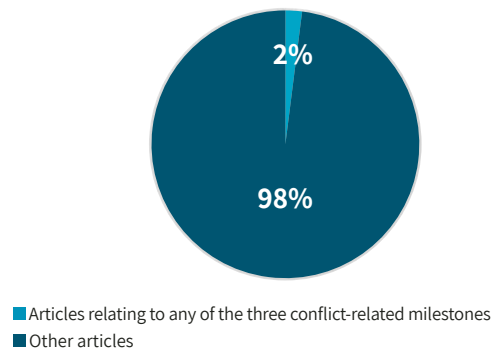

Articles relating to any of the three conflict-related milestones
Other articles

Figure 4. Proportion of articles relating to any of the three conflict-related milestones

Regarding the extent to which BDS and other civil society initiatives to boycott Israel appear in the British mainstream media, and how such efforts are framed, only 4 percent (i.e., n= 20) of the total sample directly dealt with these issues (Figure 5). Similar to the differences between the newspapers' coverage of conflict-related issues, here too are differences among the five newspapers, with *The Guardian* featuring most articles dedicated to the anti-Israel civil-society campaign (i.e., 82 percent of all BDS-related coverage).
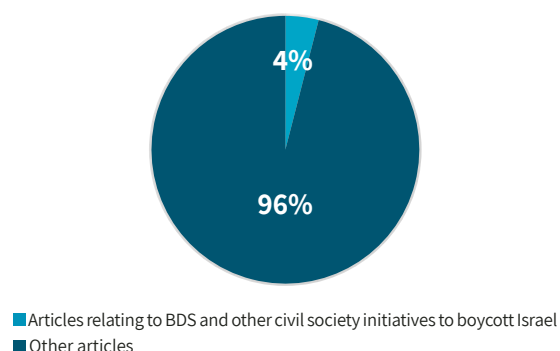

Articles relating to BDS and other civil society initiatives to boycott Israel
Other articles

Figure 5. Proportion of articles relating to BDS and other civil society initiatives to boycott Israel

Articles relating to BDS and grassroots activity launched against Israel are primarily

culturally focused (n=14, 70 percent of all articles in this category), and relate mostly to activists' pressure on artists and performers to refrain from travelling to Israel (e.g., "High-profile figures from the arts world, including…Roger Waters, have called on Radiohead to cancel an upcoming gig in Israel as part of a cultural boycott," Ellis-Petersen, 2017). Some of these items report on success for boycott initiatives resulting in the cancellation of events in Israel (e.g., "The New Zealand singer-songwriter Lorde has cancelled a planned concert in Israel following an online campaign by activists opposed to the Israeli occupation of Palestine," Beaumont, 2017d), while other items report on BDS failures (e.g., "An Israeli festival will go ahead…despite calls for a boycott by pro-Palestinian supporters," Narwan, 2017). A spike in BDS-related reporting was observed in July, coinciding with the controversy surrounding Radiohead's Tel Aviv performance (Figure 6).
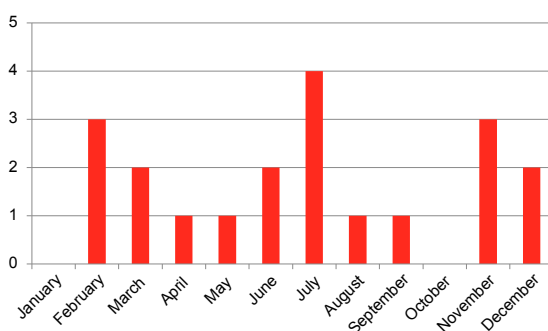

Figure 6. Number of BDS/boycott-related articles, by month (2017)

Other issues reported on in the context of civil society action against Israel are the state's decision to bar entry of BDS activists (e.g., "Foreigners who support boycotting Israel or its settlements have been banned from entering the country," Carlstrom, 2017c), and cancellation by British universities of global student-based activities "as part of an annual pro-Palestinian event called Israel Apartheid Week" (Weale & Morris, 2017).

Another dimension of BDS-related items are op-eds written by activists advocating the

boycott of Israel, in which they seek support for the cause (e.g., "The BDS movement is a response to Israel's confidence that it can act with impunity…it calls on all actors to end economic support for Israel's illegal actions," Jamal, 2017).

In terms of the tone adopted toward civil society action against the State of Israel, articles range from presenting a balanced view (e.g., "BDS…supporters say the boycott is aimed at ending Israeli occupation of Palestinian lands…Critics say the campaign…is aimed at delegitimizing and destroying Israel," Associated Press, 2017); through presenting a bias view against Israel (e.g. "Radiohead are wrong to play in Israel. Here's why," Randall, 2017); to presenting a view opposed to BDS action (e.g., "The kind of dialogue that they want to engage in is one that's black or white… rather than engage with us…throw shit at us…it was patronizing in the extreme. It's offensive,'" Guardian Music, 2017). That is, the mainstream British media includes the full gamut of articles reporting about civil society action against Israel: from those that wholeheartedly support the cause to those that fully oppose it.

Discussion

The analysis of five mainstream British newspapers available on and offline in a defined timeframe regarding coverage of a foreign state (Israel) and reference to civil society initiatives designed to boycott it, reveals two sets of findings. The first set emerges from the analysis against the background of media-related literature, and the second set is relevant to the specific case study, i.e., the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Both sets of findings, however, are relevant to states in conflict in considering that poor state images in the international arena have the potential to erode elements that are vital to states' national security, such as their (regional and) international standing.

In reviewing the findings in light of literature relating to media coverage patterns, framing, and reporting vis-à-vis civil society movements,

three points emerge. First, that the three historic and prominent milestones during the selected research period were completely sidelined in all five newspapers' reporting vis-à-vis Israel demonstrates the media's overall concern with current affairs and clear preference for allocating space to evolving developments as opposed to the commemoration of past conflict-related landmarks. This is hardly surprising given the media's drive to relay information quickly and its distance from extensive research that is required to produce historically contextualized items. In view of literature regarding the contest for media attention between rivaling actors in the international arena (in this case pro and anti-Israel advocates), this reinforces the approach that the state wherein the media channel is based, along with the media's organizational needs, takes primacy in comparison to conflicting parties' attempts to promote their own framing with international media channels.

Second, the mere 4 percent of articles found to deal with civil society action out of the entire body of articles in the database strengthens the vast literature attesting to the sidelining of civil society forces within mainstream media. In tandem, we did not find evidence of the "protest paradigm," which asserts that in competing with official state players for media coverage, civil society groups resort to protests to serve the media's need for drama, albeit at the expense of negative coverage. This is because our database demonstrates that such rallies and confrontations were scarcely reported on, and when they were, their coverage did not incorporate a negatively judgmental viewpoint.

Third, the research demonstrates the plurality of the mainstream media landscape in Britain, both content-wise and framing-wise. The diversity of content is best demonstrated by the fact that only one development (President Trump's decision to move the US Embassy to Jerusalem) reverberated in all five publications. This content-diversity is further reinforced by the varying scope of articles across the different newspapers dealing with the conflict vs. the

proportion of items not dealing with the conflict, and within that the proportion of articles that relate to the civil society component (Figure 5). The diversity in framing is apparent with *The Guardian* displaying a more positive stance toward civil society action geared against the foreign state (Israel) in comparison to other newspapers that give civil society less visibility and more neutral coverage.

In terms of findings specific to the case study, i.e., Israel and the BDS campaign, an additional three points surface. First, this research does not lend support to the David-turned-Goliath paradigm, whereby Israel is depicted in the British mainstream media as a brutal oppressor and the Palestinians an innocent victim. This can be asserted both quantitatively, seeing as almost 40 percent of all items relating to Israel did not mention the conflict at all, and qualitatively, as demonstrated by the analysis of articles covering civil society action against Israel in which support, neutrality, and opposition are evident. This is particularly characteristic of four out of the five publications analyzed (i.e., *The Sun, The Daily Mirror, The Times*, and *Metro*), with *The Guardian* displaying the most interest in conflict-related events and the highest tendency to cover BDS-related content. The lack of an across the board David-turned-Goliath paradigm is particularly highlighted owing to the sensitive period of time selected for this study (i.e., against three prominent conflict-related milestones during which media interest in the conflict was expected to hype).

Second, within the category of conflict related articles, more items refer to the international perspective of the conflict than to conflict-related developments on the ground. That is, even if there are fewer concrete conflict-related developments, the mere deadlock and the lack of a political horizon resulted in coverage of leaders who continue to relate to Israel through conflict lenses—even in an overall international arena fraught with strife. One may thus deduce that the status quo that characterizes the conflict continues to generate

media interest in Israel even in the absence of dramatic developments on the ground.

Third, the finding that the single issue most heavily reported on in conflict-related coverage is the Trump administration's decision to relocate the US Embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem is significant on two accounts. First, it demonstrates the unequivocal importance related to this policy move. The fact that this is a development of interest to the varied constituencies each publication targets signifies the dramatic precedent set by the US administration in relating to one of the core issues of the conflict. Second, it signals the importance of the United States as a superpower and the international weight assigned to its decisions.

Israeli authorities should relate skeptically to soft power leverage attributed to BDS and assign more weight to hard power policies vis-à-vis the conflict in influencing British media coverage of Israel.

Taken collectively, these findings are telling as to Israel's image in Britain, particularly because Britain has long been considered a hub for BDS action, pursuant to the BDS focus on Western states with strong bilateral relations with Israel. This is part of the soft power struggle accompanying conventional developments in the Israeli-Palestinian arena.

In light of findings, Israeli authorities dealing with the state's international image should relate skeptically to soft power leverage attributed to BDS and assign more weight to Israel's hard power policies vis-à-vis the conflict in influencing British media coverage of Israel. The fact that most BDS-related items overwhelmingly dealt with initiatives in the cultural realm is telling as to the state's most pertinent blind spot, and is perhaps the most vivid indicator of the limitations of state actors in the face of grassroots action. These state limitations, together with the symbolic weight of cultural icons and celebrities, amplified by

social media in the modern globalized world, should be considered by all states wanting to improve their international image.

This research is not without limitations. It is important to keep in mind that the comprehensive picture presented here is reflective only of the research period and the state under review (Britain). In other words, research findings cannot be generalized among different European countries, whose coverage of Israel and civil society action against it are more likely to be affected by these states' socio-cultural proximity to Israel as well as by the local media channels' organizational needs. In generalizing the findings from the year in which the coverage was examined (2017) to a present or future timeframe, variables such as developments on the ground and changes in the leaderships (in Britain, the rivaling parties involved in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and as poignantly demonstrated, the US administration) need to be considered.

Furthermore, it is not unlikely that similar research conducted on social media outlets would yield different findings, with greater emphasis on civil society players and with additional layers of information regarding the success, or lack thereof, of BDS campaigns. While the reasons for excluding social media from this study are delineated in the methodology, future comparative research between mainstream (online and offline) media content and social media content in relation to one designated subject could be instrumental in illuminating the differences between these mediums. Other than contributing to media-related literature, such information could be useful to states in strategizing methods to improve their image on the international stage as a tenet of their national security. As for the Israeli case study, a research design that factors in social media discourse could contribute toward understanding whether sparse newspaper coverage of BDS represents a failure of the movement, or a strategy that focuses on social rather than mainstream media. Social media research could also factor

in online levels of exposure, share-ability, and talkbacks as indices to measure the impact of the overall campaign.

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Notes

1   Included here are non-state actors such as Non-Government Organizations (NGOs), social and civil society movements, and campaigns, such as BDS.

2   Powers (2016a), for example, notes that whereas in 1990 two media-savvy organizations—Human Rights Watch and Médecins sans Frontières—accounted for 16.5 percent of all NGO mentions in the core research sample, by 2010, these groups garnered half (50.8 percent) of all mentions.

3   A preliminary examination was opened against Israel to probe allegations of war crimes relating to the 2010 *Mavi Marmara* flotilla incident. To date, this probe was closed twice by ICC outgoing Prosecutor Fatou Bensouda without a full criminal investigation. An additional preliminary examination that has developed into an investigation relates to war crimes in the West Bank, East Jerusalem, and Gaza Strip.

4   According to the Palestinian UN Mission official website: https://palestineun.org/about-palestine/diplomatic-relations/.

5   Palestinian Civil Society Call for BDS, July 5, 2005.

6   For more about the BDS movement, see Yogev & Lindenstrauss, *The delegitimization phenomenon: Challenges and responses.*

7   In *Metro* the newspaper's search engine disables access to articles that date more than a year back from the search date. Thus articles from this newspaper reflect May 2017 to December 2017 only.

8   The basic criterion in this respect was that the State of Israel was mentioned in the article at least twice.

9   To avoid an inflation of articles on a developing news story (such as a terror attack), only the last article of each day was listed in the database.

10 Cases in which conflict-related articles touched on both issues (i.e., developments on the ground and international repercussions of the conflict) were classified under the issue that appeared in the article's headline, assuming that readers often decide whether to read an article based on the headline.

11 Relayed primarily by the newspaper's on-the-ground Middle East correspondent.