

Telling Your Side of the Story: A Critical Discourse Analysis of News Coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict in Israel-(non) Normalising Middle East Countries

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ABSTRACT

This study used Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to examine how Israeli and Palestinian social actors were represented in news coverage during the May 2021 Gaza war, focusing on newspapers from countries with and without diplomatic relations with Israel. van Leeuwen's (2008) Framework directed the examination of role allocation, subjection, assimilation, and identification to analyse discursive practices influencing these representations. Utilising corpus linguistics methods, the study examined 40 news reports totalling 159,282 words drawn from four English-language newspapers, which are Daily Sabah, The Tehran Times, The Khaleej Times, and The Gulf Daily News. Fisher's exact test uncovered significant differences in the representation of social actors between countries with and without diplomatic ties to Israel, with non-diplomatic ties countries often depicting Palestinians as victims and Israelis as aggressors, contrasting with more nuanced or positive portrayals of Israelis in countries that have diplomatic ties with Israel. These different media representations seem to advance different narratives of the conflict that support the sponsoring states' agenda. This research enhances understanding of how linguistic and sociological factors shape public perceptions of the conflict, providing insights into media strategies in reporting contentious geopolitical events.

Keywords: Media Discourse; Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA); Diplomatic Relations; Israeli-Palestinian Conflict; Middle East

INTRODUCTION

In news media discourse, language is often perceived as a means of communication to inform the readership about newsworthy events. However, newsworthiness and information value are in fact discursive constructs themselves that are understood only when embedded in certain narratives (Fulton, 2005). Print media represents a linguistically rich platform pivotal for the exchange of thoughts and ideas, as well as for the production of prejudices and biases (Ramanathan & Hoon, 2015). Simultaneously, the newspaper industry is construed as a profit-driven enterprise akin to other businesses, as stated by Fowler (1991). The substantial impact of ownership and funding

sources, government, affluent individuals, or corporations, on news representation necessitates scrutiny, as events are shaped by news agencies' policies, viewpoints, and ideologies.

The main rationale of the study stems from the assumption that the media coverage is not always motivated by impartiality and fairness but rather by the agencies' policies and the ideological biases underpinning them. Sloan (2007; also (see Rönnback et al., 2025) illustrates that journalists may sometimes be the least competent to remark. Many journalists, even those whose readers consider them the most biased, have convinced themselves that they are genuinely impartial because of the journalistic heritage of objectivity, balance, and fairness. This might be more evident in the Middle Eastern countries that are newly diplomatically tied with Israel, which are the UAE, Bahrain, and Jordan, that have contributed significantly to influencing the media discourse owing to their unique political and geographical position. Thus, this research aims to provide new findings regarding media representations of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (2021) in the media of countries with and without diplomatic ties. With a focus on the Middle East newspapers, the paper provides an insider non-Western perspective as to how this conflict is embedded in different narratives advanced by English-language newspapers published in countries with and without diplomatic relations with Israel. This perspective has not received sufficient attention in previous studies of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which tend to focus on Western newspapers. The paper also provides insights as to how the state's agenda and its international relations may shape news coverage in Middle Eastern countries, irrespective of whether the newspapers are state-run or privately sponsored. This ultimately aims to provide some insights into media independence in the Middle East, a topic often overlooked by discourse analytic studies.

Van Leeuwen's (2008) social actor theory, supplemented by insights from Fulton's (2005) news narrativization, will be used to provide a multi-layered analysis through the diverse social categories of discourse. The paper offers a comprehensive picture of how the Palestinian-Israeli conflict is represented in the press coverage of selected newspapers during the Gaza war from 10-21 May 2021. This coverage was characterised by different attitudes and reactions that might result in contradiction in some cases, especially between countries with and without diplomatic ties to Israel. As a result, this study examines and compares articles in several selected newspapers to reveal how social actors are represented, how language manipulation affects power and ideology, and how the media of countries with diplomatic ties to Israel dictate the representation of the Gaza war. To this end, the paper is designed to answer the following questions:

RQ1: How are Israelis and Palestinians represented in terms of their social roles by the media in Israel-normalising and non-normalising Middle East countries?

RQ2: How do these different representations construct different narratives of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict?

The paper is structured as follows. Section two provides a theoretical background in which two different aspects are discussed. The section first provides a brief overview of van Leeuwen's (2008) social actor theory and introduces its key categories. The section also explains why news reports should be understood as narratives. The data collection and methodology are discussed in Section three. In section four, the findings are presented and discussed. In the conclusion section, the research questions are answered, and implications are highlighted.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Social participants are discursively represented in diverse ways in communication. Van Leeuwen's (2008) theory offers a framework of sociological classifications to analyse these discursive representations, wherein representation is understood as the ways individuals or groups are constructed by virtue of the linguistic choices made in the text. Representation, in this sense, highlights how discourse may reflect and reproduce power relations. Along this line, the underlying premise in van Leeuwen's (2008) theory is that discourse is a series of recontextualised social practices, in which different elements of the social practices, i.e., social actors, actions, time, space, etc., are textually represented differently in ways that foreground certain contextual assumptions. Thus, social actors are generally embedded within social practices that provide context for their actions. As van Leeuwen (2008, 6) states, social practices are "socially regulated ways of doing things" that can be reconstructed and represented through discourse. The regulation of social practices involves structuring these activities according to traditions, prescriptions, guidance from influential figures, technological constraints, and other factors. Although 'Inclusion' and 'Exclusion' constitute the primary binary framework of van Leeuwen's (2008) framework, encompassing all subcategories, this investigation selectively concentrates on 'Inclusion' and its related categories, such as role allocation, assimilation, and identification. The selection of these strategies is primarily dictated by the constraints of corpus linguistics, which narrows the practicable scope of van Leeuwen's theoretical linguistic features to align with this research's methodological requisites. To elucidate, the analytical terms "Palestinians" or "Israelis" necessitate their syntactic presence, rendering the exploration of the 'Exclusion' category unfeasible.

It is imperative to acknowledge that omitting these linguistic features does not compromise van Leeuwen's framework's integrity, as numerous scholars have selectively employed specific tools. For instance, KhosraviNik (2008, 2009) and Abid (2020) utilised passivation, activation, personalisation, impersonalisation, individualisation, assimilation, and functionalisation, whereas Don and Lee (2014) focused on passivation, activation, personalisation, and individualisation.

SOCIOLOGICAL CATEGORIES OF DISCOURSE

Van Leeuwen's framework highlights the essential role of inclusion in analysing how social actors are referenced in a text. Inclusion is a deliberate choice made by text producers to convey specific messages to the audience. According to van Leeuwen (2008), inclusion involves incorporating social actors into the narrative, presenting them within the context of a particular social activity. This concept is further elaborated by van Leeuwen (1995), who states that inclusion occurs when a "sociological participant" is integrated into the knowledge domain related to a social activity. Van Leeuwen's (2008) framework identifies several subcategories of the role that can be allocated to the sociological participants when they are included in the text; these roles include Activation and Passivation, Genericisation and Specification, Individualisation and Assimilation, Association and Dissociation, and Indetermination and Differentiation.

The concept of role allocation is intricately linked to Halliday's concept of transitivity, which is fundamental in critical discourse analysis to analyse "the semantic structure of clauses". Transitivity generally refers to "who does what to whom, and how" (Simpson & Mayr, 2009, p. 65; also see van Leeuwen, 2008: p. 32). For the purpose of this study, material, mental, and verbal processes will be investigated. Relational and behavioural processes are considered less analytically relevant. This is because relational processes primarily have the function of identifying

and describing participants, rather than expressing action or agency, whereas behavioural processes, being less common and vaguer in intention, offer little ideological worth in media discourse. The concept of role allocation suggests that the prominence of a social actor in a text should be reflected in their positioning as either actor or 'agent' or 'goal' of an activity. The grammatical function of the text must align with the social action being described. By designating social actors as 'agents' or 'recipients,' the text can emphasise the importance of one performer over another (van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 32). Representations cast social actors in either active or passive roles, with activation depicting them as doers of actions and passivation portraying them as undergoing actions, implying power dynamics. Passivation in this paper is represented through subjection, where subjected actors are seen as objects within the representation, realised through participation, circumstantialisation, and possessivation (van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 34).

The category of assimilation identifies whether social actors are portrayed as individuals or as part of a group. There are two forms of assimilation: aggregation and collectivisation. Aggregation depicts social actors as statistics, whereas collectivisation portrays them as a cohesive group without numerical emphasis. Aggregation is especially significant in Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) because it is employed by discourse creators to control practices and construct consensus opinions, while appearing to simply record facts (van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 37).

The category of identification occurs when social actors are defined not by their actions, but by their inherent, often unchangeable characteristics (van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 42). Identification in discourse can be expressed through classification, relational identification, and physical identification. Classification categorises social actors based on prominent identity features such as race, age, class, and religion. Relational identification defines social actors through their kinship and work relationships, such as brother, sister, or colleague. Physical identification describes social actors by their bodily characteristics, such as eye colour or hair colour, and can also include descriptive modifiers and adjectives, as in "a tall man with a stout build" or "a fair-skinned woman."

PREVIOUS STUDIES

In a news report, the representations of the social actors involved, along with their actions, collectively construct a narrative about the event reported. News narratives are often carefully constructed in line with the news agency's marketing and political agendas to turn information about real socio-political events into a newsworthy narrative sellable to the readership. The narrativization of information in news reporting makes the distinction between news as information and news as narrative hard to maintain. In these news stories, social actors and actions are represented differently to foreground different social roles that communicate contextual assumptions with ideological implications (Fulton, 2005, p. 242). Using van Leeuwen's (2008) framework can help denaturalise the ideological consequences of news narratives in Middle Eastern media coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

The subject of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has been debated for decades in the media. As a result, numerous studies have used CDA to examine how different social actors are represented in narratives that describe the issue. Kareem and Najm (2024) examined the biased role of media in the representation of the Israeli and Palestinian social actors. The results indicate that Western media tends to correlate Palestinians with terrorism (combatants, suicide bombers, Islamic militants) in contrast to the often-favourable portrayal of Israeli social actors. Similar results were provided by Kandil (2009), who examined the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in

American, Arab, and British media. The results of the research indicate that Western media tend to emphasise the theme of terrorism when mentioning Palestinians. This is, however, non-existent in Arab media (particularly Al-Jazeera). Wang (2017) examined the British media coverage of the stabbing incident in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict during the six-month aggression between October 2015 and March 2016. The results show that British media tend to formulate a binary representation of social actors where Palestinians are purposefully positioned as the "other". Similar findings were reported by Sharaf Eldin (2019), who conducted a critical discourse analysis of Arab and Western media's news headlines in relation to the Gaza war. The study showed that Western media tend to depict Israeli violence as a powerful reaction to Hamas terrorism, thus justifying their actions. On the other hand, Arab media tend to depict Palestinian social actors with emotive language to highlight their suffering.

However, little research has been paid to compare news coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in Middle Eastern newspapers published in countries with and without diplomatic relations with Israel. Therefore, the present research explores how this conflict is embedded in different narratives advanced by English-language newspapers published in Middle Eastern countries with and without diplomatic relations with Israel. This ultimately sheds light on how the state's agenda and its international relations may shape news coverage in Middle Eastern countries.

METHODOLOGY

Most scholars of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) view the field as an integrative approach that combines various perspectives, methodologies, and tools to examine the use of language, or 'discourse,' in a wide range of contexts (Wodak & Meyer, 2009). This study focuses on press reports and articles concerning the May 2021 Gaza war, a globally significant event interpreted and represented by numerous media outlets. Focusing on the Middle East Media coverage can, thus, provide an insider non-Western perspective of this conflict. The reason why this round of the prolonged conflict was chosen as a case study rather than the more recent round of the conflict (i.e., October 7th) is that the more recent round of the conflict triggered repercussions whose geopolitical implications extend beyond the Middle East. Additionally, the atrocities of the recent round made even the Middle Eastern media in countries with diplomatic ties with Israel reluctant to show pro-Israeli stances.

To achieve the study's objectives, the researcher selected articles from four reputable broadsheet English-language newspapers published in four Middle East countries. Two of these newspapers originate from countries without diplomatic relations with Israel (non-normalising countries), while the other two are from countries that have established diplomatic ties with Israel (normalising countries). The selected articles were published during the eleven-day Gaza war in May 2021, providing a focused temporal context for the analysis. Simply put, the newspapers were chosen for their status as reputable, English-language broadsheets and for their interest in covering the Israeli-Palestinian May 2021 unrest. The URLs of the selected articles were collected into a text file and processed using the BootCat program (Baroni & Bernardini, 2004), which automatically creates a corpus as a text file that can be processed and examined. It is important to note that the collected articles were independently examined by the authors and an interrater. The results of these analyses were then evaluated to ensure reliability and objectivity. Table 1 below presents the total number of articles and their respective word counts.

TABLE 1. Data of the research

ME Countries with diplomatic ties to Israel				ME Countries without diplomatic ties to Israel			
Country	Newspaper	Samples	Words	Country	Newspaper	Samples	Words
UAE	The Khaleej Times	10	44850	Turkey	Daily Sabah	10	35670
Bahrain	The Gulf Daily News	10	35632	Iran	The Tehran Times	10	43130
Total		20	78800	Total		20	80482

After collecting the news reports from the selected news websites, the following steps were followed to examine the data:

1. Using Laurence Anthony's AntConc programme (version 3.2.4), the wordlist tool was utilised to identify the key search terms that are essential for data collection. This analysis showed that Palestinian, Hamas, Militants, Israeli, Jews, and Zionists are the most used words to represent the social actors in focus.
2. Concordance and collocation tools were used to effectively examine the context in which these search terms occur. This step is essential in applying van Leeuwen's (2008) Sociological Categories of Discourse.
3. To achieve normalisation of frequency, the results from the previous step were collected and organised in terms of relative frequencies instead of the actual numbers of tokens found in each dataset, because of the unequal sizes of the two corpora under investigation in this study. This is consistent with the methodological recommendations of Baker (2014) and Paquot and Bestgen (2009). The corpus sourced from online media news reports in countries with diplomatic ties to Israel consisted of 78,800 words, whereas the corpus from countries without such ties comprised 80,482 words.
4. For statistical analysis, Fisher's exact test was conducted using R Studio software. R Studio was chosen due to its user-friendly interface, superior processing speed, comparable reliability to SPSS, and open-access availability, as noted by Jensen (2008). The predetermined threshold for statistical significance in this research is set at 0.05. The formulated hypotheses are articulated as follows: $H_0 (>0.05)$ = There is no significant difference in the media coverage between countries with and without diplomatic ties to Israel. $H_1 (<0.05)$ = There is a discernible disparity in the media coverage between countries with and without diplomatic ties to Israel.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The following section will provide a detailed analysis of the collected articles.

ROLE ALLOCATION

The study of role allocation examines the roles assigned to social actors within discourse. Through this analytical approach, social actors are categorised as 'Activated' or 'Subjected.' This is, of course, because allocating an activated social actor role can suggest the reported event is the result of human agency, whereas allocating a subjected role can indicate the expediency of the event reported.

Table 2 below presents the data analysis of role allocation in online media articles from countries with diplomatic ties to Israel.

TABLE 2. Role allocation in the media of countries with diplomatic ties to Israel

Social Actors	Activated	Subjected
Palestinian (N = 57)	54.5	12
Hamas (N = 97)	51.5	17.5
Militants (N = 28)	60.5	14.5
Israeli (N = 113)	55	11.5
Jews (N = 4)	50	0
Zionists (N = 0)	0	0

The role allocation of social actors in online newspaper articles from countries with diplomatic ties to Israel concerning the Israeli-Palestinian conflict can be summarised as follows. Firstly, Palestinian social actors, Hamas, Israeli social actors, and Jews are frequently depicted as activated, appearing as active participants or agents in 50 to 60.5% of the articles. This indicates that these actors are regularly portrayed as having agency in the events and actions described. Secondly, the depiction of actors as subjects is relatively low, with Palestinians, Hamas, militants, and Israeli social actors depicted as passive or victims. This shows that these actors are not primarily represented as being acted upon or victimised in the reports analysed. A notable finding in the above table indicates that the term Zionist was never used by the media of countries with diplomatic ties to Israel. The researchers believe that this omission may be attributed to the word's predominantly negative connotations, specifically in contexts where it is used to represent occupation, aggression, and malevolence. Such connotations may guide media in these countries to avoid the usage of the word to maintain neutrality, as well as avoid controversy.

Table 3 presents the statistics of role allocation in media discourse from countries without diplomatic ties to Israel.

TABLE 3. Role allocation in the media of countries without diplomatic ties to Israel

Social Actors	Activated	Subjected
Palestinian (N = 103)	38.5	32
Hamas (N = 30)	50	40
Militants (N = 0)	0	0
Israeli (N = 137)	68.5	21.5
Jews (N = 14)	35.5	57.5
Zionists (N = 32)	47	40.5

The role allocation of social actors in online newspaper articles from countries without diplomatic ties to Israel regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict reveals distinct patterns. Israeli social actors are prominently depicted as active participants in approximately 68.5% of the articles. Similarly, Hamas, Palestinian social actors, and Zionists are frequently activated, appearing in 38.5 to 50 per cent of the articles, while Jews are activated in about 35.5 per cent. Notably, no instances of militants being activated were found. Furthermore, Jews, Palestinians, and Zionists are consistently portrayed as being subjected to specific actions or events, with Jews subjected in approximately 57.5% of the articles, and Palestinians and Zionists in about 32% and 40.5%, respectively.

ACTIVATION

The primary focus of this study on activation was the examination of transitivity roles to ascertain how Palestinian and Israeli social actors are portrayed in terms of the material, mental, and verbal processes associated with them. Material processes depict "a quantum of change in the flow of events as taking place through some input of energy" (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004, p. 179). However, material processes are also utilised in abstract sentences, such as 'his motivation declined,' and in metaphorical sentences, such as 'she destroyed her rivals.' Table 4 below depicts the topics of the material processes that are associated with Israeli and Palestinian social actors in both corpora of the study.

TABLE 4. Topics of material processes involving Israeli and Palestinian social actors in the corpora of countries with and without diplomatic ties

Social actors	Topics	Countries with diplomatic ties to Israel	Countries without diplomatic ties to Israel	Fisher's exact test <i>p</i> -value
Israeli social	Persecution	28.12	42.98	0.03298
	Destruction	31.25	7.01	
	Insurrection	6.25	5.26	
	Displacement	3.12	20.17	
	Reaction	31.25	0.87	
Palestinian social actors	Persecution	68.25	53.84	0.01331
	Insurrection	7.93	30.76	
	Convergence	12.69	15.38	

Table 4 above shows that the *p*-value of both Israeli (0.03298) and Palestinian (0.01331) social actors in the corpora of countries with and without diplomatic ties to Israel is below the significance threshold of 0.05, leading to the rejection of the null hypothesis of independence. In countries with diplomatic ties to Israel, Israeli social actors are more frequently associated with destruction (31.25), which mostly represents the force of the Israeli army, as in "Israel pounded Gaza on Saturday". Moreover, the topic of reaction is also significantly present in the corpus of countries with diplomatic ties to Israel (31.25) to justify that the violence that is ensued by Israeli military on Palestinians is a response to the aggression from the Palestinian side, for example "Thursday as militants fired one barrage of rockets after another and Israel carried out waves of bone-rattling airstrikes". For Palestinian social actors, the topic of persecution in the corpus of countries with diplomatic ties to Israel is significantly present compared to the corpus of countries without diplomatic ties to Israel (68.25 vs. 53.84). This percentage is mostly related to highlighting the persecutive actions of Palestinian insurgencies on Israelis, as in "Palestinian resistance groups based in the long blockaded strip started launching rocket attacks against Israel, killing eight people", which significantly contrasts the view of media discourse of countries without diplomatic ties as the topic of persecution is used to show resilience and defiance of Palestinians against occupying forces, for example "Hamas has fired over 1,600 rockets towards Israel since Monday" and "Palestinian militants bombarded Israel with rocket fire".

The material processes used in relation to Israeli social actors in the corpus of countries without diplomatic ties to Israel are unique in their high percentage of persecution (42.98) and displacement (20.17). The former highlights the brutality of Israeli army on Palestinians, as exemplified by "Israeli police assaulted Palestinians at the flashpoint Al-Aqsa Mosque compound", while the latter shows the continuous efforts of the Israeli government to displace

Palestinians out of their homes in their effort to expand their occupation, as in "Israeli forces forcibly evicted 700,000-1 million Palestinians from their homes and land". For Palestinian social actors, in the same dataset, they are more frequently associated with convergence (15.38), which illustrates the collective solidarity among Palestinians in response to adversity, as in "Hamas efforts to reach a ceasefire would succeed".

Mental processes are defined as "a quantum of change in the flow of events taking place in our own consciousness" (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004, p. 197). In Table 5, the examination of mental processes involving Israeli and Palestinian social actors in online media news reports from countries with and without diplomatic ties revealed comparable thematic content across both datasets.

TABLE 5. Topics of mental processes involving Israeli and Palestinian social actors in the corpora of countries with and without diplomatic ties

Social actors	Topics	Countries with diplomatic ties to Israel	Countries without diplomatic ties to Israel	Fisher's exact test p-value
Israeli social	Necessity	28.27	9.09	0.0061
	Cognition	14.28	13.63	
	Aspiration	14.28	9.09	
	Behaviour	28.57	18.18	
Palestinian social actors	Necessity	38.46	21.42	0.022
	Cognition	23.07	28.57	
	Anticipation	7.69	7.14	
	Exhibition	23.07	21.42	

The obtained p-value of both Israeli (0.0061) and Palestinian (0.022) social actors is below the conventional significance level of 0.05, leading to the rejection of the null hypothesis that there is no association between the mental process variables of countries with and without diplomatic ties to Israel. This suggests a statistically significant relationship between these variables across the two groups and their respective categories. Countries with diplomatic ties to Israel tend to exhibit higher frequencies of respondents categorised under Necessity (28.27), as in "Israel urgently needs respite from non-stop hostilities" and Behaviour (28.57), as exemplified by "Many in Israel also spent a sleepless night as waves of rockets hit its heartland", compared to those without such ties. Non-diplomatically tied countries show a slightly higher proportion in the Cognition category (13.63), as in "many Israelis thought they were immune to the consequences of the Occupation". Both groups display relatively similar frequencies in the Aspiration category, as in "Israel says its measures aim to stop arms reaching militants" and "Zionist settlers want to expel the Arabs from the land of Palestine". These differences highlight the nuanced ways in which the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict is perceived and portrayed, influenced by varying cultural, religious, and economic contexts.

The analysis of mental processes among Palestinian social actors in both corpora showed similar themes in both datasets. The Palestinian social actors in countries which have diplomatic ties with Israel are higher in the topic of Necessity (38.46), as exemplified by "Palestinian lives need to be protected", which underlines a greater emphasis on practical needs and conflict resolution efforts. Such a high frequency suggests that in normalised contexts, Palestinian social actors are more oriented toward giving precedence to ceasefire efforts, particularly focusing on accessibility of resources and basic need fulfilment. In contrast, countries with no diplomatic links show higher values in the Cognition category (28.57), as in "Hamas political official, Moussa Abu Marzouk, expressed his belief regarding the efforts to reach a ceasefire", and slight increase in

Anticipation (7.14) as in “ Hamas expects immediate action to be taken”, signifying a deeper awareness of both their own capabilities and those of their adversaries.

The examination of verbal processes among Israeli and Palestinian social actors in online media coverage from countries with and without diplomatic ties to Israel revealed similar themes across both datasets. Table 6 illustrates their comparison alongside the results of Fisher's exact test.

TABLE 6. Topics of verbal processes involving Israeli social actors in the corpora of countries with and without diplomatic ties

Social actors	Topics	Countries with diplomatic ties to Israel	Countries without diplomatic ties to Israel	Fisher's exact test p-value
Israeli social	Narration	79.12	65.85	0.04853
	Accusing	3.29	4.87	
	Vindication	5.49	2.43	
	Declaration	4.39	9.75	
Palestinian social actors	Narration	63.07	56.75	0.0479
	Vocalisation	13.84	2.70	
	Requisition	9.69	5.40	
	Rejection	5.84	2.70	
	Declaration	7.53	10.81	

The Fisher's exact test for Israeli Social actors yielded a p-value of 0.04853, signifying a statistically significant disparity in the distribution of four communicative categories (Narration, Accusing, Vindication, Declaration) between countries with established diplomatic ties to Israel and those without such ties. The analysis reveals that countries with diplomatic ties exhibit a higher prevalence of Narration (79.12), as in "Israeli officials said they have killed 15 Hamas commanders" and vindication (5.49), for example ", Israel does have a right to defend itself", suggesting a tendency among Israeli social actors to recount events and rationalise actions involving force. Conversely, countries without such ties show elevated instances of Accusation (4.87), as in "The Israeli army blames Hamas for deliberately placing military targets in densely populated areas" and Declaration (9.75), for example ", Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu warned that Hamas had crossed a "red line"" indicative of Palestinian advocates predominantly engaging in criticism and proclamations.

The examination of verbal processes among Palestinian social actors in online media news reports from countries with and without diplomatic ties yielded a p-value of 0.0479. This result indicates a statistically significant difference between the two groups. Upon analysing the relative frequencies of verbal processes, it becomes evident that normalised countries exhibit higher occurrences of Narration (63.07), as in "Hamas said Israel was waging a 'religious war against Palestinian worshippers'", Vocalisation (13.84), for example, "Palestinian children were screaming. For half an hour, we were bombarded" and Declaration (7.53), as in "Hamas had earlier announced it had targeted an Israeli military jeep". Conversely, countries without diplomatic ties to Israel show lower frequencies overall, with Narration (56.75), as in "The Palestinian Red Crescent Society said more than 300 Palestinians were injured", being the most prevalent, followed by Declaration (10.81), as in “A spokesman for Hamas' armed wing announced the launch of the 250 kilograms (550 pounds) rocket", as well as fewer instances of Vocalisation (2.70), as in "Palestinians could be heard screaming in fear", Requisition (5.40)", for instance "Palestinians require more urgent support from international and relief institutions", and Rejection (2.70), as in "Palestinians resist the Israeli settlers encroaching on East Jerusalem". These findings suggest distinct communication patterns and expressive strategies among social actors in these contexts.

In non-normalised countries, Palestinian actors frequently employ processes such as "criticising" to express disapproval of Israeli actions, "accusing" to assign blame for violent incidents, and "mobilising" to signify readiness for defensive actions in support of their cause.

SUBJECTION

The analysis of the subjection of Israeli and Palestinian social actors represents how they are portrayed as recipients of actions in the corpora. Table 7 illustrates the comparison of how these subject social actors are evaluated using negative, neutral, or positive language (verbs, themes, etc.) in the media reports of countries with and without diplomatic ties to Israel. Below is the table presenting this comparison alongside the results from Fisher's exact test.

TABLE 7. The analysis of subjection involving Israeli and Palestinian social actors in the corpora of countries with and without diplomatic ties

Social actors	Topics	Countries with diplomatic ties to Israel	Countries without diplomatic ties to Israel	Fisher's exact test p-value
Israeli social	Negative subjection	41.36	50.49	0.0016
	Neutral subjection	26.13	37.27	
	Positive subjection	32.51	12.24	
Palestinian social actors	Negative subjection	71.63	74.76	0.0044
	Neutral subjection	21.23	7.57	
	Positive subjection	7.14	17.67	

The p-value of 0.0016 falls below the conventional threshold of 0.05, which signifies a statistically significant association between the two variables. These findings suggest that the portrayal of Israeli social actors varies significantly depending on the diplomatic ties of the countries involved. In countries with diplomatic ties to Israel, Israeli social actors are more frequently depicted in a positive light (32.51), as in "President Biden reaffirmed that "Israel has a right to defend itself," underscoring its right to security", whereas in countries without such ties, the portrayal tends to be more negative (50.49), as in "The rockets from Gaza have terrified many Israelis who thought they were immune to the consequences of the Occupation". Additionally, neutral depictions are more prevalent in countries without diplomatic ties (37.27), as in "In recent weeks as Palestinians have protested against Israel's restricting access to parts of the Old City" than in those with such ties (26.13), as in "US President Joe Biden on Wednesday urged Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to seek a "de-escalation". This disparity underscores the impact of cultural, political, or contextual factors within these diplomatic groupings on the representation of Israeli social actors in media discourse.

For Palestinian social actors, the findings (p-value = 0.0044) indicate a statistically significant association between how they are portrayed and the diplomatic ties of the country. In countries with diplomatic ties to Israel, Palestinian social actors are predominantly depicted through negative subjection (71.63), for example "Israeli forces injure 97 Palestinians during West Bank strike" with lower frequencies of neutral (21.23), as in "Israel's Supreme Court postponed a key ruling that could have forced dozens of Palestinians from their homes", and positive (7.14) portrayals, as in "The majority of the Arab people support the Palestinian cause". Conversely, in countries without diplomatic ties, while negative depictions are also high (74.76), as exemplified by "During the current round of fighting between Israel and Hamas, at least 227 Palestinians have been killed", there is a notably higher proportion of positive portrayals (17.67), as in "The Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) condemned Israel and reiterated support for

Palestinians” and a lower rate of neutral depictions (7.57), for example “Biden stressed the need for Hamas to cease firing rockets into Israel”. These results highlight systematic disparities in how social actors are represented between countries with diplomatic ties to Israel and those without, particularly concerning the frequency of negative versus positive depictions. This suggests that cultural, societal, or ideological factors within these diplomatic contexts play a crucial role in shaping the portrayal of Palestinian social actors in media narratives.

ASSIMILATION

This analysis encompasses the examination of aggregation. The subcategory of aggregation is essential in CDA analysis as it is used by discourse makers “to regulate practice and to manufacture consensus opinion, even though it presents itself as merely recording facts” (van Leeuwen, 2008: p.37). Aggregation can be realised in discourse by indefinite quantifiers. Table 8 below presents a comparison of the frequency of indefinite quantifiers used in reference to Israeli and Palestinian social actors across both corpora.

TABLE 8. Comparison of indefinite quantifiers involving Israeli and Palestinian social actors in the corpora of countries with and without diplomatic ties

Social actors	Indefinite quantifiers	Countries with diplomatic ties to Israel	Countries without diplomatic ties to Israel	Fisher's exact test p-value
Israeli social	more	31.4	22.2	0.0396
	Many	11.4	13.3	
	Some	14.2	4.4	
	several	8.5	4.4	
	Nearly	5.7	6.6	
	almost	5.7	4.4	
	Few	2.8	2.2	
	about	1.3	0.7	
Palestinian social actors	More	25.2	24.1	0.0493
	Some	17.5	4.8	
	About	7.5	1.6	
	Over	6.2	9.8	
	Many	3.4	9.6	
	several	3.2	4.8	
	Nearly	3.1	3.2	
	Most	2.5	8.6	
	around	2.5	0.6	
	almost	2.3	0.7	

The resultant p-values from Fisher's exact test for Israeli Social Actors (0.0396) and Palestinian social actors (0.0493) are below the conventional threshold of 0.05, yielding statistical significance. This indicates that there is enough evidence to deny the null hypothesis and conclude an association between the usage of indefinite quantifiers and a country's diplomatic ties status. By examining the relative frequencies of indefinite quantifiers in the two groups, some distinctions and connections emerge. Countries with diplomatic ties generally show higher usage of "more" (31.4 vs. 22.2), "some" (14.2 vs. 4.4), "several" (8.5 vs. 4.4), "almost" (5.7 vs. 4.4), and "about" (1.3 vs. 0.7) compared to countries without diplomatic ties. The usage of "many" (11.4 vs. 13.3), "few" (2.8 vs. 2.2), and "nearly" (5.7 vs. 6.6) appears to be relatively similar between the two groups. These findings offer insights into the linguistic patterns and differences in the use of indefinite quantifiers between countries with and without diplomatic ties.

The p-value of 0.0493 in the dataset of Palestinian social actors also indicates a difference in the usage of indefinite quantifiers. Looking at the relative frequencies of indefinite quantifiers within each group, there are several differences. On the Palestinian side, social actors in countries with which it has diplomatic relations have a much greater variety of indefinite quantifiers compared to those without such relations. This broader usage includes "some" (17.5 vs. 4.8), "about" (7.5 vs. 1.6), "around" (2.5 vs. 0.6), and "almost" (2.3 vs. 0.7), which suggests a much greater range of expression and description. In the countries without diplomatic relations, however, some quantifiers like "many" (9.6 vs. 3.4), "over" (9.8 vs. 6.2), "most" (8.6 vs. 2.5), and "several" (4.8 vs. 3.2) are more frequent, but the overall spread is narrower, implying a more limited linguistic range.

IDENTIFICATION

According to van Leeuwen (2008), the category of identification describes social actors through their inherent features and not activities or actions. From the comparative study of the classification in both corpora, it is found that Israeli social actors are mainly categorised by nationality, religion, ethnicity, and nationality combined with an official position as a mode of identification. Table 9, shown below, provides a comparison of the application of classification in both corpora.

TABLE 9. Classification of Israeli social actors in the corpora of countries with and without diplomatic ties

Social actors	Themes	Countries with diplomatic ties to Israel	Countries without diplomatic ties to Israel	Fisher's exact test p-value
Israeli social	Nationality	57	53	0.0002
	Religion	8	15	
	Ethnicity	14	7	
	Nationality and official position	21	2.5	
Palestinian social actors	Nationality	60	62.5	0.007
	Religion	6	14.7	
	Ideology	7	2.5	
	Nationality and official position	16.7	6.5	

The resultant p-values of 0.0002 and 0.007 give a very high significance for the association of variables in both groups. It interprets nationality (57 in countries with ties to Israel vs. 53 in those without such ties), religion (8 vs. 15), ethnicity (14 vs. 7), and the combination of nationality with an official position (21 vs. 2.5) as unique within each group compared to the conventional threshold of 0.05. The results show slight discrepancies in how nationality, ethnicity, religion, and official positions are denoted between the groups of countries with diplomatic ties and those without. It had higher frequencies of nationality and ethnicity for those countries with which it had diplomatic relations, meaning the identities were more strongly correlated to representation. On the other hand, in countries without any kind of diplomatic relations, there are higher frequencies for religion, meaning that religion had a stronger influence on representation. Also, there is a higher frequency observed for nationality and official position in those countries with which it had diplomatic relations, so it means that there was a closer link between the official role and nationality in comparison with countries that did not have any type of diplomatic relations. Moreover, the joint theme of "Nationality and Ideology" underscores how diverse groups within Israeli society—such as hardline Israeli nationalists, Arab-Jewish communities, and American

Jews—each possess unique perspectives shaped by their nationality and ideologies. Furthermore, Nationality and Ethnicity shape the identification of social actors through different factors, including historical narratives, political dynamics, and societal attitudes toward specific ethnic or national groups. For example, describing Israeli social actors as "mainly populated by people of Yemeni Jewish descent" identifies them based on their ethnic background as Yemeni Jews, shaping perceptions and understanding within the Israeli context. Examples of such identifications include "In Gaza, 83 people were reported killed since Monday, with seven killed on the Israeli side", Israeli authorities put the death toll to date at 12 in Israel....", Israeli police clashes with worshippers at Al Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem and efforts by Israeli settlers to evict Palestinians from a neighbourhood in Israeli-annexed East Jerusalem", and "Nearby, Israelis celebrated the Jewish festival of Shavuot in a synagogue that had a hole caused by a rocket strike".

In the comparison of classification within the two corpora of countries with and without diplomatic ties, it can be inferred that Palestinian social actors are primarily described by nationality, religion, and ideology, while for Israeli social actors, the description includes nationality combined with an official position. The Fisher-exact test shows a significant association between the classification of nationality (60 in countries with ties to Israel vs. 62.5 in those without such ties), religion (6 vs. 14.7), ideology (7 vs. 2.5), and nationality combined with official position (16.7 vs. 6.5) among Palestinian social actors in countries with diplomatic ties and those without. The differences in the relative frequencies of these variables indicate distinct patterns in how social actors are categorised between the two groups, underscoring the influence of diplomatic ties on these classifications. As shown in the following examples: "Storming and assaulting worshipers is proof of the brutality of the Zionist occupation", "Discriminatory policies aimed at pushing Palestinians out of Jerusalem to preserve its Jewish majority", and "The Palestinians then stayed at the site to guard the mosque against raids by extremist Israelis".

The findings indicate that the variable of religion is more prevalent in countries without diplomatic ties compared to those with diplomatic ties. Conversely, ideology displays a higher relative frequency in countries with diplomatic ties than in those without, showing that the classification of Palestinian social actors varies depending on the diplomatic status of their respective countries. In essence, the identification and categorisation of individuals within the Palestinian population are guided by whether their country has diplomatic ties with Israel.

CONCLUSION

The present study undertook a critical discourse analysis of the representation of Israeli and Palestinian social actors in media reports of the May 2021 Gaza war, with a focus on countries with and without diplomatic relations with the State of Israel. The analysis was guided by the framework put forward by van Leeuwen (2008), which observes the way discursive representations of actors like Role Allocation, Subjection, Assimilation, and Identification vie with one another in the light of these depictions. The paper aimed to provide an insider non-Western perspective as to how this conflict is represented differently in printed media in line with the sponsoring states' diplomatic relations with Israel. The analysis showed that, indeed, in countries with which Israel has diplomatic relations, Palestinian social actors were rather highly visible and active in media discourse due to a higher role allocation bringing out their agency. This seems similar to the ways in which Palestinians are frequently represented in Western media, as documented by Kareem and Najm (2024) and Kandil (2009). This highlights the influence of

Western journalistic norms in Middle Eastern media within countries that have established diplomatic relations with Israel. In countries without diplomatic ties to Israel, however, the presentation of the Palestinian social actors was largely passivised to depict them as victims of aggression, violence, and oppression waged by the Israeli forces, thus pointing out a higher role allocation percentage focused on persecution. This finding is in line with the ways in which Palestinians are commonly represented in the Arab media, as documented in previous studies (see, for example, Sharaf Eldin, 2019), indicating the well-established prevalence of the Palestinian victimhood narrative in the Middle East media within countries that have no diplomatic relations with Israel.

For Israeli social actors, a leading position of activation appears in both datasets, pointing out that in media representation, they are highly active. In terms of the countries not having diplomatic relations with Israel, subjection dominated in the representation of Israeli social actors. It is in countries that do not have diplomatic relations with Israel where most of the activities of the Israeli social actors are reported to involve acts of hostility against Palestinians, thereby portraying the forces of Israel as the aggressors. In contrast, for those countries with which it has diplomatic relations with Israel, the representation of Israeli social actors is more nuanced, reflecting a variety of roles and behaviours extending beyond that of the aggressor. Moreover, definite quantifiers are mainly used in countries with no diplomatic ties to relate the aggregation of Israeli social actors as an affected party in conflict and hence responsible for violence. On the other hand, the quantification by countries having diplomatic ties becomes nuanced in trying to tackle different dimensions of the impact of the conflict. In states with no diplomatic relations, collectivisation presented Israeli social actors as aggressors and Palestinians as victims; for states with diplomatic ties, the collectivisation of the Israeli-Palestine conflict characterises broader cultural and ethnic contexts, moving beyond the military perspective. The findings suggest that a state's agenda—particularly whether it has diplomatic relations with Israel—significantly influences news narratives in Middle Eastern countries.

The research showed that diplomatic normalisation, which is the process of opening diplomatic relations with another country, establishing economic and cultural links, and thus possibly affecting the media discourses in countries with and without such relations. In the first case, the media emphasised the positive aspects of normalised relations. However, in the latter, such media discourses would support narratives wherein Israeli social actors are shown to be aggressors and Palestinians as victims of Israeli aggression. The media's portrayal of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the situating of other related events are thus driven by diplomatic normalisation policies, hence influencing public perceptions toward it and subsequent narratives framing.

Although the paper provides an insider non-Western perspective as to how the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is constructed by various Middle Eastern newspapers, one notable limitation of the paper is its focus on a single round of this prolonged conflict—specifically, the May 2021 Gaza war. This limitation is primarily due to the constraints of space and the need to maintain a focused analytical scope, that is, how the state agenda may influence news coverage. Future research may expand the time frame to provide a nuanced understanding of news representation of this prolonged conflict.

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