**Language and civilian deaths: denying responsibility for casualties in the Gaza conflict 2014**

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Abstract

The UNHCR estimated that 1,462 civilians were killed in Gaza and six civilians were killed in Israel during the conflict of 2104. This article uses Discursive Psychology to examine how Israeli spokespeople described the conflict, and Israel’s actions, in ways that denied responsibility for civilian deaths. They did this using a number of discursive strategies. These included: a) using passive and noun constructions which minimized reference to civilian deaths and erased Israeli involvement in deaths; b) repeatedly naming and providing details on Hamas weapons and attacks while avoiding reference to Israeli weapons and violence; c) presenting Israel as only trying to avoid civilian deaths and d) describing Hamas as responsible for all deaths. These types of linguistic construction allow governments and potential supporters to avoid acknowledging the consequences of their military actions, and is one way that the virtuous nature of the ingroup is reinforced in political discourse.

**Keywords**: peace; civilian casualties; discourse; middle east; blame; identity

Introduction

International humanitarian law specifies that countries that go to war should discriminate between fighters and civilians, and weigh carefully the military advantage of attacks against the possibility of harm to non-combatants. However, civilians are invariably killed in wars, and this leads to efforts by leaders to minimize their responsibility for these deaths. Not only must they try to present their actions as acceptable under international law, but they must also protect their own citizens’ sense of positive social identity and morality. They do this partly through sets of discursive practices which present events and identities in carefully constrained ways. This article examines how this was accomplished by Israeli spokespeople in the Gaza conflict of 2014.

Protocol 1 of the Geneva Conventions prohibits attacks ‘which may be expected to cause incidental loss of civilian life, injury to citizens, damage to civilian objects or a combination thereof, which would be excessive in relation to the concrete and direct military advantage anticipated’ (Article 51.5b). If an act is deemed permissible under this condition, military authorities have a responsibility to ‘take all feasible measures to avoid and in any event to minimize incidental loss of civilian life’ (Article 57.2.aii). This might include choosing alternative targets, choosing times or weapons that minimize civilian exposure, aborting attacks, or providing advance warning. However, like many aspects of law, these conditions and principles are open to interpretation, and therefore whether a side is violating them is often disputed (Kreps, 2014; Roblyer, 2005; Tirman, 2011; Walzer, 2015; Wheeler, 2002).

Governments are also constrained in their military actions by the need to gain support from their citizens. Studies have found that people are less willing to support military interventions when they think civilian casualties will be higher (e.g. Eichenberg, 2005; Kreps, 2014; Walsh, 2014), although this effect has been found to be modest and sensitive to context (Gelpi, Feaver & Reifler, 2009). Larson and Savych (2007) found that while people in the USA reported that the level of civilian casualties would affect their prior support for war, support during war was more affected by whether they thought the military was doing enough to avoid casualties rather than the level of casualties itself. Belief that the USA was doing everything it could to avoid civilian casualties in these wars was consistently high in the USA (although not in other countries).

Governments also have to present their military actions in ways that do not threaten the group’s sense of virtue. Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) describes how our group memberships form part of our sense of self. Our sense of moral correctness can therefore be threatened if there is evidence of harm or abuse perpetrated by groups that are important to our identity (Castano, 2008). Bandura (1999) points out that, when violence is carried out by an ingroup, moral self-condemnation can be avoided through a variety of processes, including sanitizing language (which minimize the negative consequences), obscuring agency, and displacement of responsibility (which presents the group’s actions as forced by the other side, who therefore carry all the blame).

Processes that help people accept the suffering of others do not just operate at the individual cognitive level. They are rhetorical and sense-making practices that are socially determined and have a long cultural history (Bar-Tal, Halperin & Oren, 2010). Leaders and media of various types play an important role through their descriptions of the events as they unfold in the conflict (for a model of elite framing of news, see Entman, 2003). While leaders mobilize antipathy or hatred for other groups in their discourse, they also present their own group as virtuous (Bar-Tal et al, 2010; Billig, 1995; Lazar & Lazar, 2004; Reicher, Haslam & Rath, 2008). One way they do this is by managing moral accountability in such a way that the harm they do is denied, discounted and/or projected onto others (Cohen, 2001; Tirman, 2011).

When national leaders and spokespeople talk about war, they attend to these legal, moral and identity considerations in their discourse. The distinction between civilians and fighters, the question of whether the death and destruction outweighs the advantage gained, and the question of who is to blame for any suffering, depend on how military actions, the intergroup context, the identities of the actors, and the likely consequences of action and inaction are described. Opposing sides in a conflict are likely to describe these in different ways that serve to present their actions as morally just (Hodges, 2013a). However, the tendency to present one’s own side as virtuous and to deny responsibility for harm makes it difficult for the citizens of one nation to feel sympathy with or understand the anger of the other side. Correspondingly, the more one’s own suffering is not recognized, the more resentment is felt. In long-term conflicts, these conditions make it more difficult for each side to agree to the difficult concessions that are required in successful peace negotiations.

*Civilian casualties and political discourse*

Researchers have identified some of the general discursive practices used by leaders to justify going to war to their populations (e.g. Bhatia, 2013; Gavriely-Nuri, 2008; Graham, Keenan & Dowd, 2004; Hodges, 2013; Lazar & Lazar, 2004; Oddo, 2011; Podvornaia, 2013). Although less research has examined the specific issue of how civilian deaths are managed in political discourse, researchers have identified a range of communication practices in conflicts involving the USA in Korea, Iraq, Afghanistan and Vietnam.

The broadest tendency is for news media and politicians to report on and discuss civilian casualties caused by their own forces (or allies) less frequently than those caused by opponents (e.g. Aday, 2010; Herman & Chomsky, 1994; Tirman, 2011). Political affiliation plays a role in this: during the invasion of Iraq, Democrats were more likely to raise the issue of civilian casualties in House of Representatives speeches than Republicans (Leep, 2015).

Another common practice is for governments to use euphemisms when describing civilian casualties and acts of abuse (e.g. Podnorvaia, 2013; Tirman, 2011). Amnesty International (2004) gave examples used by US officials during the Iraq war, including ‘collateral damage’ for civilian casualties, ‘stress and duress’ techniques for torture, and ‘ghost detainees’ for captives secretly imprisoned. Cohen (2001) explained how these types of language forms can ‘insulate their users and listeners from experiencing fully the meaning of what they are doing’ (p. 107).

Spokespeople also describe military actions in ways that conform to accepted legal and moral frames of war. Wheeler (2002) demonstrated how US officials oriented repeatedly to ‘just war’ principles in their briefings on the war in Afghanistan. They claimed the USA only attacked military targets, took care to avoid civilian casualties by using precision weapons, and followed target scrutinization processes to minimize civilian deaths. When civilian deaths were admitted, they were often described as ‘mistakes’ or as the only option available to defend the USA (and the world) against terrorist attacks. Another response was to declare that since the USA did not start the war, the responsibility for all civilian deaths lay with the enemy.

Tirman (2011) described similar discursive responses by US policy-makers in wars from Korea to Iraq. These included emphasizing efforts to protect civilians, representing the war as ‘just’ and the US as having good intentions, suggesting that civilian casualties were over-estimated, and portraying the enemy as the worst offender. Atrocities which were acknowledged after media pressure were neutralized with euphemisms (such as ‘tragedy’), minimized as the crimes of a few deviant soldiers, and attributed to the chaos of war or the evil intentions of the enemy. Two additional practices used by Republicans in the Iraq war were identified by Leap (2015): representing deaths as a sacrifice that civilians were sharing in order to create a better future, and downplaying the numbers of civilian casualties through comparing them with greater civilian deaths in other countries.

*The 2014 Gaza Conflict*

The summary below is based on the United Nations Human Rights Commission (2015) report on the conflict. While no account is ever completely neutral, it has the advantage of not being written by either the Palestinian or the Israeli side, and it contains criticisms of both sides. According to this report, hostilities were preceded by threats to both sides. Settlement-building and appropriation of land in the West Bank was continuing unabated, and the Israeli land, sea and air blockade of Gaza, which been in force since 2007, was having severe effects on the economy and the ordinary lives of Palestinians. The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA, 2015) estimated it had reduced GDP by 50%, resulting in an unemployment rate of 43% and nearly 80% of the population relying on some type of international aid. At the same time, there was an increase in rocket fire into Israel by armed groups in the Gaza Strip, and tunnels under the border were under construction which Israel believed would be used for attacks. In June, three Israeli teenagers were murdered in the West Bank, and in July a Palestinian teenager was murdered in Jerusalem. Israel started military operations on July 7, initially with airstrikes and later a ground invasion, while armed groups in the Gaza Strip continued to fire rockets into Israel. An unconditional ceasefire was agreed on 26 August.

According to the report, 1,462 Palestinian civilians were killed in the Gaza Strip while six civilians were killed in Israel. Thus, over 99% of civilians killed were Palestinian. This disparity in casualties is an historic pattern in the Israel/Palestine conflict. For example, Levy (2010) gives the ratio of Palestinian civilian deaths to Israeli military deaths in the 2008-9 Gaza conflict as 86:1.

The report estimated that Hamas and other armed groups in the Gaza Strip fired 6,634 rockets and mortars towards Israel, causing residents in the south of Israel to make frequent use of bomb shelters. The Israel Defence Force (IDF) carried out over 6,000 airstrikes on the Gaza Strip and fired approximately 50,000 tank and artillery shells, including targeted attacks on residential and other buildings. The UNHCR concluded there were serious violations of international humanitarian law by both sides in the conflict. It questioned Palestinian armed groups for ‘the indiscriminate nature of most of the projectiles directed towards Israel by these groups and to the targeting of Israeli citizens’ (p. 181). On the Israeli side, it questioned ‘the attacks of the Israel Defense Forces on residential buildings; the use of artillery and other explosive weapons with wide-area effects in densely-populated areas; the destruction of entire neighborhoods in Gaza’ (p. 181).

This article examines how Israeli spokespeople denied blame for civilian casualties on the BBC Radio 4 Today news program. This is a particularly useful case study for examining the wider issue of how leaders protect the sense of the ingroup as virtuous, and as a result enlist the support of ingroup members, in situations of violent intergroup conflict. First, international journalists located in Gaza reported events and casualties on a daily basis. Second, the Today program is a widely-listened to current affairs show in the UK, with a politically-aware audience, many of whom would have strong views on Israel/Palestine. Finally, the program has an adversarial style of interviewing, and spokespeople appeared frequently on the show to justify and defend Israel’s actions. This article focuses only on speakers from the Israeli side because over 99% of the civilians killed in the conflict were Palestinians.

Method

*Data*

The BBC Radio Four Today program runs six days a week in the UK (three hours Monday to Friday; two hours Saturday; weekly audience 7.06 million) and is the most comprehensive news program on BBC radio, covering domestic and international affairs. The data consisted of all interviews with, and statements/quotes from, people who had an official connection to the Israeli government or military during or previous to the conflict (politicians, advisers and officials). Twenty-five separate data items were found over the 50 days of the conflict (14 interviews and 11 statements/quotes). Fifteen speakers were involved, with several people featuring more than once: Prime Minister Netanyahu (4); Ambassador to the UK Daniel Taub (3); Spokesman for the Israeli Defense Force Peter Lerner (3); advisor to the Israeli government Dore Gold (2); Ambassador to the UN Ron Prosser (2). Other speakers included the official opposition leader, former Chief of Staff of the Israeli Defense Ministry, spokespeople from the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs, former head of international law at the Israeli Defense Force, and other former government spokespeople.

The interviews and statements were broadcast along with daily updates on the conflict from BBC journalists in Gaza and Jerusalem, as well as comments from a range of others (UN representatives; charities working in the Gaza Strip; human rights organizations; UK and US politicians; experts on conflict and the Middle East). In interviews, BBC presenters often challenged speakers over civilian casualties that had happened over the previous 24 hours. Here they would often refer to statements condemning Israel’s actions from the UN (e.g. Secretary General Ban Ki Moon), western governments, medics and aid organizations.

*Analytic method*

Discursive psychology (Edwards & Potter, 1991) was used to provide a fine-grained analysis of selected extracts, while content analysis (Miles, Huberman & Saldana, 2013) was used to display the extent of particular discursive practices across the whole data set. Discursive psychology uses insights from discourse analysis and conversation analysis to examine psychological themes such as agency, intention, culpability and identity. It reveals how descriptions of events are built linguistically by speakers in such a way as to appear persuasive and factual, and to perform social actions such as blaming others and justifying one’s actions. Leaders in particular construct versions of events, contexts and identities in order to mobilize collective action (Reicher, Halsam & Hopkins, 2005).

In situations where there are potential accusations that a party is to blame for an event, spokespeople can defend their group’s actions indirectly through their descriptions as well as more directly through their justifications and accounts (Atkinson & Drew, 1979; Edwards, 2005). This can be seen in how they construct their own and other identities, the context of the war, and the ongoing events that make up the conflict (e.g. Gibson, 2011). Below I examine how speakers describe and explain civilian casualties, with a particular focus on how agency, weapons, attacks, and the identities of the actors are described. The aim is to illustrate how a version of the conflict is produced in such a way as to minimize Israeli responsibility for civilian deaths.

*Discursive context*

When analyzing rhetoric in controversial situations, we must keep in mind which alternative, competing versions it is set up to counter (Billig, 1987) Here, descriptions of war events are built by Israeli speakers in order to protect against alternative descriptions that blame Israel for civilian deaths. Many other speakers on the BBC Today program offered these alternative versions, including the Palestinian leadership, Palestinian civilians, academic experts, UN spokespeople, and charities working in the Gaza Strip. Hamas claimed their rockets would cease if there was a negotiated settlement to end the blockade; humanitarian charities claimed the IDF did not exercise due care to protect civilians; and many, including the UN, claimed Israeli attacks were disproportionate. These form what Leudar, Marsland and Nekvapil (2004) call a ‘dialogical network’ of discourses in which the speakers here were operating, and the Today program interviewers repeatedly challenged the Israeli spokespeople with these alternative versions of the attacks.

Results

The analysis below examines the issue of responsibility for civilian deaths. This was embedded in a range of constructions in which spokespeople presented Hamas as carrying all blame while Israel carried none. The conflict itself, and each round of clashes were presented as started by Hamas and other militant groups in the Gaza Strip, with Israel only ever responding to protect its own citizens (see also Bar-Tal et al, 2010). Many of the *jus ad bellum* aspects of this discourse were similar to those found by Hodges (2013b) in US presidential ‘Call to Arms’ speeches. Speakers also depicted Hamas as having no reason to fight other than wanting to kill Israelis, while the blockade of the Gaza Strip was either not referred to or minimized as trivial. Additionally, they presented Israel as only wanting peace and security, and as agreeing to, and respecting, ceasefires proposed by Egypt and the UN while Hamas rejected or violated them.

Looking specifically at the issue of civilian casualties, speakers produced a picture of events which 1) obscured Palestinian civilian deaths, 2) minimized Israeli involvement in those deaths, 3) erased Israeli weapons and attacks while emphasizing Hamas attacks and weapons, and 4) explicitly claimed Israel was not morally responsible for civilian deaths while Hamas carried all responsibility.

In the extracts below, the BBC interviewer is represented as ‘I’, with the spokesperson as ‘SP’. If questions immediately precede the extract, they are given. When no questions are transcribed, the extract occurred within a long answer or came from a statement rather than an interview.

*1) Obscuring civilian deaths*

Usually, speakers did not mention Palestinian civilian deaths unprompted. When the interviewer specifically asked about casualties caused by Israeli attacks, the spokespeople described them in ways that did not directly refer to deaths or obscured Israeli involvement. One way spokespeople did this was to use sanitized expressions that did not explicitly mention that people had been killed (for examples of the use of metaphors for a similar effect in the Second Lebanon War see Gavriely-Nuri, 2008).

Extract 1. Taub, 21.7.14

There is no way of defending yourself, tragically, which doesn’t have some impact on the civilian population.

Extract 2. Lerner, 21.7.14

We do not target civilians, but there is a civilian overspill to the battle which was, you know, we have thirteen soldiers killed in this situation.

Extract 3. Dromi, 31.7.14

Most Israelis, if not all Israelis, feel regret and sorrow for what happened in Gaza.

Extract 4. Hanegbi, 25.7.14

Once we have to, you know, take precautions to defend ourselves, sometimes there are mistakes. I don’t know what caused this mistake. Some say it’s an Israeli mistake, maybe it was a Palestinian mistake because as you know, every 6 rockets that Hamas is shooting at us falls in Gaza.

Rather than using the words ‘death’ or ‘killed’ when referring to Palestinian civilian casualties, speakers often used milder, more abstract terms that did not have the toxic moral implications of killing (see Podvornaia, 2013, for examples of this in ‘War on Terror’ discourse, and Hansson, 2015, for general blame avoidance strategies in political discourse). In the extracts above the civilian deaths were referred to a ‘some impact’, ‘civilian overspill’, ‘what happened in Gaza’, and ‘mistakes’. These expressions also do not specify the agent responsible for the acts.

Sanitized descriptions are embedded in other discursive constructions that speakers used to deny culpability. Supporting war involves delicate identity work (Gibson, 2011): in extracts 1 and 3, the speakers express sympathy and sadness over the deaths by using terms such as ‘tragically’ and ‘sorrow’. ‘Regret’ is an ambiguous term, sometimes used to imply the speaker admits a transgression, but sometimes simply implying a feeling of sadness that the outcome has happened. Expressions of sympathy suggests that Israel does not want to cause these deaths and is suffering emotionally as a result (for another example see Buttny & Ellis, 2007). Edwards (2005) calls these types of constructions ‘counter-dispositional formulations’, where a speaker presents a state of affairs as not due to their preference, but as due to necessity or as an outcome of an external situation.

In extracts 1 and 4, speakers describe the Israeli action as self-defense, (rather than an attack or an offensive action). This implies the other side initiated the violence and that Israel’s actions are therefore justified in international law (see Hodges, 2013b, for similar examples in US presidential speeches). The speaker in extract 4 comes closest to the issue of Israeli agency, but while he acknowledges the possibility that Israel might be responsible in a rather vague way (‘some say it’s an Israeli mistake’), he immediately makes a more detailed suggestion that Hamas might be to blame, where he provides both numbers and weapons as supportive evidence. The use of specific details such as numbers in describing events is a way of ‘working up’ its factual status (Edwards & Potter, 1991; Potter, 1996). It provides a more vivid and detailed picture for the listener and gives the impression the speaker has a good knowledge of the issue. We see this again in extract 2, which comes in a response to a question by the interviewer about an Israeli attack on Shuja’iyeh which led to approximately 55 civilian deaths, and which was condemned by the UN Secretary General. Here there is a clear contrast between the vague way the speaker describes Palestinian deaths (‘civilian overspill’) and the way he refers to Israeli military casualties, using both a specific number (13) and the word ‘killed’.

*2) Erasing Israeli agency in civilian deaths*

When speakers did refer explicitly to Palestinian civilian deaths, they often used discursive constructions that obscured Israeli involvement in those deaths. Critical discourse analysts have shown how political speakers often refer to processes and actions using passive and noun constructions (nominalizations) (e.g. Charteris-Black, 2014; Fowler, 1991; for a conceptual discussion see Billig, 2008). These forms allow speakers to acknowledge events without specifying the agent behind the event. In Fowler’s (1991) terms, they permit ‘habits of concealment’ (p. 80). Here are three examples using the passive tense:

Extract 5. Curiel, 24.7.14

*I: How can Israel justify the fact that 166 children have been killed in the last 2 weeks?*

SP: Every child, every civilian that is killed in a situation like this is a tragedy.

Extract 6. Peri, 12.7.14

And they are suffering, I know, casualties which not all of them are terrorists but they are paying the price for what they are doing

Extract 7. Dromi, 31.7.14

Every couple of years Hamas, who rules them, will attack us and then will lure us into this trap of heavily populated area and then shed crocodile tears because civilians are hurt.

In each of these three examples, passive constructions are used (‘every civilian that is killed’; ‘they are suffering casualties’; civilians are hurt’) which acknowledge the deaths but make no mention of the involvement of Israeli weapons or military personnel. The sense of these events would change markedly if active phrasings were used and agents were specified. Compare extract 5 with the active phrasing: ‘Every child, every civilian that we kill in a situation like this is a tragedy.’ In the active phrasing the contradiction between an expression of sympathy and the act is clear. As emotion appraisal theory (e.g. Ellsworth & Scherer, 2003) illustrates, sadness tends to be relevant for a negative event where agency lies with the circumstance rather than the actor. The usual emotion when a negative event is linked to self-agency is guilt.

In extract 5, we see a similar expression of concern for the victims (‘tragedy’) to those noted above, while in extract 6 the conflict is presented as something initiated by Hamas, since the deaths are a result of ‘what they are doing’ (Philo & Berry, 2011, also noted this discursive feature in the 2008/9 Gaza conflict). In extract 7, Hamas is also presented as the initiator, as repeatedly belligerent (attacking every couple of years) and as creating a trap whereby civilians will be killed. Hamas’s concern for civilian deaths, in contrast to Israel’s in the extracts above, is presented as fake (‘crocodile tears’). When we combine these, Israel’s involvement in the deaths is erased, while Hamas is presented as directly or indirectly responsible. The virtue of the ingroup is constructed through attributions of emotion and agency.

When speakers use noun constructions (nominalizations) they can again refer to killing without stating an agent (e.g. ‘some impact’ (extract 1); ‘civilian overspill’ (extract 2)). In the example below, the interviewer is asking Daniel Taub (then Israeli ambassador to UK) about an incident in which ten civilians (including six children) died outside a UN school after an Israeli airstrike. A UN official had condemned the strike as a moral outrage, while the Director of UN operations in Gaza claimed that Israel had been informed of the location of the school 33 times, including an hour before the strike.

Extract 8. Taub, 4.8.14

*I: Ed Miliband has described what you, what Israel has done as unacceptable and unjustifiable. The foreign secretary Philip Hammond describes it simply intolerable and must be addressed.*

SP: We, we completely share the concerns about this appalling loss of life.

The interviewer presents a challenge attributed to two leading British politicians (Ed Miliband and Philip Hammond), one of whom directly accuses Israel of unjustified civilian deaths. The speaker appears to agree with the judgment (‘we completely share the concerns’) but edits out Israeli involvement – applying the ‘concerns’ to the loss of life in general rather than the Israeli attacks (for a discussion of how politicians paraphrase interview questions in order to subtly shift the premise see Clayman & Heritage, 2002; for a description of how witnesses omit blame-implicative parts of questions in court see Atkinson & Drew, 1979). As with using the passive tense, the nominalization ‘this appalling loss of life’ is a construction in which no agents or weapons are specified.

*3) Referring to weapons and attacks*

*a) Erasing Israeli while emphasizing Hamas weapons and attacks.* Threats to either side were compared using counts of words referring explicitly to weapons and attacks (see table 1). The *weapons count* included the following: rockets/rocketeers; weapons; Fagr-5 (missiles); arsenal; missiles; mortars; bombs; heavily-armed. No speaker mentioned tanks, jets, planes or bombers (all of which were only used by Israel), or rifles/guns. The *attack count* included descriptions of violent actions aimed at Israel or Gaza. These included: words with the root ‘target’, ‘fire’, ‘kill’, ‘bomb’, and ‘attack’ (including ‘attack tunnels’); kidnap; murder; destroy; shoot; launch (missiles); onslaught; harm; hurt; aggression; destruction; sending troops in; take out. Words were not included if they implied both sides acting equally (e.g. combat with, war between, battle), one side acting against its own people, euphemisms which have no direct violent implication (e.g. operate, operation, deal with, clean out) or sentences where the agent was unclear.

*(Table 1 here)*

Table 1 shows that Palestinian weapons were mentioned a great deal, while Israeli weapons were only mentioned once. A similar disparity was found for attack words: those originating from fighters in Gaza were mentioned over three times as often as those originating from the Israeli military.

Attack words were also used differently when applied to Palestinian sources compared to Israeli. No Palestinian attack was described as targeted at a military source. Instead they: a) had no specific target (e.g. ‘When a ceasefire was declared a week ago for six hours it (Hamas) continued firing.’ - Curiel 24.7.14); b) were targeted at civilians or civilian locations (e.g. ‘Their sole purpose is to infiltrate, attack and kill civilians’ - Lerner 21.7.14); or c) were aimed at a more general ‘us’, Israelis or Israel (e.g. ‘Yesterday over a hundred rockets were fired on Israel and Hamas was leading the firing’ - M. Herzog 8.7.14).

In contrast, Israeli attacks were referred to in accounts where they: a) were not responsible for civilian deaths (e.g. ‘It was not because they (IDF soldiers) were fighting civilians’ – Lerner 21.7.14); b) were directed at military targets (e.g. ‘We want to hit as much as we can the terrorist infrastructure of Hamas’ – Peri 12.7.14); or c) were mentioned in an account of trying to save civilians (e.g. ‘There are frequent attacks that are aborted because we see that there are civilians in the neighborhood’ – Taub 4.8.14). Israeli actions were also more likely to be described in general ways which did not clearly specify weapons, violence or the victims of that violence (e.g. ’ground operations’, ‘go into Gaza’, ‘achieving the mission’, ‘take action’, ‘do something about it’, ‘go in there and clean it up’ – see also extract 15) (see Gavriely-Nuri, 2008 for examples of this in the Second Lebanon War, and Oddo, 2011 for a discussion of this in US presidential speeches).

The following extract illustrates the contrast between how Hamas and Israeli actions are described. Earlier in the program, a clip was played in which the UN Secretary General, in response to rising numbers of civilian deaths, said ‘I urge Israel to do far more to stop civilian casualties’ (18/7/14).

Extract 9. Taub, 18/7/14

We have to be as careful as we can, we have to be as effective as we can. This operation so far we’ve managed to take out something like 1000 of Hamas’s rockets and missile launchers. We’ve managed to deal with 200 of their control centers. Just in the past night we’ve managed to take out 20 of their long-range missiles and deal with 9 of those terrorist tunnels which as Yoland described are used for attacking Israelis, trying to send in heavily armed terrorist squads.

The contrast between how the speaker describes the two sides is striking. He details rockets, missile launchers, long-range missiles, terrorist tunnels and heavily armed terrorist squads on the Hamas side, and makes the purpose clear: they are for ‘attacking Israelis’. Compare this to how he describes Israeli actions – there are no weapons mentioned, and no humans appear to be affected. Instead, Israeli actions are ‘careful’ and ‘effective’, and only military targets appear to be affected: they ‘deal with’ control centers and ‘terrorist tunnels’, and ‘take out’ weapons and launchers.

*b) Civilian locations as targets and sources of attacks*

There is a similar disparity when we examine how civilian locations are described in the context of violence. Counts were made for mentions of *civilian locations* as the sources or targets of violence. These included: homes; schools; kibbutzim; towns/cities/regions; hospitals; communities; open air/outside (in residential areas); and bomb shelters (for civilians). References to ‘us’ (e.g. shot at us) were not included in the count.

*(Table 2 here)*

As can be seen in table 2, locations in Israel were only referred to as the targets and never the source of attacks (e.g. ‘These missiles are launched on our heads including my family, including my home, including 5 million other Israelis’ – I. Herzog 16.7.14). In contrast, civilian locations in Gaza were mainly mentioned as the sources of attacks (e.g. ‘They’re hiding rockets in hospitals, they’re hiding arms in hospitals, they’re shooting from hospitals’ – Netanyahu, 22.7.14). The following is an example. Earlier in the program that day, it was reported that Save the Children (a UK charity) estimated that one child every hour had been killed in Gaza over the previous two days.

Extract 10. Curiel, 24/7/14

*I: We know that 166 children have been killed. We know that a further 1300 have been injured. You say it’s a tragedy but it is also inevitable when you look at the situation in Gaza where it is so densely populated and there is nowhere people can go. Can Israel really say that this is the right thing to do?*

SP: Well, I think that when you have 100 rockets a day at your population centres, landing there, you have to fight this terrorist organization. When they are fighting from schools, you know, we had journalists, Western journalists, yesterday tweeting seeing rockets fired near Shifa Hospital at Israel. We have rockets hidden in schools.

The interviewer’s question suggests that the heavy loss of life is inevitable given that Gaza is densely populated, and calls on the speaker to declare whether Israel’s attacks are the ‘right thing to do’. As is common in news interviews, the speaker answers a slightly different question (Clayman & Heritage, 2002), treating it as having been about whether it is right to fight *per se*, rather than whether it is right to launch attacks in such a densely populated area. First, he describes attacks on population centers in Israel. Explicit mention of the weapons (rockets) and the number (100 a day) makes the violence of Hamas and other Palestinian groups vivid. This is combined with the description of the agent behind the rockets as a ‘terrorist organization’. Edwards and Potter (1991) point out that category labels are not purely descriptive – they carry implications that allow inferences to be made. Branding an opponent ‘terrorist’, as was done constantly by the spokespeople here, implies their grievance is illegitimate and can be ignored, and that blame lies solely with them (Jackson, Jarvis, Gunning & Smyth, 2011; see Erjavec & Volcic, 2007 for a Serbian example). Indeed, Hamas’s condition for a ceasefire, the lifting of the blockade, was either ignored or minimized by all speakers.

The speaker describes Hamas in such as way as to make Israel’s response inevitable: ‘you have to fight’. The issue of child deaths in the interviewer’s question is only addressed in a roundabout way by claiming that civilian locations in the Gaza Strip are used to attack Israel – they are ‘fighting from’, ‘firing’, and ‘hiding’ rockets in schools and a hospital. The speaker reinforces this description by claiming that journalists have confirmed it (see Edwards & Potter, 1991, on building consensus). The response to the interviewer’s question, then, is a justification for fighting Hamas in Gaza, but one that avoids explicitly addressing the issue of whether the child deaths are morally justified.

*3) Explicit denial of responsibility for civilian deaths*

We have seen how spokespeople erased or minimized Palestinian civilian deaths, and Israel’s involvement in them, through the way the context, the events, and the casualties were described. Now we examine how blame is managed more explicitly to represent Israel as acting morally and in accordance with international humanitarian law, often in the face of accusations from the interviewer. Israel is portrayed as not intending or desiring the deaths, and as making efforts to minimize casualties. In contrast, Hamas is represented as responsible for these deaths and as breaking moral and legal conventions.

No speaker admitted Israel was responsible for any civilian deaths. When explicitly challenged by the interviewer over Palestinian casualties, four speakers argued that it was unclear who the perpetrator was, suggesting that it could have been a misfired Hamas rocket or that the incident was being investigated (e.g. extract 4). More frequently, civilian deaths were described as causing the speaker or Israel sorrow (see extracts 1,3,5,8 above) and Israel’s (unspecified) actions as forced on them. In much of the data, the Israeli government and military were presented as careful, restrained and reluctant, targeting only militants and exercising due care to minimize civilian casualties.

Extract 11 is from an interview broadcast after reports that Israeli airstrikes had killed ten people in Gaza overnight, including a 5-month old baby, while 155 rockets were fired into Israel the previous day, killing one Israeli.

Extract 11.I. Herzog, 16/7/14

*I: You say Mr Netanyahu exercised restraint. It doesn’t always look like that to the outside world, particularly when they see pictures of tiny children terribly injured or killed by Israeli bombs.*

SP: Look, these are terrible tragedies in war. Israel alerts each and every house, and each and every citizen of Gaza well before any attack.

While the interviewer explicitly describes the deaths as caused by Israeli bombs, the speaker resists this by saying ‘these are terrible tragedies in war’. This phrasing removes Israeli bombs from the picture, while the casualties are generalised as just the sort of thing that happens in any war, and therefore not specific to this conflict. This is a script formulation (Edwards, 2005), a discursive device used to suggest that what has happened is something normal for a particular situation and does not require special explanation. It is war that causes the tragedy rather than the decisions and actions of Israel. Next, the speaker narrows the interviewer’s question about ‘restraint’ to the topic of alerting citizens to forthcoming attacks. Restraint, however, is a more general term, one which includes the possibility of not launching attacks in heavily populated areas. The function of respecifying ‘restraint’ as alerting people (rather than not launching the attack) allows the speaker to present Israel as exercising restraint, and thus deflects the blame implied in the question. Finally, claiming that ‘every citizen of Gaza’ is alerted before any attack is an extreme case formulation (Pomerantz, 1986). Formulations like this are not literally true (it is implausible to claim you have alerted every one of over a million people), but are routinely used in arguments to add strength to a description, and often pass without challenge from others. In this case, it could be heard to imply that somehow it is the civilians’ own fault that they did not leave. Thus, while the speaker does not deny or contest the interviewer’s statement, it places the responsibility for the deaths elsewhere.

In contrast, speakers described Hamas as deliberately putting civilians in danger. In 11 interviews/statements, Hamas was described as responsible for the deaths of Palestinian civilians because they stored arms in, and fired from, civilian locations (e.g. extract 10) (see Philo & Berry, 2011, for similar findings in in 2008/9 Gaza conflict). The term ‘human shield’ was often used in this context to suggest fighters were hiding behind civilians. Hamas were also described as preventing civilians from leaving areas that were about to become combat zones. For example:

Extract 12. Taub, 9/7/14

*I: You would agree there is no such thing as holy and unholy blood. All deaths are -*

SP: - I think that’s absolutely right. That’s the reason why, as we are protecting the lives of our civilians, and as you know we have 3.5 million people today, that’s close to half of our population, 40% who have to live their lives within reach of bomb shelters because of the missiles being fired, but as we try to protect them we are also trying to as much as possible protect the lives of Palestinians who the terrorists are hiding behind.

*I: You just killed 25 civilians, or mostly civilians, including women and children.*

SP: When you are fighting a terrorist organization, and every democracy fighting terrorism has found it, that hides behind terrorists*,* it is extraordinarily difficult, but the responsibility ultimately for the lives of these civilians lies with those people who are launching attacks from behind them.

In the first part, the speaker anticipates the later accusation from the interviewer by first agreeing with the statement and then delivering an account that emphasizes the threat to Israeli citizens, with numbers given to bolster the factual status of the account. Hamas missiles and attacks are again mentioned. However, when the speaker turns to Palestinian civilians, Israeli weapons and attacks are not mentioned: instead of Israel being involved in deaths, it is described as trying to protect civilians. The use of ‘as much as possible’ is a defensive move which anticipates the interviewer pointing out that civilians were actually killed by Israeli weapons. Indeed, the interviewer immediately does this, using the active verb construction ‘You just killed 25 civilians’ to blame Israel for the latest casualties. The speaker does not explicitly disagree but nevertheless withholds agreement (Atkinson & Drew, 1976), reformulating the interviewer’s statement by erasing details of Israeli involvement. He uses a terrorist discourse to categorize Hamas, immediately contrasting this with a construction of Israel as a member of the larger category of ‘every democracy fighting terrorism’. This not only suggests there is international consensus about who is to blame in this situation, but it also allies Israel with the USA and other democratic countries (see Billig, 1995; Hodges, 2013b; Leudar et al, 2004; Oddo, 2011 for similar practices in US and UK leaders’ speeches). Indeed, politicians often align themselves and their party with the majority while representing their opponents as aligned with a disruptive or hostile minority (e.g. Reicher & Hopkins, 1996).

The speaker then states that the blame for the civilian deaths are the fighters who ‘are launching attacks from behind them.’ Both implicitly, by editing out Israeli weapons or actions, and explicitly, by blaming Hamas, the responsibility for the deaths is shifted away from Israel (for examples of this in a televised discussion during the second intifada see Buttny & Ellis, 2007).).

*4) A final example from Prime Minister Netanyahu*

The final example illustrates many of these discursive features knitted together in a description of the conflict. It was broadcast after the UN Secretary General Ban Ki Moon condemned Israel for strikes in which over 60 civilians had been killed, saying ‘Israel must exercise maximum restraint and do far more to protect civilians.’

Extract 13. Netanyahu, 21/7/14

I regret and the people of Israel regret any civilian casualty. Even one. We target the rocketeers. We target Hamas and Islamic Jihad terrorists. In this particular area it’s a stronghold. It’s a terrorist stronghold. They manufacture the rockets there. They store the rockets there. They fire the rockets there. Over a hundred rockets have been fired from this area to the cities of Israel. They also dig terror tunnels, attack tunnels, under the homes. Where they store the rockets, they build attack tunnels that penetrate into Israel’s side and kill Israeli civilians. They try to get into kindergartens, and get into schools, kibbutzim and murder people and kidnap people like Gilad Sharit. This is what we face, so we want to go in there and clean it up, so that we are safe. Yet in the course of doing that we have to go into densely civilian populated areas. We ask the population ‘leave’. We ask them again and again. We call them up, we text them messages, we give leaflets. We ask them to leave. Hamas says, and some of the do leave, Hamas says ‘don’t leave.

Again we see an expression of concern for civilian deaths. Netanyahu uses an extreme case formulation: it is not only the prime minister but everyone in Israel who feels concern, and it is not just mass casualties that elicit this regret, but ‘even one’. This sensitivity to every single Palestinian civilian is followed by a claim that Israel only targets fighters. As in so many extracts above, the speaker goes on to detail Hamas weapons and violent attacks, using numbers and emphasizing civilian locations in Israel. Active verbs are used which specify the agent of violence towards Israel (‘they’ i.e. Hamas): ‘They build attack tunnels that penetrate into Israel’s side and kill Israeli citizens. They try to (…) murder and kidnap people”. The danger to civilians and the criminal nature of the enemy is emphasized by specifying kindergartens, schools and kibbutzim (see Lazar & Lazar, 2004 for “criminalization” in US presidential rhetoric and Graham et al, 2004, in ‘call to arms’ speeches throughout history). In contrast, Israeli actions are described non-violently, and weapons, deaths and injuries are erased: they simply ‘go in there and clean it up’. The action is described as cleaning, with its connotations of improving, tending, and making orderly. The use of the imperative ‘we have to’ is a claim that the Israel has no choice. Israel’s lack of aggression is reinforced by describing efforts to protect civilians. This is presented in a three-part list (“We call them up, we text them messages, we give leaflets.”), a common feature of political rhetoric which gives the impression of completeness (Atkinson, 1984).

Discussion

This article has illustrated how Israeli spokespeople on BBC radio presented Israel as carrying no blame or responsibility for civilian casualties during the Gaza Conflict 2014. They gave rich descriptions of Hamas weapons and attacks, but only vague, passive or non-violent descriptions of Israeli attacks. Israeli weapons, tanks and planes were almost never mentioned. Israel was not explicitly implicated in the deaths of Palestinian civilians, instead agency was erased through the use of noun phrases and passive constructions. While the threat to Israeli citizens was described in detail, Palestinian deaths were often described in vague euphemisms that failed to spell out the suffering. When speakers addressed the issue directly, Hamas was blamed while Israel was presented as trying to avoid civilian deaths. The overall impression given was that violence was only happening on one side. Yet the statistics tell a different story: over 99% of the civilians killed in the conflict were Palestinians, and most were killed by Israel weapons.

When spokespeople talk in these ways, they provide versions of events that allow supporters to avoid ‘spelling out’ the details of the suffering caused by their own nation, and to look away from things they do not want to see (Cohen, 2001): ‘Cultures of denial encourage turning a collective blind eye’ (101). This is not to deny the anxiety and fear of Israeli civilians living with the threat of missiles, or the tragedy of the six civilians killed in Israel. Rather, the aim of this article is to illustrate one of the contextual factors that explains how people can be persuaded to support military actions when there is evidence that large numbers of innocent people are suffering from those actions.

There was a good deal of consistency in how spokespeople talked about civilian deaths over the 50 days of the conflict. Some of these elements were also similar to those found in the communications of Israeli spokespeople during the 2008-9 Gaza conflict (Philo & Berry, 2011). This consistency in message should be no surprise. Public relations, information control, and cross-departmental message co-ordination by governments is an increasingly important aspect of war, and in 2008, the National Information Directorate of Israel was set up to co-ordinate the content of communications from public bodies (for descriptions of US and UK bodies see Miller & Sabir, 2012; for descriptions of Russian and Georgian efforts see Rodgers, 2012). From the early days of the Zionist movement, Israel has developed a well-organised and proactive public relations (hasbara) system (Philo & Berry, 2011). Toledano and McKie (2013) trace this as having its origins in the Jewish Diaspora, which was always in danger of persecution and needed official intermediaries to negotiate with the majority culture.

How casualties are described to the outside world is important. While Israel has a loose coalition of international supporters among both Jewish and Christian Zionist communities (Mearsheimer & Walt, 2007), identification with Israel does not mean unqualified support for the policies of its government. A recent survey of Jews in the UK (Miller, Harris & Shindler, 2015) found that while 93% believed Israel was part of their identity as Jews (32% ‘central’, 41% ‘important but not central’, 20% ‘some role’), 61% felt pursuing peace negotiations with the Palestinians should be the Israel’s first priority, with 42% supporting negotiations with Hamas. A majority of respondents supported a two-state solution, believed Israel should give up territories in exchange for guarantees of peace, and saw the Israeli government as ‘constantly creating obstacles to avoid engaging in the peace process’. Regarding the 2014 Gaza conflict, 56% saw the Israeli action as ‘proportionate’ and 37% ‘disproportionate’, with those respondents with higher levels of education more likely to see it as disproportionate. This indicates that the Israeli government cannot assume the support of Jews internationally for its policies, and explains why it engages actively in efforts to persuade and mobilize that support, and to reassure that Israel’s actions are just. It is also important to remember that these communications are designed for external audiences, and other types of argument might be presented to different internal audiences. For example, Slater (2012) illustrated how targeting civilians has been a strand running through some forms of political Zionism since Jabotinsky, and that this has been admitted by a succession of government ministers over the years.

Researchers have often pointed out that a sense of threat is pervasive in Israeli national identity and discourse due to the historical persecution of the Jews (including the Holocaust) and the opposition of neighboring states to Zionism (Bar-Tal et al, 2010; Halperin & Bar-Tal, 2011; Finlay, 2005; Novick, 1999). This sense of victimhood is reinforced in the descriptions we saw here, where speakers emphasized and detailed Hamas weapons and attacks on Israelis and civilian locations. At the same time, erasing of Israeli involvement in civilian deaths in Gaza avoids a potential threat to the societal sense of virtue and morality.

Political psychologists emphasize that intergroup conflict is as much about the processes that occur within groups as between them (e.g. Finlay, 2014; Reicher et al, 2008). This paper has illustrated how leaders provide ways of seeing events that mobilize support and protect the positive image of the ingroup. Discursive psychology allows us to see how speakers use numerous small details of language to build versions of events and identities in persuasive and convincing ways. Identities are represented explicitly, through references to national traits and values, and implicitly, through the details of how intergroup behaviors are described, through emotion terms, and through relative descriptions of infrastructure and intention. Here we have seen how the humanity and moral rectitude of the Israeli leadership and military is implied by elisions and denials of violence and violent intent. These types of discursive constructions feed into the ‘ethos of conflict’ that allows groups to cope with intractable conflict at the same time as creating barriers to successful peace negotiations (Bar-Tal et al., 2010).

This article contributes to the wider question of how leaders justify violence, and how they persuade other group members that violence is acceptable. We saw here that each new event in the conflict, particularly those that raised questions about the group’s morality, was interpreted through a lens of virtue. As Tirman (2011) pointed out with respect to indifference to civilian casualties in US conflicts, this type of discourse makes the next round of conflict easier to start and justify. Studies have shown that leaders who make statements with higher levels of ‘integrative complexity’ (i.e. which acknowledge more than one viewpoint) are more likely to achieve peaceful outcomes in conflict situations (Lambie, 2014). If supporters of Israel accept the narrative seen here, where Israeli involvement in suffering is erased and Hamas are held to blame for everything, it makes it harder to understand why Palestinians might feel angry, and harder to accept the concessions necessary in peace negotiations. Citizens need to acknowledge the effect of their country’s actions in order to make an informed decision the next time a conflict is looming: descriptions such as those seen here erase too many details to allow this.

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**Table 1**. Weapons and attacks: total mentions and number of interviews/statements with at least one mention (total data items = 25)

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Weapons** | | **Attack words** | |
|  | **Palestinian** | **Israeli** | **Palestinian against Israeli** | **Israeli against Palestinian** |
| Total count | 71 | 1 | 87 | 25 |
| Number of interviews and statements (out of 25) with at least one mention | 16 (64% of data items) | 1 (4%) | 18 (72%) | 10 (40%) |

**Table 2.** Civilian locations referred to in the context of violence: number of interviews/statements with at least one mention

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Civilian locations in Gaza Strip** | **Civilian locations in Israel** |
| Number of data items (out of 25) mentioning civilian locations as targets of violence | 7 (28% of data items) | 15 (60%) |
| Number of data items (out of 25) mentioning civilian locations as the origin of violence | 11 (44%) | 0 |