

Avoiding Blame in Israeli Editorials
the March of Return and the Terror Wave

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ABSTRACT

With the recent violence inside Israel and the Palestinian territories showing how distant peace in the region really is, engaging with the question of responsibility for the occupation and the conflict's future is paramount to finding a just solution for it. As influential gatekeepers of the public sphere, the media plays an important role in this discussion by framing and evaluating events, ushering in specific understandings into the public debate. Editorials are a particularly powerful tool in this process because they are unencumbered by the pursuit of objectivity, and overtly serve persuasive and normative purposes through the mobilisation of intersubjective knowledge. As the occupying power's society is precluded from engaging in conversations about responsibility while blame avoidance strategies obscure events and offer a way out of engagement with criticism, this research aimed to answer the following question: what forms of blame avoidance took place in the editorials published by *Haaretz* and *Jerusalem Post* during the 2015 and 2016 Terror Wave and the 2018 and 2019 March of Return? Embedded in the qualitative approach, this study engaged with Discourse Analysis to reveal the presence of blame avoidance strategies in both Israeli newspapers. In accordance with the literature that establishes bias as a form of social identity construction, this research found that whilst the left-wing *Haaretz* did not employ blame avoidance strategies, the right-wing *Jerusalem Post* made extensive use of them. The analysis of the *Jerusalem Post's* editorials further revealed the use of extreme claims to avoid engagement with criticism stemming from the International community. As no indication of such claims was present in *Haaretz*, their presence on the *Jerusalem Post* indicated the materialisation of a discourse of persecution and imminent danger that seems out of place in the contemporary reality and standing of Israel.

KEYWORDS: *Media, Israel, Palestine, March of Return, Terror Wave*

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Introduction

The Palestinian-Israeli conflict is, perhaps, one of the most complex clashes in modern times. A solution for the issue of two peoples claiming the same holy land has eluded negotiators and policy-makers for little over a century, and fuels passionate, opposing camps around the world. Observing the intractability of the conflict today, it is easy to forget that a Jewish minority lived in peace with an Arab majority in the region for centuries (Massoulié, 1997). Since its inception with the mass migration of Jews to Palestine in the early XIX century, the conflict has had many phases. It is now configured by a protracted military occupation, the schism in the Palestinian leadership (with the Palestinian Authority governing the West Bank and Hamas the Gaza Strip), and the consolidation of the influence of the Right in Israeli politics (Agabaria, 2016; Shlaim, 2010).

Benjamin Netanyahu, Israel's recently ousted right-wing prime minister was in power for twelve consecutive years. His ultranationalist, adversarial, and force-over-peace style has shifted the whole of Israel's political arena to a more overtly hard-line stance (Holmes, 2019). Far-right parties that support Jewish settlement and oppose a Palestinian state are well represented in the Knesset, the Israeli parliament, including a member of the Kahamist movement, a Jewish extremist group outlawed as terrorist by the United States (U.S) over its incitement to violence against Arabs (Krauss, 2021). Naftali Bennett, the incoming premier, is a far-right politician who got his start in politics as a settler leader.

The schism in the Palestinian leadership happened after the first legislative elections following Israel's unilateral disengagement from Gaza in 2005, when it evacuated the 8,000 settlers who lived surrounded by 1.4 million Palestinians under heavy guard from the Israeli army. A move that was rewarded by then U.S president, George W. Bush, with the Israeli retention of six major settlement blocs holding 92,000 people on the West Bank, allowing Israel to unilaterally define its borders while avoiding the high financial cost of keeping settlers in a region with no significant strategic or

religious importance. In the free and fair 2006 elections, Hamas, which had been observing the cease-fire negotiated between Israel and Palestinians before the former's withdrawal from Gaza, secured 72 seats of a total of 132 (Shlaim, 2010; Prelude to war, 2009).

Israel then refused to negotiate with the Hamas-led government, claiming it was a terrorist organisation. The U.S and the European Union joined in ostracizing the democratically elected government, and withheld foreign aid to the Palestinian Authority (PA) in a bid to force it to oust Hamas from power, despite it having begun to moderate its political programme. Concerted efforts were made to instigate a Palestinian civil war with the aid of hard-core US neoconservatives and, under pressure, the Palestinian government collapsed. After a mini civil war, Hamas seized control of Gaza and the PA took over the West Bank. Israel then imposed an economic blockade on Gaza, which has been in place until today, closing all the border crossings, and forbidding any movement between Gaza and the West Bank (Shlaim, 2010).

Since the Israeli withdrawal, there have been three wars between Gaza and Israel. Because of the blockade, reconstruction could not go through and the toll on infrastructure added to the dire humanitarian situation of the enclave, deemed uninhabitable by the United Nations (UN) (UN, 2018). After then-U.S president Donald Trump declared Jerusalem the capital of Israel, in the background of Arab leaders' fatigue over the Palestinian cause, Gaza activists envisioned the March of Return as a way to make their frustrations heard. The feeling of an inevitable political disaster, including from issues stemming from the political schism in the Palestinian leadership, propelled the protests. They took place almost every Friday in Gaza from March 2018 until December 2019, to demand the right of return of refugees, 70% of Gaza's population, and the end of the Israeli blockade (Abusalim, 2018).

According to the United Nations, whilst the vast majority of protesters were peaceful, "during most protests dozens have approached the fence attempting to damage it, burning tires, throwing stones and Molotov cocktails towards Israeli forces and flying

incendiary kites and balloons" (UN, 2020, para. 6) into Israel with considerable damage to agriculture and natural reserves. However, all protesters were met with the use of force by the Israeli army, warranting an independent Commission of Inquiry appointed by the UN Human Rights Council. Throughout the duration of the protests, 214 Palestinians died and over 36,00 were injured. One Israeli soldier was killed and seven were injured (UN, 2020).

The situation in the West Bank has also been tense, especially since the beginning of the settler enterprise on Palestinian lands after the Six-Day War in 1967, when Israel captured the whole of historical Palestine and begot the longest military occupation in modern times. Together with the refugee issue and the final status of Jerusalem, the settlement expansion in the West Bank is considered the greatest impediment to peace. As the land grabbing, considered illegal under International Law (International Court of Justice, 2004), moves forward, the occupation continues to control extensive aspects of Palestinian life. In this context, all the ingredients were present for frustration to boil over, as it has cyclically and was also the case in October 2015.

The spark of what the media dubbed a "Terror Wave" was the Israeli government's threats on the Al-Aqsa mosque, but deep-seated resentments underlay it (Lavie-Dinur et al., 2018). This "wave of terror" consisted in a series of isolated attacks that took place from October 2015 until losing intensity towards September 2016, perpetrated mainly by Palestinian civilians (untrained assailants without support from organisations), against Israeli civilians and security personnel. These attacks took the shape of stabbings, shootings, and car-rammings and often resulted in the death of the attacker. The Israeli government's response included punitive demolitions, more checkpoints, and a mass revocation of permits, which generated reproach from groups concerned about the application of unlawful collective punishment measures, as well as from members of the Israeli military who worried about it generating more violence (Office for the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2016).

Since then, very little has changed. Palestinians remain politically and geographically segregated, the military occupation remains in place, and the settlements continue to grow in the West Bank. As this thesis was being written, another spat of violence between Hamas and Israel took place claiming the lives of 260 people, including 67 children. During its duration, the worst episodes of violence between Israelis and Palestinians inside Israel in decades reminded the world just how distant peace in the region is. In a time of heightened tensions, spin-doctors and journalists work overtime to construct meanings about events for audiences. Having the right lenses to see through the discursive strategies that help them present their versions of reality is essential to understand how worldviews are presented as commonsensical analysis.

1.1 Problem definition

In political communication, there has been extensive engagement with the work spin-doctors do to avoid blame (Hood, 2011; Hansson, 2015; Hinterleitner, 2017; Weaver, 1986). In a work of particular importance for the present study, Finlay (2017) investigated how Israeli spokespeople avoided responsibility for the high death toll of Palestinians in the 2014 Gaza War. Conducted in the Political Psychology field, Finlay's (2017) work uncovered the discursive strategies used to deny responsibility for the deaths, present events as conforming to International Humanitarian Law and, as a result, preserve Israel's citizens' sense of positive social identity and morality.

In media research, the issue of blame attribution has received some attention. Herfroy-Mischler and Friedman (2018), for example, used newspapers from Israel and other countries to analyse blame attribution after failed peace talks in Israel and Syria. They concluded that the use of virtue-based blame frames have greater impact for future relations than blame frames that criticise political figures' actions. In scholarship concerned with how the Israeli media covers of the conflict, the focus has been mainly on how news outlets frame and narrate it, and how its actors are portrayed (Baden & David, 2017; Liebes & Kampf, 2009; Rinnawi, 2007; Tenenboim-Weinblatt et al., 2016; Wenzelburger & Hörisch, 2016). Although bias and guilt suppression in editorial work

(i.e., photo selection, headlines, text placement) has been addressed (Dor, 2005), studies centred on Israeli editorials' discourse are absent from scholarship.

In contrast to the attention given to blame attribution in media research, the use of blame avoidance strategies in media discourse is markedly under-researched (Dor, 2004; 2005). Furthermore, in the prolific environment of media research, editorials are still an under-investigated type of media text (Firmstone, 2019). This study aims to fill these gaps by investigating how blame avoidance strategies are constructed in Israeli editorials. Specifically, the present research proposes to answer the following research question: what forms of blame avoidance took place in the editorials published by *Haaretz* and *The Jerusalem Post* during the 2015 and 2016 Terror Wave and the 2018 and 2019 March of Return?

This study is placed within the long held connection between media and politics (Firmstone, 2019; Le, 2010), and the understanding of media as a mediator of social identity in imagined national communities (Anderson, 2006, Dor, 2005; 2006; Le, 2010). Media institutions contribute to the construction of public knowledge through agenda-setting (Le, 2010; McCombs & Shaw, 1991), news framing, and the opinion-forming potential of editorials (Van Dijk, 1995; Van Gorp, 2007). As such, blame avoidance in the editorial discourse of a nation in conflict can have broader social consequences; it can obstruct public debates, delegitimise actors, and impede the reconciliation of opposing narratives at the cost of peace (Herfroy-Mischler & Friedman, 2018; Hansson, 2015; Rotberg, 2006).

As seen yet again in 2021, the cyclical violence between Israelis and Palestinians continue to flare up and no steps toward peace continue to be the norm. The International Crime Court has been under attack since announcing an investigation into Israeli and Palestinian war crimes, which recently prompted over 50 senior figures to write an open letter condemning the "unwarranted public criticism of the court regarding its investigation of alleged crimes committed in the occupied Palestinian territory, including unfounded accusations of anti-Semitism" (Beaumont, 2021, para. 6). In this context,

understanding how specific constructions of reality make it into public knowledge through editorials, and the complex interactions between media and society that mediate this process, can help to forward the case for more honest conversations about responsibility, deflection of blame, and engagement with criticism.

This introduction is followed by a literature review chapter, where relevant discussions and understandings for the analysis proposed here are presented. A methodological chapter follows the literature review, where the research approach, data collection, sampling strategy and analysis method are addressed. Next, a chapter is dedicated to the presentation of the analysis' results. It is followed by the conclusion and discussion chapter, which close the present study.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This chapter is dedicated to reviewing the literature that will serve as the basis for engaging with the research problem. The first section clarifies fundamental concepts for the construction of the theoretical apparatus and engages with literature that helps to conceive the object of analysis: editorials. Section two reviews literature on the role of intended and overt bias in media texts and dissent in Israeli media, two topics fundamental to contextualise the analysis' results. The third and final section presents a theory of blame and its intersection with moral disengagement, and addresses blame avoidance strategies in previous researches.

2.1 Discourse, editorials, and frames

Editorials as discourse

Before delving into the particular media texts that editorials are and looking closer at the specific ways their normative and persuasive functions contribute to the creation of social reality (Van Dijk, 1995), This study engages with the definition and differentiation of key terms for the analysis conducted in this research, namely text and discourse. This research borrows Chalaby's sociological conceptualisation of discourse, as it espouses his understanding of discourse as a social fact, moving forward from a purely linguistic definition that reduces it to language or text (Chalaby, 1998).

Discourse, as conceptualised by Chalaby (1998), is a "class of texts" (p. 688) that is not reduced to the sum of the texts it contains. According to Chalaby (1998), discourse has relatively independent qualities from the elements it is comprised of, which does not mean it is independent from its producer, "it is concrete however, since it is an historical and social reality" (p. 688). From this definition it follows that text, in spoken or written form, is the material manifestation of a discourse, a discursive unit (Chalaby, 1998).

Therefore, editorials are understood here as discursive units, texts where discourses are embodied. They are also a specific type of text whose particularities within

the news realm need to be addressed. Editorials are a distinctive media text because they explicitly represent the opinion of newspapers as institutions and, as such, are unbound by the journalistic ritual of objectivity. They construct meanings about events to audiences and serve persuasive and normative purposes, acting as a link between media and society through the use of intersubjective knowledge (Firmstone, 2019; Van Dijk, 1992; 1995; Van Gorp, 2007).

Although news discourse analysis is a rich tradition in media research (Fairclough, 1995, Fowler, 1991; Kelsey, 2019; Van Dijk, 1989; 1990; 1992; 1995), editorials are still a relatively under-researched type of media text (Firmstone, 2019). Firmstone (2019) distinguishes three lines of inquiry about editorials in media studies: its impact on public opinion based on media-effects theory with timid positive results, the less explored research about the routines and practices of editorial boards, and discourse analysis investigations of how editorials present issues to readers. This study is developed within the last research tradition, based on the premise that editorials are windows into public discourse.

Editorials as frames

According to Firmstone (2019), how much impact editorials have in changing behaviour and shaping the public discourse is still debated, but it is accepted that they have some influence in the making of public knowledge. Van Dijk (1995), however, goes further and proposes that editorials "play a role in the formation and change of public opinion, in setting the political agenda, and in influencing social debate, decision making and other forms of social and political action" (p. 2). Whilst there are considerations made elsewhere about whom editorials are written for (readers or political elites and news actors) and with what success (Firmstone, 2019; Van Dijk, 1992; 1995), these concerns are secondary here. This research focuses rather on the role editorials have on shaping issues, ushering them thus in public discourse.

Of particular interest here is what van Dijk (1995) calls the cultural function of editorials, in particular, how they persuasively articulate and reproduce values and norms

through which the news could be interpreted. Editorials manage to fulfil this function as well as their social and political functions due to some extent to how they are discursively structured. Whilst analysing racism and argumentation in British tabloid editorials, Van Dijk (1992) elaborates on the overall schema of editorials. According to Van Dijk (1992), an editorial is composed of (a) the definition of a situation, where the events are summarized, (b) an evaluation, where said events are evaluated, and (c) a conclusion, in which expectations about further developments and recommendations about how actors should move forward are made.

Constructed around this structure, Van Dijk (1992) argues, editorials have argumentative and persuasive functions and are capable of influencing the social cognition of the reader, meaning the processes through which individuals learn about the world and make sense of human behaviour (Renfrew et al., 2008; Malle et al., 2014). According to Van Dijk (1992), they do so by the strategic use of socially shared beliefs (general or issue specific) in their argumentative structure, or by making new points anchored in these beliefs to make the target belief more acceptable, particularly in what concerns the social representations of group members (Van Dijk, 1990). This ability to define a problem and employ strategies to persuade readers to accept the ideologically based definition reproduces in turn the symbolic power of the media (Bourdieu, 1991; Van Dijk, 1992).

In another analysis of editorial texts, Van Dijk (1995) investigates the relationship between discourse and "socially shared mental representations" (p. 2). More precisely, Van Dijk (1995) is concerned with the discursive expressions of opinions, which, he proposes, are based on shared mental representations, in a process loop that links society and individual through the intersubjective knowledge that flows through the social environment and informs private opinions. Once again, Van Dijk (1992; 1995) is addressing how the expression of socially shared beliefs in editorials impacts social cognition, tying society and editorials through the use of intersubjective knowledge.

Considering Van Dijk's (1992; 1995) description of editorials' textual elements

presented above, and how socially shared beliefs are mobilised in this type of media text to present an issue, it follows that editorials are, essentially, frames. A closer inspection of Entman's (1993) definition of the functions of a frame reveals that they perform the same problem definition, evaluation, and recommendation functions of the editorial, which are also based on the cultural stock of a society to facilitate the resonance of the frame with the receiver. Although this research's objective is not to distinguish which frame the coding units correspond to, it is concerned with how framing has the ability to influence thinking (Entman, 1993, p. 52):

Frames, then define problems - determine what a causal agent is doing with what costs and benefits, usually measured in terms of common cultural values; diagnose causes - identify the forces creating the problem; make moral judgments - evaluate causal agents and their effects; and suggest remedies - offer and justify treatments for the problems and predict their likely effects.

However, something needs to be said about the resonance power of the frames present in media texts, so that their ability to influence readers is put into perspective. As Entman (1993) explains, the resonance of a frame is deeply connected to how the cultural phenomena present in the text interact with the receiver's belief system. Frames do not exert a deterministic influence in the audience despite the established links between social cognition and discourse (Van Dijk, 1990; 1992; 1995). Engaging with a social group perspective of this argument, Baden and David (2017) analysed the resonance of media discourse in different sections of Israeli society. Their research showed that the process that renders ideas intuitively convincing and relevant, making them part of that group's socially shared interpretation of an event, is culturally dependent and, as such, self-reinforcing.

The resemblance between editorials' and frames' functions matters for this research in two significant ways, first, because understanding editorials as frames allows it to account for the role of culture in them and situate the texts in a social context, where the discourses manifested in them originate and perpetuate. Second, because the process of giving salience to certain aspects of reality whilst omitting others, intrinsic to framing

(Entman, 1993), is an important way of constructing meaning, of deflecting blame, and ignoring alternatives to the frame. Furthermore, the central focus on agency (who the actors are and what kinds of actions they perform - or not - with what consequences) has direct implications in the attribution of causal responsibility and can, therefore, indicate instances of blame avoidance (Hansson, 2015).

In this section, the foundational concepts of discourse and text were presented. Editorials were discussed in light of discourse and frame theory, and resonance was addressed to mediate the presumed power of this type of media text. The constitutive elements of the editorial were presented to unpack how intersubjective knowledge is mobilised within them to realise their cultural function and achieve their persuasive and normative intentions. In the next section, the role of bias in editorials and dissent in the Israeli media will be discussed.

2.2 Bias

Bias as identity construction

The pursuit of objectivity marked an important moment in the professionalization of the journalistic field, but studies about media bias revealed that the pursuit of objectivity is just that, the necessary pursuit of an unattainable goal. Media bias can be defined as the lack of objectivity in reporting, resulting in the silencing of dissent and the manufacturing of consent around elite interests (Herman & Chomsky, 1988). Bias, McQuail (1992) proposes, exists in four different forms: a partisan bias that is open and intentional like the endorsement of a political candidate, a propaganda bias that is intentional and hidden and causes news organisations to act as mouthpieces, an unwitting bias that is open and is expressed in the editorial choices of newsmaking and, finally, the ideological bias that is unintentional and hidden, hard to spot, and embedded in the text.

The social practices and ideologies of journalists and the newsmaking process, as well as the economic, social, and cultural context of news organisations help to shape the message in numerous ways with social consequences (Herman & Chomsky, 1988;

Kelsey, 2019; McQuail, 1992; Philo, 2007; Van Dijk, 1985; 1992). But, one may ask, why discuss bias within research that uses as units of analysis texts where the promotion of a particular worldview and the interests of the media organisation publishing them are expected? The answer lies in the identity construction function bias. In imagined communities, media organisations act as mediators of social identity, and bias, in addition to manufacturing consent, help news outlets to project social identity markers (Anderson, 2006; Dor, 2005; Le, 2010; Herman & Chomsky, 1988).

According to Dor (2005), the media has a type of relationship with the public that goes beyond the defence of the establishment's interests and the marginalisation of dissent. This relationship happens within the constraints of the power dynamics news organisations are embedded in, but it is of a more intersubjective nature and restrains news outlets in what concerns the resonance of their discourse with their audience. Dor (2005) proposes that this exchange rests on the premise that the media will reaffirm for their audiences things that they already think about themselves, and in doing so they provide them with a wanted sense of security regarding their social identity.

Social identity can be defined as an individual's ability to recognise that they are part of certain social groups, which give group members a sense of shared identity that clarifies who they are, what are their beliefs and expected ways of behaving (Hogg, 2016). In-groups have agreements about what they and what the out-groups are like, a process that, Hogg (2016) argues, foments the assimilation of the group's values and normative behaviour. Importantly, specific behaviour can be elicited through the mobilisation of symbolic reminders of group identities, which "are often subtle (but) emotionally salient" (Phillips DeZalia & Moeschberger, 2016, p.122).

Bringing in social identity has multiple implications for this research. It allows it to engage further with van Dijk's (1992; 1995) proposition about the relationship between "mental representations" or "shared beliefs" present in editorials and social cognition. When contrasted with Entman's (1993) and Baden and David's (2017) culturally-dependent understanding of frame resonance, it offers yet another level of explanation as

to why news organisations dip into the intersubjective knowledge well to construct understandings and present events in presumably convincing ways. Moreover, when understood in light of Dor's (2005) proposition about bias as vectors of identity construction, this conceptualisation of social identity clarifies the elements of the intersubjective relationship between media and audience he describes.

Anderson (2006) has long theorised the newspaper as a means to represent the imagined community. Imagined, because although most members do not know each other personally, they feel they belong to the same community, as they share, among other things, a sense of common fate, myths, and a measure of solidarity towards each other (Anderson, 2006; Smith, 1991). About the role of the newspaper, Anderson (2006) noted that the news reader, confronted with the omnipresence of the same newspaper he consumes, becomes convinced that the world he grasps from the pages he reads is objectively rooted in everyday life. Thus, the depiction of reality newspapers offer seem factual, promote specific social identities, and help to maintain the imagined communities they resonate with.

Whilst Dor (2005) develops his argument in the broader context of the symbolic mediation that media provides between an individual and his group, he discusses the effects of bias in editorial practices (i.e., photo selection, headlines, text placement) in particular. Dor (2005) criticises these practices in the Israeli media coverage of a controversial military operation, because news outlets do not convey that their intent is to present news events in a way that corresponds to the likely interpretation of events by the majority of the community they cater to. This, in turn, leads news organisations to exploit an actual need in order to exert their very own power over their readers, a power that is not necessarily connected to that maintained by the establishment (Dor, 2005).

According to Dor (2005), the identity construction function of the media is relevant to both the construction of national identity and to the construction of social dissent (meaning the manufacturing of consent inside social groups who identify themselves as dissidents in relation to the dominant group). This distinction matters for

this research, because it chose as units of analysis newspapers that represent opposing sides of the political spectrum. If a newspaper's discourse is also an attempt to maintain its imagined community, what will the analysis say about the dissenter's and the consenter's perspective about the March of Return and the Terror Wave? And what can this indicate about the future of the conflict?

Dissent in the Israeli media

What came before and after Israel's inception made it a particularly singular state; therefore, attempts to address Israeli media phenomena must be contextualised. The partial privatisation of the Israeli media in the early 1990s meant less cooperation between news outlets and the ministry of Defence, which set it apart from the democratic world for decades, and opened space for more free speech and opinion (Pappe, 1997). However, there are limits to the reach of political dissent in Israel. According to Sharoni (2000), the persistence of the "us" versus "them" rhetoric in the construction of the Israeli national consciousness fomented the creation of a unified, stable collective identity in which differences within the community are undermined. Thus, when faced with what is perceived as an international discourse critical of Israel, the Israeli-Jewish collectivity rallies around the dominant assumptions of Israeli collective identity (Sharoni, 2000).

Accordingly, when Dor (2005) analyses the Israeli mainstream media's focus on the issue of guilt in its coverage of a violent military operation, he evokes a hidden interlocutor: the outside world. Dor (2005) details how the Israeli media did not eschew blame for the military operation but systematically used strategies to suppress the guilt the country collectively felt is (always) being placed on them by the international public opinion. As a result, Dor (2005; 2006) argues, this perceived need to defend itself prevents Israeli society from "developing an alternative discourse, one which centres on the notion of *responsibility*" (2005, p. 104).

In his analysis, Dor (2005) shows that some news outlets, among them the establishment-critical *Haaretz*, went as far as contradicting or minimizing divergent

reports from their own correspondents to suppress guilt. Likewise, in an investigation about the Israeli media's coverage of the first outbreaks of violence of the 2nd *Intifada* inside Israel, Zandber and Neiger (2005) found that all news outlets analysed initially defaulted to national solidarity frames. They only shifted to the use of more civic frames in their coverage after being cued by the government which, recognising the severity of the situation, started framing the issue as such (Zandber & Neiger, 2005). The *Jerusalem Post* was not included in the analysis, but about *Haaretz's* performance the authors wrote:

It is as if the newspaper tried to operate according to the professional-neutral model but, at the same time, to stay within the national Jewish-Israeli framing. Part of the Israeli public could not accept the paper's deviation from the patriotic tone, and some of them cancelled their subscription as a protest (p. 138).

The journalistic dilemma of covering a conflict one's country takes part in, and the conflicting calls of professional objectivity and the national impulse of solidarity it brings up, is not exclusive to Israel (Jackson, 2005; Zandber & Neiger, 2005). As Zandber and Neiger (2005) point out, among the roles journalists and the media have is that of building, shaping and keeping the solidarity of a community through time. It is, nevertheless, a situation with which the Israeli national press has had to deal with periodically since 1948 and, as evidenced above, poses challenges to covering the conflict. As such, it needs to be taken into account when analysing Israeli news outlets' discourse around the conflict.

In this section, bias' identity construction and maintenance of imagined communities functions, as well as the limits of political dissent in Israel were discussed. This thesis argues that the overt and intended bias of editorials perform the same identity construction function of the hidden bias analysed by Dor (2005), by the same means, albeit in less problematic terms because that is the contract of this type of media text. Like Dor (2005), it contends that bias has a social role, which is to allow different media outlets to offer through their coverage different perspectives about what being Israeli to specific social groups should feel like. In Dor's (2005) investigation, he finds that these

perspectives converged around a feeling of being blamed by something you are not guilty of. A finding that points this research towards its own guiding question. In the following section, blame and the issue blame avoidance are presented.

2.3 Blame avoidance

Blame and moral disengagement

The concept of blame is part of everyday life and a rather common, if not dreaded word, but how can blame be defined and how does it play out in the social world? To answer this question, this research borrows Malle et al.'s (2014) theory of blame, which proposes that blame is a kind of moral judgment with four properties: it is cognitive and social, it is a regulator of social behaviour, it fundamentally depends on social cognition and, as a social act, it demands a justification.

According to Malle et al. (2014), blame is cognitive and social in the sense that it happens in the public, the social sphere, and also in the private, cognitive realm in a relationship that is co-constitutive. As such, in the same way that the norms and values of the social blame-attribution process influence the cognitive attribution of blame, the stimuli and emotion-dependent information processing that make up the process of cognitive blame also influence social blame attribution (Malle et al., 2014).

Malle et al. (2014) argue that, as a moral judgement, blame has the power to regulate social behaviour in a way that corresponds to the interests of the community. As such, if an action is deemed blameworthy, it is placed in the realm of the culturally objectionable. Thus, it can be assumed that, conversely, the act of refusing to accept an action as blameworthy places it in the realm of the culturally acceptable, desirable even. Moreover, this "cultural morality" (Malle et al., 2014, p. 148), regulates conduct through the propagation of norms and values, very much like those mobilized in editorials to define problems, evaluate situations, and make recommendations (Van Dijk, 1992; 1995).

This aspect of blame evokes Bandura's (1999) study of moral disengagement.

Bandura (1999) analyses how the self-regulatory mechanisms governing moral agency can fail to be activated by a series of psychosocial manoeuvres, making it possible for people to behave in ways that would normally be against their moral standards whilst still avoiding self-condemnation. According to Bandura (1999), these mechanisms are intimately tied with discursive strategies, such as shifting blame, also seen in Dor (2005) and Finlay (2017). Therefore, by linking these two perspectives, this research gains insight into how potentially objectionable actions enter the realm of morally sanctioned behaviour that promotes the interests of the community.

Malle et al. (2014), propose that judging a person's behaviour as blameworthy is a process that relies on an individual's social cognition and is based on certain types of processing information, such as intentionality. This property of blame alludes to Dor's (2005) engagement with guilt suppression in mainstream Israeli media, in which he differentiates between blame and guilt based on the issue of intentionality. According to Dor (2005), despite the fact that the Israeli media did not reject blame for the events of the military operation, it did not accept guilt because the soldier's actions were unintentional, or coerced from them due to the circumstances others (Palestinians) put them in.

Whilst this research borrows some of Dor's (2005) guilt suppression strategies, it moves away from the intentionality debate and equate the act of suppressing guilt to that of avoiding blame. This move is supported by the observed interchangeability of very similar discursive strategies in works that deal with "avoiding responsibility (Finlay 2017), "avoiding blame" (Hansson 2015), and, as seen, "suppressing guilt" (Dor, 2005). The present study places emphasis on the causal relationship between blame and responsibility, and how discourse can be constructed to do away with both through strategies that facilitate the process of moral disengagement (Bandura, 1999).

Finally, Malle et al. (2014) argue that blame requires a warrant because as a damaging intervention it must be justified, and the justification lies in the cognitive criteria (i.e., causality, intentionality, preventability) individuals use to form blame

judgements. The co-constitutive nature of cognitive and social blame underlines the role pre-existing ideas play in the individual formulation of such judgements. The importance of this element lies in the fact that it ties in with Dor's (2005) proposition of bias as identity construction, as well as Entman's (1993) and Baden and David's (2017) culturally dependent process of frame resonance. Ultimately, the blame (avoidance) judgements formulated by journalists are imbued with the values that form the social identity of the groups that constitute their audience. It is the process through which discourse finds materiality in the media (Van Dijk, 1992; 1995; Chalaby, 1998).

Blame avoidance in political communication

In political communication there has been extensive engagement with the issue and the strategies of blame avoidance (for some examples see: Figenschou & Thorbjørnsrud, 2018; Giger & Nelson, 2011; Hood, 2011; Hansson, 2015, 2018; Hinterleitner, 2017; Weaver, 1986). Finlay's (2017) investigation into how Israeli spokespeople avoided responsibility for the high death toll of Palestinians in the 2014 Gaza war is of particular relevance to this research. Conducted in the Political Psychology field, Finlay's (2017) work uncovered the discursive strategies used to deny responsibility for the deaths, present events as conforming to International Humanitarian Law and, as a result, preserve Israel's citizens' sense of positive social identity and morality. Among these strategies are obscuring agency, sanitising language, and shifting blame.

Finlay's (2017) paper is relevant for this research for three main reasons: first, because some of the discursive strategies the author finds intersects with Dor's (2005) in meaningful ways, such as the tendency to present one's side as not at fault for the violence taking place and emphasising one's own victimhood. Second, because Finlay (2017) connects the discursive strategies being used by Israel's spokespeople to the need to preserve Israel's citizens' sense of positive social identity and morality, offering valuable insights for the analysis of results. And third, because unlike Dor (2005), who focuses on the relationship between blame and guilt he sees as mediated by intentionality,

Finlay (2017) privileges the more straightforward relationship between blame and responsibility.

Furthermore, put together, the works of Dor (2005) and Finlay (2017) shed light on how similar practices are used by both the government and the mainstream media, leading to a potential decline in the capacity of Israeli society to engage with the possibility of achieving peace. A claim supported by the fact that since the breakdown of the Oslo peace process in the year 2000 no other serious steps were taken to end the conflict. Dor (2005; 2006) argues that regardless of sensitive debates about historical justice, the fact remains that, right now, the Palestinians are under Israeli military occupation, making the latter responsible for finding a just and viable solution to end it. Yet, his argument continues, whilst there is a need to defend against an international "discourse of blame against Israel" (Dor, 2006, p. 285), Israeli society will not engage in discussions about Israel's responsibility for the end the occupation.

Although Dor (2005) and Finlay (2017) discuss the impact of guilt and responsibility-avoidance strategies employed by the media and the government on societal disengagement with a path towards peace, Finlay (2017) does not address the existence of a blame discourse against Israel. He explains the country's spokespeople's display of strategies to avoid responsibility for the deaths of Palestinians in the deadliest confrontation between Hamas and Israel up until this point, and the accentuation of Israel's own victimhood in this context, through the existence of a pervasive feeling of threat embedded in Israeli discourse and national identity, owing to the millenary persecution the Jews were subjected to, including the Holocaust and the opposition of Arab states to the Zionist goal of establishing a Jewish state in Palestine.

Blame avoidance in media discourse

In contrast to the lack of attention to blame avoidance strategies in media discourse, blame attribution has received more engagement. On a topic related to that of this research, Herfroy-Mischler and Friedman (2018) used newspapers from Israel and

other countries to analyse blame attribution after failed peace talks in Israel and Syria. They concluded that the use of virtue-based blame frames have greater impact for future relations between actors than blame frames that criticise the actions of political figures. This is an interesting because it alludes to the power that certain types of narratives have to hurt relations deeper, something similar to what Bandura (1999) proposes in terms of the psychic power of discourse (Yanay, 2012).

Friedman and Herfroy-Mischler (2020) also analysed Israeli, Palestinian and American media's framing of blame agency (who is blaming whom) in the context of failed peace negotiations. They conducted their investigation in light of the asymmetric relation of power between the negotiating parties, and the national context and type of newspaper (i.e., tabloid, broadsheet). The authors' findings reveal a typical blame game dynamic after failed peace talks, constructed around the 'Us versus Them' colours of ethnocentrism. Moreover, in the mediator's media, America, the adopted blame frames were favourable to Israel. Although the authors deal with blame frames, their paper addresses the centrality of agency to the attribution of blame, a focus this research also employs to understand which actor is represented as doing what and how that contributes to the construction of blame avoidance strategies.

The fact that media institutions contribute to the construction of public knowledge through agenda-setting (Le, 2010; McCombs & Shaw, 1972), news framing (Entman, 1993), and the opinion-forming potential of editorials (Van Dijk, 1992; 1995) has earned them the informal title of the fourth power. In this context, the use of blame avoidance in editorials gains renewed importance, especially in a nation in conflict, where it can have broader social consequences. Crucially, it diminishes people's capacity to empathise with the pain and the arguments of opponents, creating an atmosphere that does not push politicians and civil society to strive for peace (Shlaim, 2010; Dor, 2005; Finlay, 2017; Friedman & Herfroy-Mischler, 2020).

Ways of avoiding blame

Blame avoidance can happen through several discursive strategies depending on

the context (Hansson, 2015). Dor (2005) and Finlay (2017) address the accentuation of one's own victimhood and shifting responsibility by blaming the opposing side as particularly effective strategies to avoid blame. Although Finlay (2017) states that government representatives use these and other strategies to preserve citizens' sense of positive social identity and morality, and Dor (2005) proposes that media does it to reflect the sentiment of the public they cater to, both acknowledge its role in a discourse of blame avoidance. Dor (2005) also highlights the disqualification of the source of the blame as an additional powerful strategy for this purpose. All aforementioned strategies will be employed in the present study.

To detect these blame avoidance strategies, the issue of agency will be given special attention to because it is central in the attribution of causal responsibility, as seen from the problem definition property of editorials (Van Dijk, 1992; 1995). The actions agents carry out and undergo, and with what repercussions, are intrinsic parts of the issue-framing editorials offer. The ways of describing specific events and actors, and how certain characters are brought to light whilst others are left in the shadows are also elements that help to construct these discursive strategies (Dor, 2005; Finlay, 2017; Hansson, 2015; Herfroy-Mischler & Friedman, 2018; Friedman & Herfroy-Mischler, 2020). They were, therefore, also singled out for analysis.

In this chapter, the main concepts that guided the construction of the methodology and the discussion of the results were discussed. In the next chapter, the blame avoidance strategies mentioned here are fleshed out, and the codes that were used to identify their presence in the editorials selected for analysis are operationalized.

Chapter 3: Methods

This chapter is dedicated to the methodology employed in the present research. It starts by delving into the qualitative nature of the research approach and the data collection analysis method. Next, it unpacks the sampling strategy by engaging with the sampling and coding units. Finally, it addresses the data analysis method, namely discourse analysis. The final part of the chapter is dedicated to the operationalization of the concept-driven blame avoidance strategies selected from Dor (2005) and Finlay (2017), the presentation of adapted elements from Van Leeuwen's (1996) typology of representation of social actors, and the data-driven categories centred on the description of specific actors and events, which are employed to indicate the presence of the strategies in the editorials.

3.1 Research Approach

This research is positioned within the constructivist paradigm. It subscribes to the notion that there is no objective reality that can be independently apprehended, but a process of reality-construction where agent and structure play equally meaningful roles in shaping each other (Wendt, 1999). As such, it departs from the stance that the meaning of the social entities is not pre-given, but attributed through human action, which is, therefore, meaningful (Boeije, 2010).

This study is thus embedded in the qualitative approach and is concerned with the description of social phenomena, their characteristics and features, not with their quantification. It also aims to understand how a specific instance of reality was constructed, and the role of language is crucial to that pursuit. As method tends to follow paradigm (Boeije, 2010), this study employs a qualitative data collection method, namely qualitative content analysis to be discussed in the next section. The centrality of language for the investigation of the object is reflected in the method for data analysis, discourse analysis, addressed in the last section of this chapter.

3.2 Data collection

Qualitative content analysis is a technique used to analyse text that goes far beyond the manifest meaning looked for in quantitative textual analysis (Mayring, 2000). It is a systematic approach that facilitates the reduction and re-presentation of data, thereby allowing the researcher to construct a systematic account of a recorded phenomenon. By assigning segments of text to codes one connects the data to the theory, making it possible to organise and examine material in a defined research framework. Furthermore, coding latent content requires this research to engage with the social and cultural contexts embedded in the text, facilitating thus a more nuanced data analysis (Allen, 2017).

Importantly, qualitative content analysis supports the combination of deductive and inductive coding categories. As the object of analysis and the research question welcome data-driven categories and open the possibility of identifying other strategies of blame avoidance than the ones addressed in this chapter, content analysis is the most suitable data collection method for this study (Allen, 2017; Schreier, 2013). The coding software Atlas.ti was used to conduct the data collection process.

3.3 Sampling strategy

Sampling units

The Israeli newspapers *Haaretz* and *The Jerusalem Post* were selected as sampling units because they frequently addressed the 2018 and 2019 March of Return and the 2015 and 2016 Terror Wave. They represent opposing camps in the Israeli political landscape and both outlets have English versions available online. The Hebrew version of *Haaretz* was founded in 1918, thirty years prior to the foundation of the Israeli state, whilst the newspaper's English version was established in 1997. *Haaretz* is widely regarded as an elite newspaper, which caters to an educated and influential audience, as well as the foreign public and press (Gilboa, 2008; Madmoni-Gerber, 2009). It is

described as left leaning, and willing to give space to a broader spectrum of opinions, albeit not with equal prominence (Dor, 2005; Haas, 2009).

The Jerusalem Post was founded in 1932 under the name *Palestine Post* but changed it in 1950. It has always been published in English, and it has a print version and an online version that are somewhat different; this research uses the latter as a source. Not having a Hebrew version limits its popularity in Israel but it contributes to its circulation among the diaspora (BBC Monitoring, 2006; Gilboa, 2008). Ideologically, it is known as a right-wing newspaper since the late 1980s, with tough stances on security and the Palestinian territories (BBC Monitoring, 2006; Hass, 2009).

Because the sampling units are in diametrically opposing ideological camps, their content will presumably present two polar perspectives about the Terror Wave and the March of Return circulating in Israeli society. Therefore, choosing *Haaretz* and the *Jerusalem Post* as the sampling units gives this research access to how different narratives surrounding the events were discursively constructed, and how right and left-lining camps in Israeli society likely perceived them. Being able to capture the dissonance in these constructions, in turn, can help to clarify what needs to be bridged.

Coding units

This research's population is comprised of editorials, which is a type of media text that represents the opinion of newspapers as institutions. As such, they are not signed by a journalist and always appear in the same part of the newspaper, separated from the news. Because editorials are unbound by the journalistic ritual of objectivity, the editorial board is free to construct meanings about events to audiences through "overt and deliberate persuasive intentions" (Firmstone, 2019, p. 2). And to do so, strategies that bring values and beliefs to the fore are used (Fowler, 1991), leading editorials to serve persuasive and normative purposes, acting as a link between media and society through the use of intersubjective knowledge (Van Dijk, 1995; Van Gorp, 2007).

These very particular characteristics in a media text make the editorial an interesting object of analysis. Through them it is possible to apprehend how issues surrounding events were defined and evaluated, and how these understandings, in turn, reflect the social identity of the groups each news outlet caters to (Dor, 2005). Furthermore, although it is still debated whether editorials change behaviour, it is accepted that they have a certain influence in the making of public knowledge (Firmstone, 2019). As a consequence, because the Palestinian-Israeli conflict is tied to Israeli domestic politics (Shlaim, 2010), editorials will exert some level of influence in its future developments through the definitions, evaluations, and recommendations it introduces in the public sphere.

The 2015 and 2016 Terror Wave and the 2018 and 2019 March of Return were chosen due to their different nature: a series of lone-wolf terror attacks carried out by Palestinian assailants against Israeli civilians and law enforcement personnel, and overwhelmingly peaceful protests (UN, 2020) with a high toll of deaths and injuries. Their geographical scope is also relevant as it covers both Palestinian territories, Gaza and the West Bank. Together, the events' different nature and their all-encompassing scope have the potential to offer a multifaceted view of the issue of blame avoidance in Israeli media discourse. By choosing these events, the results cannot be explained away by its link to a particular section of Palestinian territory and its political situation, or to a specific type of act being perpetrated by Palestinian actors.

This research selected 40 editorials in total, 20 from *The Jerusalem Post* and 20 from *Haaretz*, ten dealing with the March of Return, and 10 with the Terror Wave from each news outlet. In the case of *Haaretz*, the newspaper published exactly 10 editorials that centrally addressed the March of Return. About the Terror Wave, however, 12 editorials were published and 10 were selected through random sampling, a process carried out through a random number table, where all texts published within the desired timeframe were assigned a number and chosen at random (Krippendorff, 2013).

In *The Jerusalem Post*, 16 editorials were published about the March of Return and 13 about the Terror Wave. The final 10 editorials about each event were also selected through random sampling in the same way the process was conducted to select *Haaretz's* editorials. The dates in which the editorials were published in each newspaper did not coincide, so they could not be analysed in pair as initially hoped, but this has not presented a hurdle for the analysis.

The editorials were retrieved through the newspapers' search engines, and all editorials that centrally addressed the events were retrieved for the later selection when applicable. In *Haaretz*, the editorials about the March of Return were published in between April 1, 2018 and March 29, 2019. During the Terror Wave, the editorials fell between October 4, 2015 and September 21, 2016. In the *Jerusalem Post*, the editorials about the March of Return were published in between April 1, 2018 and May 6, 2019. The ones about the Terror Wave appeared in between October 5, 2015 and 3, July 2016.

The words used to search for editorials concerning the March of Return in *Haaretz* were: March of Return, Gaza border protest, demonstration, protester, Gaza crisis, Gaza border unrest. In *The Jerusalem Post*, because the ideological stance of the newspaper was known, two extra terms were added for the same search: Gaza tension and violent protest. In the search for Terror Wave editorials, because the nature of the event was less disputed among media organisations, the words used in both search engines were the same: terror wave, stabbings, car-ramming, lone-wolf attacks, shooting attacks, knife attacks, third Intifada, limited Intifada.

3.4 Discourse Analysis

While there are many ways to make sense of data through a qualitative research approach, this study will employ Discourse Analysis (DA). It does so because DA carries within itself assumptions about the centrality of language in the construction of social reality. As a constructivist methodology, it allows the researcher to go beyond the investigation of reality as it is and engage with the question of how that reality was constructed and is maintained. An essential concern of DA is, therefore, how relations of

power structure, constrain, and produce systems of meaning (Herrera & Braumoeller, 2004). As such, in DA, discourses need to be contextualised, as they have no meaning detached from the social relations and structures where they originate and are reproduced (Hardy et al., 2004; Wendt, 1999).

DA is the best methodology to analyse my data, because it contributes to the understanding of how discourse helps to construct a reality that is often thought of as inevitably material, made of tanks, bullets, soldiers and tears. DA allows this research to uncover the ways language is used to produce and reproduce the systems of meanings that sustain action in the social world (Herrera & Braumoeller, 2004). And in doing so, it unveils language as a non-neutral medium that has the power to help maintain the adjective "intractable" in the description of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Additionally, DA provides the means to connect the meanings that lie beyond the surface of the text to structures and processes that go further than the editorial boards where the texts are created (Fairclough, 1989; Hardy et al., 2004).

Furthermore, the systematic aspect of qualitative content analysis allows this study to focus solely on the blame avoidance strategies present in the coding units, by iteratively assigning parts of the material to the meaningful categories of the coding frame. The blame avoidance strategies selected from the literature, the categories inspired by Van Leeuwen's (1996) typology, and the data-driven categories centred on the description of certain elements are presented and operationalized next.

The blame avoidance strategies

The literature points to three relevant blame avoidance strategies for this research. Dor's (2005) and Finlay's (2017) findings intersect as both authors address the accentuation of victimhood and the shifting of blame in their work. The accentuation of victimhood entails emphasizing the aspects of a situation that cast one's own side as the victim, whilst erasing or obscuring the aspects of the same situation that characterise it as an aggressor. Finlay (2007) exemplifies this strategy by demonstrating how Israeli

spokespeople addressed in great length Hamas' weapons whilst erasing Israel's weapons and attacks. Shifting blame, or counter-blaming, consists of placing all the blame on the adversary while overlooking one's own role in the situation, as Dor (2005) explains, the other side bears the guilt, as such, one cannot be to blame.

Dor (2005) also contributes to this study with the strategy of disqualifying the source of blame. Here, this strategy is expanded to mean the disqualification of a judging authority and also of the "Other", of actors that are perceived as opponents. Applying this strategy entails undermining them so that their judgements, claims, and actions are emptied of value. The empirical procedures proposed to unveil the presence of these strategies in the editorials are selected and domesticated elements from Van Leeuwen's (1996) typology for the representation of social actors, as well as the ways in which specific elements were described by the newspapers. As Van Leeuwen's (1996) framework was constructed to be applied to various types of texts, topic and object-relevant categories were selected to create a manageable and targeted coding frame.

Operationalization

The codes were created from Van Leeuwen's (1996) categories after an initial reading of the editorials. In this process, some of the typology's categories that had initially been selected, such as backgrounding and suppression, were dismissed and the codes were further developed. Although not present in Van Leeuwen's (1996) work, ways of describing specific actors and events also became a category after the initial reading, as it was observed that these depictions were instrumental in the construction of the strategies and could, therefore, help to indicate their presence. All three blame avoidance strategies were weaved through an amalgamation of codes, and the ways in which they combine to form each one will be addressed in the conclusion.

Representing social actors

Departing from the premise that language has potential, not a fixed meaning, and

that its use is informed by particular systems of beliefs, Van Leeuwen (1996) developed a framework for describing the ways in which social actors can be represented. These representations matter for this research because they have the power to rearrange social relations between the participants of an activity, and to individualise or collectivise actors in ways that humanize or background them. These representational resources are part of how editorialists constructed meanings about events for their audiences and, as such, they will invariably reflect understandings about blame for the developments being discussed. They are, thus, singled out for analysis.

Although Van Leeuwen (1996) uses this typology to engage with Critical Discourse Analysis, the present study understands that the categories the author proposes can, unproblematically, be used to conduct Discourse Analysis. While Van Leeuwen's (1996) framework gives this research tools to systematically interpret the texts and to identify how blame avoidance strategies were constructed, they do not require an engagement with the social analysis level. Furthermore, although Van Leeuwen also has a typology to analyse the representation of social actions, due to the time and space limitations this research focuses solely on social actors owing to its centrality to the attribution of causal blame (Hansson, 2015). The following subsections are dedicated to the definition the categories based on Van Leeuwen's work. The codebook can be found in Appendix A.

Activation

In Van Leeuwen's typology, social actors are allocated roles to play in the ways that they are represented, a resource that can potentially reposition the social relations among the participants in an action. According to Van Leeuwen (1996), representations can cast social actors in active or passive roles during an activity, and activation happens when social actors are construed as the active force in an action. For this research, because the editorials deal with the complexity of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and events that developed over an extended period of time, the understanding of "action" was

expanded. It included actors being active forces in an activity, but also in the outcome of a situation developed over time.

Van Leeuwen (1996) does not define codes for his categories, but for this study five codes were developed under "activation" to address the research problem. The codes are: "attacking", "defending themselves", "to be to blame", "ignoring", "inciting".

Passivation

According to Van Leeuwen (1996), passivation occurs when actors are represented as "undergoing" an activity or as being "at the receiving end of it" (Van Leeuwen, 1996, p. 44). Therefore, just as with activation, passivation can rearrange the social relations between actors in a given activity or situation. For this research, this category was broken down into three codes: "being under siege", "being condemned", and "being undermined".

Assimilation

In Van Leeuwen's (1996) typology, "assimilation" entails referring to a social actor as part of a group and not as an individual. To portray someone as part of a collective entity, amorphous and faceless, instead of as an individual with whom the reader might share similarities is a powerful tool for constructing the meaning of an event. Furthermore, as Finlay (2017) points out, addressing the instances when a group was victimised while backgrounding the same instances of another group helps to assert a group's victimhood. Van Leeuwen (1996) breaks this category further into ways of assimilating, such as in terms of a profession or identity markers commonly used, like religion, age, or ethnicity. Here, however, these further categorisations will not be taken into account. The assimilation of four actors was observed: Israeli and Palestinian victims, the Israeli government/army and the Palestinian governments/armed groups.

Individualisation

In Van Leeuwen's (1996) typology, individualisation refers to representing a social actor as an individual, and the details of how this individualisation is presented are taken into consideration. In the present study, however, the identity markers used to describe the individual do not matter, as long as this individual is represented as being detached from a group. Therefore, instances where a victim does not receive an identity markers, such as a name, age, or gender but is specifically addressed, for example through the way they died, it was also counted as an instance of individualisation. As this category is constructed in direct opposition to "individualisation", similar actors were observed: Israeli and Palestinian victims, and Palestinian and Israeli members of government or armed forces/armed groups.

Ways of describing

In addition to domesticated categories from Van Leeuwen's (1996) typology, the ways in which specific actors and events were described are also instrumental in the identification of the blame avoidance strategies addressed in this research. Because they help to construct these strategies, they can also reveal their presence. Moreover, ways of describing reveal assumptions underlining discourse in a straightforward manner, making it a rich source of material for DA. As Machin and Mayr, (2012) argue, lexical fields correspond to particular systems of beliefs and their implicit presence makes it possible to identify which elements they suppress or allude to. If an actor is depicted as a rioter instead of a demonstrator, for example, conclusions can be drawn about how legitimate the describer finds the actor's actions. Descriptions, thus, support the understandings being constructed elsewhere in the text.

After a initial reading of the editorials, the protesters of the March of Return and the attackers of the Terror Wave were the actors singled out for this category. They were chosen because the ways in which they were described helped to construct the discourse around their actions and, consequently, around the issue of blame. Repeatedly using

terms like "terrorist" over "attacker", for example, frames their actions in specific ways and helps to underscore the victimisation of one's group. Likewise, choosing "rioter" over "protester" will exempt one from the responsibility for violence against them, shifting the blame to the "rioters" themselves. Last but not least, certain characterisations of social actors will also work to disqualify them, as rioters and terrorists cannot have a claim on legitimacy.

The events singled out for this category are the events being analysed, the March of Return and the Terror Wave. They also form the analytical framework because the ways in which they were described helped to construct the discourse around each phenomenon and, consequently, the issue of blame for why and how they played out. Additionally, the description of the events also help to define the role social actors are allocated to play in them, thus contributing to the configuration of specific social relations among actors (Van Leeuwen, 1996). Describing a protest as a violent event, for example, delegitimizes its organisers' claims by presenting it as an event permeated by acts of aggression. In this light, participants will invariably be perpetrators.

During the coding process, all the ways in which the March of Return and its protesters, as well as the Terror Wave and its attackers were described were highlighted. Next, the most frequent ways of describing them were singled out. They are presented and discussed in the next chapter.

Table 1

Final table of codes

Activation	Passivation	Assimilation	Individualisation	Ways of describing
Israelis attacking	Israelis being condemned	Israeli victims	Israeli victims	Describing the March of Return
Palestinians attacking	Palestinians being condemned	Palestinian victims	Palestinian victims	Describing the March of Return protesters
Israelis defending themselves	Israelis being under siege	Israeli government/armed forces	Israeli members of government/armed forces	Describing the Terror Wave
Palestinians defending themselves	Palestinians being under siege	Palestinian government/armed groups	Palestinian members of government/armed groups	Describing the Terror Wave attackers
Israelis to be to blame	Israelis being undermined			
Palestinians to be to blame	Palestinians being undermined			
Israelis being intransigent				
Palestinians being intransigent				
Israelis inciting				
Palestinians inciting				

This chapter laid out the methodological framework of the present study. The next chapter presents the results of the coding process. For its elaboration, the editorials were selected for analysis and carefully read. After the first reading, new coding categories emerged whilst others were adjusted. Once the categories were clear and defined, the material was coded. After the elaboration of the results chapter, the conclusion and discussion followed. They are presented in the last chapter.

Chapter 4: Results

In this chapter, the results of the data analysis will be presented. The most dominant codes from each of the four categories will be discussed and illustrative quotes will be provided. The most frequent descriptions of the March of return, the protesters, the Terror Wave and its respective attackers will also be addressed.

Activation

Discourses around "activation" revolved mostly around "attacking", showing up in 39 coding units from a total of 40. It is noteworthy how the code frequency shows *Haaretz* and the *JP* as having practically opposing perspectives regarding which side of the conflict is the main aggressor.

In *Haaretz*, Israelis are depicted as attacking in 17 out of 20 editorials in quotes such as: "The authorities' vindictiveness against the families, by delaying the bodies' burial, is nothing but unnecessary abuse that is typical of every collective punishment" (*Haaretz*, 2016), or "The strategy of firing live ammunition at unarmed protesters has not changed and it seems like the IDF is determined to continue with this strategy" (*Haaretz*, 2018b). Meanwhile, Palestinians were depicted as attacking in 4 editorials from a total of 20, evidencing a discourse centred on Israeli aggression.

In the *JP*, there are no instances where Israelis are depicted as perpetrators. Palestinians, nevertheless, are represented as attackers in 18 of the 20 editorials analysed through quotes such as "Under the circumstances, Hamas decided that its easiest option was to launch a series of violent demonstrations against Israel" (*JP*, 2018a).

"Being intransigent" was the second most dominant code, present in 25 out of 40 editorials in total. Because both newspapers being analysed are Israeli, with its interlocutors being primarily the Israeli political establishment, the Israeli elite and the Jewish diaspora (Haas, 2009; Madmoni-Gerber, 2009), it was expected that this code

would appear more in relation to Israeli actors, especially in the establishment-critical, *Haaretz*. The results, nevertheless, show *Haaretz* depicting solely Israeli actors as being intransigent with mentions in 18 of the 20 editorials, with quotes such as ""The solution is not a military one," the military chief of staff repeatedly claims, but it doesn't seem anyone in the cabinet is listening to him" (*Haaretz*, 2018a), without ever classifying Palestinian actors as such. In the *JP* there is more balance. "Being intransigent" was present in 3 out of 20 editorials in relation to Israelis, and in 4 in 20 to represent Palestinian actors.

The problem is it's not backed up by an overarching strategy to keep Israelis safe. We've repeated the "quiet for quiet" formula for nearly a decade, and nothing has changed (*JP*, 2018b).

Hamas channels its limited resources into preparation for another failed war with Israel instead of investing in improving the lives of Gaza's citizens. The results of Hamas's intransigence are tragically evident (*JP*, 2018a).

This code revealed that the *JP*'s discourse centred on two sources of criticism against Israeli policies: the collective punishment of Palestinians in the West Bank because of the risk of violence it generates, and the cyclical violence it engages with in Gaza without achieving permanent solutions. In accordance with what other codes in the category suggest, for the rest, *JP* stands by the Israeli government's and denounces the actions of Palestinian actors, shielding Israeli actors of responsibility.

Table 2 presents the "activation" category codes, in order of dominance, with each number corresponding to one editorial where the code was present. *Haaretz* and *JP*'s columns are divided into two further columns; Palestinians and Israelis, to indicate in how many editorials the code appeared in relation to each actor and make it clearer how the news outlets represented each one.

Table 2

Activation

Code	<u><i>Jerusalem Post</i></u>		<u><i>Haaretz</i></u>	
	Palestinians	Israelis	Palestinians	Israelis
Attacking	18/20	0/20	4/20	17/20
Being intransigent	4/20	3/20	0/20	18/20
Bearing blame	11/20	0/20	3/20	9/20
Inciting	6/20	0/20	0/20	6/20
Defending themselves	0/20	10/20	0/20	1/20

Table 2 reveals other interesting insights. Previous literature (Dor, 2005; Zandber and Neiger, 2005) led to the assumption that *Haaretz* could remain on the fence regarding the condemnation of the Israeli government in situations of violence with Palestinians, but this was not observed in the analysis. *Haaretz* depicts Israelis bearing blame in 9 out of 20 editorials and Palestinians only in 3 out of 20. The following quote is an example of how *Haaretz* portrayed Israel as the active force in the creation of the current situation in Gaza and the outbreak of violence:

The reason for these protests is well known. As predicted by the army and the security agencies, the harsh conditions in which 2 million Gazans live under an Israeli closure amid a diplomatic solution nowhere in sight have prepared the ground for a mass eruption in which tens of thousands of people took part, people who've lost all hope for a better future (*Haaretz*, 2018b).

Conversely, *JP's* discourse emphasised Palestinian culpability. "Bearing blame" in relation to Palestinian actors was identified in 11 out of 20 editorials, whilst Israeli actors were completely exempt, with no depictions of them as blameworthy. This trend is captured in the following quote:

There should be absolutely no doubt or wavering from the fact that Hamas, as the theocratic, authoritarian governing body in Gaza, is responsible for the violence against Israeli soldiers and civilians and the grievous conditions in which Gazans live (*JP*, 2018c).

Although "inciting" and "defending themselves" are the least dominant codes, they present valuable insights due to their distribution across newspapers and actors. The code "inciting" shows that *Haaretz* and the *JP* have diametrically opposing views regarding the issue. *JP* presents Palestinians in 6 out of 20 editorials as the only active force in an incitement that is pervasive, and often the cause of the outbreak or continuation of violence:

It may be convenient to place the blame for the current state of affairs on all Palestinians, and especially their leaders, and there's no shortage of issues that must be put on their shoulders – from continued incitement in statements by Palestinian leaders like PA President Mahmoud Abbas (with his offensive "filthy Jewish feet" on the Temple Mount comment) to more organizational incitement via textbooks and media that raises generations of Palestinians to view Israelis as sub-human usurpers (*JP*, 2015a).

Haaretz, however, depicts Israeli actors as the only inciters of violence, also in 6 out of 20 editorials. Israel's policies in Gaza and the West Bank, as well as the violence against the March of Return protesters, are depicted as the main sources of incitement. Interestingly, although *JP* also criticizes the policies that amount to collective punishment in the West Bank, which it portrayed as counterproductive for Israel's security, it does not address it as a possible source of incitement. The following quote illustrate *Haaretz* portrayal of Israeli incitement:

The reality of their lives includes every element of "incitement" possible. These range from the procedures at the checkpoints, the frequent arrests, the controls imposed on their exit from and entry to their hometowns and extends all the way to the extinction of any chance for diplomatic negotiation (*Haaretz*, 2015).

Accordingly, the *JP* represents Israeli actors defending themselves in half of the editorials, while *Haaretz* does it in one out of 20. In the *JP* and in *Haaretz* Palestinians are not depicted as defending themselves. In addition to ideology, perhaps the nature of the events analysed, a terror wave comprised of lone-wolf attacks and a series of marches, played a role in the absence of this code regarding Palestinian actors.

Passivation

In this category, the newspapers discourse centred on the code "Being condemned". It is an interesting code because *Haaretz* and the *JP* mean different things when they depict Israeli actors being condemned. In *Haaretz*, where the code showed up in 1 out of 20 editorials for Palestinians and in all 20 for Israelis, the condemnation Israeli actors face stems mainly from the newspaper itself, which consistently disagrees with the government's policies for Palestinians.

Such proposals sound like a fantasy in the era of an extreme right-wing government drunk on its "victory" over the Palestinians that tries to solve every problem by military means (*Haaretz*, 2018b).

In *JP*'s editorials, where the code was present in 13 out of 20 editorials for Palestinians and 9 in 20 for Israelis, although there was some criticism of the Israeli government by the newspaper, in the vast majority of times the newspaper depicted Israeli actors being unfairly condemned by other actors, as in the following example: "Inexplicably, the ICC and its legal bureaucrats throw legal formalism by the wayside in the name of the higher goal of bashing Israel" (*JP*, 2018d).

This way of depicting Israel as being unfairly condemned by external actors, such as the global public opinion or International Organizations, agrees with what Dor (2005) sees as a "discourse of blame against Israel" (Dor, 2006, p. 285), against which Dor (2005) proposes Israeli media is too busy with to engage in meaningful discussion about

Israel's responsibility for the end the occupation. Its lack of mention in *Haaretz*, however, invites questions about the nature of this charge.

The "passivation" codes are presented in Table 3, in order of dominance, with each number corresponding to one editorial the code was present in.

Table 3
Passivation

Code	<i>Jerusalem Post</i>		<i>Haaretz</i>	
	Palestinian	Israelis	Palestinians	Israelis
Being condemned	13/20	9/20	1/20	20/20
Being under siege	5/20	14/20	9/20	6/20
Being undermined	0/20	7/20	0/20	0/20

The remainder of table 3 also provides interesting insights. Whilst both *Haaretz* and the *JP* depicted Palestinians as "being under siege", they usually meant different things by it. *Haaretz*, where the code was present in 9 out of 20 editorials for Palestinians, usually meant a siege Israel is imposing on Gaza:

Israel bears responsibility, although not exclusively, for the Gazan disaster. The 2005 withdrawal did not absolve Israel of its responsibility, certainly so long as it suffocates Gaza with a blockade (*Haaretz*, 2018c).

The *JP*, where the code showed up in 5 from 20 editorials in relation to Palestinian actors, it meant a siege Hamas imposes on Gaza, "Hamas holds its people hostage and as prisoners. The people of Gaza are not free" (*JP*, 2018d). When depicting Israeli actors under siege, both newspapers referred to the cyclical violence and threat of

violence. Nevertheless, this idea was present in *Haaretz* in 6 in 20 for Israelis, less than half of the times it showed up in the *JP* for Israelis, in 14 from 20 coding units.

Furthermore, although "being undermined" is not a dominant code, it is noteworthy that it only appears in the representation of Israeli actors by the *JP*, in reference to the Israeli state being purposefully undermined as illustrated by the quotes: "Meanwhile, the ICC finds ways to single out Israel for investigation and criticism" (*JP*, 2018d), and

Hamas is using the demonstrations to undermine and delegitimize Israel. It doesn't want its people to have hope for a better future. It prefers they be shot and killed by Israelis (*JP*, 2018a).

This element of *JP's* discourse interacts with the one represented by the code "defending themselves", and reveals a specific image being created by *JP's* editorial board, one in which Israel is portrayed as the victim of attacks. This victimization also gains the contour of anti-Semitism through the pen of *JP's* editorial board:

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's response confronted Ban [Ki-moon] with what is finally becoming acknowledged as the fundamental truth of the Arab-Israeli conflict: The violence is the result of the hatred of Jews, rather than a response to alienation and despair due to years of failure to reach a peace settlement (*JP*, 2016a).

In a context where Palestinians have "success at winning what appears to be the entire galaxy to its cause in defiance of all logic and truth" (*JP*, 2015b), there is no room for Palestinians to be undermined too. In *Haaretz*, neither actor was depicted as being undermined. In it, Israelis are not undermined but they are condemned, a trend that supports their narrative of blame attribution to Israel. In the case of Palestinian actors, *Haaretz* focus is on denouncing the consequences of the Israeli policies and military engagements, particularly its human cost. It does not address the subtler game of image and standing.

Assimilation

In this category, the most frequent code was the Israeli government/army and the Palestinian governments/armed groups. The former was mentioned in 18 from 20 editorials in the *JP* against 17 in 20 in *Haaretz*. The former appeared in 17 out of 20 editorials in the *JP* against 11 in 20 of *Haaretz*.

As expected from the literature (Firmstone, 2019), the number of mentions of the Israeli government and army were high in both newspapers. After all, the interlocutors of the editorials were Israelis in general, and the political establishment in particular. Therefore, the definition of issues and subsequent recommendations will invariably include the domestic government and armed forces. It is interesting, however, to observe the difference in frequency with which the Palestinian government or armed groups showed up in each newspaper. In the *JP*, it appeared in as many coding units as the Israeli government or army was present in *Haaretz* editorials, in 17 from 20 editorials. This number suggests that they are a central character in the *JP*'s definition of problems, and that they are less so in *Haaretz*, which mentions it in 11 from a total of 20 editorials.

This category gives interesting information regarding the discourse of each newspaper around Israeli and Palestinian victims. In *Haaretz*, although Palestinian victims were assimilated in half of the editorials, 10, more than any other victim in any newspaper, this could be attributed to the extremely high numbers of victims. Yet, the newspaper tried at times to give more context to these victims, either by qualifying them further, "nine unarmed protests were killed" (*Haaretz*, 2018d), or by using precise numbers, which seem to be saying that every single one counts, "15 people have been killed and 758 wounded" (*Haaretz*, 2018c).

In the *JP*, assimilated Palestinian victims were present in 2 editorials out of 20 and in one of the quotes the newspaper squarely rejects responsibility for them: "More than 200 Palestinians have been killed and thousands injured, all sacrificed so Hamas can save face for more than a decade of failures in Gaza" (*JP*, 2018e). The assimilation of

Palestinian victims by the *JP* in only two editorials gains more meaning when it is combined with the information that these are the only times Palestinian victims were mentioned in the 20 *JP* editorials, as will be seen in the discussion of the next category.

The assimilation of victims also highlights the different focus presented by *Haaretz* and the *JP*. Whilst *Haaretz* brings to the fore the human cost of the policies and attacks it denounces, *JP* foregrounds Palestinian victims. In the *JP*, Palestinians are victims only when it is at the hand of " the theocratic, authoritarian governing body in Gaza" (*JP*, 2018c).

Table 4 presents the codes in the "assimilation" category, with each number corresponding to one coding unit the code was present in.

Table 4

Assimilation

Code	<i>Jerusalem Post</i>		<i>Haaretz</i>	
	Palestinians	Israelis	Palestinians	Israelis
Victims	2	4	10	1
Government or the army	17	18	11	17

Individualisation

In this category, whilst the individualisation of government or armed forces/militias members does not bring revealing insights, the individualisation of victims does. The numbers observed in this code support the assumptions presented in the discussion of the assimilation code. *Haaretz* and *JP* present different focuses, with *Haaretz* equally individualising Israeli and Palestinian victims, each in 5 out of 20 editorials, and the *JP* refraining representing Palestinian victims as individuals.

Although most of the Palestinian victims individualised by *Haaretz* were children, the newspaper highlighted the death of a journalist: "Among those killed last weekend, the second in the series of "Marches of Return," was a journalist who lived in Gaza, Yaser Murtaja, 30" (*Haaretz*, 2018d). In the *JP*, Israeli victims were usually represented in terms of their personal relations or the context surrounding their deaths.

The 16-year-old Palestinian who stabbed to death Dafna Meir in Otniel as she valiantly prevented him from entering her home to murder her daughter was from Beit Amra, also in the Hebron area (*JP*, 2016b).

Table 5

Individualisation

Code	<i>Jerusalem Post</i>		<i>Haaretz</i>	
	Palestinians	Israelis	Palestinians	Israelis
Victims	0/20	6/20	5/20	5/20
Members of government or armed forces/armed groups	6/20	11/20	4/20	17/20

Descriptions

In this section, the most frequent ways of describing the March of Return, its protesters, the Terror Wave and its respective attackers are presented. The descriptions supported the construction of the blame avoidance strategies, and helped to capture the underlying assumptions of the discourse of each newspaper.

The most frequent way *JP* used to describe the March of Return was as a violent event, appearing in 3 out of 10 editorials, followed by a protest or a demonstration in 2 out of 10. Describing the March of Return through the language of violence underscored

JP's discourse of victimisation, and aided its delegitimation of accusations of undue violence against Palestinian protesters perpetrated by Israeli defence forces.

Going in the opposite direction, *Haaretz*'s descriptions of the March reveal the legitimisation of the event as a protest. "Demonstration" or "protest" was the most frequent way of describing it, showing up in 7 of the 10 editorials, followed by the name given to it by the organisers, appearing in 6 out of 10. Interestingly, the March is specifically described as a non-violent in 2 in 10 editorials, an assertion made in connection to the condemnation of the high number of deaths and injuries among protesters. Table 6 shows the descriptions of the March.

Table 6

Descriptions of the March of Return

Codes	<i>Jerusalem Post</i>	<i>Haaretz</i>
Protest or demonstration	2/10	7/10
A non-violent event	0/10	2/10
A violent event	3/10	0/10
March of Return	2/10	6/10

The insights drawn from the descriptions of the March also emerge from the descriptions of protesters. *Haaretz* used the more neutral "protesters" or "demonstrators", denominations accompanied by the adjective "unarmed" in all 6 of the 10 editorials where they were mentioned. The *JP* opted for the terms "terrorists" or "rioters", which allude to aggression and disruption, in all 3 of the 10 editorials where protesters were mentioned. In the context of overwhelmingly peaceful protests where only a small number of people committed acts of aggression (UN, 2020), these terminologies and their implicit lexical field (Machin & Mayr, 2012) are instrumentalised to disqualify all demonstrators and support the image of a Israel under siege in need to defend itself, despite the imbalance of forces.

As protestors were present in 3 out of 10 editorials in the *JP*, and individualised Palestinian victims were absent from it altogether, with assimilated Palestinian victims showing up in 2 out of 20, it can be inferred that Palestinians as subjects were minimised in *JP*'s discourse. The same cannot be said about *Haaretz*'s discourse. Palestinians were constantly featured in it and the human cost of what they described as excessive Israeli force was placed front and centre. Table 7 shows the descriptions of the protesters.

Table 7

Descriptions of the March of Return protesters

Codes	<i>Jerusalem Post</i>	<i>Haaretz</i>
Demonstrators or protesters	0/10	6/10
Terrorists or rioters	3/10	0/10

The descriptions of the Terror Wave were less disparate among newspapers, because the event was widely accepted as such by the Israeli media. The contours of the event were clear-cut, lone-wolf attacks against Israeli civilians and security personnel, and thus less susceptible to discursive manoeuvres. Table 8 shows the descriptions of the Terror Wave.

Table 8

Descriptions of the Terror Wave

Codes	<i>Jerusalem Post</i>	<i>Haaretz</i>
Terrorist attacks, wave of terror, wave of violence	4/10	6/10
Gruesome, inhumane, savage, murderous attacks	3/10	2/10

The ways of describing the attackers, however, was more revealing. Although both news outlets understood the event as a wave of terror attacks, *Haaretz* described an attacker as a "terrorist" only once, while the *JP* used the term in 4 out of 10 editorials. Moreover, in the *JP*, the attackers of the Terror Wave appear in 5 of the 10 editorials, the

same number of times Palestinian victims and march of Return protesters appeared in its 20 editorials combined. This presence reaffirms the newspaper's accentuation of Israel's victimhood, as it highlights the instances where it suffers aggressions whilst concomitantly backgrounding the instances where it acts as the aggressor (Finlay, 2017). It also indicates that as perpetrators of acts of terror Palestinians have more space as subjects in *JP's* discourse. Table 9 presents the descriptions of the attackers.

Table 9
Descriptions of the Terror Wave attackers

Codes	<i>Jerusalem Post</i>	<i>Haaretz</i>
Attackers	1/10	2/10
Terrorists	4/10	1/10

In this chapter the results of the analysis were presented. In the following chapter, the ways in which the codes combine to form the blame avoidance strategies are addressed. The ensuing discussion presents additional insights into the topic, as well as the research's relevance, its limitations and future possibilities.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

This research set out to answer what forms of blame avoidance strategy took place in the editorials published by *Haaretz* and the *Jerusalem Post* during the 2018 and 2019 March of Return and the 2015 and 2016 Terror Wave. The results show that all three blame avoidance strategies selected from previous literature were present in the *JP* editorials and none of them were present in *Haaretz's*. This was expected, to some extent, due to the ideological affinity of each newspaper, nevertheless, it was surprising to observe their total absence in *Haaretz* and also the extent to which they framed *JP's* narratives about the events. The nuances of the findings and how combinations of the codes revealed each strategy are discussed next.

Although *Haaretz* is considered an establishment-critical newspaper, the literature showed that dissent in the Israeli media can be a complicated matter due to the particularities of how the Israeli national consciousness was forged (Sharoni, 2000). Dor (2005) and Zandber and Neiger (2005) addressed instances where *Haaretz* was torn between its journalistic ethos and the national impulse of solidarity and, as a result, compromised either its coverage or its relationship with their audience. In the present analysis, however, there were no signs of hesitation as a very clear image emerged. *Haaretz's* editorial board unequivocally placed the majority of the blame for the outbreaks of violence during the 2018 and 2019 March of Return and the 2015 and 2016 Terror Wave, as well as for the situation in Gaza and the West Bank, on the Israeli government.

Haaretz did partially credit Hamas for the hardships of the Gaza population. These instances of blame attribution however, came hand in hand with outcry over the 14 years-long Israeli-imposed economic blockade on the Strip and the killing and maiming of demonstrators in the March of Return by the Israeli army. Even during the Terror Wave, when Palestinian assailants were randomly targeting Israelis, the culpability of the Israeli government for creating the frustration that lead to the outbreak of the attacks was omnipresent. When discussing developments during the Terror Wave in Hebron for

example, a Palestinian city in the West Bank where fundamentalist settlers and Palestinians live under intense friction, Haaretz wrote an editorial called "Hebron settlement's contribution to Terrorism". This was not an isolated incident; other editorials where the causal relationship was laid bare were also published.

The absence of blame avoidance strategies on *Haaretz's* editorials raise questions about the approach adopted on these issues in other areas of the newspaper. In Dor's (2005) research, the texts of a correspondent embedded in Palestinian territory during the coverage of a controversial military operation painted a different picture than the one presented through the editorial choices, with the editors relegating her work to a less prominent space of the print version. Would *Haaretz's* hard news reflect the findings of the analysis conducted in their editorials? These and other limitations of the research will be addressed in the discussion. Next, the ways in which the codes combined to form the blame avoidance strategies in *JP's* texts is addressed.

The accentuation of victimhood

The accentuation of Israel's victimhood was neatly weaved throughout *JP's* editorials. The construction of this strategy relied heavily on the process of giving salience to certain aspects of reality while omitting others, intrinsic to framing (Entman, 1993) and to how editorials shape issues. Palestinians as subjects were given significantly more space as the perpetrators of terror attacks than at any other capacity. Palestinian victims were mentioned scarcely, always in passing and assimilated form. Israeli victims, however, were more present and often individualised, with their deaths portrayed in vivid colours.

In line with the accentuation of Israel's victimhood, Palestinians were represented as the exclusive perpetrators and inciters, whilst Israeli actors were depicted as defending themselves and being subjected to cyclical violence or threat of violence at the hand of Palestinians. Allocating each actor to play these specific roles positioned their social relations in the conflict in specific ways (Van Leeuwen, 1996), and in doing so, created

certain understandings about who is the perpetrator and who is the victim. This version of the events was supported by the omission of the military occupation and the unbalance of force between both parties, which muted any potential contradiction regarding these roles.

The terminology *JP* chose to describe actors and events was also instrumental in the construction of this strategy, as they presuppose aggression. In their texts, the March of Return was depicted as a violent event carried out by "terrorists" or "rioters", terms that emphasize Israel's condition of attacked. As one cannot be blamed for defending themselves against acts of violence, these terms also establish Israel's lack of responsibility for the deaths of protesters. In the Terror Wave, this type of terminology was expected and observed in both newspapers. Nevertheless, *JP*'s consistent use of the term "terrorist" for designating an attacker was combined with *JP*'s placement of Israel in the broader fight against radical Islam. Shedding this light in these events has a twofold effect. It entrenches Israel further in a globally recognisable victim role, and erases the underlining causes of Palestinian violence together with any potential culpability for them.

The accentuation of victimhood has yet another layer in the *JP*. Giving materiality to Dor's (2005) perceived discourse of blame against Israel, the *JP* denounces what they see as an international smear campaign against their country. Their editorial board calls out instances where it perceives Israel is being deliberately undermined; giving an ideational dimension to the types attacks being carried out against the country. However, not finding any indication of a discourse of blame against Israel in *Haaretz*'s editorials raises questions. Did *Haaretz* not address it because it did not recognise its existence or because it did not feel it is undue? *Haaretz*'s framing of events suggests the second hypothesis is more likely.

Shifting blame

The strategy of shifting blame is interesting because unlike the accentuation of victimhood, shifting blame does not entail erasing acts of violence committed by one's own side. It does entail, however, eschewing blame for them by rendering the opponent fully responsible for these actions. This strategy was extensively present in *JP's* editorials, sometimes blatantly so. For example, an editorial called " Hamas is to blame " was published on July 2018, after 212 deaths and 16,011 injuries of Palestinians in the March of Return had already occurred (UN, 2020). In that and other instances, *JP* overtly declared either Hamas, or the Palestinian Authority, or its leader, Mahmoud Abbas, personally to blame for the outbreak of violence. Palestinian civilians were also deemed blameworthy because of what *JP* denounced as a culture of incitement, whilst Israeli actors were fully exempt of responsibilities, albeit some criticism of certain policies and politicians' behaviours.

In addition to overt moves, this strategy was also constructed through subtler discursive resources. Perhaps alluding to the mind-set that led Israelis to name their army "The Israel Defence Forces", Israelis were never depicted as aggressors in *JP's* texts. They retaliated and responded, which configures self-defence and a justifiable reason to use force. Unlike in *Haaretz*, considerations over proportionality were absent from the editorials. The findings about terminology used by the *JP* addressed in the previous subsection are also relevant for this strategy, as they reinforce the idea of aggression and self-defence.

Furthermore, when it came to Gaza, the culprit was unequivocally Hamas. The governing body was ostensibly mentioned in the editorials, making it a crucial character in *JP's* problem definition and evaluation. When the issues were in the West Bank, although Abbas was harshly criticized, there was some room to recognise the Israeli government's intransigence and the role of their strict policies in the Palestinian's frustration with the lack of economic growth and freedom of movement. These policies

were not, however, depicted as incitement as they were in *Haaretz*. They were mainly discussed in the context of the violence they can generate against Israeli citizens.

The idea that Israel is under siege is another pillar of this strategy. Although violence in the region is cyclical and perpetrated by actors in both sides of the conflict, Israel is the occupying power and has the military might. Yet, there are no direct mentions of the occupation or the settlements in *JP*. Even whilst addressing events that transpired in the settlements, such as the murders of settlers in Hebron by Palestinians, the fact that the events happened in colonies and to settlers was omitted. In Gaza, although there are no boots or settlers on the ground, Israel controls everything that enters and leaves the Strip. However, in *JP*, Hamas is depicted as the sole responsible for the hardships of the civilians who must live under the blockade. Moreover, collective punishment in Gaza was not presented as an issue like it was in the West Bank.

Once these dimensions of the conflict are excluded of how problems are defined and evaluated, the path to attribution of blame becomes unobstructed. Interestingly, *JP* recognises the discourse of blame against Israel, which Dor (2005; 2006) argues precludes the Israeli media, and consequently the Israeli society, of engaging in a debate about its responsibility for the end of the occupation. It is tantalizing to think that this part of Dor's (2005) argument could have been at play in the newspaper's disengagement with the occupation. However, a less interested observer might wonder if it is not actually Dor's (2005) understanding of bias that was at work, the normalisation of settlements as part of Israel in the discourse of a right-wing newspaper that writes to a settlement-supporting diaspora.

Disqualifying the source of blame

This is a strategy that comes in tandem with the notion that there is a discourse of blame against Israel, that the global opinion is against it, and that there is a need to defend the country in the face of it. The disqualification of the source of blame was achieved in the *JP* through different discursive resources, and the ways of describing

perceived opponents was one of them. As previously discussed, if one's adversary is characterised as a "terrorist" or a "rioter" any claims of legitimacy their actions or goals might have become void. They are instantly cast in the bad guys role, and engagement with the root causes of their actions can quickly be made to seem beside the point. Similar results are achieved by consistently allocating Palestinians to the roles of attackers and inciters.

Another way to disqualify captured in the analysis was by pointing out how one is purposefully being undermined. In a move that evokes Dor's (2005) understanding of the role of bias and Finlay's (2017) desire to preserve a sense of positive social identity and morality, *JP* fends off further criticism for the killing and maiming of protesters by accusing Hamas of using them to undermine Israel. Criticism from the International Crime Court's members was overtly deemed compliance to Hamas, whereas the disapproval expressed by then UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon during the Terror Wave was classified as justification of terrorism, as stated in an editorial's title verbatim. The reasoning behind this blame avoidance strategy is that if the claims against Israel are only a deliberate campaign to undermine it, there is no point in engaging with their substance.

The manner in which the *JP* chose to rebuff the criticisms of Israel's conduct can be understood in light of Finlay's (2017) and Sharoni's (2000) complementary considerations about the pervasive feeling of threat in Israeli discourse, and the Israeli-Jewish collectivity's readiness to rally around the dominant assumptions of Israeli collective identity when facing a perceived threat. The sense of egregious injustice in *JP*'s arguments, and the unavailability to reasonably engage with the challenges posed by the international community, are signs of the textual materialisation of a discourse of persecution and imminent danger that seems out of place in the contemporary reality and standing of Israel.

Discussion

This research's findings contribute to the understanding of how blame avoidance strategies play out in media discourse. Whilst government and business spin-doctors are well known, there is room to shed more light on these practices in the media. Editorials offer a trove of material for this purpose due to their discursive structure and inherent subjectivity (Van Dijk 1992; 1995). By revealing how blame avoidance was discursively constructed, this study laid bare part of the mechanisms through which media outlets introduce understandings in public discourse as morally acceptable and actions as reflective of the community's interest (Malle et al., 2014). To this assertion, however, one significant caveat must be made: the communities that likely accepted the editorial board's views as their societally shared interpretation of events are those that already share a sense of social identity with the news outlets (Baden & David, 2017; Entman, 1993).

Different authors mobilised in this research proposed different ideas regarding the issue of victimhood in the Israeli-Jewish discourse, and whether it could explain the disengagement with the responsibility to find a just solution for the end of the occupation. Whilst the analysis here conducted does not allow one to definitely weigh in on this issue, it does allow for the presentation of an insight. Dor's (2005) proposed discourse of blame against Israel is not addressed, or even hinted at, in *Haaretz* but is rather frequently discussed in *JP*, where extreme claims were made to avoid engaging with criticisms. Thus, one must wonder if it is not the sense of threat that accompanies the perception of such a discourse that is preventing a confrontation with the material reality of the conflict, rather than the actual existence of said discourse.

The lack of blame avoidances strategies in *Haaretz*, although revealing, also represented a limitation. It impeded the comparative analysis this research planned to engage in, even if it raised interesting points for future investigations. The construction of a methodology with blame-attribution frames in combination with blame avoidance strategies, could be more appropriate to reveal the different ways that news outlets with

competing ideological stances deal with the issue of blame. Trying to grasp a newspaper's approach to the issue of blame throughout its content by analysing opinion pieces and hard news also offers an interesting avenue for future research.

The Palestinian-Israeli conflict is a protracted source of instability in the region. With the peace process moribund for over two decades, a resolution seems increasingly out of reach. When this research was being written, yet another spat of violence between Hamas and Israel took place claiming 12 lives in Israel, including one child, and 248 lives in Gaza, including 66 children (Rabah Sulaiman, 2021). Whilst analysing the use of blame avoidance strategies in Israeli editorials does not yield recommendations for the conflict's resolution, it sheds light on Israel's engagement with its share of responsibility for its end as the occupying power. It is hoped that more clarity about this complex relationship can help to spark the honest discussions these very strategies enable society to keep away from.

Moreover, the use of blame avoidance strategies by the media of a nation embroiled in conflict is not limited to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. As Bandura's (1999) theory of moral disengagement show, the discursive strategies that activate the psychosocial manoeuvres capable of making otherwise objectionable actions morally sanctioned behaviour are a pervasive resource in conflicts everywhere. The media, in its capacity of influential gatekeepers of the public sphere, can obstruct public debates, delegitimise actors, and impede the reconciliation of opposing narratives at the cost of peace. As such, comprehending how and why news outlets make use of blame avoidance strategies in conflict situations can perhaps nudge the debate towards a post-blame paradigm, where the debate centres on the shared responsibility for finding peace.

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Appendix A

ATLAS.ti Report: Codes

- **Describing the March of Return protesters**

Comment:

Apply when the protesters of the March of Return are described in the most frequent ways captured in the editorials: demonstrators and protesters, or terrorists and rioters

- **Describing the March of Return**

Comment:

Apply when the March of Return is described in the most frequent ways captured in the editorials: a protest or a demonstration, a non-violent event, a violent event, March of Return, or The Great March of Return.

- **Describing the Terror Wave**

Comment:

Apply when the Terror Wave is described in the most frequent ways captured in the editorials: Terrorist attacks, wave of terror, wave of violence or gruesome, inhumane, savage, murderous attacks

- **Describing the terror Wave attackers**

Comment:

Apply when the attackers of the Terror Wave are described in the most frequent ways captured in the editorials: attackers or terrorists

- **Israeli government or army / (ASSIMILATION)**

Comment:

Use every time the Israeli government or army is mentioned.

- **Israeli members of government/armed forces (INDIVIDUALISATION)**

Comment:

Use every time a member of the Israeli government or armed forces is mentioned by name.

- **Israeli victims (ASSIMILATION)**

Comment:

Use when Israeli victims are referred to as part of a group and not as an individual.

- **Israeli victims (INDIVIDUALISATION)**

Comment:

Use when Israeli victims are referred to as an individual.

- **Israelis attacking**

Comment:

Apply when an Israeli actor is depicted physically attacking, such as in a military or a terrorist attack, or when policies towards Palestinians being depicted as unfair are enacted, such as those that result in collective punishment. Thus, when members of the government are only discussing policies represented as unfair by the editorial board, it is not labeled as "attacking".

- **Israelis Being condemned**

Comment:

Apply to code instances when Israeli actors are being condemned either by the editorial board or an external actor because of their views or actions towards Palestinians.

- **Israelis being intransigent**

Comment:

Apply when Israeli actors are portrayed behaving as if they were in denial about a situation, where their chosen course of action is continuously failing to provide better results. Use also to code instances where members of the government are depicted ignoring reports or advice from other government members or government institutions, such as the army.

- **Israelis Being under siege**

Comment:

Apply when an Israeli actor is described as being in the grip of a power they did not want to be controlled by, or when actors are subjected to cyclical violence or the threat of violence.

- **Israelis being undermined**

Comment:

Apply when Israeli actors are depicted as being delegitimised through the intentional actions of others, be those of Palestinians or of an external actor.

- **Israelis defending themselves**

Comment:

Apply to indicate when an Israeli actor is depicted as engaging in retaliatory acts of violence, such as shooting back, responding, killing an assailant, fighting for survival, or also when an actor is described as guarding a section of their territory against physical aggression.

- **Israelis inciting**

Comment:

Apply to code the instances where an Israeli actor is portrayed inciting violence against Palestinians.

- **Palestinian government/armed groups (ASSIMILATION)**

Comment:

Use every time a Palestinian government or armed group is mentioned.

- **Palestinian members of government/armed groups (INDIVIDUALISATION)**

Comment:

Use every time a member of a Palestinian government or armed group is mentioned by name.

- **Palestinian victims (ASSIMILATION)**

Comment:

Use when Palestinian victims are referred to as part of a group and not as an individual.

- **Palestinian victims (INDIVIDUALISATION)**

Comment:

Use when Palestinian victims are referred to as an individual.

- **Palestinians attacking**

Comment:

Apply when a Palestinian actor is depicted physically attacking, such as in a military or a terrorist attack, or when policies towards Israelis being depicted as unfair are enacted. Thus, when members of the government are only discussing policies represented as unfair by the editorial board, it is not labelled as "attacking".

- **Palestinians being condemned**

Comment:

Apply to code instances when Palestinian actors are being condemned either by the editorial board or an external actor because of their views or actions towards Israelis.

- **Palestinians being intransigent**

Comment:

Apply when Palestinian actors are portrayed behaving as if they were in denial about a situation, where their chosen course of action is continuously failing to provide better results. Use also to code instances where members of the government are depicted ignoring reports or advice from other government members or government institutions, such as the army.

- **Palestinians being under siege**

Comment:

Apply when a Palestinian actor is described as being in the grip of a power they did not want to be controlled by, or when actors are subjected to cyclical violence or the threat of violence.

- **Palestinians being undermined**

Comment:

Apply when Palestinian actors are depicted as being delegitimised through the intentional actions of others, be those of Israelis or of an external actor.

- **Palestinians defending themselves**

Comment:

Apply to indicate when a Palestinian actor is depicted as engaging in retaliatory acts of violence, such as shooting back, responding, killing an assailant, fighting for survival, or also when an actor is described guarding a section of their territory against physical aggression.

- **Palestinians Inciting**

Comment:

Apply to code the instances where a Palestinian actor is portrayed inciting violence against Israelis.

- **To be to blame / Israelis**

Comment:

Apply where an Israeli actor is directly deemed responsible for the outbreak of violence or the general situation in Gaza or the West Bank.

- **To be to blame / Palestinians**

Comment:

Apply where a Palestinian actor is directly deemed responsible for the outbreak of violence or the general situation in Gaza or the West Bank.