

Local Media in Global Conflict: Southeast Asian Newspapers and the Politics of Peace in Israel/Palestine

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Local Media in Global Conflict: Southeast Asian Newspapers and the Politics of Peace in Israel/Palestine

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It is often assumed that local media are a potential deescalating tool in global conflict. This study examines how four leading newspapers in Southeast Asia (*Star of Malaysia*, *Philstar* of the Philippines, *Jakarta Post* of Indonesia, and *The Nation* of Thailand) reported the Israeli-Palestinian conflict during the year after the 2009 Gaza War. A census of 536 reports was coded for tones (to detect alignment), frames (to detect characterization of the conflict), and sources (to examine correlation with coverage tones). The results show fragmented alignment of the newspapers with Palestine and Israel. Conflict frames on offensives, fighting, threats, military strategies, demonization, death, and destruction were most prevalent. Coverage tones were significantly correlated with sources, suggesting that the potential of local media to serve as deescalating tools in global conflicts is subject to the varying political contexts in which they operate in relation to specific conflicts.

Despite growing recognition of the importance of local media in shaping conflicts (Puddephatt 2006), existing evidence still upholds Blondel's observation that "much of the research on the role of the media in conflict has focused on international news organizations" (2004, 27). Very few studies have been conducted on the roles local media play in bringing news of international conflicts to the attention of local audiences. This evident research deficit implies that local media involvement in global diffusion of conflict is ignored. Of specific concern here is the growing assumption that local media are a potential de-escalation tool in global conflict, on which there has been little in the way of empirical research. Attempts to examine how local media function in conflict de-escalation have actually been based on local conflicts, and focused on specific peace projects – examples include Rwanda's Studio-Ijambo (Hagos 2001; Paluck 2007) and Bosnia's Open Broadcast Network (OBN) and Free Exchange Radio Network (FERN) (Bratic 2009, 21–22). What seems to be more common are studies focusing on how global media report local conflicts, example the CNN effect in Somalia (McSweeney 2011) and Aljazeera's and the BBC's framing of Darfur (Kinner 2005).

Surprisingly, the most neglected conflict in local media research is the most globally diffused and intractable one – the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, whose metamorphosing recurrence and growing chain of links to global terrorism has intensified security surveillance and restrictions on civil liberty all over the world. While this conflict seems central to the globally impacting revolution that swept through Middle East and North Africa, how local media around the world present the conflict to their audiences is an important question that has remained largely unanswered. This observation stems from negative antecedents, in which local media have often been found to be effective in pushing people to engage in conflict and mobilizing public support for war. Examples of this include the manipulation of media to justify use of armed force in the Chechen conflict (Baranovsky, 2012); the abuse of local media in facilitating conflict in former Yugoslavia (Bratic 2009) and modern Russia (Glukhov 2009); and the goading of ethnic genocide by Radio-Télévision-Libre-des-Milles-Collines in Rwanda in 1994 (Des Forges 2007; Paluck 2007).

The prevailing assumption seems to be that the "international media" is the most appropriate choice for assess-

ing the media's role in "international conflict." In a sense, this can be defended considering that in international conflicts of global relevance such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, international media and news agencies sometimes serve as sources of information to local media outlets, which are often not financially equipped to source first-hand information. However, in terms of both global diffusion and de-escalation, local media operating within a country actually have greater potentials than international news media, as Blondel (2004) argues, depending on the role they choose or are able to play.

This study was conceived to examine how major newspapers in selected Southeast Asian countries – namely, *The Star* (Malaysia), *The Philstar* (the Philippines), *The Jakarta Post* (Indonesia), and *The Nation* (Thailand) reported the Israeli-Palestinian conflict during the year after the 2009 Gaza war. Of course that fighting, perhaps more than ever in the history of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, attracted civic and news reactions from all over the world including Southeast Asia. The goal of this study is therefore to determine how the local press handled the one-year post-war period in terms of the dominant news frames used and their tones towards the conflict actors, Israel and Palestine. It is also of interest in this study to identify the major news sources used by those newspapers in reporting the conflict, and to establish whether there are correlations between the tone of their coverage and the sources they use. These goals are relevant to the need for increased understanding of the roles of local media as possible tools of de-escalation and peace building in global conflict.

1. Global Conflict in Local News

In a conflict of international or global dimensions, there always seems to be a nexus that explains coverage in local media. A local media outlet may report international conflict to serve its commercial interests, as the *Australian* did in relation to the Democratic Republic of Congo (Hawkins 2009). They may also rally round the flag in patriotism or acquiescence to a nation's interest, as the British media did during the 1982 Falklands War (Goddard, Robinson, and Parry 2008). In another sense, the local media may report an international conflict simply to meet its ethical responsibility to bring international news events to the attention

of local audiences, as the British *Daily Mirror* did in its coverage of the US-led invasion of Iraq (see Goddard, Robinson, and Parry 2008).

Again, local media may report an international conflict to promote a specific local agenda and response based on ideological considerations, as Dutch media demonstrated in their stereotypical reporting of the Bosnian war and proposals for Dutch government action (Ruigrok 2008). Local media may also become involved in international conflict situations in order to contradict perceived opponents of the geopolitical interests and ideological values that define their existence and operations. This is journalism of attachment, in which the reporters are regarded as participants in the conflict they report (Ruigrok 2008). Local media attachment in international conflict sometimes occurs where the home country is directly involved in the conflict. In this case, the media often accompany their states to the war front in a rally-round-the-flag approach, and function as tool of government propaganda as Taylor (1992) observed. This was exemplified in the role played by the British media during the Falklands war, and by the American media during the Vietnam and Gulf wars (Hallin 1986; Bennet and Paletz 1994).

Where the home country is not directly involved in a conflict, shared transnational ideology, for instance democracy, capitalism, religion, or a complex combination of some or all of them, might connect local media to a global conflict. In recent years, religion seems to have become the most important transnational ideology affecting media coverage of global conflicts. It seems indeed correct to assert that since the demise of the global anti-communist propaganda of the cold war era, religion has emerged as the most important ideological influence in media coverage of global conflicts, ostensibly because religion is at the heart of current trends in global conflict. This trend appears to affect the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, in which Muslims and Jews and, in some places, Christians are perceived and cited as the conflict actors, whose global presence explains the global spread of the conflict. Islam is heavily present in civic life and government levels in Malaysia and Indonesia, where over 60 percent and over 80 percent of local populations respectively are Muslims (Hosen 2005). Christianity

is heavily present in the Philippine where over 90 percent of the population are Christians (Miller n.d.). In Thailand, over 90 percent of the population practices Buddhism.¹

A few attempts have been made in public discourse and research to examine the linkage between religion and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Some scholars, like Edward Luttwak and Shibley Telhami consider religion not to be the key determinant in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.² Researchers like Slater (2006) and Roy (2004), who also share this view, believe that the political layers are more important than religion for understanding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. There are, however, other researchers (Gopin 2002; Ranstorp 1996) who positively associate religion with the conflict, seeing it as an asset in the search for peace; and others still (Baumgartner et al. 2008), who find a strong association between religion and the global spread of the conflict. While these works are not directly related to mass media, lack of research into the roles of local media in global conflict makes it even more difficult to find scientific evidence on the linkage between religion and local media coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In fact, religion has not been a widely used variable for explaining the sources of foreign policy attitudes, as Baumgartner et al (2008) observed. However, it has been established that an association exists between correspondents' demographic backgrounds and their coverage of international conflicts (El-Nawawy 2002).

An association between demographic background and a journalist's account of international conflict suggests that religion, as a demographic indicator, may be able to explain differences in local media coverage of a conflict between predominantly Islamic setting and predominantly Christian settings. On that basis, this study assumes that Southeast Asian newspapers operating in a predominantly Islamic setting (*Star of Malaysia* and *Jakarta Post* of Indonesia) are likely to report the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in favor of Palestinians. Similarly, Southeast Asian

newspapers operating in a predominantly Christian setting (*Philstar* of the Philippine) are likely to report the conflict in favor of Israel. Southeast Asian newspapers operating under neither Islamic nor Christian religious predominance (*Nation* of Thailand) are likely to be non-aligned and therefore more neutral than inclined towards Israel or Palestine. To investigate these assumptions, this study questions the coverage tones in the newspapers thus:

Research question 1: Does the tone of coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict by Southeast Asian press reflect alignment with Israel and Palestine, and how does this vary in newspapers from different religious backgrounds?

To determine how the press characterized the conflict, the study asks:

Research question 2: What is the dominant frame used by Southeast Asian presses in reporting the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and how does this differ between newspapers from different religious backgrounds?

In developing a framework for understanding the influences around US media coverage of the Vietnam War, Hallin (1986) documented the sources used by the US media. Taking a cue from Hallin, this study goes on to ask:

Research question 3: What are the major news sources used by Southeast Asian press to report the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and how does this vary between newspapers from different religious backgrounds?

To find out if the tones of coverage (as dependent variable) relate to the sources used by the newspapers (as independent variable), the study followed up with:

RQ4: Are there significant associations between the tones of coverage and the news sources from which local newspapers in Southeast Asia reported the Israeli-Palestinian conflict?

2. Method

This study is based on a content analysis of coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in the *Star of Malaysia*, *Jakarta*

¹ Information regarding religion in Malaysia and Thailand from <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/malaysia/religion.htm> and <http://www.amazing-thailand.com/relig.html> respectively (accessed June 20, 2013).

² Edward Luttwak is Senior Associate of the Center for Strategic and International Studies, Washington, D.C.; Shibley Telhami is Anwar Sadat Chair and Professor for peace and development, University of Maryland.

Post of Indonesia, *Philstar* of the Philippines, and *The Nation* of Thailand during the year following the 2009 Gaza war. Although these newspapers are published in English only, they were selected on the strength of their circulation and popularity within their countries of origin. According to the Audit Bureau of Circulation (2011), *Star* is the largest English-language newspaper in Malaysia, with daily circulation close to 300,000. The newspaper is owned by an alliance of the Malaysian Chinese Association and Malaysia's ruling party, *Berisan Nasional*. The *Jakarta Post* is a leading Indonesian English daily, independently owned by Bina Media Tenggara but with a political orientation toward public office-holders (Eklof 2004). According to the Nielson Media Index (2011), *Philstar* is among the three largest newspapers in the Philippines. *The Nation* is one of Thailand's top English newspapers with daily circulation of between 60,000 and 80,000. The paper is considered nationalist, pro-royalist, and pro-elitist government in its editorial policies.³

The unit of analysis was the article. The texts of articles were obtained from the websites of the newspapers using the search terms "Israel Palestine," "Israeli Palestinian," and "Israel Palestinian". Stories published between November 22, 2009, and November 21, 2010, were analyzed. The newspapers published different volumes of relevant reporting during this period. The *Star* of Malaysia produced 230 related articles and the *Jakarta Post* of Indonesia 222, while the *Philstar* produced 49 and *The Nation* of Thailand 35. Due to the low output of the latter two newspapers, we conducted a census study in which all the articles were included in the study population. Overall, 536 articles were analyzed.

2.1 Categories and Measurement

For coding the characterization of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict by Southeast Asian Press, this study drew upon the most commonly used frames in media coverage of conflict identified by Semetko and Valkenburg (2000): "conflict," "human interest," "economic consequences," "morality," and "responsibility," but also created a "peace" frame to determine the newspaper's tendency to play a deescalating

role. Semetko and Valkenburg's "economic consequences" was modified as "consequences," broadening its meaning to include non-economic consequences. The "conflict," "morality," and "responsibility" frames were retained as defined by the authors.

Coverage tones were analyzed using the "slant" category, coded into "favorable," "unfavorable," and "neutral" stories. The "sources" were coded into "news agencies" (mostly AP, Reuters, and Xinhua), "other media," "government" (former or active members of parliament, members of the executive, including the president), "civic bodies" (external individuals, human rights, civic and interest groups), and "independent" sources (editorials, columns, opinions, and analysis by internal staff). Articles that did not fit into any of these categories were coded in a residual category of "others." Drawing upon existing literature (Galtung 1998; McGoldrick and Lynch 2000; Semetko and Valkenburg 2000; Howard 2003), these frames and categories were defined as follows:

1. *Peace*: stories on or with emphasis on peace initiatives, events, or subjects.
2. *Conflict*: stories that emphasize offensives, fighting, threats, military strategies, death, and destruction.
3. *Human interest*: stories that stress suffering and distress in the conflict.
4. *Consequences*: stories that make salient the implications and likelihood of spread of conflict.
5. *Morality*: stories questioning or justifying the moral stand taken by conflict participants and mediators.
6. *Responsibility*: stories that provide background on causes and suggest remedial actions.

The frames, sources, and tones were measured as quantitative variables by identifying and coding articles in which their descriptors are present as "1," and others in which their descriptors are absent as "0." Cases of multiple frames occurring in a single article were resolved by initially recording each occurrence of a descriptor as "1," such that each article (unit of analysis) is coded for the most preva-

³ For more information on the circulation and editorial line of the *Nation* see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_newspapers_in_Thailand#Newspapers.

lent descriptor. Drawing on Lee and Maslog (2005), this was done to comply with the rule of coding each unit of analysis into only one category. Data was analyzed using SPSS16.0.

2.2 Inter-coder Reliability Test

An inter-coder reliability test was conducted using two experienced coders, who also received one month of specific training. A systematic random procedure was used to sample fifty-three articles, which constituted 10 percent of the content populations, for pilot coding. ReCal2 internet-based software was used to calculate inter-coder reliability. The test result shows a reliability coefficient of between 94 and 100 for percent agreement, and between .72 and 1.0 for Scott *Pi*, Cohen Kappa and Krippendorff's alpha. Reliability is substantial if it yields kappa coefficient ranging

between .61 and .80 (Stemler 2001). This range of value is similarly held as substantially reliable in Scott *Pi* and Krippendorff's alpha.

3. Results

Each newspaper produced different search results, all of which were coded. Therefore, rather than base data reporting on mere numerical frequency, we focus on relative percentage occurrences to report the value of each coded variable. Chi square and correlation statistics were then used to answer the research questions.

3.1. RQ1: A Journalism of Fragmented Alignments

To discover whether the newspapers exhibit alignment in reporting the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the incidence of neutral slanted stories was analyzed.

Table 1: Coverage Tone

	Slanted stories <i>n</i> (%)	Neutral stories <i>n</i> (%)	Total <i>n</i> (%)	Mean	Standard deviation
<i>Star</i> Malaysia	127 (55.2)	103 (44.8)	230 (100)	1.55	.498
<i>Jakarta Post</i> Indonesia	136 (61.3)	86 (38.7)	222 (100)	1.61	.488
<i>Philstar</i> Philippines	36 (73.5)	13 (26.5)	49 (100)	1.73	.466
<i>Nation</i> Thailand	20 (57.1)	15 (42.9)	35 (100)	1.57	.502
Total	319 (59.5)	217 (40.5)	536 (100)	1.60	.491

Table 2: Breakdown of slanted stories

	Favorable to		Unfavorable to		Total <i>n</i> (%)
	Israel <i>n</i> (%)	Palestine <i>n</i> (%)	Israel <i>n</i> (%)	Palestine <i>n</i> (%)	
<i>Star</i> Malaysia	8 (3.5)	35 (15.2)	80 (34.8)	4 (1.7)	127 (100)
<i>Jakarta Post</i> Indonesia	43 (19.4)	24 (10.8)	65 (29.3)	4 (1.8)	136 (100)
<i>Philstar</i> Philippines	27 (55.1)	3 (6.1)	2 (4.1)	4 (8.2)	36 (100)
<i>Nation</i> Thailand	0 (0.0)	4 (11.4)	11 (31.4)	5 (14.3)	20 (100)
Total	78 (14.6)	66 (12.3)	158 (29.5)	17 (3.1)	319 (100)

Overall, there were significantly more slanted stories than neutral stories $\chi^2(1, n=536) = 19.410, p<.001$ (see Table 1). This result implies that the Southeast Asian press shows a strong general alignment with the conflict actors.

3.1.1. Newspapers from Predominantly Muslim Environments

The *Star* of Malaysia and *Jakarta Post* of Indonesia publish in predominantly Muslim cultures. At the aggregate level, they produced 263 slanted stories and 189 neutral stories (Table 1). Further analysis shows that the amount of slanted stories produced by this group was significantly higher than the neutral stories it produced: $\chi^2(1, n=452) = 12.115, p<.001$. This means that Southeast Asian newspapers operating in predominantly Islamic contexts showed meaningful levels of alignment in reporting the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in the period under study. This alignment is revealed by the large amount of stories slanted against Israel produced by this group (Table 2).

At the level of individual newspapers, there was no significant difference between the amount of slanted and neutral stories in the *Star* of Malaysia $\chi^2(1, n=230) = 2.504, p=.114$, but in the *Jakarta Post* of Indonesia, evidence was found of a significant difference in the occurrences of slanted and neutral stories $\chi^2(1, n=222) = 11.261, p=.001$. Both papers were significantly sympathetic towards Palestine in terms of the amount of slanted content that favored and disfavored Palestine – *Star* of Malaysia: $\chi^2(1, n=39) = 24.641, p<0.001$; *Jakarta Post*: $\chi^2(1, n=28) = 14.286, p<0.001$. Thus Southeast Asian newspapers from predominantly Islamic countries displayed strong alignment with Palestine in their reporting of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict during this period.

3.1.2. Newspapers from Predominantly Christian Environments

Philstar of the Philippine was the only newspaper included in this study that operates in a predominantly Christian context. Evidence was found of a significant difference between the amount of slanted and neutral stories produced by *Philstar*: $\chi^2(1, n=49) = 10.796, p=.001$. This means the *Philstar* displayed strong alignment in its reporting of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This alignment is reflected in the high volume of slanted stories produced by the paper, which significantly favored Israel $\chi^2(1, n=30) =$

19.200, $p<0.001$. It is noteworthy that *Philstar* produced the largest amount of pro-Israel content among the researched publications, with 55.1 percent of its coverage (Table 2).

3.1.3. Newspapers from Other Religious Environments

The Nation of Thailand is the only newspaper in the research sample from a context dominated by neither Islam nor Christianity. Thailand, as noted above, is a Buddhist culture where almost 95 percent of the population practices Buddhism. The assumption of this study is that *The Nation* of Thailand is “non-aligned.” Aggregate analysis of coverage tone (Table 1) shows that there was no significant difference between the amounts of slanted and neutral stories produced by *The Nation*: $\chi^2(1, n=35) = 0.714, p=.398$. However, a breakdown of the slanted stories (Table 2) reveals the paper’s unfavorable stance on Israel as against its sympathy for Palestine, thus negating the study assumption on *The Nation*.

3.2. RQ2: Conflict Frames Most Prevalent

The coding of identified frames was analyzed to answer the second research question. The analysis focused on determining the distribution of frames in overall and individual newspaper coverage, and identifying the most prevalent frame at each level. This supplied an understanding of how the press characterized the conflict.

Overall, the conflict frames were most prevalent with 19 percent. This was closely followed by the peace frames with 17.7 percent. The human-interest component of the conflict was the third most salient with 12.5 percent (see Table 3).

Examining the individual newspapers, *Philstar* produced the highest figure for “conflict” frames (40.8 percent of its coverage), followed by *Star* of Malaysia (22.6 percent). *The Nation* of Thailand turned out the lowest proportion of “conflict” frames (2.9 percent), but with 22.9 percent was second to *Jakarta Post* (25.7 percent) in producing “peace” frames.

In the “human interest” frame, the highest proportion (17.4 percent) was found in *Star* of Malaysia. Virtually all

the articles published by *Star* in the “human interest” category portrayed Palestinians as victims of Israel. This line was closely shared by *Jakarta Post*, where 12.2 percent its stories sympathized with Palestine in the “human interest” frame. *The Nation* of Thailand was the least likely to report the Israeli-Palestinian conflict from a “human interest” angle. Instead, the paper focused greater attention on the “consequences” of the conflict (37.1 percent of articles), and questioning its “morality” (17.1 percent). *Jakarta Post* took the lead in the “responsibility” frame, while *Philstar*

was least likely to consider the “consequences” or question the “morality” and “responsibility” issues (Table 3). As the results show, individual Southeast Asian newspapers held a range of different perspectives on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. There was no strict religious dimension to the use of identifiable frames, but at aggregate level, the “conflict” frames was the most prevalent. There were also important levels of attention to the “peace” and “human interest” perspectives, with the latter skewed largely in favor of Palestine.

Table 3: Frames employed by individual newspapers

	Conflict n (%)	Peace n (%)	Human interest n (%)	Consequence n (%)	Morality n (%)	Responsibility n (%)	Others n (%)	Total n (%)
<i>Star</i> Malaysia	52 (22.6)	25 (10.9)	40 (17.4)	21 (9.1)	21 (9.1)	4 (1.8)	67 (29.1)	230 (100)
<i>Jakarta Post</i> Indonesia	29 (13.0)	57 (25.7)	27 (12.2)	23 (10.4)	15 (6.7)	37 (16.7)	34 (15.3)	222 (100)
<i>Philstar</i> Philippines	20 (40.8)	5 (10.2)	0 (0.0)	2 (4.1)	2 (4.1)	2 (4.1)	18 (36.7)	49 (100)
<i>Nation</i> Thailand	1 (2.9)	8 (22.9)	0 (0.0)	13 (37.1)	6 (17.1)	2 (5.7)	5 (14.3)	35 (100)
Total	102 (19.0)	95 (17.7)	67 (12.5)	59 (11.0)	44 (8.3)	45 (8.4)	124 (23.1)	536 (100)

Table 4: Sources

	News agencies n (%)	Other media n (%)	Government n (%)	Civic bodies n (%)	Independent n (%)	Other n (%)	Total
<i>Star</i> Malaysia	31 (13.5)	9 (3.9)	65 (28.3)	33 (14.3)	89 (38.7)	3 (1.3)	230 (100)
<i>Jakarta Post</i> Indonesia	129 (58.1)	0 (0.0)	9 (4.1)	41 (18.5)	42 (18.9)	1 (0.4)	222 (100)
<i>Philstar</i> Philippines	30 (61.2)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	4 (8.2)	10 (20.4)	5 (10.2)	49 (100)
<i>Nation</i> Thailand	0 (0.0)	1 (2.9)	1 (2.9)	21 (60)	12 (34.2)	0 (0.0)	35 (100)
Total	190 (35.4)	10 (1.9)	75 (14.0)	99 (18.5)	153 (28.5)	9 (1.7)	536 (100)

3.3. RQ3: Foreign News Agencies are Dominant Sources

To answer the third research question, the articles were coded for five common news sources: news agencies, other media, government, civic bodies, and independent. Stories that did not fit into any of these categories were coded “Others.” News agencies were the dominant source for

Southeast Asian press reporting of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Overall, 35.4 percent of stories were obtained from the Associated Press (United States), Reuters (United Kingdom) and Xinhua (China). Although independent sources followed closely, with 28.5 percent, and civic bodies with 18.5 percent, it is apparent that foreign news agencies were

the most common sources used by the Southeast Asian Press for reporting the Israeli-Palestinian conflict within the period investigated.

The sources used by individual newspapers offer an insight that is not noticeable at the aggregate level. *Star of Malaysia*, which produced the largest volume of stories on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, acquired them principally from independent sources (38.7 percent), government sources (28.3 percent), and civic bodies (14.3 percent). The *Jakarta Post*, on the other hand, relied mostly on news agencies (58.1 percent, principally Associated Press), civic bodies (18.5 percent), and independent sources (18.9 percent). *Philstar* also relied mostly on news agencies (61.2 percent) (principally Associated Press and Xinhua) and independent sources (20.4 percent). *The Nation* of Thailand sourced most of its stories on the conflict from civic bodies (60.0 percent) and independent sources (34.2 percent). Table 4 summarizes the general distribution of news sources.

3.4. RQ4: Coverage Tones Significantly Correlated with News Sources

At the aggregate level, a large majority (87.6 percent) of neutral stories were sourced from foreign news agencies (AP, Reuters, and Xinhua) while half the slanted stories (48 percent) were obtained from independent sources. Government sources (18.2 percent) and civic bodies (31 percent) also played an important role in sourcing slanted stories.

3.4.1. Tone-News Source Relationship: Star of Malaysia

The main sources of neutral stories produced by *Star of Malaysia* were news agencies (mainly Reuters) (30.1 percent) and government sources (61.2 percent), while most of the slanted stories came from civic bodies (26 percent) and independent sources (70.1 percent). Evidence of significant positive correlation was found between the tone adopted by *Star of Malaysia* towards Israel and Palestine and the sources from which it reported the conflict $r(228) = .859, p < .001$. This means that the sources from which *Star of Malaysia* reported the Israeli-Palestinian conflict were likely explain the tone adopted by the paper within the period investigated.

3.4.2. Tone-Sources Relationship: Jakarta Post of Indonesia

All of the neutral stories published in the *Jakarta Post* were sourced from news agencies (mainly AP). News agencies

also contributed the largest proportion (31.6 percent) of its slanted stories, just ahead of independent sources (30.9 percent) and civic bodies (30.1 percent). Evidence of a positive correlation was found between the tone adopted by *Jakarta Post* towards Israel and Palestine and the sources from which it reported the conflict $r(220) = .653, p < .001$. This also means that sources were likely to explain the tone of reporting of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in *Jakarta Post* within the period investigated.

3.4.3. Source-Tone Relationship: Philstar

Like the *Jakarta Post*, all the neutral stories that appeared in *Philstar* came from news agencies (mainly AP), which also constituted an important source of its slanted stories (47.2 percent). The second source of slanted stories in *Philstar* was the independent sources (27.8 percent). A strong positive correlation was found between the tone adopted by *Philstar* towards Israel and Palestine and the sources used by the paper $r(47) = .467, p = .001$. Again, this means that sources in *Philstar* were likely to have influenced the paper's tone of coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict this period.

3.4.4. Tone-News Sources Relationship: The Nation of Thailand

Most (86.7 percent) of the neutral stories published in *The Nation* of Thailand were sourced from civic bodies, while its slanted stories came mainly from independent sources (60.0 percent) and civic bodies (40.0 percent). A significant positive correlation was found between the tone adopted by *The Nation* towards Israel and Palestine and the sources it used $r(33) = .611, p < .001$. This similarly suggests that sources could explain the tone of *The Nation's* coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in the post-Gaza period.

4. Discussion

The local press in Southeast Asia, like its counterparts in other parts of the world, is faced with many challenges in reporting the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, including political environment and ideological attachment. The investigated newspapers were found to be divided in their alignments. In predominantly Muslim environments, the *Star of Malaysia* and *Jakarta Post* of Indonesia were aligned with Palestine and significantly disfavored Israel in their coverage. *Philstar* of the Philippines, in a largely Christian

environment, was aligned with Israel. *The Nation* of Thailand, which operates in a context that is neither Islam-dominated nor Christian-dominated, was sympathetic to Palestine in its reporting of the conflict. It appears then, that religion might offer a useful paradigm for explaining the attitudes of the Southeast Asian press towards the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

In terms of frames, conflict-focused language (“attacks,” “hostilities,” “hostages,” “clashes,” “escalation of violence,” “risks,” etc.) dominated the pages of these newspapers. Consciously or unconsciously, content highlighting peace featured less prominently. *Philstar* for example, which produced the largest amount of conflict frames, was clearly sympathetic to Israel with favorable stories representing 55.1 percent of its coverage of the conflict. Its articles made frequent reference to Israel, and predominantly offered defenses for Israel’s positions. For example, the paper once reported:

A day after the Arab League (AL) Committee on the Middle East peace process recommended to Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas to decide on when to start direct peace talks with Israel, Gaza militants fired a long-range Russian-made rocket from the Gaza Strip at southern Israel. The Israeli army immediately responded to Friday’s attack, during which the rocket hit a populated area in the southern coastal Israeli city of Ashkelon, causing some damages, but no injuries were reported ... Hamas armed wing al-Qassam Brigades vowed to revenge [sic] ... (*Philstar*, July 31, 2010).

This story and many others like it, which *Philstar* sourced from Xinhua and the Associated Press is mirrored in the *Star* of Malaysia, which relied predominantly on Reuters and devoted 34.8 percent of its articles to criticizing Israel’s position. Words such as “bully,” “goliath,” and “criminal” were frequently associated with Israel in the *Star*, which also presented a human-interest picture of the conflict through frequent portrayal of Palestine as Israel’s victim. *Jakarta Post* of Indonesia took a similar anti-Israeli position, but with slightly more pro-Israel content than the *Star*. *The Nation*’s sympathy for Palestine was conveyed with stories that focused mostly on cross-border consequences and moral obligations in the conflict. For example, an editorial titled “Time We Grasped Palestinian Issue” (sic) categorically stated:

The issue of Palestine and Palestinian statehood will eventually hit Bangkok’s front door and it’s best to take up the debate now and prepare our country for it. Along the way, the government could be genuinely scoring political points with the Malay Muslims in the South, instead of insulting their intelligence by bringing foreign clerics who know nothing about the historical sentiment of the region and the mistrust ... As a member of the UN Human Rights Council, Bangkok should at least feel it has a moral obligation to the people in Israel and Palestine.” (*The Nation*, June 14, 2010).

The portrayal of Israel as the bully and Palestinians as the victims by the *Star* of Malaysia, the defense of Israel by *Philstar*, the sympathy of the Thai *Nation* towards Palestinians, and the *Jakarta Post*’s anti-Israel frames are clear indications of alignment in the Southeast Asian press. Obviously, this is an important challenge to the local media playing a deescalating role in global conflict.

Bina (2007) observed that Malaysian media cooperate closely with the government to support its policy of maintaining unity between the Muslim world and Malaysia. The situation is similar in Indonesia, which has the world’s largest Muslim population and a constitution that stresses “Pancasila” – the principle of one supreme God. However, Indonesia’s open-door media policy, which is considered a step in the right direction, might explain *Jakarta Post*’s extensive reliance on America’s Associated Press, which perhaps led the paper to produce pro-Israel content that ranked second to the highest in amount. The policy might also see the press balancing its views and becoming neutral. *The Nation* of Thailand probably feels no obligation to favor Muslims or Jews or Christians, but in an attempt to take a dispassionate look at the issues, it found itself softening towards Palestine. This suggests how difficult it can be for the media to be impartial in reporting an asymmetric conflict. The Philippine media are known to favor US views and policies (Bina 2007), in light of the country’s strong business relationship with Israel. If this is considered from the viewpoint of US support for Israel, it then may well explain the pro-Israel position of *Philstar*.

6. Conclusion

The cultural proximity of regional media to its audience offers a good reason to be optimistic that it can serve as a deescalating tool in global conflict, but a complex combination of global political engagements of local media

actors and the helpless dependence of local media on foreign news agencies makes it difficult to maintain this hope. This study reveals that the Southeast Asian press shares the global sentiment on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and is consciously aligned in reporting the conflict. This is particularly the case with newspapers in Islam-dominated and Christian-dominated political environments. Looking at the relationships between coverage tones and news sources at aggregate level, Southeast Asian reporting of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict reflects the broader orientation of foreign news agencies towards the conflict. Firstly, the majority of local news about the conflict was sourced from foreign news agencies. Secondly, at the level of individual newspapers, an important proportion of slanted stories were also sourced from foreign news agencies. This renders local media coverage of global conflict vulnerable to the remote influence of foreign news agencies.

At the aggregate level, government is not a major source of news about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict for the Southeast

Asian press. In Malaysia, however, the *Star* newspaper framed an important proportion of its neutral stories on the conflict around government sources, portraying the Malaysian government's concerned neutrality in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This framing in reality reflects the close political cooperation between government and the media in Malaysia (see Bina 2007).

As the results of this study also show, stories from civic bodies were cleverly framed as popular opinions coming from individuals, human rights, and interest groups. This and independent sources (editorials, columns, opinions, and analysis by staff journalists) perhaps most explicitly reflected the Southeast Asian press alignment in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, as they were found at aggregate and individual newspaper levels to be the major sources of the slanted stories. Drawing on these results, it is plausible that the potential of local media to serve as deescalating tools in global conflicts is subject to the varying political contexts in which they operate in relation to specific conflicts.

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