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The Self and Other: Portraying Israeli and Palestinian Identities on Twitter

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The self and other: portraying Israeli and Palestinian identities on Twitter

Jason Deegan, John Hogan, Sharon Feeney
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Abstract

The conflict between Israel and Palestine has lasted over half a century, with both sides enduring military and political turmoil. This paper explores how Twitter is being used as a medium to portray identities in the conflict. We examine the tweets contained in the @IDFspokesperson and @ISMPalestine Twitter accounts between late 2015 and early 2016. Using textual analysis, we gain an insight into how these Twitter accounts, defined by the conflict, are used in portraying the self and the other.

Introduction

The Israel-Palestine conflict is the definition of a protracted struggle (Lavi et al., 2014). The conflict permeates both societies and has led to a polarization of views and positions. This paper seeks to understand how Twitter is being used to portray the 'self', and the 'other' in the conflict through the examination of two Twitter accounts, @IDFspokesperson and @ISMPalestine. Through textual analysis of Twitter messages, we can gain an understanding of how Twitter accounts that are not only shaped by a conflict, but defined by it, function, and what their role is within the conflict in portraying identities – an emerging area of research (Zeitsoff, 2011; Siapera, Hunt, and Lynn, 2015; Mor, Kligler-Vilenchik,

and Maoz, 2015). While most of the literature has examined the organizational and strategic results of social media use for protest purposes, comparatively little research has concerned itself with issues of collective identity forms of communication (Gerbaudo and Trere, 2015).

We begin with a brief overview of the literature, examining identity and group identity in the context of the Israeli/Palestinian conflict, before discussing Twitter. Next comes the research method section, encompassing case selection, data gathering and the corpus of tweets to be examined. The results section explores the corpus of Twitter messages collected from the two accounts using textual analysis, as well as seeking to examine the formation of these messages and their impact upon the portrayal of the self and the other. We finish with a discussion of our results.

Literature review

Identities

When it comes to identity, there are identities for oneself and for others; for individuals and for groups, and all are manifested as linguistic phenomena (Joseph, 2004). The identities we build for ourselves and those we portray of others do not differ in kind – but in the status we give them. Freehand drawings have been used, along with discursive interaction as a means of clarifying beliefs and opinions of individuals and groups (Feeney and Hogan, 2018, p.13; Feeney et al., 2015). Social media, such as Twitter, can create a fuzzy boundary between the private and public identity. But, there is a difference in kind between individual and group identities. That said, one's personal identity is partly made up of the group identity, or various group identities, to which one sees oneself belonging (Joseph, 2004). The tensions between individual and group identities endow the concept of identity with power, and mean that the distinctions between what we conceive as our individual identity and our identity as part of a group is not so clear as might first seem.

One of the most common group identities is national identity. 'National identity involves some sense of political community, however tenuous' (Smith, 1991: 8). This implies common institutions, codes of rights, and a boundary. This frontier demarcates a homeland, a place a people are bound to, and regard as sacred

(Smith, 1991). National identity is bound to the land, past, present and future, and this hallowed place is not for the other.

In recent decades Israelis and Palestinians have increasingly come to regard each as the 'other' (Auron, 2012). They have come to define themselves vis-a-vis each other in an oppositional relationship, where identity is developed and cultivated in opposition (Said, 1978). Each side can be seen as agents of change, or political entrepreneurs (Hogan and Feeney, 2012, p.3). In terms of social media Najjar (2010) examined how Palestinian identity was articulated on Facebook and YouTube during the Gaza War; while Aouragh (2011) looked at how the internet is an important medium for the formation of the Palestinian identity. Additionally, Rogers and Ben David (2010) examined the use of terms for the structure separating Israel from the Palestinian territories. Auron (2012) argues that the future of both the Israeli and Palestinian identities appears to depend upon the future of the conflict between these contesting identities.

Twitter and the Middle East

One of the most notable trends on the internet has been the growth in social networking sites (SNS) since the advent of Web 2.0 (Lynch and Hogan, 2012). Boyd and Ellison (2007: 211) define SNSs as:

...web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system.

Since their introduction, SNSs have allowed users form online communities, express views and present stylized version of themselves that no other medium has allowed (Boyd and Ellison, 2007: 1).

Twitter, developed in 2006, and with 336 million users as of the first quarter of 2018¹, is a microblogging social media site that allows users express opinions, share content, or engage with other users, by way of 140 characters. As such, points must be made succinctly, permitting easily consumable information (Zimmer and Proferes, 2014). Twitter has proved to be an efficient medium of information transfer, identity portrayal and identity construction (Long, 2012; Siapera et al., 2015; Gerbaudo and Trere, 2015). This form of SNS allows users

¹ <https://about.twitter.com/company>

create deeper bonds with people they already have bonds with offline (Zhang et al., 2010: 78). The use of hashtags, which allows users make their content visible to particular audiences, allows users to network, diffuse ideas, and particular areas of interest more easily (Hiscott, 2013; Zimmer and Proferes, 2014). The hashtag connects the sentence and keywords to the broader picture and allows for communications to continue and to be accessed by users (Hiscott, 2013). Twitter hashtags assist in the creation of ad hoc publics around specific themes and topics (Bruns and Burgess, 2011).

Unlike other platforms, such as Facebook, discussions on Twitter are rarely confined to a user's 'friends' profile, and hashtags and retweets can open up discussions to new audiences. It has played a significant role in a variety of recent revolutions and political upheavals (Gerbaudo, 2012) through the instant propagation of news, ideas and actions with an instant and wider audience than ever before. This has facilitated more active participation by members of the public in the creation and dissemination of news.

Rane and Salem (2012) examine how social media was used to co-ordinate demonstrations in the Middle East in 2010. The Arab Spring has been referred to as the 'Twitter Revolution'. The value of social media during the Arab Spring lay in its ability to transcend national boundaries (Rane and Salem, 2012) and to share views, opinions and updates as they were evolving in real time (Howard and Parks, 2012).

In the context of the Israeli/Palestinian conflict there is a similar trend, but with a stronger focus on getting the message to the wider world (Kuntsman and Stein, 2013; Siapera et al., 2015; Sucharov and Sasley, 2014). Ben-David (2014) points out that social media, and Twitter in particular, has been employed by Israel and its opponents since 2012. In fact, Siapera et al. (2015) explored how individuals and organizations, in the Gaza War of 2008-09, constructed identities for themselves and the 'other' through hashtags. Zeitzoff (2011) looked at how the activities of Hamas and Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) on Twitter contributed to the way that conflict was fought. However, an area that needs to be addressed is how Twitter accounts play a role in the formation of identities during the conflict.

Research method

Case selection

In studying Twitter, despite having received considerable attention from researchers over the years, methodology is still largely emergent (Gerlitz and Rieder, 2013). In terms of case studies, finding direct overlap between Twitter accounts is challenging, more so in this case, given the multi-faceted and asymmetrical nature of the Israeli/Palestinian conflict (Maoz, 2011).

Nevertheless, we employ Gerring's (2007) case selection techniques of 'most similar' (where the same independent variables are focused upon) and 'most different' (where different independent variables are focused upon) (for example see Hogan and O'Rourke, 2015). Under the 'most similar' criteria, our selected cases are Twitter accounts, created around the same time, from the Middle East, that focus upon the Israeli/Palestinian conflict, and that are in English. The selection of English was to understand how both accounts constructed their identities for the wider world. For the 'most different' criteria, we examined different types of Twitter accounts, with opposing objectives, and that differ in terms of numbers of followers. Here, we are trying to ensure that the accounts examined, although in many respects similar and providing comparable data, are sufficiently different to permit scrutiny of contrasting findings (Hogan et al., 2009).

@IDFSpokesperson is the official Twitter account of the IDF. As of late 2016 @IDFSpokesperson had 620,000 followers, was established in January 2009, gives its location as Israel and tweets in English. The IDF seeks to highlight the morals and ethics of how it conducts itself. The account is important in understanding how the IDF is representing its conduct and behaviour overseas (Heemsbergen and Lindgren, 2014; Zeitzoff, 2016). The account tends to be technical and matter of fact (Heemsbergen and Lindgren, 2014). However, when it comes to direct comparability (Gerring, 2007) between Twitter accounts, the Palestinian side has no single official military. Discounting Palestinian militia Twitter accounts which can be politically partisan within Palestine, whereas the IDF's account is apolitical in domestic Israeli politics, we decided to focus on the Twitter account @ISMPalestine of the International Solidarity Movement (ISM). This is a media aggregator of content in Palestine and transcends partisan lines

like the IDF's account. That this, a non-governmental organization's Twitter account was the most apposite to pick as a comparator with the IDF account speaks to the asymmetry of the conflict. As of late 2016 @ISMPalestine had 51,700 followers, was established in August 2008, gives its location as Occupied Palestine, and tweets in English. As a result, we are comparing the Twitter account of an official state institution with that of a non-governmental organization. Nevertheless, despite their differences, the similarities of the accounts ensure 'the contexts of analysis are analytically equivalent, at least to a significant degree' (Collier, 1997, p. 4).

Data gathering

Data gathering from the two Twitter accounts took place between 1 September 2015 and 6 January 2016. The data was collected through Chorus's *TweetCatcher*, which can extract a large volume of tweets by linking into Twitter's application programming interface (API) (Obholzer and Daniel, 2016). Chorus's *Tweetvis* allows for information to be retrieved from the datasets (Brooker et al., 2016).

We conducted a text-based analysis of the messages to appreciate how keywords and hashtags are critical in the corpus of tweets. Analyzing the messages in English ensures that the research can go some way to understanding how the accounts express themselves towards the outside world.

The corpus of tweets

The corpus of tweets collected reflects three months of Twitter data. This period witnessed an increased level of violence, with a wave of knife attacks on Israelis (Segal, 2016). This led to the term 'stabbing intifada' being applied to the period (The Economist, 2016). For instance, in October 2015 alone, 10 Israelis and 68 Palestinians were killed (Khoury et al., 2015). The heightened violence persisted into 2016. By then over 200 Israelis had been stabbed with others shot or the subject of car attacks (Beaumont, 2016). The result was a widespread increase of personal insecurity in both Israel and the Israeli-occupied West Bank (Brecher, 2017).

The data is separated into a corpus of tweets collected from @IDFSpokesperson and a corpus collected from @ISMPalestine. There were 543 tweets in the Israeli

corpus and 1,773 in the Palestinian. This approach is somewhat similar to that of Seo (2014), except that she examined Twitter images connected to the Israel-Hamas conflict of 2012.

These corpora reflect a variety of themes and issues, but in both the most prominent themes were based round identity. For example, the term 'Israeli' appeared in 14.7 percent of the Palestinian Twitter corpus (see Table 1 below), while 'Palestinian' appeared in 9.04 percent of the Israeli corpus (see Table 2 below).

Results

Analysis of @IDFspokesperson and @ISMPalestine

Separating the corpora into 'Israeli tweets' and 'Palestinian tweets' permitted us to observe both accounts in isolation. It also allowed for identification of keywords and hashtags, their context, and what variables they were most closely linked to, as well as identifying spikes in their usage. This was broken into several areas, which allowed for exploration of the 'novelty' of the individual corpora.

Examining the patterns throughout the datasets allows us to look at terms across similar 24-hour intervals – with a low novelty score indicating that similar topics are being discussed and a high novelty score indicating migration to a new topic. In this manner, we can define whether the Twitter accounts are similar, or different, in their selection of words. Indeed, it allows us understand whether the tweets were responses to particular outcomes and situations, or whether they are structured across the datasets. This is important in deciding which keywords to select.

Tweetvis allows us to explore whether the content posted was like other such tweets over the period selected – content 'homogeneity'. As the data consisted of three months of Twitter messages, looking between the accounts, we could see that many dominant keywords and hashtags, across the datasets, were interacting with one another – co-occurrences. For example, within the Israeli dataset we could see that the term 'Palestinian' was likely to be followed by 'stab', 'IDF', 'attempted', 'attacker', 'armed' and 'shot'. When looking at the Palestinian dataset we could that 'Israeli' was likely to be followed by 'forces', 'occupation', 'apartheid', 'coated' (reference to rubber bullets) and 'attacked'.

Many of these terms are also used as hashtags by [@ISMPalestine](#) to enhance their contextual value in the conflict nomenclature. This illustrates some homogeneity across the accounts. As the tool breaks down every term and shows correlations of usage, we can see that many keywords have attribute scores which show how frequently they are likely to be used either within the same 24-hour interval, or within the same tweet.

Examining the content of a tweet, we looked at how the tweet was received and how popular it was – volume of retweets. Recuero et al (2011) argue that retweets not only share information with a group, but allow for other users (those originally posting the information) to become visible to this group. Therefore, we argue, retweets play an important part in gathering social capital. In Figure 1 we see the retweet scores (y axis) attributed to [@ISMPalestine](#) in the context of the total dataset of tweets over the three months (x-axis). This is helpful in identifying keywords.

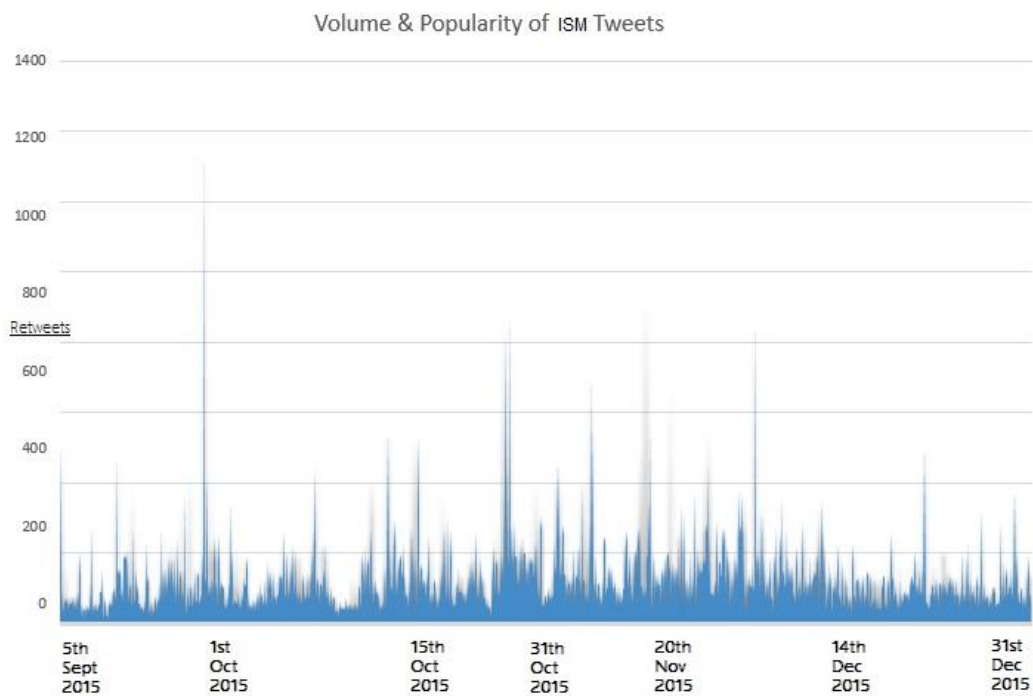


Figure 1: Volume and popularity of Palestinian ([@ISMPalestine](#)) retweets

There can be dramatic changes within the graph as individual tweets can be incredibly popular. Whereas, in Figure 2, we are looking at the volume of tweets over the period, with the most popular tweets coming when the tweeting intensity was low to average.

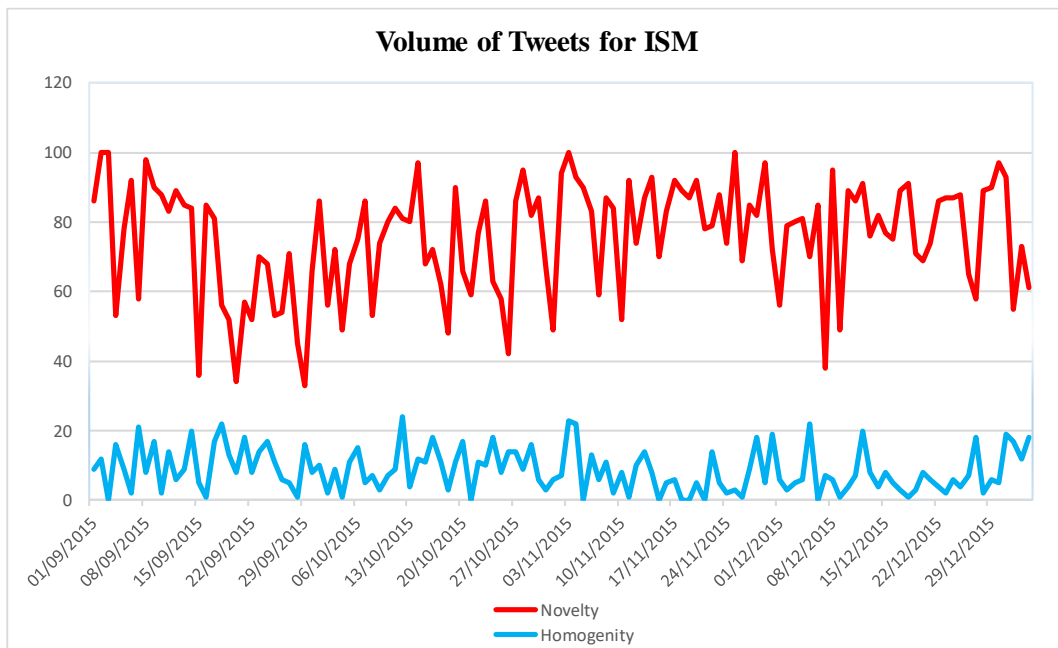


Figure 2: 'Novelty' (Red) and 'homogeneity' (blue) & of Palestinian (@ISMPalestine) tweets

There appears little correlation between content homogeneity (degree to which tweets within an interval use the same keywords – 0% means every tweet has distinct content; 100% every tweet is identical, thus a value approaching 100% indicates heavy retweeting), and novelty (the similarity in word occurrence profile between the selected interval and the average of the preceding intervals) on the relative success of certain tweets. This insight requires analysis and a cross-comparison of the Palestinian and Israeli datasets – which aims to offer a deeper understanding of patterns that have presented themselves within the corpus.

Israeli Twitter volume was lower than the Palestinian (554 vs 1,773) and the data was more condensed (see Figure 3). We can see the popularity of the tweets in Figure 3, with a high level of retweets potentially attributed to the larger follower base.

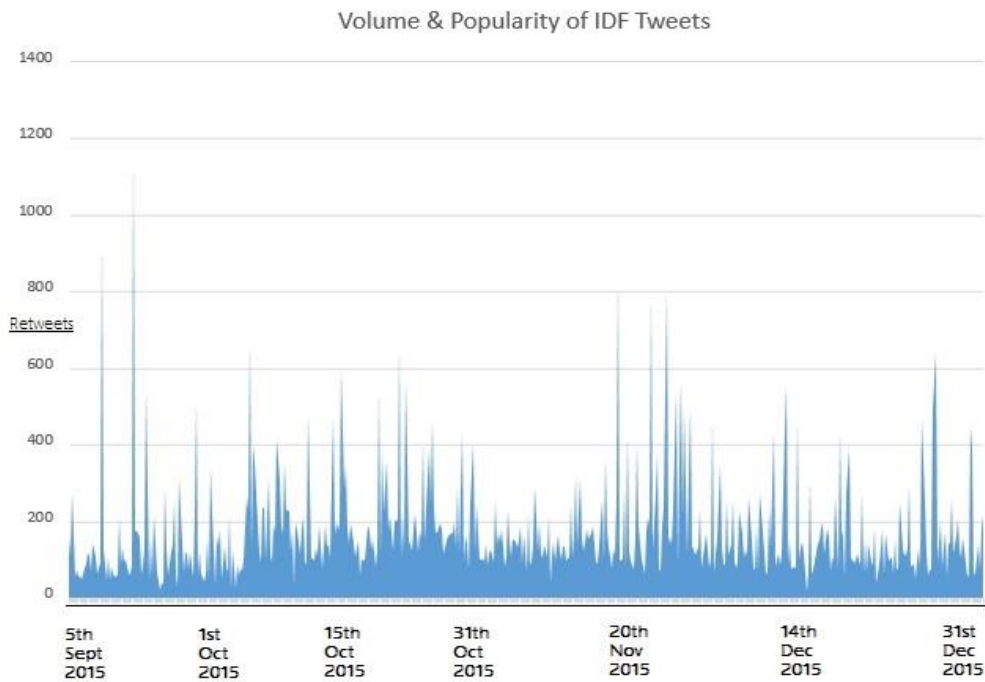


Figure 3: Volume and popularity of Israeli (@IDFspokesperson) retweets

In Figure 4, there is on average a low degree of homogeneity within the corpus of tweets, indicating the usage of different keywords and terms. However, we can see that a significant spike occurred at the start of November 2015. The novelty rate within the corpus of tweets is high, indicating significant change.

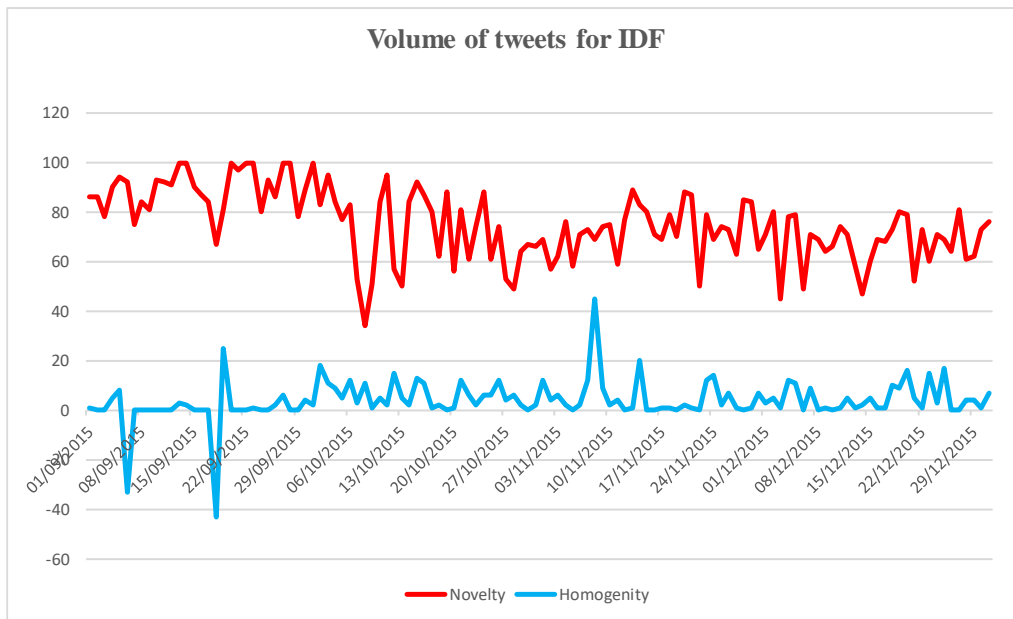


Figure 4: 'Novelty' (red) and 'homogeneity' (blue) of Israeli (@IDFspokesperson) tweets

The data in both corpora point to a fairly low degree of homogeneity, as well as the prominence of identity terms. However, we still need to examine how identity is portrayed in Twitter. The first two keywords selected are 'Israeli' and 'Palestinian'. This addresses the national identities, alongside their prominent usage in the corpora. The second pair of keywords are 'IDF' and 'Israeli Forces' because these terms were widely used by the Israelis and Palestinians to refer to the conduct of the Israeli military. The aim is to place the keywords in their contextual relevance by looking at when they are used within a sample of tweets and to examine keyword replacement, i.e. what effect would a substitute word have on the tweet.

Central to this analysis is to look at the identities created using these keywords as opposed to alternatives. What core message is being delivered to the 'other' in this conflict? We must look at the keywords within the broad scope of the dataset and how the frequency of using certain terms (a qualifying metric for analysis) impacts the representation of the sender and the intended target of the communication.

Analysis of keywords 'Israeli' and 'Palestinian'

When we look at the use of 'Israeli' and 'Palestinian', in the two Twitter accounts' datasets, it is important to examine the frequency of the terms over the course of the collection period. Understanding which words are employed with others can be used to analyze the tone of the terms (O'Rourke and Hogan, 2014). This allows us to look at what the terms are closely linked to within individual tweets. From mid-November there was a general decline in use of the term 'Israeli' by @ISMPalestine, which coincides with a spike in more targeted and conflict heavy terms such as 'Israeli Forces', as the stabbing intifada intensified. In many cases, 'Israeli' is followed by terms of conflict and violence.

Exploring tweets that focus on 'Israeli' within the Palestinian dataset, we find: '#Israeli forces increase harassment of Palestinian schoolchildren' or '#Israeli army arrives to #Jalud today to issue 4 house demolition orders: threatens with 10 more.' In these Tweets 'Israeli', and its hashtag, is being used as an indicator of despair for Palestinians as they define who is the oppressor and oppressed. The identity being portrayed and the hashtag are intrinsically linked to the

conflict and violence. This coincides with how 'Israeli' closely relates to other terms such as 'soldiers' and 'forces' as presented in Table 1.

Table 1, from the Palestinian corpus of tweets, shows terms occurring over the 24-hour interval. The columns 'co-occurrence score' set out the strength of associations of those terms that co-occur with 'Israeli'. These are listed and ordered, with 1 being directly associated, and 0 having no association. While there is a slight variation in the terms that occur prominently, there are some variations that co-occur within the same tweet. The Document Frequency (DF) score illustrates the number of tweets in which the term appears. For example, across the whole corpus of tweets 'forces' occurs 183 times. When we look at examples of terms paired within tweets we see '*Rubber-coated steel bullets fired by Israeli Forces*' or '*Israeli Forces firing dozens of stun grenades at bab al-zawwiva in #Hebron.*' The percentage column is the frequency of each term as a percentage of all 1,773 @ISM Palestine tweets. It is clear that 'Israeli forces' is a hashtag, as is 'Hebron', designed to diffuse the context, content and message to a wider audience.

Same Interval				Same tweet			
Term	Co-occurrence Score	Document frequency	Percentage	Term	Co-occurrence Score	Document frequency	Percentage
Israeli	1.000	262	14.8	Israeli	1.000	262	14.8
Forces	0.904	183	10.3	Forces	0.709	183	10.3
Palestinian	0.574	400	22.5	Palestinian	0.264	400	22.5
Steel	0.527	085	4.8	Soldiers	0.245	100	5.6
Youth	0.500	068	3.8	Live	0.177	147	8.3
Attacked	0.496	044	2.4	Ammunition	0.167	089	5
Coated	0.480	094	5.3	Shot	0.167	227	12.8
Hit	0.478	022	1.2	Settlers	0.165	154	8.7
Palestinians	0.458	154	8.6	Rubber	0.158	100	5.6
Checkpoint	0.446	101	5,6	Steel	0.158	085	4.8
Man	0.423	086	4.9	Coated	0.157	094	4.7

Source: Derived from @ISMPalestine using Tweetvis.

Table 1: Terms that co-occur with 'Israeli' in @ISMPalestine (1773 tweets in total)

Use of 'Soldiers' and 'Forces', whilst seeking to illustrate who is against the Palestinians, is telling, as the terms are broadly a mark of legitimacy. A member of a legitimate military is referred to as a soldier, or member of an armed force, whereas such terms are not applied in the reverse, which we will see when analyzing how @IDFspokesperson uses 'Palestinian'. Use of 'apartheid' seeks to portray 'Israel' as akin to white minority ruled South Africa (Zreik, 2004). This aims to link into a broader advocacy of boycott, divestment and sanctions, which was credited with assisting in the downfall of the racist South African regime (McMahon, 2014). The choice of terms and hashtags, charged with contextual information, concerns the portrayal of identity and cause in the conflict.

When we look at the use of 'Palestinian' within the data set of @IDFspokesperson, we see almost the opposite employment of terminology. It paints Israelis, either civilians, police, or IDF, as victims of attacks from Palestinians (Seo, 2014). The high frequency of 'Stab' (Table 2) points to the spike in stabbings in Jerusalem during the period of data collection. Within a broader context, attacks on the army or police, are seen as attacks upon the state. In Table 2, we can see some interesting same interval co-occurrences and tweet co-occurrences that point to a fundamentally different perspective on the conflict from the Palestinians.

Same Interval				Same tweet			
Term	Co-occurrence Score	Document frequency	Percentage	Term	Co-occurrence Score	Document frequency	Percentage
Palestinian	1.000	50	9.2	Palestinian	1.000	50	9.2
Stab	0.537	17	3.1	Stab	0.480	17	3.1
IDF	0.519	101	18.6	Attempted	0.345	33	6
Attempted	0.499	33	6	Shot	0.335	91	16.7
Assailant	0.482	86	15.8	Approached	0.283	4	7.3
Police	0.464	16	2.9	Attacker	0.277	26	4.7

Shot	0.454	91	16.7	Assailant	0.269	86	15.8
Israeli	0.451	55	10.1	Armed	0.267	7	1.3
Checkpoint	0.416	5	1	Knife	0.267	7	1.3
https	0.412	228	42	Hebron	0.263	45	8.3
Car	0.401	30	5.5	Ago	0.255	59	10.8
Forces	0.387	91	16.7	Forces	0.254	91	16.7

Source: Derived from @ISMPalestine using Tweetvis

Table 2: Terms that co-occur with 'Palestinian' in @IDFspokesperson (543 tweets in total)

Looking at the terms in Tables 1 and 2 there is a difference in what 'Palestinian' in @IDFspokesperson and 'Israeli' in @ISMPalestine are occurring with. The most common co-occurring terms in @IDFspokesperson are action words in which there were attempts, or actual attacks, using terms that describe the weapons. The terms used are not employed to link to a broader context, as in @ISMPalestine, but to the current reality from the Israeli perspective. Comparatively, there is little use of political, military, or historical, terminology in @IDFspokesperson. Identity portrayal in the Israeli corpus is focused on current violent events.

The IDF operates as a military exempt from contextualizing situations. This is not to say that a broader political context is not contained within the Israeli tweets, but when referring to the opposing side they describe their actions and place them within the context of a threat to the state. Palestinians are neither 'soldiers' nor 'forces' in @IDFspokesperson tweets. Instead, terms such as 'attacker' or 'assailant' are used which highlight that the IDF see themselves as defenders.

Both corpus of Twitter messages paint a picture of how the 'Self' and 'Other' in the conflict is presented. The term 'Israeli' is seen as an aggressor from the @ISMPalestine perspective. Whereas, 'Palestinian' is associated with a violent criminal type from the @IDFspokesperson perspective. This is an instance where language is employed to demarcate the difference between 'us' and 'them' (Bratchford, 2014). Both accounts want to construe the conflict as a process in which they are the victims.

Analysis of keywords 'IDF' and 'Israeli forces'

The use of 'IDF' and 'Israeli forces' concerns the portrayal of the IDF and its members conduct. 'IDF' is most commonly used by @IDFspokesperson, whereas 'Israeli Forces' is used by @ISMPalestine. With neither term an expressly derogatory comment on members of the Israeli military, their employment constitutes a nexus of usage by the Palestinian and Israeli Twitter accounts, as they portray the behaviour and identity of the Israeli military. This nexus of communication allows for an understanding of how mirror terms can be employed by both sides to communicate their vision of how the Israeli military functions and how this contributes to the portrayal of identities which are separate, but relate to the military. This will allow for use of substitution terms to further analyze and understand how identities are created in the conflict.

In placing the terms in their frame of reference, it is important to understand which side is using which term to comment on the behavior of the Israeli military. For this, we can look at the relative scores and DF values, which tell us how many times the term occurred in the totality of tweets. The DF value for 'Israeli' and 'forces' within @ISMPalestine tweets shows slight variation in Table 1. This is because 'Israeli' is also used with a variety of other terms, for example: 'Settlers' 'Youth' and 'Man'. This means that we must pay attention to terms that co-occur within 'IDF' and 'Israeli forces' same interval and same-tweet tables.

In Table 1, 'Israeli' and 'Forces' were regularly closely linked in @ISMPalestine tweets. 'Israeli' appeared in isolation in 262 of the 1,773 Palestinian tweets, or 14.7 percent, and 'forces' occurred 183 times, or 10.3 percent. However, 'forces' at 0.904 is strongly co-occurring in tweets with 'Israeli' in the dataset (24-hour intervals over the three months of data collection), such that you can consider it a probability that you will find those two words together in the Palestinian dataset.

In Table 2 'IDF', appearing in 101 of 543 Israeli tweets, constitutes a larger share of the Israeli tweets, at 18.6 percent, than the 12.69 percent for 'Israeli' and 'Forces' in the Palestinian tweet database. The higher frequency points to a useful term for the portrayal of identity around the Israeli military used by @IDFspokesperson. 'IDF' is also more practical than 'Israeli Forces' due to Twitter's character limit. 'IDF' constitutes 2.14 percent of the (then) 140-

character limit, whereas 'Israeli Forces', at 14 characters, constitutes 10 percent of available space. But, the identity @ISMPalestine seeks to portray about the Israeli military is one which is being used in place of more practical terms like 'IDF'.

Tweets and the use 'IDF' and 'Israeli forces'

The nexus of communication around 'IDF' and 'Israeli Forces' provides the opportunity to look at a small number of tweets to see how these terms are used in both datasets to portray identities for the Israeli military and its actions. The choice by @ISMPalestine to use a term closely resembling that used by the Israeli military is perhaps a way to connect into, and shift, the narrative when people search either by hashtag, or keywords, about the behaviour of the Israeli military using terms such as #Israeli forces or 'Israeli Forces'. This is because the official name of the Israeli military would result in sufficient cross-over. Similarly, this would explain why @IDFspokesperson seeks to do the same, and to engage in a tug-of-war for control of the portrayal of the identity of the Israeli military.

Examples of @ISMPalestine tweets

If we look at the options available to both parties, we can analyze why they choose to be so closely linked in their language when describing the 'who' in the conflict, with the 'what' and 'why' being the main differences in their tweets. Examining the other terms most frequently used by @ISMPalestine to refer to the Israeli military and their conduct, 'Apartheid' (DF score 63) and 'Occupation' (DF score 41) (or some variant of occupation) we can see that this language is portraying a particular identity and historical precedent for the Israeli military.

'Apartheid' and 'occupation' occur frequently, but in isolation. They are used as standalone hashtags, to link to a broader understanding by followers of @ISMPalestine about the suffering of other peoples. If we take 'apartheid', which is used in the same tweet as 'Israeli Forces', we can see that 'Israeli Forces' is used followed by the event and then '#apartheid', see examples below.

Example 1: Palestinian tweet

Israeli forces spraying skunk water on demonstrators and Palestinian homes in queitun in #hebron #apartheid

Example 2: Palestinian tweet

#IsraeliForces blocking Red Crescent #ambulances in #Jerusalem, and do not allow them to pass at all #apartheid

If we changed the structure of these tweets to include 'apartheid' in the description of Israeli military, they would be different and more targeted. In both examples, 'apartheid' is used as an appendage, albeit with a hashtag. But, if the opening read 'Israeli apartheid forces' then there would be no uncertainty to the motives behind the tweet. However, using 'apartheid' towards the end of the tweet allows the reader comprehend the content and then for the viewpoint of the poster to be conveyed.

Example 3: Palestinian tweet

14-year old boy shot with live ammunition by Israeli forces yesterday in #KufrQaddum #occupation #freePalestine <http://t.co>

Example 4: Palestinian tweet

One Palestinian shot with live ammunition in both legs at #Ofar military prison by Israeli forces. #occupation #freePalestine

In the examples above 'occupation' features in the same tweets as 'Israeli forces', but fails to feature within the term, appearing towards the end of the tweet and as a hashtag. In these examples we can see that the 'what' being discussed takes precedence over the 'who' and indeed the term 'occupation'.

Again replacing, or enhancing, the who section of the tweets, in this case 'Israeli forces', with the term 'occupation' would see a dramatic shift in tone. They would become more targeted and belligerent messages, as 'Israeli occupation forces' shifts to describing the Israeli military as one whose primary purpose is not defence. This would allow for a more targeted use of language than employed by @ISMPalestine to communicate their message, as well as their own position.

Examples of @IDFspokesperson tweets

Use of 'IDF' by @IDFspokesperson is efficient in character spaces, allows for the portrayal of a singular identity, and serves as a rallying point to find the account and refer to the conduct of the military. Standardization means that in their communications there is no ambiguity as to what the acronym means, no

ambiguity between what is mentioned as the conduct of the IDF and what is portrayed by @IDFspokesperson. To highlight this, we look at a selection of tweets that show how 'IDF' is used by @IDFspokesperson.

In the tweet below, we see the portrayal of 'IDF' embracing powerful and emotive language, such as family, to relate to a broader construction of the defense of Israel. This language is not uncommon in a military, and supports the creation of a positive, familial understanding of the functions of the military

Example 1: Israeli tweet

We salute the newest members of our IDF family – the hundreds of soldiers who came to Israel to defend our country.
<http://t.co/DF7CW2GTCl>

Similarly, the portrayal of an inclusive, tolerant military can be seen in Example 2. This seeks to show Israel as a multi-denominational state, and that it is a welcoming military.

Example 2: Israeli tweet

This IDF battalion of Muslims, Christians, Bedouins & Jews just received an award for educational excellence. <https://t.co/LWibh3YOY7>

Example 3 highlights the reality faced by members of the military, but also seeks to suggest that the 'IDF's purpose is defense.

Example 3: Israeli tweet

Update: Assailant stabbed IDF soldier at Gush Etzion Junction. Forces responded to attack & shot assailant.

The next tweet, while pointing to proactive defense, alludes to a broader issue. Nablus is within the formal West Bank, and governed by the Palestinian authority.

Example 4: Israeli tweet

IDF forces uncovered weapons cache including guns, knives and munition near Nablus.

The portrayal of the 'IDF' seeks to convey positivity in an otherwise bleak atmosphere, and creates an inclusive, standard perception of how a military should function. They aim to show the most positive elements of being engaged

in such a prolonged conflict and seeks to portray an identity for themselves as ethical and acting in defence. This allows for a homogenized identity to be conveyed and permits followers of the Twitter account to have their beliefs confirmed. Alternatively, @ISMPalestine is seeking to portray an identity for the Israeli military as an oppressor, or aggressor, with terms closely linked with historical injustices - 'apartheid' or 'occupation'. So, although this nexus points to how close the terms used by both sides are, we can see that the portrayal of identities points to just how far apart the sides are.

Conclusion

This paper sought to use two accounts from the micro blogging site Twitter to gain an understanding of how the opposing sides in the Israel-Palestine conflict portray their identities. The datasets were selected to show how the tweets, and some of their hashtags, were focused on portraying identity to a broader audience than just those active within the region.

We explored two corpora of tweets from @IDFspokesperson and @ISMPalestine, and looked at how language choices were employed to communicate a sense of the 'self' and 'other'. This allowed for the examination of terms both in their original tweets and in relation to co-occurring terms. This enabled us to look at how the substitution of terms would offer an alternative understanding of how the tweets could be construed.

In all, we see how both sides referred to the 'other', and how they portray their own identities. The contrasting narratives in these Twitter accounts produce and reproduce social identity among their own communities and followers. Both Twitter accounts echo the conflict narrative of their 'side'.

This paper provides an insight into how two Twitter accounts feed into identity formation in a time of conflict. Each of the accounts represent opposite views, and each stay true to the broader agenda of their side. Social media, in the form of Twitter, provides an unparalleled opportunity for each side to share their views unmediated. This has enabled them to gain significant audiences. Thus, we see the importance of Twitter accounts in building social identities for potentially global audiences supportive of political causes.

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