

Framing of the U.S. Embassy Move to Jerusalem: A Comparative Qualitative Study

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Abstract

*President Trump's declaration to make Jerusalem the capital of Israel and then later move the U.S. Embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem was met with disagreement from many in the international community. In this study, a qualitative content analysis was performed to investigate the news media coverage surrounding the Israel-Palestine conflict, and more specifically around President Trump's announcement. Two publications were examined, one serving a primarily Jewish population, and the other serving a primarily Arab population. Sixteen articles from *The Jewish Star* and 15 articles from *The Arab American News* were thematically studied. It was hypothesized that the media coverage serving the Jewish population would be in favor of the move and more positive than that of the Arab coverage; the results were consistent with the hypothesis. Not only did the study examine possible bias in the two publications, but also how coverage was framed. Themes that emerged from both publications reinforced the problem at the core of the Israel-Palestine conflict: the preservation of identity, culture and religion of both peoples.*

I. Introduction

The Israeli and Palestinian people have long been in conflict in the Middle East. Despite efforts toward a two-state solution – creating two independent states alongside one another – no such resolution has come to pass. Both sides have been at odds over a number of key issues, including who would have control of Jerusalem. Both sides view the city as their own capital. Jerusalem is one of the oldest cities in the world and is a holy site for Judaism, Islam, and Christianity. In December 2017, United States President Donald Trump recognized Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, and in May 2018 the American embassy in Tel Aviv was moved to Jerusalem. The move generated substantial backlash from the Palestinians as well as local and international critics. Not only were Palestinians angered by the move; much of the international community also rebuked Trump's announcement (Landler, 2017).

This study presents a thematic analysis of news articles from two publications, one serving an area with a high Jewish demographic, and one serving an area with a high Arab demographic. The research uses framing theory to examine how the embassy announcement was covered by different publications with two different perspectives. "Framing theory suggests that how something is presented to the audience influences the choices people make about how to process that information" (Davie, 2014, p. 1). In other words, the way

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in which the news media presents a topic directly relates to the way the public perceives that issue. This study hypothesized that the publication serving a Jewish population (*The Jewish Star*) would frame the embassy move positively, and that the publication serving an Arab population (*The Arab American News*) would be against the move.

II. Literature Review

This section examines existing literature on news media's role in shaping public opinion through agenda setting and framing. Public attitudes can be shaped by how the news media portray an issue or topic. When an event or conflict occurs far from home, the public relies on the media to understand and form an opinion about the topic. International news coverage shapes our opinions and perceptions of foreign nations.

Agenda Setting

In 1972, Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw first presented the concept of agenda setting. "They originally suggested that the media sets the public agenda, in the sense that they may not exactly tell you what to think, but they may tell you what to think about" (Davie, 2010, p. 1). In their first article, the authors state, "Readers learn not only about a given issue, but also how much importance to attach to that issue from the amount of information in a news story and its position." (McCombs & Shaw, 1972, p. 176). This theory holds significance because many news stories take place far from where the readers reside, and by the media choosing whether or not to cover a certain topic, issues may appear as more or less important to the reader.

The news media not only determine which topics are covered, but also the way in which a particular issue is portrayed. The agenda setting theory sheds light on how media cover controversial issues, including the Israel-Palestine dispute. In the view of some scholars, "The media have clearly played a pro-active role in the Middle East conflict, the coverage of which is obscured by the contrasting images of Jew and Muslim in western thought" (Egorova & Parfitt, 2004, p. 3).

Agenda setting is based upon two principles. "The first is that the media filters and shapes what we see rather than just reflecting stories to the audience. [...] The second assumption is that the more attention the media gives to an issue, the more likely the public will consider that issue to be important." (Karell, 2018, p. 2).

Previous research has established that there is a relationship between media coverage of nations and how the public viewed those nations. "The news media can show the public both how vitally important countries are to the United States and how negatively the countries should be viewed" (Wanta, Golan, & Lee, 2004, p. 1). Agenda setting theory is evident in the way international news is perceived by the public. Few have first-hand experience in foreign countries, making coverage of international news an important agenda-setting duty of the media (Wanta, Golan, & Lee, 2004).

Framing

Goffman maintained that "framing theory suggests that how something is presented to the audience (called "the frame") influences the choices people make about how to process that information..." (Davie, 2014, p. 1). Frames organize the structure and meaning of a message. In understanding how the news media set an agenda, researchers must examine how a specific topic or issue is framed within the media coverage, which in turn shapes our understanding of the topic itself. Previous scholars have identified "four structural dimensions of news discourse" (Pan & Kosicki, 1993, p. 59). Syntactic structures look for patterns in the way words and phrases are used within the context of a news story. Script structures look at the overall newsworthiness of the topic as well as the intention of the journalist to communicate an event to the public that goes beyond their own experience. Thematic structures refer to a journalist and or publication to impose an underlying theme to a news story. Rhetorical structures refer to the stylistic choices a journalist makes, such as the use of metaphors, catchphrases and wording, in order to make a story seem more provocative. (Pan & Kosicki, 1993).

Framing of International Conflict

The type of framing a journalist uses greatly influences whether the public will sympathize with a particular side or simply feel removed from these far away events. (Evans, 2010). Numerous scholars have

focused on media bias in the coverage of the Israel-Palestine conflict. The main argument of Neureiter's (2016) article, which examined sources of media bias around the Israel-Palestine conflict, was that the portrayal varied depending upon the country that provides the coverage. Neureiter suggested that the biggest implication of media bias surrounding a group of people is population: "The more populous an ethnic community becomes, the more likely it is to make its voice heard and to effectively promote its interests. Such ethnic interest groups then possibly influence both foreign policy-making and public opinion on certain issues" (p. 79). These intersections, scholars argue, mold opinion and biases, not only within the media, but also within the public.

In previous research, a number of frames were commonly found in U.S. news media surrounding international issues: "conflict, economic consequences, human impact, and morality" (An & Gower, 2009 p. 108). This study aims to identify which frames are present in more narrowly targeted news coverage.

III. Methods

A qualitative content analysis was performed to investigate the news media coverage surrounding the Israel-Palestine conflict, and more specifically around President Trump's announcement to move the Israeli Embassy to from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. To better understand how a particular target audience may affect the way the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is framed, this study examined content from two news sources. One was *The Arab American News*, a newspaper located in Dearborn, Michigan, where more than one-third of the population is Arab, according to Census Bureau estimates. The other was *The Jewish Star*, the highest-circulated Jewish newspaper in the greater New York City area, one of the most populous Jewish areas in the United States. These two periodicals were chosen and examined to obtain insight into the local-level framing of the Israel-Palestine conflict and, more specifically, the relocation of the U.S. Embassy.

The study analyzed the content of all articles that were published in the *Arab American News* and *The Jewish Star* between December 1, 2017 (right before Trump's announcement to move the embassy) and June 1, 2018 (two weeks after the actual move of the embassy) which contained the topic "U.S. Embassy move from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem." Articles were accessed through the NewsBank database. A total of 15 articles from the *Arab American News*, and 16 articles from *The Jewish Star* were analyzed. A qualitative thematic analysis examined quotes contained in the articles, as well as overarching rhetoric and themes. The qualitative analysis allows for the identification of framing around the embassy move narrative. It is important to note that qualitative research is not generalizable, but instead provides insight into the framing process in these particular instances.

IV. Findings

Publication #1: The Jewish Star

An analysis of 16 news articles from *The Jewish Star* publication revealed four key themes: religious significance, historical significance, aligning values, and the law. *The Jewish Star* also published complete transcripts of Vice President Mike Pence's speech to the Knesset (Israeli Parliament), and of Trump's Jerusalem speech.

The theme encompassing support for the move of the embassy on religious grounds were prevalent in four of *The Jewish Star* articles. For example, a commentary by Ammiel Hirsch noted that Jerusalem was "the place where our people was formed, where the Bible was written. Jews lived free and made pilgrimage to Jerusalem for a thousand years. Our national existence changed the world and led to the creation of two other great faiths" (Hirsch and Wise, 2017). Articles centered on this theme argued that Jerusalem is not only a historic part of the Jewish identity, but also the most central part of the Jewish religion.

Similarly, in another news article, the president of Christians in Defense of Israel said Jerusalem "has historically and biblically always been the capital of Israel, and I think Christians are united by and large by this move" (Savage, 2017). Many evangelical Christian organizations are in support of the move because the Bible states that Jerusalem is Israel's capital.

A second theme, found in nine *Jewish Star* articles, encompasses the support for the move on the basis of its historical significance. For example, the editor of *The Jewish Star* wrote in an editorial, “All the United States has done is to recognize what has been the truth on the ground for 70 years” (Tobin, 2018a). Another article noted that the ribbon-cutting ceremony for the new embassy was planned for Israel’s Independence Day: “Selecting May 14 might soften the blow to the Palestinians,” one writer suggested, because Israelis will already be celebrating that day (Dunetz, 2018). The American Israel Public Affairs Committee also was quoted in a news article talking about the significance of the move occurring on Israel’s Independence Day, and in the same news article, The American Jewish Congress applauded the Trump administration for its “historic commitment to relocating the American embassy from Tel Aviv to Israel’s rightful capital of Jerusalem” (“Jewish organizations,” 2017).

Previously, Israel was the only country in the world whose capital city was not recognized by the United States, and four news articles noted this fact. One said Trump’s announcement, “is more than an important benchmark—it is a milestone that corrects a historical wrong” (Savage, 2017), while quoting the Jewish Council for Public Affairs saying, “We agree with the president that Israel, like all countries, has the right to determine the location of its capital” (Savage, 2017).

Other coverage emphasized that the relocation of the embassy was an important event that acknowledges the history of the Jewish people in Israel. In a news article, Daniel B. Shapiro, who served as U.S. ambassador to Israel during the Obama administration, was quoted saying, “The presence of a U.S. Embassy in parts of Jerusalem no one disputes are Israeli territory is one way of acknowledging the centuries of history that link the Jewish people to the city” (“U.S. embassy relocates,” 2018).

A third theme focused on alignment of values that the United States and Israel share. Some of these values include liberty, religious freedom, and safety, among others. The published transcript of Vice President Mike Pence’s speech to the Knesset included: “We stand with Israel because your cause is our cause, your values are our values, and your fight is our fight. We stand with Israel because we believe in right over wrong, in good over evil, and in liberty over tyranny” (“Pence vows,” 2018).

Another value that was stressed in eight articles was that of a promise kept. During his presidential campaign, Donald Trump made a promise that he would move the U.S. embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. One article included, “Thank you, President Trump for keeping the promise so many other presidents broke” (Dunetz, 2018). Within the 16 articles, “thank you” appears ten times in reference to Trump’s decision.

Religious freedom was another shared value noted in coverage. One article said, “recognition [of Jerusalem as the capital] reinforces Israel’s role in guaranteeing religious freedom in Jerusalem for all faiths” (“U.S. embassy relocates,” 2018). In addition, safety and protection of the people was prominent in the coverage. People in support of the embassy move cite the effects that years of waiting for such an event have had, and two news articles discussed those effects. For example, one article suggested that “The problem with waiting was that holding off only served to reinforce Palestinian rejectionism” (Savage, 2017).

Another theme, noted in five articles, related to U.S. law. For instance, one news article wrote that the move “represents the fulfillment of the Jerusalem Embassy Act of 1995, which mandates that the United States move its embassy to Jerusalem” (“U.S. embassy relocates,” 2018). Other articles noted that the move was a result of a bipartisan effort in the U.S. government. For example, one article used a 2017 quote from Democratic Sen. Bob Menendez, senior member of the senate Foreign Relations Committee, who supported moving the U.S. embassy to Jerusalem.

Coverage in *The Jewish Star* was not exclusively positive; some consistent themes emerged against the move of the embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. One was that the move would discourage peace talks between the two sides because there is no overall peace plan in place. For example, one news article quoted Rabbi Rick Jacobs, President of the Union for Reform Judaism, who said that although the U.S. Embassy “should, at the right time, be moved from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem,” the decision should not have been made “absent a comprehensive plan for a peace process” (Hirsch & Wise, 2017). Likewise, another article noted, “some Jewish leaders, while recognizing the importance of the Jerusalem move, said the timing was not right” (Savage, 2017). Coverage in *The Jewish Star* also noted backlash by the United Nations, which voted to condemn the U.S. decision, and concerns about protests from the Palestinian Authority.

President Trump himself was also a focus of coverage. As Jonathan S. Tobin noted in a commentary, some American Jews were unhappy about the move of the embassy solely because it was implemented by Trump. While Tobin found some of the president’s “personal behavior and style” regrettable, he also argued

that, “only someone like Trump, who distrusts the experts and disdains the established rules of politics, would have ignored the predictions that the world would end if the embassy were moved.” (Tobin, 2018b). Other articles saw the move through a political lens: “Trump wants to help (Israel Prime Minister) Netanyahu stay in office and the move will certainly help him politically” (Dunetz, 2018).

Publication #2: The Arab American News

In analyzing 16 news articles from *The Arab American News*, four key themes emerged: religion, international criticism, critique of the U.S. / Trump administration, and consequences of the announcement in the Middle East.

Many Palestinians believe that Jerusalem is an essential part of the Muslim religion, a prominent theme that was reflected in the newspaper’s coverage. One news article wrote that Jerusalem “is an integral part of the Palestinian identity” (Elassar, 2018), while an opinion piece lamented that many U.S. leaders had not “acknowledged that Jerusalem is the commercial, cultural, educational and religious center for Palestinian life” (Zunes, 2017).

The Arab American News also made note of the international community’s disapproval of the move in seven articles. In particular, four news articles noted Turkey’s objections and threats “to cut diplomatic ties with Israel if Trump recognizes Jerusalem” (“Trump tells Arab,” 2017). Four news articles pointed out that the Russian government “feared the embassy move would increase tensions across the Middle East” (“Israeli forces kill,” 2018). Two articles also noted the United Nations’ opposition to the move.

Some Palestinians believe that the embassy decision might conflict with international law, and three articles in *The Arab American News* mentioned this concern. An opinion piece noted that the move “raises serious questions” legally, while also risking “a violent and destabilizing reaction targeting U.S. interests globally” (Zunes, 2017). In another article, a Palestinian negotiator was quoted saying, “This [embassy] move is not only illegal but will also thwart the achievement of a just and lasting peace” (“U.S. Embassy road,” 2018). Still another opinion piece said “Not only did the U.S. pull out of the ‘peace process,’ it is expected to do its utmost to jeopardize any Palestinian initiative aimed at holding Israel accountable for its 50-year-old illegal military occupation” (Baroud, 2018).

Twelve of the 16 articles included critique of the U.S. government. One commentary on the embassy decision lamented that “U.S. foreign policy has been bankrupt for years. It was never fair, nor did it ever intend to be so” (Baroud, 2017), while another wrote that the change in policy meant “the United States could no longer serve as an honest broker in any peace process with Israel” (“Israeli forces kill,” 2018). Other related articles laid blame directly on Trump for his “dangerous and provocative move regarding Jerusalem— like so many of his reckless policies both abroad and at home” (Zunes, 2017).

Some articles in *The Arab American News* portrayed the embassy decision as part of a broader political calculation by the U.S. president. “Trump appears intent on satisfying the pro-Israel, right-wing base, including evangelical Christians, that helped him win the presidency,” asserted one article (“Trump tells Arab,” 2017). Another article suggested that “any rioting and acts of terrorism by Muslims in reaction to Trump’s decision would only reinforce his narrative and his agenda for restricting immigration and bombing Muslim countries.” (Zunes, 2017).

Another primary theme of coverage, the effect the embassy move might have on security and stability in the Middle East, was addressed in 10 articles. One article addressed “outrage from Palestinians and the Arab world and concern among Washington’s western allies” (“U.S. vetoes U.N. call,” 2017), while another news article noted “potential damage to U.S. relations with Muslim countries” (Reuters, 2017). Yet another article expressed concern that the move would “surely create further destabilization in a region that has been taken on a destructive course for years” (Baroud, 2017). This destabilization, according to another opinion article, raised concerns that extremists “will likely take advantage of popular outrage over the decision to encourage violent attacks, including terrorism, targeting U.S. interests” (Zunes, 2017).

None of the 15 *Arab American News* articles supported the embassy move, but a number of articles had content that remained relatively neutral. These articles addressed Trump’s campaign promise being fulfilled, other nations potentially getting on board, and the move as a fulfillment of the 1995 law. One news article did see something of a silver lining: “a negotiated settlement between Israel and the Palestinians on defining Jerusalem’s borders” (“U.S. Embassy road,” 2018).

V. Discussion

An analysis of *The Jewish Star* found that all 16 articles were in support of the U.S. Embassy move. *The Jewish Star* comes from the most populous Jewish area in the United States, an interesting point to consider in light of previous scholarship indicating that “the more populous an ethnic community becomes, the more likely it is to make its voice heard and to effectively promote its interests” (Neureiter, 2016, p. 79). The language used in *The Jewish Star* is not only pro-move of the embassy; it is also pro-Israel and pro-Trump in many ways. Previous studies also acknowledge the “existence of an interrelationship between demographics, public opinion, foreign policy/interstate relations, and media bias” (Neureiter, 2016, p. 79), a conclusion that is further supported by findings in this study. This foreign policy decision by the Trump administration is one that has received countless criticism and backlash, but all of *The Jewish Star* articles support the move. This would seem to indicate the presence of media bias in the publication because there were no alternative viewpoints offered. Although the articles from *The Jewish Star* did mention reasons why the move might not be wise, it is evident that such reservations are not representative of the general trend of the publication. The 15 articles from *The Arab American News* generally reflected strong sentiment against the U.S. Embassy move, further supporting past scholarship on how demographics can shape media coverage and public opinion.

An interesting finding was the juxtaposition of how *The Jewish Star* and *The Arab American News* each viewed the significance of the date of the move. *The Jewish Star* cited the fact that the embassy move was occurring on Israel’s 70th birthday, and as a result some of the articles from *The Jewish Star* suggested that the embassy move to Jerusalem was a great birthday present to Israel. One article asserted that the choice of that day would “soften the blow” to the Palestinian people since the Israeli people would be celebrating anyway. On the other hand, Israel’s birthday is also the anniversary of the Palestinian people losing their nation, and an article from *The Arab American News* stated that it was insensitive making the move on that day because it might hinder peace efforts.

Another interesting juxtaposition between the two publications is the way they cast the significance of the embassy relocation in the light of decades past. In five articles from *The Arab American News*, Trump is condemned for breaking decades of U.S. policy. On the other hand, *The Jewish Star* thanked Trump for breaking from decades of precedent and fulfilling the Jerusalem Embassy Act of 1995.

VI. Conclusion

Although the study sought a fair and even examination of both publications and the content within them, there were some limitations. Photos were not included in the analysis due to a desire to focus on how the embassy move was framed solely within text. A future study could contribute to the understanding of the way in which each publication framed the issue by examining photos, design choices, and article placement. Future scholars also could focus on publications that are more widely read in the United States, as well as international publications.

In this study, it is evident that religion and identity are key issues in this conflict based on the way each publication framed its coverage. Both publications point out multiple times the significance of Jerusalem to religion and identity. Israelis and Palestinians want to preserve their identities, religions, and cultures, and both believe that Jerusalem is fundamentally at the core of those. Both peoples will do everything they can to preserve Jerusalem as “theirs,” and until a compromise or a defeat, a two-state solution might be impossible. This fact alone underscores what is perhaps the ultimate problem within this conflict: It is not merely a conflict over land; it is a complex conflict that includes preservation of religion and identity that dates back centuries.

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