

ISSA Proceedings 2010 - Strategic Communication - How Governments Frame Arguments In The Media



Vice President Joe Biden visited Jerusalem in March, 2010 to attend a series of high profile and carefully planned meetings with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and senior members of his government. The visit was designed to calm Israeli anxieties about U.S. commitment to Israel and to restart the peace talks with the Palestinians. Biden has been a strong supporter of Israel throughout his political career. Upon reaching Jerusalem, he gave a speech in which he pledged continuing support for Israel stating, “Progress occurs in the Middle East when everyone knows there is simply no space between the United States and Israel” (cited by Bronner 2010). Only a few hours later the Vice President was stunned by the announcement that Netanyahu’s conservative government intended to build 1,600 new housing units for ultra-orthodox Jews in East Jerusalem on land that was claimed during the Six Day War. This announcement came despite the fact that the Obama administration had been pressing the Israeli government to halt the construction of any new settlements on land also claimed by the Palestinians as necessary for the creation of a viable Palestinian state (Bronner 2010; McCarthy 2010).

Over the next few days the controversy between the United States and Israel, two close allies, grew as new statements condemning or defending the decision and the manner and timing in which it was communicated were discussed in mediated public statements issued by the respective governments and their officials and in press accounts that both reported and analyzed these statements.

The situation prompted a series of carefully choreographed arguments from both governments as they attempted to communicate to a wide array of domestic and international audiences. The incident provides an interesting example of strategic communication in foreign policy, and specifically into the role of strategic media

maneuvers in media diplomacy. This essay will: 1) discuss the notion of strategic communication and media diplomacy as a macro-context and how they have co-evolved in the new media environment; 2) critically examine the arguments in this case as examples of media maneuvering by government spokespersons in this controversy; 3) identify the tensions that were exposed, created, and eventually mitigated within the multiple domestic and international audiences who see themselves as stakeholders in this controversy; and 4) offer initial conclusions regarding the “lessons learned” for media diplomacy in a global environment.

Strategic Communication, Media Diplomacy, and Foreign Policy Arguments

Strategic communication is typically defined as the study of deliberate programs of messages or arguments that are designed by organizations, institutions or other entities in order to achieve particular goals (Riley, Weintraub & Hollihan 2008). Much of the early work in strategic communication focused on either internal organizational change strategies or on external marketing campaigns. Recently, the research and the practice of strategic communication have moved to the study of governments as they attempt to win over either domestic or international publics. The Biden visit was intended to demonstrate U.S. interest and influence in the region. The ill-timed Israeli announcement of the new housing units, however, reveals the challenge of attempting to think, act, and communicate strategically in an environment where one lacks control over the actions of one’s partners or the media. Successful strategic communication depends upon the ability to predict not just how one’s messages and arguments will be understood and interpreted, but how one’s partners and adversaries are likely to respond. When surprises occur, as they did in this instance, strategies must be adapted to the changed situation. One of the challenges of adapting to the situation, and one of the elements most present in this case study, is determining whether the unexpected response is a result of a misunderstanding (defined in this analysis as an accident: formal communication based on premises not presented or on interpretations not intended by the other government) or whether the “misunderstanding” is itself strategically ambiguous communication (Eisenberg 2007) that is a form of strategic media maneuvering and understood differently by each stakeholder group.

Strategic communication touches on foreign policy, international diplomacy, military strategy, and domestic politics. It used to be possible for political regimes to create alternative messages for different audiences and thus to preserve a level

of nuance, ambiguity, and perhaps even outright deception when they had to respond to challenging messages. In our increasingly connected and globalized world, this is no longer possible. The messages of foreign policy must be formulated with the understanding that they are likely to be seen or heard by many different audiences, each applying their own cultural understandings, worldviews, and objectives (Klumpp, Hollihan, & Riley 2002). As Nick Cull, a key scholar in public diplomacy likes to say, “What is said in Kansas is heard in Kandahar” (2010).

Those who have studied strategic communication successes and failures have argued that it must be integrated into the policy making process and not merely appended onto that process after the important policy decisions have been made (Riley et al. 2008). An effective communication process will not compensate for failed or ill-conceived policy choices by governments. The strategic communication process should be designed in anticipation of the likely responses of both allies and adversaries, and it must involve the construction of metrics that help governments understand the effects of the messages and policies (Lynch 2009). Admiral Michael Mullen, the Chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, and thus the nation’s highest ranking military officer, declared that he was unhappy with the term “strategic communication,” because he believed that “the essence of good communication [was] having the right intent up front and letting our actions speak for themselves” (Mullen 2009). The problem with this view, as Mark Lynch (2009) argued is that:

Everything is subject to spin, framing, and interpretation. Mullen is right to critique those who focus exclusively on the messaging and ignore the policy. But it doesn’t follow that just getting the policy right will succeed without an effective communications strategy. There is going to be an information war, a struggle over framing and interpretation, no matter what policy is pursued. This is why strategic communications can’t be ignored in the formation and execution of policy in today’s international system.

We believe that understanding the role of media diplomacy is critical in assessing the effectiveness of any nation’s strategic communication of its foreign policy objectives. The instruments of media diplomacy may include speeches, press conferences, interviews, visits, media events, or even leaks (Gilboa 1998). Media diplomacy occurs when policymakers or skilled negotiators “use the media to send messages to leaders of rival states and to non-state actors” (Gilboa 1998, p.

63). The U.S., as one example, has long been committed to the use of international media campaigns to advance its foreign policy objectives (Hayden 2006). Another important aspect of media diplomacy is that it permits those who are engaged in complex negotiations to send signals that are multi-directional and can be interpreted and understood differently by different audiences. Recent developments in new forms of digital media and social networking sites have created huge challenges as diplomats and policy makers attempt to maintain any semblance of control over their messages. Hayden (2006) posits that argument scholars are well-positioned to study how argument formations emerge in different media in order to illustrate how diverse and networked publics construct meaning about complicated foreign policy issues.

Multidirectional foreign policy arguments are consumed by publics that have different assessments about those facts and are drawn from multiple sources to provide empirical materiality to their facts. Likewise, stakeholders will value those facts differently because they will be relying upon their own unique histories, cultural memories, social knowledge, notions of what constitutes good reasons, and normative rules for argumentative praxis. In short, argument becomes less a rule governed activity of shared understanding and more a process of deliberative construction as real controversies are worked over in the public and political spheres. **[i]** In this sense, political argument in the world of international relations and public diplomacy has become what Joseph Nye calls “a contest of competitive credibility” (2008, p. 100). Compared to the previous world of power politics where a nation’s military or economy decided who will win in foreign policy, international politics in a global network of information may be much more about whose story wins (Arquilla & Ronfeldt 1999).

Through its focus on media diplomacy and the role of public argumentation in shaping understanding of US-Israeli relations following Vice President Biden’s visit to Israel, this study takes “. . . an approach that locates the engine of world politics in globally linked communication networks where competing ideas shape the course of events” (Mitchell 2002, p. 68). Goodnight notes that communicative argumentation is grounded in the logic of the institution and thus institutional logics are both material and symbolic and provide the formal and informal rules of action but they are also historical and evolve over time and “render state of the art practice sometimes unstable” (2008, p. 262). Such is likely the case as media diplomacy evolves to be multi-directional - coping with the multiple stakeholders

that receive messages on the state of international relations.

A Framework for Analysis

Strategic communication in a global sphere is contextualized both by time and institutional logics or frames (a more detailed discussion of framing can be found in Riley, Usher & Hollihan 2009). The question is whether the goal of the argument is to respond to a particular event that is rhetorically exigent, to build international relationships, or something in between. Thai cooking shows, for example, are excellent examples of long term media diplomacy for Thailand since studies show people around the world love Thai food but these shows are not responsive to the mob violence that took place in the spring of 2010. As Gilboa explains:

Traditional public diplomacy was aimed at long-term results, but the information age required a major adjustment in the time framework. It would be useful to distinguish among three time dimensions: immediate, intermediate, and long. Each presents different purposes and means, different attitudes to the media and public opinion, a different degree of desirable association or ties with the government, and matching public diplomacy instruments. At the immediate level, the purpose is to react within hours or a few days to developing events, usually to minimize damage or exploit an opportunity through techniques of news management. Such immediate action is generally led by senior government officials. The most appropriate public diplomacy instruments for this stage would be advocacy, international broadcasting, and cyber public diplomacy. (Gilboa 2008, p. 72)

Media diplomacy goals in an intermediate time period, we believe, should be transitional and focus on identifying critical stakeholder groups – Advocates (supportive and likely to be engaged), Allies (supportive but less active), Adversaries (opposed and likely to be engaged), and Anti-’s (opposed but less active) (NPS/USC 2010) – as well as on developing message themes that further the goals of strategic communication plans and attempt to shift the argument frames for those stakeholders.

Long time period diplomacy programs are built through new institutional logics that emerge from developing new relationships, through transparency and shared goals for the future. While media diplomacy plays an important role in these programs, Cull (2010) argues that the most important communication activity is listening and that this appears considerably harder for governments to practice

than most other elements of diplomacy.

US-Israel Relations

To appreciate the dynamics in this particular case, it is necessary to briefly consider the history of US-Israeli relations. The U.S. has long been identified as Israel's closest ally. Cordesman (2010) noted: "The real motives behind America's commitment to Israel are moral and ethical. They are a reaction to the horrors of the Holocaust, to the entire history of Western anti-Semitism, and to the United States' failure to help German and European Jews during the period before it entered World War II. They are a product of the fact that Israel is a democracy that shares virtually all of the same values as the United States." In the sixty years since Israel was founded, the U.S. has provided huge amounts of foreign aid. For example, in 2009, the U.S. provided more than \$2.55 billion in military aid. The two nations conduct joint military planning, training, and exercises. In addition, they closely collaborate on military research and weapons development (Background Note: Israel 2009). Despite the close political, military, and economic ties, however, the relationship has sometimes been fraught with difficulty. It has arguably been a much more successful partnership when Israel has been governed by its more liberal as opposed to its conservative parties. The U.S. also wants to maintain cordial relations with the Arabic nations in the region, but its close contacts with Israel complicate this goal and are often cited as a primary cause for the current global tensions and acts of terror.

In order to reach a lasting peace in the region, and in an attempt to secure positive relationships with Arabic nations, the U.S. has since the early 1990s supported the call for a Palestinian homeland with secure borders and sufficient territorial resources to sustain a rapidly growing population (Background Note: Israel, 2009). The United States would prefer that Israel return the land gained in the 1967 and 1973 wars to the Palestinians to help create this homeland, but this is unlikely to happen. In recent years Israel has experienced a rapid growth in population as immigrants from around the world have poured in, many of whom are profoundly religious and conservative and not eager to compromise with moderate or liberal Jews, let alone Palestinian Arabs. These immigrants typically had large families and wished to create religious communities apart from more secular Israelis. They were given the right to build settlements in disputed territory starting in 1981 during the term of Prime Minister Menachem Begin. This policy not only housed the new immigrants in areas that formed a more

defensible perimeter to protect Israel from invasion, but also made it less likely that this land would ever be repatriated to the displaced Palestinians. The rapid expansion in the size and number of Israeli settlements “take up more and more of the land the Palestinians want for their state and make partition increasingly difficult. Today, nearly 300,000 Israeli settlers live in the West Bank and 180,000 in east Jerusalem” (Joe Biden’s Snub 2010).

The U.S. government has for many years pressured Israel to stop the expansion of the settlements in an effort to make peace with the Palestinians. In November, 2009, Israel agreed to a ten month freeze on new settlement building in the West Bank. The Israelis refused, however, to halt the expansion of settlements in East Jerusalem which it captured in the 1967 war and considers part of its ancient capital (Bronner 2010).

The Mini-Case Study

The announcement of the new housing units during Vice President Biden’s visit, given how vocal U.S. foreign policy makers have been on the subject, was especially provocative. Biden declared:

I condemn the decision by the government of Israel to advance planning for new housing units in East Jerusalem. The substance and timing of the announcement, particularly with the launching of proximity talks, is precisely the kind of step that undermines the trust we need right now and runs counter to the constructive discussions that I’ve had here in Israel. We must build an atmosphere to support negotiations not complicate them. (cited by Hounshell 2010)

As might be expected, the Palestinian government also condemned the decision, declaring that the announcement of the new housing units was “destroying our efforts” toward negotiating a peace agreement (cited by McCarthy 2010). The construction plan was also sharply criticized by Egypt, Israel’s closest ally in the Arab world. A spokesman for the Egyptian Foreign Ministry declared the announcement “absurd” and proclaimed it “disdainful of the Arab and the Palestinian positions and the American mediation” (Joe Biden’s Snub 2010). The announcement also drew the ire of others. The European Union reiterated its declaration “that settlements are illegal under international law,” a position shared by United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki-moon. Russia declared the move “unacceptable,” and Britain and Turkey said it would cause doubt regarding how serious Israel was in pursuing peace (Rabinowitz 2010, Joe Biden’s Snub 2010).

The Obama administration used the moment, and the global opposition to Israel's actions, as an opportunity to emphasize its opposition to new settlements. But it chose very low risk and low intensity strategic responses. Vice President Biden, after having issued his statement, arrived ninety minutes late for a scheduled dinner with Prime Minister Netanyahu, forcing the Israeli head of state to endure the embarrassment of entertaining an openly rude guest (Buck 2010). The next day Secretary of State Hillary Clinton referred to the announcement during Biden's visit as "insulting." Her office also issued the following statement:

"Mrs. Clinton spoke this morning with Prime Minister Bibi Netanyahu... to reinforce that this action had undermined trust and confidence in the peace process and in America's interests. . . . The secretary said she could not understand how this happened...and she made clear that the Israeli government needed to demonstrate not just through words but through specific actions that they are committed to this relationship and to the peace process." (Gandelman 2010)

President Obama's closest political advisor David Axelrod (who is Jewish) called the approval of new housing units during Biden's visit an "affront" and an "insult," and added that the announcement "seemed calculated to undermine" the peace talks with the Palestinians (Gandelman 2010). Axelrod also declared, however, that "Israel is a strong and special ally. The bonds run deep. But for just that very reason, this was not the right way to behave" (Gandelman 2010). In order to allow the impact of the story to percolate even deeper into the public's consciousness, the White House let it be known that President Obama was personally "livid" over the humiliation (Gandelman 2010).

The transitional strategy was also clear - the bond between the nations would stretch enough to diminish Israel in the media and portray the special relationship between these two states as becoming less special over time. Through mediated arguments about Israel's inappropriate behavior for an ally and the harmful effects on the mediation process, the messages put distance between the two nations' perceived goals and values. And without a personal statement from President Obama, nor any visible signs of support, a new media diplomacy frame was evolving in an intermediate time period - to be our ally means "No New Settlements."

World Leader's Arguments in Response to the Controversy

If one goal pursued by the Obama administration was to convince Palestine that

the U.S. wanted to play a more neutral role in the region, there is some evidence that they succeeded. The guardedly angry statements coming from the Obama administration were met with approval by the Palestinian Authority. Saeb Erakat, a spokesperson declared that the PA “welcomes the statements from US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and the Quartet condemning the Israeli government decision to build settlements in the eastern sector of Jerusalem.” He further declared: “We want these positions to become binding and for Israel to scrap its settlement decisions, especially its plan to build 1600 homes in Jerusalem” (Gandelman 2010).

If the goal of all of this tough talk was to intensify the pressure on Prime Minister Netanyahu and urge him to change his policy toward building new settlements, the results were mixed. Clearly, Netanyahu felt the pressure sparked by his open break with his closest ally, yet his own ideological commitments and the domestic political environment in Israel made it unlikely that he would cave in to this pressure and freeze the building of new settlements. Netanyahu summoned his closest advisors, supposedly conducting a probe to determine precisely what had happened. Netanyahu also quickly issued a statement in which he claimed to be as surprised by the announcement to build the new housing as Biden had been. Netanyahu also called German Chancellor Angela Merkel and Italian President Silvio Berlusconi to express regret at the incident (Gandelman 2010). The interior minister who announced the new housing development declared that the timing of the announcement was purely coincidental and that “There was certainly no intention to provoke anyone and certainly not to come along and hurt the vice-president of the United States” (cited by McCarthy 2010). The Israelis also reported that the new housing units had been previously announced, and that the timing merely indicated that the project was progressing through the permit process.

At the same time, Netanyahu’s government announced that it was not backing down, that it would build the 1,600 disputed housing units, that it reserved the right to build still more projects in East Jerusalem, and that it would remain the undivided capital of Israel (Netanyahu says there will be no concession 2010). Their media diplomacy included prefacing the “unhappy” news with positive or conciliatory statements – a common communication tactic that we call, “Two pieces of good news and oh, by the way . . .”

The stinging rebukes from the U.S. and other world leaders prompted Prime

Minister Netanyahu to visit Washington, D.C. approximately a week later to illustrate that the U.S. and Israel continued to be on good terms and that this incident was merely a minor distraction. Even this visit to Washington was replete with examples of continued media diplomacy, designed to communicate to different stakeholders. President Obama met with Netanyahu twice, but signaled his continuing displeasure by refusing to admit any reporters or photographers to either meeting. As a result, there were no jointly issued press briefings and no images of the two leaders standing next to each other grinning. The argument in this case was visual but not in the usual sense - it was the *absence* of traditional photo opportunities with the most powerful man in the world that suggests the unequivocal power of U.S. support is less present than it was previously.

As the story evolved, Obama continued to press Israel for a freeze on all future settlements on disputed land and Netanyahu assured his conservative supporters that he adamantly refused to even consider a change in policy. He declared that he told President Obama, "from our standpoint, building in Jerusalem is like building in Tel Aviv" (cited by Ravid 2010). Through this analogy, Netanyahu sets up two positions - first, an argument to the global audience that the land is unequivocally Israel's now (and therefore not disputed) and second, an argument positioned for his conservative home audience that claims Israel does not need to bow to the wishes of the US administration and that he will follow the policies that got him elected.

Israeli Audience (including supporters)

Netanyahu also used his visit to Washington as an opportunity to meet with a pro-Israel lobbying group and with small groups of congressmen known to be fiercely pro-Israel (Ravid 2010). Despite these attempts to manage if not fully resolve the conflict with the Obama administration, Netanyahu returned to Israel with little to show for his efforts. The Obama administration and other world leaders continued to express strong opposition to the new construction and analysts declared in the Israeli media that Netanyahu had been first surprised, then embarrassed, and finally politically weakened as a result of the strong rebuke from his closest ally. As Yossi Beilin, an Israeli peace negotiator observed: "Netanyahu understands, perhaps better than some of his Likud predecessors, that even if he believes 'he is 100 percent right and the world is 100 percent wrong' on Jerusalem, 'he cannot go on and destroy the relationships with the whole world'" (Zacharia 2010).

It is not just the relationships around the world that were troublesome for

Netanyahu. His handling of the affair arguably damaged him at home. Some claimed that his center-right coalition was in danger and that he might be forced to reach out to the moderate Kadima Party to lessen the tensions with the United States (Zacharia 2010).

US Domestic

Netanyahu was not the only player in this controversy who was feeling domestic political pressure. The political climate in the United States was also deeply polarized and President Obama faced pressures of his own. With ongoing legislative battles over health care, banking reforms and the politically volatile issue of illegal immigration, Obama hardly needed the distraction that would come if he were labeled by either his political opponents or the media as hostile to Israel.

Senator Charles Schumer (NY-D), normally an Obama supporter, but someone who also represents a state with a large and vocal pro-Israel electorate, told reporters that he worried the administration's approach to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict was "counterproductive" (Rogin 2010). Schumer was not the only member of the President's own party to express anxiety about the harsh criticism of Israel. Representative Anthony Weiner (NY-D), a member of the House Jewish Caucus said that, "The appropriate response was a shake of the head - not a temper tantrum . . . Israel is a sovereign nation and an ally, not a punching bag. Enough already" (Zimmerman 2010). Representative Steve Israel (NY-D) declared that "The Administration, to the extent that it has disagreements with Israel on policy matters, should find way to do so in private and do what they can to defuse this situation" (Zimmerman 2010). Representative Shelley Berkley (NV-D) expressed her concern that the administration had an "overreaction," to the Biden snub (Zimmerman 2010). Representative Eliot Engel (NY- D) agreed that the response had been "disproportionate" and urged that "we all have to take a step back" (Zimmerman 2010). Leading Republicans were even more critical. Senator John McCain (AZ-R) urged the administration to end its public criticism of Israel which would only strengthen our enemies, while Representative Eric Cantor (VA-R), the House Minority Leader warned that the Obama administration was using the incident as a strategy to change the course of U.S. policy toward Israel (Critics Accuse Administration of Exploiting Israel Dispute 2010).

Quite a number of these arguments are examples of traditional argumentative rebuttals that condemn the President's motives and international acumen. Others

are similar to the derailing and “re-railing” strategic maneuvers described by van Eemeren & Houtlosser (see 2002 for a detailed description) and other scholars, but because they do not take place in one-on-one conversations or in exchanges in Parliament, but in the mediascape, we refer to them as *media maneuvers*.

The context as a whole likely gave the administration additional cover for its efforts to portray the building of new Israeli settlements as the obstacle to the peace process - the Republicans and other voices of support created an alternative set of U.S. arguments that created a “Good cop, Bad cop” media maneuver for the administration in the mediascape. In other words, yes the White House is truly unhappy with Israel’s announcement, but Congress remained steadfast in its support. Thus the counter arguments by Israel’s supporters don’t necessarily remain the oppositional arguments that were delivered by various members of Congress - as they move into the global public sphere they instead provide cover while the Obama administration negotiates with Israel.

Palestine

The situation clearly suggested that both the United States and Israel walked a “tight rope” - trying to achieve their foreign policy objectives while simultaneously managing their domestic political audiences. But the other most significant actor in this controversy naturally faced his own political pressures. Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas immediately announced that he would withdraw from the negotiations when Israel announced its intentions to build the 1,600 new housing units in March (Indirect Israel talks ‘called off’ 2010). It seems apparent that he felt this decision was justified and necessary if he was to retain credibility with his constituents. Abbas was not persuaded to return to the bargaining table for two months. The White House convinced the Palestinians to participate with a pledge that the U.S. would at least consider allowing a United Nations Security Council resolution to come to a vote, should one be proposed, that condemned Israel for building new homes in disputed territory. The concession was noteworthy because it would mean that the U.S. was declining to use its veto power to block an attempt to sanction Israel. “The U.S. has vetoed more than 40 U.N. resolutions critical of Israel since 1972 - at least three of them explicit condemnations of Israeli construction activity in East Jerusalem” (Levinson 2010). “The Palestinians were given the impression by the American side that things are not going to be business as usual as far as negotiations are concerned,” a senior Palestinian official close to the discussions declared (Levinson 2010). It was soon apparent, however, that there was significant

ambiguity regarding precisely what the U.S. pledged. As Levinson (2010) reported:

Officials involved in the diplomacy have different interpretations of what exactly was promised in the meeting between Messrs. Hale and Abbas. Palestinians briefed on the meeting say Mr. Hale read from a letter in which the U.S. said it “may consider taking action against significantly provocative settlement activity including not using the veto in the Security Council.” The U.S. refused to put their assurances in writing, according to the Palestinians briefed on the meeting.

But other officials familiar with the exchange said the U.S. threat to withhold a veto in the Security Council was limited to any further building in Ramat Shlomo. In that Prime Minister Netanyahu had already indicated that the construction of the 1600 new units would not begin for two years, the Obama administration would not really have to worry about honoring this pledge before 2012 (Levinson 2010).

An Israeli spokesperson minimized the significance of the pledge declaring: “This sounds very conditional . . . If the Palestinians think that this is another tool with which they can corner Israel, they may be in for a very gross miscalculation” (Levinson 2010). The media maneuver was thus a vague and tenuous pledge not to veto a resolution that is not currently before the Security Council, and that is not likely to be raised before that Council for at least two years. This timing-tactic gave all of the parties in the dispute room to communicate their own goals and demonstrate their principles and their “toughness” for their domestic audiences.

Long Time Period Diplomacy: The Saga Continues

The snub of Vice President Biden, and all of the public and media arguments created in response may have helped shape the public debate on U.S.-Israeli relations, but the complex character of the issues in the Middle East was further intensified only a couple of months later when Israel intercepted and boarded a Turkish vessel in international waters destined for the Gaza strip. The ship which was attempting to bring food, medicine, and other aid to Gaza also included many peace activists. Accounts differ as to who may have started the fighting, but when the incident was finished, nine passengers on the vessel were killed and many others were injured. Nations around the world quickly condemned the action, and further declared that the blockade of occupied Gaza violated international law (Palmer 2010). This incident again inflamed the strained relationship that the Netanyahu government had with the Obama administration and led to yet another

round of media diplomacy.

Among the more sharply worded criticisms of Israel was expressed by Anthony H. Cordesman, who previously served in the U.S. Department of Defense as a director of intelligence, and holds a distinguished chair at the Center for Strategic and International Studies. Cordesman is typically moderate on U.S.-Israel foreign policy, and his past experience in government and his prominent position in a think tank known for its influence in shaping U.S. foreign policy caused the following statement to take on extraordinary significance. Cordesman (2010) argued:

The depth of America's moral commitment does not justify or excuse actions by an Israeli government that unnecessarily makes Israel a strategic liability when it should remain an asset. It does not mean that the United States should extend support to an Israeli government when that government fails to credibly pursue peace with its neighbors. It does not mean that the United States has the slightest interest in supporting Israeli settlements in the West Bank, or that the United States should take a hard-line position on Jerusalem that would effectively make it a Jewish rather than a mixed city. It does not mean that the United States should be passive when Israel makes a series of major strategic blunders—such as persisting in the strategic bombing of Lebanon during the Israeli-Hezbollah conflict, escalating its attack on Gaza long after it had achieved its key objectives, embarrassing the U.S. president by announcing the expansion of Israeli building programs in east Jerusalem at a critical moment in U.S. efforts to put Israeli-Palestinian peace talks back on track, or sending commandos to seize a Turkish ship in a horribly mismanaged effort to halt the “peace flotilla” going to Gaza.

Cordesman's arguments were followed by similar statements in the blogosphere and they were influential in two ways. First, his overarching argument is about a series of actions over a long period of time that require a new frame for their interpretation – one that portrays the controversy over the settlements within a pattern of Israel's strategic errors. In this sense, the settlements are evidence in a larger story that moves Israel out of the role of a strategic asset to the U.S. to that of a strategic liability. Second, that Cordesman speaks not as a government servant but as an independent expert is crucial – the administration is allowed its relationship as the Great Friend of Israel but the new story gains credibility coming from an esteemed and independent source.

Lessons Learned: Arguments in Media Diplomacy

The analysis of this mini-case study suggests a few important lessons about foreign policy arguments and media diplomacy in a new media age. First, the study confirms that press coverage is now truly global and that multi-directional argument strategies can be created for domestic and international audiences who will evaluate these messages and diplomatic actions through the cultural narratives and understandings that have shaped their varying political interests. This case study also indicates that governments or other actors need not and should not make all the critical arguments themselves in media diplomacy. A strategic communication plan allows multiple stakeholders, even those with opposing positions, to create a media discourse that, as a whole, can achieve its strategic goals. It is important to note that this is *not a recommendation to say nothing* as the media abhors a vacuum and will find someone happy to help fill a 24/7 news hole.

Second, the diplomats who sought to maneuver through the minefield of domestic and international political tensions in this dispute employed a variety of different types of symbolic actions. There were formal public statements both by the principle characters in the drama (Vice President Biden, Prime Minister Netanyahu, Secretary of State Clinton) and by subordinates and surrogates but President Obama himself was mostly quiet about the incident, permitting others to speak on his behalf (remember, he was said to be “livid”). The symbolic gestures themselves, may have seemed petty (for example, Vice President Biden showing up ninety minutes late for dinner and a White House meeting where no reporters or photographers were allowed), but those non-verbal messages created powerful arguments in a visually saturated media milieu. It is important to note that Biden showing up late to dinner was carefully explained in the media, not just because it was a visual rebuttal but being very late to an event would not be uncommon in many parts of the world.

Third, the strategic ambiguity of some of these arguments permitted the media to have a great deal of interpretive power in the controversy. It was typically left to the press, for example, to explain the “meaning” of no photographs being taken at Obama and Netanyahu’s White House meeting, or to create the timeline when Prime Minister Netanyahu supposedly went to Washington to apologize and seek reconciliation but also on the same visit gave a defiant defense of the new housing units before a pro-Israel lobbying group. In this sense the media becomes a stakeholder in the controversy and must be treated as such when diplomats

create strategic communication plans that include developing possible scenarios and testing possible messages.

Fourth, the twenty-four hour news cycle meant that there was little time for reflection once the controversy began to unfold. As the stories entered the media they sparked quick public reactions from affected actors. It was difficult for any of the participants to manage their communication in such a rapidly developing storyline. Thus the public argument marketplace in this controversy was very similar to the arguments surrounding the recent economic crisis - emotionally charged and volatile. The need for superior risk communication assessments and post hoc analysis is clear. New research currently being conducted on presenting and responding to financial arguments may help future analyses of passionate and complex stories.

The conflict between Israel and the Palestinians has raged for more than sixty years and may now be more intense and entrenched than in previous years. The possibilities for peace in the region remain dim unless these nations can find new ways to negotiate and to strategically communicate with their agitated domestic audiences. In foreign policy, strategic communication plans are necessary before successful arguments can be constructed. Israel wants security and Palestine wants humane treatment for its citizens and sufficient land to create a sustainable state. These are not minor issues. The goals of diplomatic activities in the Middle East are certainly long-term and completely new frames such as the sharing of leadership or the development of alternative networks of governance might be required. Few nations can stand alone, or at least not for very long.

NOTES

[i] This process is considered more thoroughly and systematically in a paper we co-authored with James Klumpp. See: Klumpp, Hollihan, & Riley (2002).

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