

**ANALYZING THE WAY PAKISTANI MEDIA COVERS
HUMANITARIAN ISSUES DURING VIOLENT
CONFLICTS: A CASE STUDY OF THE GAZA WAR IN
REAL TIME PERSPECTIVE**

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Abstract

This study contently analyzes the media coverage of the Palestine-Israel conflict in the context of human rights violations and policy issue. To examine the Pakistani media approach towards this burning issue, two leading English newspapers, i.e., Daily Dawn and The News, were selected from the print media, which have considerable influence over policy issues, and they are reportedly highlighting the international conflicts more in the broader context of Pakistan's foreign policy on one side and giving noticeable space to human's rights, which are more likely to be violated during conflict. The findings of this real-time study show that casualties and human rights violations dominated the overall coverage of the conflict, indicating the inclusive framing of the conflict as 'humanitarian crises' where possibly human rights were compromised during combat between Hamas and Israel. The findings also suggest that both newspapers collectively gave higher supportive coverage to Palestinian or otherwise Hamas' stance. While Hamas was made accountable for small amount of critical coverage, which was shaped mainly in the context of human rights violations.

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Introduction

Hard news from conflicts takes up a lot of space and attention in media outlets, which shape coverage that is more clearly aligned with the larger policy directives of the governments. As a result, numerous researchers who looked into how the media covered conflicts during the years discovered that, far from maintaining objectivity, the media used the opportunity to further their nationalist and propagandist agendas, making their coverage more divisive at the time of conflict (Galtung, 2006; Hanitzsch, 2007; Hussain, 2017; Lynch, 2013).

However, a number of academics contend that the media's preference for governments' policy stances or positions stems from journalists' heavy reliance on official sources, which helps to shape media narratives that support national interests in times of conflict (Zeitsoff, T. 2011). Because of this, when media outlets report on conflicts or crises that have an international impact, they tend to take the official line of their respective governments. Asi, M. (1981) and el-Din, B. A. (1987), for example, discovered in their research studies that the US media covered the Arab-Israel conflict with pro-Israel and anti-Arab biases, thereby endorsing the US policy on the matter. But the relationship between reporters covering conflicts and their sources is a complicated one, involving muddled friendships and interests as well as a blurring of professional and national identities (Gonen, Y., & Hoxha, A. 2019). By engaging with a variety of sources, the journalists are attempting to close the gap between the opposing sides of the conflict in this hazy scenario. This gives them the chance to mold the conflict's environment

and convey it to their audience within that specific context (Gonen, Y., & Hoxha, A. 2019). Earlier in 2018, Gonen identified two key patterns that largely influence how the conflict is covered by the media while researching the shifting dynamics of conflicts in the context of sources. These patterns were: (1) In today's global digital media environment, sources have greater influence over the news and the relationship between sources and journalists is becoming increasingly blurred. As a result, the power dynamics between journalists and news sources during times of conflict and crisis are changing and becoming more complex. (2) By introducing readers to new characters and sources, such as terrorists, opposition figures, and common people—news reports provide readers with a broader perspective on the conflict (Gonen, Y., 2018).

This study looks at the coverage of the Palestine-Israel conflict by Pakistani media during a period when both sides were suffering greatly from the conflict, particularly the Palestinian people. A variety of factors are taken into consideration when evaluating the coverage of particular newspapers, including the conflict's humanitarian implications and Pakistan's policy position on the current conflict between Palestine and Israel, which has been clarified by Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of Pakistan in its statement on October 7, 2023;

“We are closely monitoring the unfolding situation in the Middle East and the eruption of hostilities between Israel and Palestinians. We are concerned about the human cost of the escalating situation. Pakistan has consistently advocated for a two-state solution as the key to enduring peace in the Middle East, with a just, comprehensive and lasting solution to the Palestinian question anchored in international law and in line with relevant United Nations and

OIC resolutions. A viable, sovereign and contiguous State of Palestine should be established on the basis of pre-1967 borders, with Al Quds Al-Sharif as its capital. We call on the international community to come together for cessation of hostilities, protection of civilians and for a lasting peace in the Middle East” (MOFA, 2023).

Media, Conflicts and Policy Perspective

Several researchers have focused their attention on how the media portrays conflicts in routine news practices, primarily in relation to how it frames the policy debate on conflicts. The debate over whether the government influences media reporting on policy-related issues or the media influences government policy, particularly during times of conflict, is one example of how scholarship on political communication is split. While examining the interactions between the media and governments, Dagherir (2016), Robinson (2000, 2017); Wang J&X Wang, 2014; Zhang & Meadows, 2012; and numerous other researchers primarily contended that the media take policy guidelines into account when reporting on international or policy issues or humanitarian crises. On the other hand, the important role of CNN and the scholarship on its effects, which spans from the famine crisis in Somalia (1990–1991) to the war in Kosovo (1999), convinced many scholars that news can influence policy, which is the central tenet of the literature on the “CNN effect” (Robinson, 1999). Nevertheless, there is insufficient empirical support for the CNN effect, making it challenging to draw the conclusion that the US government was forced to intervene in Somalia and Iraq at the start of the 1990s as a result of CNN's live coverage.

Consequently, the differing scholarship solicits the question of whether the United States’ policy on intervention was influenced

by media coverage or either other forces put pressure on the government through the media. According to Livingston & Eachus (1995), news coverage came in response to the decisions relating to diplomatic and bureaucratic operations, leading to the U.S. intervention in Somalia. Thus, the justifications for the American decision to intervene [militarily] in Somalia suggest that the media may have little to no influence over issues pertaining to foreign policy. Similarly, Mermin (1999) argued that rather than showing how powerful television was in forcing the government to act, the U.S. intervention in Somalia shows how powerful the government is at using and mobilizing television. In another study, the researcher made a similar stance, arguing that in the cases of Rwanda and Somalia, leaders determined the agenda of the media (Riley, 1999). Some researchers, in contrast to Riley's study, do support the minimal impact of media on foreign policy. Within this framework, Wheeler (2000) and Robinson (2000) contended that the media played a “supportive” or “weak” role in the intervention in both Somalia and Kurdistan.

According to academic research on policy issues, such as intervention or peace processes, media outlets typically present the conflict in a way that best aligns with the governments' respective positions on policy. For example, Friedman, E., & Herfroy-Mischler, A. (2020) studied why peace talks between Israel and Palestine failed in 2014, and discovered that while both Israeli and Palestinian media blamed the government on the other side for failure. However, the researchers termed the Israeli media as ‘stronger party’, which was found placing blame on Palestinians while quoting Israeli actors in news coverage while the weaker party’ media (Palestine), which reported on both Palestinian and Israeli actors, was founded tended to blame Israel. Similarly, the analysis of the Palestine-Israel coverage in the cross-national media organizations found that the Russian

television- RT and Al-Jazeera gave more supportive coverage to Palestine while the coverage of BBC and CNN on the issue was found more supportive to Israel's stance on the conflict (Shahzad, F., Qazi, T. A., & Shehzad, R., 2023).

In light of the above scholarly discussion, this paper aims to investigate the media's coverage of the recent conflict between Palestine and Israel from a wider perspective, considering Pakistan's policy stance regarding the loss of Palestinian lives, whereas it [Pakistan] consequently, is calling on the international community to do its part to help the Palestinian side of the conflict return to normalcy (MOFA, 2023).

Theoretical Perspectives

The study examines Pakistani media coverage of the Palestine-Israel conflict, particularly the way it covered the recent uprising in Gaza's restive area, theoretically in light of the main tenets of the policy-media interaction model (Robinson, 2000) and indexing theory (Bennett, 1990). Synergy of both the theoretical perspectives helped researchers to thoroughly evaluate the nature of coverage, which was shaped at the real time (from October 07 to October 31, 2023) in two leading English newspapers of Pakistan i.e. Dawn and The News. According to the prior theoretical viewpoint, policy and media are related in an interactive way. The argument over the CNN effect, which asserts that news media coverage appears to have the capacity to spur western intervention during humanitarian crises, provides a clear example of how the media and foreign policy interact (Robinson, 2000). Politicians use the media to further their own political agendas, though this is not always the case. Their aim is to utilize the media to emphasize how crucial news media coverage is in influencing policy reactions to humanitarian emergencies. When assessing policy-media interaction model, one could contend that the media's involvement in matters

pertaining to policy depends on the "certainty or uncertainty" of the policy. The media supports the government or foreign policy elites when the issue is clear; nevertheless, when the issue is blurred or the government is unsure of its position, the media adopts an opposing viewpoint. Regarding the human cost of the worsening circumstances, Pakistan's position on the current policy issue of Palestine is more worrisome. Pakistan is therefore advocating for a peaceful resolution and viewing the conflict from a humanitarian perspective. As a result, there was an elite debate in Pakistan that needs to be examined in light of policy certainty and elite consensus. The later arguments are based on the theoretical framework of the indexing model (Bennett, 1990), which is regarded as a more influential model that explains how the American media indexes the perspectives of elites in a policy debate.

Research Questions

Q1. What types of attributions and frames dominated the media coverage of

the Palestine-Israel conflict in the selected newspapers?

Q2. What main viewpoints, which support or contradict Pakistan's policy position on

Palestine, did the Pakistani media adopt in their reports on the Palestine-Israel conflict?

Research Methodology

To examine the way Pakistani media gave real-time coverage of the Palestine-Israel conflict, content analysis of two English-language newspapers, i.e., Daily Dawn and The News, was conducted. These newspapers have established their credibility, besides having high circulation in the country (Ali, H., Hussain, T., et al., 2017). The timeframe of the study spans from the initiation of conflict on October 7, 2023, to October 31, 2023, reflecting real-time media coverage. Using the census technique,

the researchers were able to obtain a total of 160 news stories that had appeared on the front, back, and international pages of the selected newspapers from the records of the Central Library, University of Swat. In order to examine how the Palestine-Israel conflict was covered by the media during the policy crisis, the researchers employed two methods: frames (Gamson, W. A., & Modigliani, A. 1989) to obtain a concise and unambiguous picture of the conflict, and slants (Entman RM, 2007) to ascertain the type of coverage. Following data collection, a coding schema was created for the purpose of examining how the Gaza conflict was covered by the selected newspapers of Pakistan. In addition to the slant categories, supportive, neutral, and critical, researchers identified three representative frames: human rights violations, political/political policy, and casualties. They also identified four attributions to parties involved in the conflict: killed, dead, fighters, and strikes/bombardment. The University of Swat graduate from the Department of Media and Communication Studies was trained in the coding process and given the first 40 news stories from the two chosen newspapers to code. The principle author also coded the same stories in order to ensure inter-coder reliability. After coding, the data, the Krippendorff's alpha was calculated for all the frames and attributions, whereas for all the frames and attributions higher than .83 α values was recorded. In addition to the frames, the slant categories, supportive, neutral, and critical of Hamas, were used to categorize the media's coverage. In this study, the researchers used the coding scheme created by other researchers (ul Amin, R., 2019), where they used a single news story as their unit of analysis, classifying a paragraph as a "recorded unit" in the news story.

Results and Findings

This study thoroughly discusses the Pakistani media approach towards conflict between Palestine and Israel, whereas the timely

analysis of the news contents of selected newspapers reflects a clear policy line of Pakistani media toward deadly conflict. The paper discusses and interpret the collected data to measure the research questions.

Q1. What types of attributions and frames dominated the media coverage of the Palestine-Israel conflict in the selected newspapers?

Table No. 1. Attributions to Hamas and Israeli forces in the selected newspapers

| Newspapers | Killed (N%) | Dead(N %) | Fighters(N%) | Strikes/bombardment (N%) | Total |
|------------|-------------|-----------|--------------|--------------------------|----------|
| Dawn | 41 | 08 | 13 | 24 | 86 |
| The News | 37 | 09 | 07 | 21 | 74 |
| | | | | 45(28) | |
| Total | 78(49) | 17(11) | 20(12) | | 160(100) |

$X^2(3, N=160) = 59.95, p < 0.001$

The attributions to Israeli and Hamas forces are displayed in Table No. 1, while during October 2023, all of the selected newspapers reported on the deaths of both Israeli and Hamas forces as well as citizens affected by the conflict (49%) in their entire coverage. While some of the Hamas and Palestinian civilian casualties were reported by both newspapers as dead (11%), this is a kinder word than killing. However, 12% of the news stories published by the selected press referred to Hamas as "fighters." This indicates that Pakistani media has a slight inclination toward taking an ideological stance on the conflict. In contrast to Hamas, 28% of the news articles in a selected newspaper focused on Israeli military strikes and bombardments,

portraying them as a threat to humankind. For example, the Daily Dawn stated in one of the news pieces that Palestinians are in "grave danger of mass ethnic cleansing," citing UN human rights experts (Dawn, 2023). The statistical result, shown in the table above, $X^2(2, N=160) = 10.46, p=0.005$ indicates a significant difference in the distribution of the selected attributions.

Q.2. What main viewpoints, which support or contradict Pakistan's policy position on Palestine, did the Pakistani media adopt in their reports on the Palestine-Israel conflict?

Table No. 2. Coverage of the conflict on the basis of frames in selected newspapers

| Newspapers | Casualties(N%) | Human right violation (N%) | Politics/ policy(N%) | Total |
|------------|----------------|----------------------------|----------------------|----------|
| Dawn | 46 | 29 | 11 | 86 |
| The News | 23 | 34 | 17 | 74 |
| Total | 69(43) | 63(39) | 28(18) | 160(100) |

$X^2(2, N=160) = 08.50, p < 0.003$

Table No. 2 shows that the selected newspapers reported on the recent conflict between Palestine and Israel in terms of casualties and human rights violations, framing it as a humanitarian crisis (39% out of 160 news reports). The casualties frame shaped 43% of the overall coverage, while politics and policy generated 18%. This suggests that the selected newspapers focused more on emphasizing the humanitarian aspect of the conflict than on the political or policy aspect. The results primarily align with the scholarly research conducted by Livingston, S., & Eachus, T., 1995; Robinson, P., 2000; Shattuck, J., 1996; and Wheeler, N., 2000. These studies assessed the media's influence in humanitarian emergencies, which compelled global powers,

particularly the US, to take humanitarian action, as exemplified by the Somalia conflict. The preceding table's statistical result, $X^2(2, N = 160) = 8.50, p < 0.003$, shows that there is a significant difference in the categories' dispersion.

Table No. 3. Coverage of the conflict on the basis of slants in selected newspapers

| Newspapers | Favorable to Palestine (N%) | Balance (N%) | Critical to Hamas movement (N%) | Total |
|------------|-----------------------------|--------------|---------------------------------|----------|
| Dawn | 51 | 23 | 12 | 86 |
| The News | 28 | 38 | 08 | 74 |
| Total | 79(49) | 61(38) | 20(13) | 160(100) |

$X^2(2, N=160) = 10.34, p = 0.004$

The above table No. 3. shows that the selected newspapers were more inclined towards supportive and neutral slants that reflect that Pakistani media covered the Palestine-Israel conflict in a way that extended their support to Palestinian narratives and stances on the issue. The findings show that both newspapers collectively framed the conflict favorably for Palestine, i.e., 49% of the total news stories (160). Comparably, only a small amount of oppositional coverage (13%) was prompted in the chosen newspapers, wherein they primarily denounced certain incidents that transpired during the Hamas movement. Of the 160 news stories in the chosen newspapers, the neutral or balanced coverage accounted for 38% of the space after the supportive coverage. Accordingly, $X^2(2, N = 160) = 10.34, p = 0.004$ indicates a statistically significant difference in the distribution of the given categories.

Discussion

Since there have been many casualties on both sides of the conflict—particularly on the Palestinian side due to humanitarian concerns—the conflict between Palestine and Israel has attracted the attention of media outlets worldwide. Similar to the international media, the Pakistani media extensively covered this hot topic. In order to assess Pakistani media coverage of the Hamas-Israel conflict, the researchers selected two of the country's most prominent English newspapers to evaluate the Pakistani media approach toward the Hamas-Israel conflict, preferably to conclude the results in the context of humanitarian crisis and a larger framework of policy issues in Pakistani media. The overall findings of this study reflect that Pakistani media [as outside independent actor] highlighted the Palestine crisis mores in humanitarian ground, whereas the media, especially the selected elite newspapers of Pakistan gave more focus to human loses and violation of human right as both the frames collectively shaped 82% [see, table No.2] news coverage out of the overall 160 news stories that were published during the timeframe of this study. While examining the media coverage in the context of attributions, the findings of this study suggest that both the selected newspapers framed the conflict more in the context of casualties of Palestinian and Israeli, where is the media used the attribution of 'killed' in majority of their news reports. In case of Hamas, a few news reports [see table No. 1] attributed fighters, indicating a slight tendency in Pakistani media to associate the Palestine-Israel conflict with ideological conflict. Regarding Israeli forces, selected newspapers employed the tactic of attributing strikes and bombardment to them, portraying them as more accountable for the humanitarian crisis and casualties than Hamas, the opposing party to the conflict. As a result, the prevailing portrayal of the Gaza conflict in Pakistani media is consistent with the government's policy regarding the matter,

demonstrating its concern for human casualties while simultaneously endorsing the Palestinian position, urging the world community to unite in support of the Middle East's long-term peace, the protection of civilians, and the end of hostilities (MOFA, 2023). This policy setting appears to have influenced Pakistani media coverage of the Gaza conflict, which primarily criticized Israeli forces for their hard-hitting combat while framing the conflict between Palestine and Israel highly in favor of Hamas. In addition to criticizing Israeli aggression, the selected newspapers also framed comparatively fewer news stories that criticized Hamas for its violent actions that resulted in casualties.

Conclusion

The results of this study on one side show the Pakistani media approach towards the Palestine-Israel conflict, which shaped the mixed nature of media coverage, and on the other side, the findings indicate that Pakistan had a 'certain policy line' at the peak time of the conflict that was, seemingly, the major cause of shaping less critical coverage on the Hamas movement in the current scenario. Reporting in certain policy situations, the Pakistani media tendencies were in line with the key assumption of Pier Robinson's model of media-policy interaction (Robinson, 2000). However, the findings of this study are also, largely, in support of the key suppositions of the W. Lance Bennett (1990) indexing hypothesis, arguing that media professionals tend to "index" different voices and views, which are expressed in the elites' circles, about policy issues in a way to reflect [or advocate] the point of view of [political or policy] elites. In this study, a similar situation is found as the selected media reported the conflict between Palestine and Israel in professional manners

that, seemingly, were best suited to the point of view of ruling elites.

Recommendations

On the basis of the overall findings, discussion, and conclusion, this study has certain limitations; thus, it outlines some recommendations for future studies.

1. The findings are based on the content analysis of two leading English newspapers. It is, therefore, recommended for future researchers, especially students of journalism, to evaluate the coverage of electronic media as well, which have their due influence over policy matters.
2. The study is confined to Pakistan-based newspapers; thus, it is recommended that future studies be conducted while examining the cross-national media approach to conflict, especially the Palestine-Israel conflict.
3. Similarly, this study is restricted to quantitative analysis. Thus, it is also recommended that research studies be conducted qualitatively, whereas the researchers may examine the perceptions of journalists, experts, and the general public about the role of media during conflict.

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