Israeli public diplomacy following targeting campaigns: A rhetorical analysis of the Al-Jalaa Tower strike in Gaza

Christopher Emeka Ajalie[1], Winifred Uzochikwa Okafor[2]

[1] https://orcid.org/0009-0009-9542-786X

c.ajalie@student.uw.edu.pl

[1]Department of Regional and Global Studies, Uniwersytet Warszawski, Krakowskie Przedmieście 26/28, 00-927, Warszawa, Poland

[2]winifred.okafor@utsa.edu

[2] https://orcid.org/0009-0002-3506-2386

[2]Department of Finance, University of Texas at San Antonio, 24245 Wilderness Oaks, 78258, San Antonio, TX, United States

Abstract

This study investigates how states use public diplomacy to defend their legitimacy following contested military actions. Focusing on Israel's airstrike on the Al-Jalaa Tower during the 2021 Gaza conflict, the research examines how rhetorical strategies were employed to manage international criticism and sustain normative legitimacy. Unlike prior research that addresses entire conflicts, this study narrows its focus to a single high-profile event involving protected objects. Drawing on Ben D. Mor's rhetorical defence framework, the study applies qualitative discourse and rhetorical analysis to a dataset of 57 official statements, including government press releases, speeches, media briefings, and verified social media posts issued within 5 months after the incident. Each statement was coded thematically into three rhetorical strategies, blame avoidance, blame imposition, and moral differentiation, and analysed across temporal distribution, source diversity, and target orientation. The findings reveal that Israel's public diplomacy reflected a layered rhetorical defence dominated by blame avoidance and blame imposition, often deployed in tandem to deflect criticism, justify actions, and redirect moral responsibility towards Hamas and third-party critics. Moral differentiation served as reinforcement for Israel's self-presentation as a rule-abiding democracy acting within legal and ethical bounds. The study concludes that in contested military action, public diplomacy functions less as a means of persuasion and more as a communicative mechanism for managing reputational risk and contesting narratives of legitimacy. By demonstrating how rhetorical strategies evolve and interact under normative pressure, the research contributes to a deeper understanding of the strategic role of wartime communication in asymmetric warfare and legitimacy management.

Keywords:

public diplomacy, blame imposition, blame avoidance, moral differentiation, dual-use target

Introduction

In contemporary asymmetric warfare, where conventional methods often fall short of addressing non-state threats, targeted operations have become a prominent strategy, frequently employed as a last resort when necessity, utility, and proportionality align (Banks and Raven-Hansen, 2003, p. 678; Gross, 2006, p. 32; Gross, 2010, p. 103; Meisels and Waldron, 2020, p. 10). Although sometimes described as the "most natural application of the principle of *jus in bello*" (Statman, 2004, pp. 183–185), targeting in counterterrorism contexts often emerges from the impracticality of defeating such actors through traditional policing or military means.

One of the primary controversies surrounding targeted operations lies in the ambiguity of lawful targets. Terrorist organisations exploit civilian environments, embedding personnel and assets among non-combatants and civilian infrastructure with the intent to not only shield themselves but also erode the ethical high ground of their adversaries (Faul and Moki, 2015; Gross, 2002a; Gross, 2002b; Gross, 2010, p. 35; Milshtein, 2021; Schmitt, 2009, p. 298;). By blurring the distinction between combatants and non-combatants, they aim to provoke disproportionate responses and maximise reputational damage to states operating within the constraints of international humanitarian law (IHL). Vividly, asymmetry here is not rooted in a disparity of firepower but rather, in differing commitments to the legal and ethical norms of warfare.

Such dynamics place states under intense scrutiny. Public opinion becomes a battlefield in itself, especially when operations are perceived as excessive or indiscriminate. The perceived legitimacy of a strike can significantly influence international and domestic support. As studies have shown, public approval declines when targeting operations involve civilian casualties or the destruction of civilian infrastructure, otherwise considered illegitimate targets (Robert and Davies, 2019, p. 271; Kreps, 2014, pp. 1–7; Goodman, 2015; Pew Research Center, 2013, 2014). In this context, public diplomacy (PD) emerges as a vital post-strike tool, one that seeks to mitigate reputational fallout, manage public perception, and justify the state's actions within internationally accepted normative frameworks. Strategic communication, which uses rhetorical appeals, are deployed to reframe targeting operations as morally and legally justified acts. Such communication aims to assure both domestic and global audiences that the principles of necessity, distinction, and proportionality have been upheld.

A compelling example of this dynamic is the 2021 Israeli airstrike on the Al-Jalaa Tower, one of four high-rise buildings considered dual-use structures in Gaza, during Operation Guardian of the Walls. The building housed international media outlets, including the Associated Press (AP) and *Al-Jazeera*, private residences, and allegedly, Hamas-operated electronic warfare infrastructure used to disrupt the Iron Dome defence system. The Israel Defense Forces (IDF), 2021 asserted that the strike targeted a legitimate dual-use military objective and that evacuation warnings were issued in advance. However, even the absence of casualties did not shield the operation from extensive international criticism. By challenging both legal and ethical legitimacy of the action, human rights organisations and media actors caused reputational crises for Israel.

Bearing this in mind, this paper investigates how public diplomacy functions in such contested post-targeting environments. Specifically, it querieshow actors construct public diplomacy appeals to justify targeted strikes in asymmetric conflict, particularly when targets involve dual-use civilian infrastructure. The central hypothesis guiding the research assumes that in asymmetric warfare, where terror organisations deliberately exploit the distinction principle to provoke reputational damage, an actor's public diplomacy appeals are

rhetorically crafted to demonstrate compliance with the Law of Armed Conflict (LOAC), with particular focus on justifying targeting decisions in terms of necessity, legitimacy, and proportionality.

To answer the above question, based on the notion that rhetorical strategies in image management are dependent on shared and/or widely accepted normative frameworks, the study examines the evolving debate on what constitutes a legitimate target under the law of armed conflict, particularly in relation to dual-use infrastructure. Besides, it is important to note that although the case study is an object, conceptual arguments surrounding the targeting of individuals were deployed within this section to illuminate how the status of a target is determined. This includes a critical review of prevailing interpretations of direct participation in hostilities and the military utility of objects,concepts that significantly shape how states frame their public diplomacy appeals in relation to normative ideals.

In what follows, the paper outlines key literature on the use of public diplomacy as a form of rhetorical self-presentation and impression management. Using the Al-Jalaa Tower strike as a case study, the paper employs a qualitative methodology centred on discourse and rhetorical analysis. Primary sources, including official statements, press briefings, media reports, and social media posts, are examined through the lens of Ben Mor's rhetorical defence model. These rhetorical appeals are categorised into three dominant strategies: blame avoidance, blame imposition, and moral differentiation. By coding these statements and analysing how legitimacy was discursively constructed, the study explores the broader normative function of public diplomacy in wartime communication. Particular attention is paid to how these appeals align with international legal standards concerning distinction, proportionality, and military necessity. Finally, the paper applies these conceptual insights to Israel's post-strike public diplomacy campaign following the Al-Jalaa Tower incident, illustrating how these rhetorical strategies functioned to manage both political and perceptual consequences of the event.

Despite growing scholarly interest in the strategic function of public diplomacy in war and crisis settings, a critical research gap remains. Few empirical studies have systematically examined how rhetorical strategies are deployed in real time to justify strikes, especially those targeting contested dual-use or civilian-associated infrastructure. With the exception of Mor's contributions, existing literature tends to treat rhetorical strategies conceptually, without applying empirical methods, such as discourse coding and event-based analysis. Furthermore, prior studies rarely track rhetorical appeals from the moment of the strike through its immediate aftermath. This study fills that gap by focusing on a singular, high-profile incident, the Al-Jalaa Tower airstrike, within a delimited 5-month timeframe. It uniquely operationalises Mor's framework in an empirical context, coding and categorising rhetorical statements across media formats and government channels. In doing so, the paper not only provides a systematic application of rhetorical defence theory to a real-world public diplomacy campaign but also offers new insights into how legal sensitivity and reputational risk are managed in targeting operations involving civilian-affiliated infrastructure, particularly media sites. This subject remains marginal in existing scholarship despite its increasing relevance in hybrid and urban conflict zones.

Normative coherence and the slippery slopes surrounding the determination of a legitimate target

Public diplomacy within the confines of this paper is depicted as a rhetorical form of interaction focused on image management. Its efficacy is contingent upon a shared or consensual normative setting, which within the context of warfare is defined by the

principles and provisions enshrined in the law of armed conflict (LOAC). The LOAC, a dual-faceted legal framework traditionally divided into the "Hague Rules" and the "Geneva Rules," emerged through a complex historical evolution reflecting normative assumptions about the nature of warfare. The Hague Rules are oriented towards regulating the conduct of combatants, that is limiting permissible methods and means of warfare, while the Geneva Rules are concerned with the protection of victims, emphasising humane treatment. Together, they constitute the foundational legal regime for armed conflict, commanding near-universal ratification with 196 states party to the core conventions.

At its core, the LOAC seeks to strike a balance between humanitarian imperatives and the military necessities of belligerents. Regulated by three core principles, distinction, proportionality, and precaution, it defines lawful targets during hostilities, stipulating protection for individuals and objects not participating in combat. As earlier noted, however, asymmetric warfare has engendered intricacy and uncertainty apropos the distinction between legitimate military targets and persons or objects protected against direct attacks. The principle of distinction stipulates that:

> Combatants are obliged to distinguish themselves from the civilian population while they are engaged in an attack or in a military operation preparatory to an attack. Recognising, however, that there are situations in armed conflicts where, owing to the nature of the hostilities an armed combatant cannot so distinguish himself, he shall retain his status as a combatant provided that, in such situations, he carries his arms openly: (a) during each military engagement, and (b) during such time as he is visible to the adversary while he is engaged in a military deployment preceding the launching of an attack in which he is to participate (Protocol Additional to the Geneva Conventions, 1977, Art. 44(3)).

In other words, it specifies that combatants must distinguish themselves from civilians, presuming that civilians are non-combatants that cannot be targeted unless and for the duration they take a direct part in hostilities.

Yet, the second statement of the article creates textual uncertainty by watering down the duty to distinguish, thereby undermining the clarity of its application. Its allowance for exceptions in cases where hostilities prevent distinction dilutes the requirement and, in essence, complicates targeting, especially when civilian and military functions converge. Accordingly, the intentional act of not using distinguishing features by terror actors creates the strenuous task of discerning between civilian combatants and non-combatants. Similarly, it is difficult to categorise a dual-use object as either a military or civilian object. Without clear signs of affiliation, a person's participation or objects use in hostilities becomes the determining trait of combatancy or military objective for the latter (Gross, 2010, pp. 39, 155).

In attempting to clarify these ambiguities, addressing: "Who is considered a civilian? What conduct amounts to direct participation in hostilities and modalities that govern the loss of protection against direct attack?; the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) interpretative guidelines which defines direct participation in hostilities as an individual's "involvement in acts which by nature and purpose are intended to cause actual harm.",obtains that passive supporters are civilians except their role additionally encompasses deeds amounting to "direct participation in hostilities" (ICRC, 2009, p. 6-7, 34, 52). According to the guidance, as participation occurs in diverse forms, magnitudes and ample varieties of context not traditionally defined, "direct participation analogous to identifying a legitimate target" hinges not on the individual's status or affiliation but on the "quality and degree of involvement" or engagement in specific hostile acts (ICRC, 2009, p. 44; Miesels, 2020, p. 31).

As a result, some targeting campaigns have generated criticism regarding the status of the targets, with the contention seemingly revolving around the nature and magnitude of their involvement (Belkis and Solvang, 2015, pp. 12, and 41; Bering, 2019). Illustrating this, following the aftermath of signature strikes in Yemen, the German Constitutional Court in 2017 expressed concern about targeting operations carried out from German soil against civilians it considers not as legitimate target, starkly because they are "supporters" of groups like Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) (Bering, 2019). Expressing their concerns about distinction and the extent to which precaution was taken, the court equated these attacks to guilt by association. Undoubtedly, some organisations have tried to separate their political and military wings in order to render the former's leadership or partisans immune from targeting.

Due to the separation stated above, when members of a political wing of an organisation were targeted in the past, it evoked some level of disapproval from the international community. At the same time, the political wing of an organisation may be complexly entangled with terror strategies or actors as some political wing members assume command and control of particular operations, thus obscuring their status. Some authors and policy experts assert that this diplomatic distinction between functionaries of terror organisations is not just vague but also flawed (Chesney et al., 2010; Hegghammer, 2010; Levitt, 2006; Miesels, 2020, p. 30; Mishal and Sela, 2000; Ne'eman, 2016). Hence, they dismiss such divisions. The targeting of individuals like Sheik Ahmed Yassin and Anwar al-Awlaki as leaders of operations exemplifies this (Bergman, 2018, p. 410–417; Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2004).

Doctrinal shifts in state practices reflect this trend. To clarify their position, some states modified their operational manuals. These manuals, which required "actual involvement," were expanded to include specifics of passive support in war-sustaining activities. The US counterinsurgency manual categorises participants as follows: (i) the "leaders and combatants;" (ii) the "political cadre" or "militants of the party," who exploit grievances in local areas and provide the perception of executing activities that satisfy the population; (iii) "auxiliaries" or "active sympathisers," who operate safe houses, store weapons, provide passive intelligence, give early warning of attacks and provide funding; and (iv) the "mass base" or "supporting populace," who often lead clandestine lives to support insurgent movements (US Army Combined Arms Centre, 2014; Gross, 2010, pp. 42–43). Regarding the targeted killing policy of Israel's Operation Cast Lead, four categories of people were defined as legitimate targets: (i) individuals involved in making missiles; (ii) individuals involved in smuggling missiles (couriers); (iii) individuals directly involved in firing missiles; and (iv) individuals providing support to terrorist, including those who willingly allow their property to be used for purposes of missile firing (Guiora, 2013, p. 61).

The expansion of Israel's operational model was predicated on a threat based theory adopted from the suicide bomber paradigm, which includes individuals continuously involved in distinct aspect of the operation as legitimate targets due to the severity of their actions. Simply put, although the operational manuals of both mentioned states recognise partisan political affiliation to terror groups, targeting in their respective doctrines are based on the following principle: the closer the act in question is to a specific military operation, the more suitable it is to classify it as direct participation analogous to legitimate targets. Therefore, several of their strikes have targeted individuals transporting suicide bombers, explosives makers, and the so-called engineers, whose enclaves or laboratories are located entirely within civilian population and objects. The functional criterion is that individuals are targeted based on the activities and strategies they exert regarding hostilities, rather than the grail they serve (Miesels, 2020, p. 30). Following

this criterion, in a scenario where an object is the target of an attack, Article 52(2) of the Geneva Convention establishes that:

> Attacks shall be limited strictly to military objectives. In so far as objects are concerned, military objectives are limited to those objects which by their nature, location, purpose or use make an effective contribution to military action and whose total or partial destruction, capture or neutralisation, in the circumstances ruling at the time, offers a definite military advantage (Protocol Additional to the Geneva Conventions, 1977, Art. 52(2)).

Accordingly, once a warring party utilises civilian objects for military purpose, then the character of these objects may fulfil the requirement of "military objectives." Put differently, if a civilian object is utilised such that it helps to sustain the war effort of a belligerent party, it can be targeted based on its function. For example, the Taliban sheltered heavy weaponry in several mosques as well as placed a tank and two large antiaircraft guns under trees in front of the office of the Cooperative for Assistance and Relief Everywhere (CARE) International to deter attacks (Blank, 2010, p. 283).

Other illustrations include the use of tunnels running through the entirety of civilian objects and population for transporting military materiel in Gaza and, appallingly, the use of schools, hospitals, media centres, religious places and even UN facilities by terror organisations as arm storages facilities, safe houses as well as command and control centres (Amnesty International, 2015, p. 6; Fabian, 2022; Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center, 2024; Orde, 2021; Orion 2021; Times of Israel, 2021a). When used by terrors actors, these civilian objects seem more effective than conventional defence systems, since there would be questions regarding the status of these targets in the event of a strike. Practically, as these actors intentional ignore the stipulation of care in their operations in order to create a psychological conundrum for the opposing side, they effectively change the character of these civilian objects, making them fit the description of a military objective. In other words, they become legitimate targets only subject to proportionality assessments.

Similarly, the status of civilians becomes obscure when applying the concepts advocated by the direct participation in hostilities (DPH) guidelines, such as continuous combat function dichotomy and the so-called "revolving door" ("farmers-by-day, fighters-by-night") of protection, which prescribes that civilians can repeatedly lose and regain protection against direct attack. In this regard, criticism and questions by policy experts and human right groups have arisen regarding the legal basis and military validity of targeting several suspected Al Qaeda operatives who were victims of strikes in Pakistan and Yemen (BBC, 2013; Hopkins, 2013; Mullen, 2013). Article 51(3) of the Additional Protocol 1 specifies that "Civilians shall enjoy the protection afforded by this Section, 'unless and for such time' as they take a direct part in hostilities" (Protocol Additional to the Geneva Conventions, 1977, Art. 51(3)).

The lack of clarity of the phrase "unless and for such time" in the above article has sparked debates regarding the span of that interval. Grounding their claim on this article, critics of the attacks in both countries seem to dispute the status of the targets, whom in their opinion were not contributing to hostilities at the timing of the attack. In line with this logic, the DPH guidance reads that:

> "Civilians lose protection against direct attack for the duration of each specific act amounting to direct participation in hostilities, whereas members of organised armed groups belonging to a non-State party to an armed conflict cease to be

civilians . . . , and lose protection against direct attack, for as long as they assume their continuous combat function." (ICRC, 2009, p. 70)

Accordingly, in contrast to combatants who can be targeted throughout the duration of a conflict, civilians *de facto* members lose and regain protection against direct attack in parallel with the intervals of their engagement in direct participation in hostilities. For them, it would be contradictory to attach and apply an even more serious consequence, that is, continuous loss of protection, when they are removed from the conduct of hostilities.

While there is passive agreement regarding this position, significant disagreement arises over how to define and monitor that "window of loss," particularly in relation to individuals or objects whose functions shift repeatedly over time. This is especially contested when dealing with individuals considered *de facto* members of armed groups or terrorist organisations, based not on formal affiliation but on the repetitive nature of their conduct, a condition that blurs the lines of continuous combat function. To paint a picture of the "revolving door" logic with civilian objects, consider the case of electronic countermeasure (ECM) pods and nodes—dual-use devices embedded within civilian infrastructure. In one scenario, these ECM systems may be used to manage the radio frequency spectrum to facilitate civilian communication services like broadcasting news or enabling cellular networks, qualifying the object as civilian in nature. In another scenario, these same systems may be activated to jam enemy radar, disrupt communications, or mislead targeting systems, thus transforming the object into a military objective under Article 52(2) of Additional Protocol 1.

If this ECM system, embedded within a civilian building, alternates between these two functions within hours or even minutes, then under the revolving door principle, it would only be subject to lawful attack during the period it performs the military function. Outside that timeframe, attacking the object would not be permissible. In a nutshell, where an object's legal status fluctuates based on transient use, a fundamental dilemma arises: how can the "window of loss" of protection be reliably assessed in real time, when the object's utility, and thus its legal character, can revert within moments and often without clear observable indicators? This contrasts sharply with a scenario in which the same ECM equipment is installed inside a military base. In such a case, the location itself confers a persistent military status on the object, making it a lawful target at all times, regardless of the equipment's operational mode at a given moment.

Unsurprising, this aspect of the ICRC interpretative guidance and the Additional Protocol 1 remain under scrutiny by scholars and policymakers. In fact, with reference to what they call the "great schism," critics have suggested that the revolving door concept lies amongst the root of the refusal to ratify the Additional Protocol 1 by some states (Dinstein, 2021, p. 708). While some believe that "there are grave errors in the formulation of some of the rules, and part of the commentary, in ways that adversely affect the ability to project an image of objective scholarship," others highlight its troubling ignorance of the realities of 21st century battlefield combat (Dinstein, 2007, p. 105; Schmitt, 2010, p. 739). Harsher critics have even tagged the Additional Protocol 1 as a pro-terrorist treaty masquerading as humanitarian law, given that political expediency, rather than legal technicalities, dictated its revision (Feith, 1985, p. 47).

Within this complex legal and operational environment, actors conducting targeting operations often frame their public diplomacy efforts around the assertion that strikes were both necessary and compliant with humanitarian *sine qua non*. This narrative becomes especially important, given the slippery nature of defining legitimate military targets in real-time operations, where the dual-use or transient nature of individuals and objects

complicates legal assessments. Following a strike, the absence of real-time, verifiable data makes it extremely difficult to distinguish between harm arising from lawful targeting under conditions of military necessity and harm resulting from either non-compliance with the LOAC or ambiguous legal standards. This creates a gap in post-strike evaluations, affecting how the legitimacy of an attack is perceived.

On one hand, states may report higher numbers of combatants, often including civilians deemed to have directly participated in hostilities. This classification removes those individuals from protection under the proportionality principle, thus justifying the strike under IHL. On the other hand, independent human rights bodies, often lacking access to real-time operational intelligence or denied access to conflict zones, tend to report lower combatant figures and higher civilian casualty rates. These assessments are usually based on post-strike impact and visible destruction, leading them to conclude that the attacks were disproportionate or indiscriminate. The same divergence in interpretation applies to civilian objects. A building considered a military objective by a state—due to real-time use or intelligence—may appear to human rights monitors as a civilian structure unjustifiably attacked. Ultimately, these competing assessments shape public and international perceptions of the legitimacy of the war effort. The legal and moral framing of individual targeting decisions can either reinforce or undermine an actor's strategic narrative, influencing diplomatic fallout, media coverage, and public support.

Public diplomacy in crisis management

Grand strategy in international conflict today increasingly depends on the integration of force, diplomacy, and communication. As political actors ascribe significance to their image on the global stage, they turn to public diplomacy as a strategic instrument to justify actions, defend policies, and shape perception. While nuances exist, public diplomacy is best understood as the strategic communication efforts by International Relation actors aimed at influencing public opinion and legitimising policy choices (Tuch, 1990; Manheim, 1994; Signitzer and Coombs, 1992; Gilboa, 2001). Scholarship emphasises that public diplomacy targets not only the masses but also elite constituencies—diplomats, policymakers, journalists, intellectuals, and emerging opinion-shapers such as podcasters—whose interpretations and agenda-setting roles are crucial in constructing global discourse (Mor, 2006, 2012; Gilboa, 2008; Melissen, 2005). More recently, studies highlight public diplomacy's role in crisis management, particularly when traditional diplomacy struggles to adapt swiftly to transboundary outrage or reputational threats. In this context, public diplomacy becomes vital not only for persuasion but also for navigating reputational harm, norm-based challenges, and identity-based scrutiny.

One of the most foundational contributions to understanding public diplomacy in crisis management is Robert Entman's (1993) articulation of framing theory. Although Entman (1993) does not deal with public diplomacy directly, his model underpins much of the strategic communication within public diplomacy by demonstrating how actors selectively construct meaning to enhance image management and normative alignment. He argues that frames define problems, assign responsibility, make moral judgements, and propose remedies. In crises, actors use such frames to construct meaning, justify behaviour, and exhibit alignment with normative expectations. Through framing, they structure how events are perceived and morally evaluated by audiences. Entman's insights highlight that maintaining normative coherence in public view is largely a battle over narrative construction and moral framing.

Complementing Entman, Patterson and Monroe (1998, p. 316) argue that political behaviour cannot be understood apart from narrative construction. For them, narrative

is not merely a method of storytelling but a fundamental cognitive, cultural, and political process that structures reality, identity, and agency. While Entman emphasises the elite-controlled framing of discrete issues, Patterson and Monroe (1998) highlight the deep-rooted contestation over meaning and the ongoing redefinition of identities through narrative. Together, these scholars suggest that public diplomacy succeeds not just through persuasive messaging but through the ability to frame actions as legitimate within broader moral and political narratives, particularly under crisis conditions.

Cowan and Arsenault (2008, p. 11) extend this idea by emphasising the relational dimensions of public diplomacy. Their monologue–dialogue–collaboration model reconceptualises public diplomacy as a relational and participatory practice, rather than a one-way information flow. Especially in crisis contexts where reputations are fragile, trust recovery demands not only narrative control but also audience engagement in restoring legitimacy and aligning identities with broader normative expectations. Similarly, Schimmelfennig (2001) demonstrates that rhetorical action, especially when grounded in shared liberal norms, can constrain powerful actors through what he terms "rhetorical entrapment." Here, actors find themselves normatively bound by prior commitments, making public diplomacy a vehicle not only for image-shaping but also for normative accountability.

Symbolic and emotional aspects also shape public diplomacy in times of crisis. Eva-Karin Olsson (2013, p. 220) stresses the need for sense-making, boundary-spanning, and culturally resonant communication, as shown in her study of the Danish cartoon crisis. Dmitry Chernobrov (2022, p. 278) contributes a novel perspective using strategic humour and ironic framing, demonstrating how ridicule can be used to erode adversary legitimacy. While their approaches differ, with Olsson advocating empathetic bridge-building and Chernobrov favouring disruptive subversion, both point to the emotional texture of modern PD, especially in narrative warfare.

Though these scholars have contributed valuable insights to the study of public diplomacy in times of crisis, their theoretical models suffer from a lack of clear operationalisation, limiting their utility for systematic analysis. For instance, Entman's framing theory provides a powerful conceptual tool for understanding how political actors shape public narratives, but it does not offer a framework for tracing the consistency, evolution, and impact of specific rhetorical moves across time or actors. Similarly, Patterson and Monroe's (1998) work on narrative and identity highlights how deeply embedded stories shape political behaviour, yet their focus remains at a philosophical level, offering little guidance on how such narratives can be empirically identified, categorised, and compared. These frameworks enrich our understanding of meaning-making but fall short in offering methodological precision when applied to high-stakes diplomatic interactions.

Likewise, Cowan and Arsenault's dialogic model of public diplomacy, while forward-thinking in its emphasis on relational engagement, tends to prioritise normative prescriptions over analytical structure. It proposes how public diplomacy should work, through dialogue and collaboration, but provides limited tools for identifying or classifying how rhetorical strategies unfold in adversarial settings, particularly during moments of reputational crisis. Olsson and Chernobrov expand the scope of public diplomacy to include cultural sensitivity and emotional appeal, but their insights, though compelling, are often case-specific and difficult to generalise. The lack of typologies or codable categories in these approaches makes it difficult to assess rhetorical effectiveness across different cases or crises.

In contrast, Ben Mor's rhetorical defence framework provides a methodologically grounded, typologically clear, and empirically adaptable model for analysing how political

actors manage legitimacy in times of crisis. His approach conceptualises public diplomacy not merely as a persuasion or narrative construction but as a structured process of rhetorical interaction, specifically "attack-defence" exchanges, where actors use recognisable strategies, such as blame avoidance, blame imposition, credit denial, and credit gain (Mor, 2007, p. 669; Mor, 2009, p. 227; Mor, 2012, p. 402; Mor, 2014, p. 254). What sets Mor apart is his ability to operationalise these strategies within a norm-sensitive context, particularly when actors are accused of violating shared standards, such as IHL. Mor's model allows for rigorous coding, comparative analysis, and empirical tracing of how rhetorical appeals function across different audiences and forums.

Moreover, Mor's framework is uniquely suited for analysing targeting campaigns and their communicative aftermath, where legality, morality, and legitimacy intersect. It moves beyond abstract theorising by linking rhetorical content to specific evaluative claims: appeals to truth (logos), rightness (norms), and sincerity (identity/ethos). By grounding rhetorical analysis in these normative dimensions, offers a replicable method for assessing how states justify contested actions in legal and moral terms. Unlike broader framing or narrative theories, his approach enables researchers to identify not just what is said but also how and why particular rhetorical strategies are used to deflect, redirect, or affirm normative expectations. For these reasons, this paper adopts 's framework. The following section outlines this framework in greater detail, clarifying the theoretical basis for the subsequent empirical analysis of Israel's rhetorical conduct following the Al-Jalaa Tower strike.

Public diplomacy as a rhetoric-based interaction in the use of force

In the war on terror, where terror actors rely heavily on publicity to amplify the effects of their tactics, public diplomacy often assumes strategic primacy, supplementing military force in shaping conflict outcomes (Mor, 2009, p. 219; Gilboa, 2006, p. 719; Yarchi et al., 2013). As Yoram Dinstein (2011, p. 484) observed in reference to the Vietnam war, public opinion can matter "no less, or perhaps even more" than the battlefield result itself. While some audience hold firm stances consistently opposing, others supporting the use of force adjust their positions based on evolving perceptions of legitimacy, anticipated success, and human costs (Gelpi et al., 2009, p. 237). In such a landscape, public diplomacy functions not merely as messaging but as a strategic instrument for managing both principled opposition and more flexible audiences. By addressing both ends of the spectrum, public diplomacy becomes central to maintaining operational legitimacy and international standing during conflict.

Building on this understanding, Mor reconceptualises public diplomacy not simply as a soft power strategy or monologue-based persuasion but as a rhetorical exchange embedded in contested legitimacy claims, termed "rhetorical attack-defence," interactions worthwhile only within a normative setting (Mor, 2007, pp. 661–683; Mor, 2009, pp. 219–239; Mor, 2012, pp. 393–422; Mor, 2014, pp. 250–265). Delivered through speeches, statements, and/or digital media, these exchanges employ factual and norm-based appeals in identity-enhancing or identity-threatening situations. Mor identifies several core strategies, blame avoidance, blame imposition, credit denial, and credit gain, each rooted in the normative context that governs social interaction. This study examines three interrelated strategies from Mor's framework,: blame avoidance, blame imposition, and moral differentiation, to understand how states navigate such predicaments, defend their legitimacy, and position themselves relative to adversaries in contested conflicts.

For instance, consider a "predicament of image protection" when an actor's conduct prompts negative attribution. Assuming a shared standard of responsibility between actor and audience, public diplomacy appeals aim to reject blame by showing that such attribution is unwarranted. A key rhetorical strategy, blame avoidance, justifies controversial action within the realm of what other normatively aligned states would do under similar circumstances. This form of rhetorical defence rests on the presumption that if a broad category of actors would or have acted similarly, then the action in question should be viewed as normatively acceptable or at least understandable. Mor (2009, p. 231) alludes to this tactic as part of a broader strategy where blame is deflected not simply by denying wrongdoing but by embedding the contested action within a socially recognisable pattern of behaviour (Mor, 2009, p. 231). This mechanism does not require the audience to see the act as ideal only but also as reasonable, predictable, and standard practice in the face of shared threats. In this way, rhetorical legitimacy is derived from invoking precedent and shared rationality, rather than from a purely legal or moral defence.

To exemplify, a state might respond to criticism over its resort to force by arguing as follows: "Any state faced with a barrage of rockets targeting its cities would take similar defensive measures." Here, the focus shifts from the morality of the outcome to the presumed inevitability of the decision-making process, thereby downplaying culpability. It may even cite the conduct of other actors as analogues, subtly transferring normative legitimacy from those cases to its own. While justification is the most common form, Mor notes that blame avoidance can also take the shape of outright denials, excuses, or even partial or full acceptance of culpability. These strategies operate not merely to defend the actor in the immediate controversy but also to anchor the actor's conduct within a shared normative order.

A vivid case is the US admission and apology for a drone strike in Afghanistan killing illegitimate targets. In this event, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs Gen. Mark Milley initially called the attack a "righteous strike" but later retracted, stating that "…. after deeper post-strike analysis, our conclusion is that innocent civilians were killed." Gen. Frank McKenzie, commander of the US Central Command, which oversaw the strike was quoted as saying, "It was a mistake and I offer my sincere apology" (Coren, *et al.,* 2021; Rothenberg, 2021). A similar tone was echoed by the Secretary of Defence Lloyd Austin (Coren *et al.*, 2021; Rothenberg, 2021). This rhetorical shift from firm justification to acceptance of culpability and expression of regret demonstrates a tactical move intended to reaffirm normative commitments even in the face of operational failure.

In certain image protection scenarios, blame avoidance may involve expressing regret for an undesirable outcome while framing the underlying action as necessary and norm-compliant. For example, a state might acknowledge civilian casualties resulting from a strike on a legitimate military target located within a populated area. In such cases, the expression of regret signals moral awareness, yet the action is portrayed as unavoidable given the circumstances. Civilian harm is framed not as a violation but as collateral damage, a tragic but lawful consequence of military necessity. This rhetorical strategy allows the actor to preserve the perceived legitimacy of its conduct while demonstrating sensitivity to humanitarian concerns, striking a balance between justifying the operation and protecting its reputation.

Conversely, in an "opportunity of image enhancement," occurring when an opponent's actions evokes a negative attribution, an actor's appeals apply blame imposition tactics intended to impose and maximise the responsibility of the opponent (Mor, 2009, pp. 231–232). Blame imposition redirects responsibility for contested outcomes towards an adversary or a third party, reframing the actor's conduct as either compelled by the

other's wrongful behaviour or overshadowed by the other's greater culpability. This strategy appeals to widely recognised norms and shared narratives, positioning the opponent as the true violator of legal or moral standards. In this framing, the actor's actions are portrayed not as primary causes of harm but as necessary responses to the provocations or violations of others. In highlighting the modus operandi of an adversary that stands contrary to social norms, blame imposition gets rhetorical force. President Emmanuel Macron's defence of French airstrikes in Syria, following Assad's alleged use of chemical weapons, exemplifies this approach. Macron asserted: "We cannot allow regimes that believe they can act with impunity to violate international law in the worst possible way" (Elysée, 2018; France 24, 2018). Here, capitalising on violations, responsibility for escalation is firmly placed on Assad, reframing France's strikes as enforcement of international norms rather than acts of aggression.

A key feature of blame imposition is its ability to shift the moral lens, with the narrative focusing less on defending one's actions and more on exposing the opponent's transgressions. This can be done either directly by accusing the adversary of violating norms or indirectly by highlighting their negligence, recklessness, or deliberate malfeasance. Observably, in this case, the communicative goal is to make the opponent's behaviour the central object of scrutiny, thereby diluting or nullifying criticisms aimed at the actor. Blame imposition can also target third-party critics, such as internationalorganisations, states, and NGOs, especially when they are perceived to apply double standards. Here, rhetorical counterattacks may accuse critics of hypocrisy or moral inconsistency, effectively imposing blame on the critics themselves. For example, Israeli Permanent Representative to the UN, Ms. Meirav Eilon Shahar, stated:

> "Since the council inception, 30 percent of all special sessions have targeted Israel, instead of the council being a moral voice and unequivocally stating that Israel has the right to defend itself and condemning Hamas for the terrorist activity… We have witnessed a ritual where Israel is targeted and singled out" (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], 2021).

She further argued:

> "You cannot be pro-Palestinian if you do not condemn Hamas for using its own people (the Palestinian people) as human shields. You cannot be pro-Palestinian if you continue to allow Hamas to use the international aid to build terror infrastructure in its schools, residential buildings and hospitals" (UNHCR, 2021).

This strategy is also evident in responses to direct international criticism. Israeli Ambassador Ron Dermer, during a CNN interview, stated: "In placing the blame on Israel, they are unwilling accomplices... It sends a message to terror organisations: if you use human shields, it works" (CNN, 2014). By framing critics as enablers of unlawful conduct while redirecting attention to the opponent's negligence, appeals shift moral responsibility from Israel's targeting decisions to those condemning them without equally condemning the adversary's violations.

Importantly, blame avoidance often operates in concert with blame imposition. Once an actor has mitigated its own perceived culpability, whether by justification, denial, or limited acceptance, it can pivot to reframing the issue so that responsibility is redirected towards an adversary or critical third party. This sequencing enables the actor to first secure its own legitimacy before actively undermining that of others, creating a two-step rhetorical defence: neutralising damage to one's reputation and then counter-attacking to

reshape the moral narrative. Whereas blame avoidance focuses on minimising or neutralising one's own culpability, blame imposition works in the opposite direction: it actively redirects responsibility for contested outcomes towards an adversary or a third party. Both strategies operate within the same normative terrain, but their orientations and communicative purposes differ. Simply, while blame avoidance is inward-facing, seeking to protect the actor's legitimacy, blame imposition on the other is outward-facing, seeking to erode the legitimacy of others.

Though both rhetorical strategies can function as stand-alone rhetorical countermeasures, they are most potent when used as bridges to moral differentiation. In this regard, moral differentiation emphasises the ethical superiority of the actor over the adversary by drawing stark contrasts in conducts, values, and adherence to norms. Unlike blame avoidance, which focuses on defending one's own actions, or blame imposition, which targets the opponent's misconduct, moral differentiation reframes the conflict in comparative terms. By first establishing that the opponent is at fault—or at least more culpable—an actor creates the moral contrast that underpins claims of ethical superiority. This transition allows the speaker to move from "they are in the wrong" to "we are the ones upholding the right," turning the defensive act of shifting blame into an offensive assertion of moral leadership.

The strength of moral differentiation lies in its ability to integrate with the outputs of the other two strategies. When preceded by blame avoidance, it builds on a foundation of demonstrated innocence, portraying the actor as compliant with legal and ethical standards despite allegations. When following blame imposition, it leverages the opponent's perceived violations to heighten the contrast, making the actor's adherence to norms appear even more pronounced. In either sequence, it transforms defensive or offensive communicative moves into a lasting reputational asset. Moral differentiation, often grounded in tangible examples that allow audiences to see and compare behaviours, reframes the conflict as a struggle between virtue and vice, credibility and duplicity, order and lawlessness. An actor might highlight its compliance with targeting procedures, proportionality assessments, or the issuance of advanced warnings to civilians, juxtaposing these actions against the adversary's alleged indiscriminate attacks or deliberate endangerment of civilians.

The strategy is also strengthened by publicising evidence of self-restraint. Decisions not to strike certain targets, to abort planned attacks upon detecting civilians, and to permit humanitarian corridors, all serve to underscore a commitment to minimising harm, even when such restraint comes at a tactical or strategic cost. Highlighting such contrasts reinforces the actor's moral standing, consolidates credibility, attracts sympathetic allies, and shapes the broader narrative in favour of the actor's legitimacy. These acts are then presented not only as lawful but also as expressions of moral responsibility. In some cases, moral differentiation extends beyond military conduct to humanitarian or diplomatic initiatives. Facilitating aid deliveries, enabling evacuations, and engaging constructively with neutral intermediaries can be woven into the narrative as proof of a principled stance. When deployed in conjunction with blame avoidance or blame imposition, these actions help crystallise the moral contrast in the minds of audiences, cementing the perception of the actor as a legitimate and responsible participant in the conflict.

In sum, this literature review underscores how public diplomacy regarding armed conflict functions as a rhetorical battleground, where legitimacy is contested through strategies of blame avoidance, blame imposition, and moral differentiation. These rhetorical devices do more than shield states from criticism—they actively recalibrate narratives around legality, necessity, and proportionality, especially in conflicts involving asymmetric warfare and

civilian harm. As framework demonstrates, these appeals are not isolated but interlinked, evolving dynamically to protect reputational capital and delegitimise adversaries or critical observers. Moreover, the interplay of normative expectations, audience psychology, and strategic communication reveals that rhetorical success is not simply a function of truth but of resonance with shared norms and plausible precedents. This layered understanding of rhetorical defence situates public diplomacy as an essential arena of modern conflict, where the narrative stakes often rival, and at times exceed, those on the battlefield. As such, the subsequent empirical analysis interrogates not just what states say in the wake of contested strikes but also how, to whom, and with what normative implications such rhetorical performances are deployed.

Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative methodological approach, using discourse analysis and rhetorical analysis to evaluate public diplomacy communications related to the Al-Jalaa Tower strike. A case study design was chosen to explore Israel's strategic communication during the 2021 Gaza conflict, allowing for a contextual and in-depth examination of how legitimacy is constructed after a targeting operation. The sources analysed include official Israeli government and IDF press releases, speeches and interviews by political figures, media reports, and social media posts, primarily from verified X accounts.

Materials were selected based on their relevance to the Al-Jalaa Tower strike and the presence of rhetorical content justifying the attack or framing the event in legal and moral terms. Keyword searches were conducted across news databases to identify relevant articles. A Python-based script was used to extract named entities (e.g., officials, ministries) and their accompanying statements from retrieved articles, ensuring systematic selection. Forming the dataset for the study, this approach yielded a final sample of fifty-seven statements, which were then categorised for analysis. The analysis is grounded in Mor's rhetorical defence model, which categorises rhetorical appeals into three primary strategies: blame avoidance (deflecting or minimising responsibility for contested actions), blame imposition (assigning responsibility for harmful outcomes to adversaries or external critics who ignore violations by adversaries while condemning the actor), and moral differentiation (drawing contrasts between the ethical values of the actor and its opponent).

Each statement was coded thematically based on the dominant rhetorical strategy and the persuasive appeal employed. A structured coding framework was employed to organise and classify textual segments according to the defined analytical categories. The coding process included open coding to identify initial rhetorical patterns, followed by axial coding to consolidate themes under the three strategy categories. The distribution was as follows: twenty-two statements were classified as Blame Avoidance, twenty-four as Blame Imposition (with twelve specifically targeting third-party actors), and eleven as Moral Differentiation. To assess frequency and emphasis, the rhetorical strategies were measured across three axes: distribution over time, to observe whether rhetorical strategies intensified, diminished, or shifted in tone; source diversity, examining whether multiple official representatives repeated similar messaging; and target orientation, particularly for blame imposition, identifying whether statements were directed at Hamas or third-party critics (e.g., UNHRC, states, or NGOs). Illustrative rhetorical examples are used to enhance transparency and show how rhetorical strategies manifest in practice; several examples from the data are highlighted below. These are categorised based on the rhetorical strategy and the dominant appeal used:

Blame avoidance

- Israel didn't initiate this conflict—We were attacked in an unprovoked manner.

- The full responsibility for this escalation lies with the Hamas terrorist organisation, which chose to initiate rocket fire at Israel cities.

- Prior to the strikes, the IDF warned the civilians in the building and gave them sufficient time to evacuate.

Blame imposition

- Hamas deliberately operates among Gaza's civilian population in order to obstruct the IDF's operational action.

- Hamas choose to hide among civilians as it carries out attacks against Israel… This choice does not grant Hamas terrorist immunity from IDF strikes…

- You cannot be pro-Palestinian if you do not condemn Hamas for using its own people (the Palestinian people) as human shields. You cannot be pro-Palestinian if you continue to allow Hamas to use the international aid to build terror infrastructure in its schools, residential buildings and hospitals.

Moral differentiation

- You cannot equate a democracy that values life with a terror organisation that glorifies death.

- They target civilians while hiding behind civilians. We target those who target us—with precision.

In essence, these rhetorical patterns underscore how public diplomacy appeals were crafted to manage reputational risks, affirm legal and moral legitimacy, and reassign responsibility in the aftermath of targeting campaigns. In the text, representative examples are provided to illustrate how rhetorical strategies manifested in practice, categorised based on rhetorical strategy and dominant appeal. These examples were selected to avoid redundancy and maintain narrative clarity. For transparency and to facilitate further research, the complete dataset of all fifty-seven statements, each with the full text, speaker/source, date, context, and coding strategy, are presented in the Appendix. This ensures that while the analysis section highlights key examples for interpretive depth, readers can review and verify the entire corpus of data in full.

Public diplomacy in crisis management

On the 10 May 2021, Hamas, designated as a terror group, launched an unprovoked offensive attack by firing rockets towards Israeli towns and cities, thus eliciting significant response from the IDF, who dubbed their response Operation "Guardian of the Walls." Five days in, four high-rise towers were destroyed during the operation as they were considered dual-use structures used unlawfully as shields. The Al-Jalaa Tower was

one of them. Providing advanced warnings to residents of the tower, which was occupied by international media outlets (including the AP and Al-Jazeera), several other business offices as well as private residences, the target was destroyed.

The incident, which incurred no casualties, generated a plethora of criticism from the media and human rights organisations. Concerns emanated from the status of the target as legitimate and the extent of Israeli offensive, considered excessive or disproportionate (Harkov, 2021; United Nations Security Council [UNSC], 2021). Human Rights Watch for one, questioned the targeting of the tower as a legitimate military objective in its third report on the 11-day war, tagging the strike a possible "war crime.". For them, even with Hamas equipment present in the towers, the strikes seemed to inflict foreseeably disproportionate harm to civilian property. Criticism also emerged around the broader accusation of collective punishment, a term invoked when an entire civilian population is perceived to be punished for the actions of a few. B'Tselem claimed that the attacks constitute war crimes, fitting a pattern of Israeli collective punishment towards the local population (B'Tselem, 2021; Committee to Protect Journalist [CPJ], 2021). Taking a similar stand, Amnesty International on its social platform tweeted as follows: "The Israeli attack on Al-Jalaa building, destroying homes & @Aljazeera & @AP offices must be investigated as a war crime.… The strike fits a pattern of Israel's collective punishment of the Palestinian population" (Amnesty International, 2021).

These opponents of the strike argued that destroying a building housing international media and multiple civilian offices constituted an overbroad reprisal and a punitive measure against a wide civilian group, rather than a targeted military action. Observably, necessity and adherence to humanitarian *sine qua non* were at the crux of their criticism. The incident was reported across numerous media houses and social media platforms, with some media groups characterising the towers as solely civilian in nature and the attack as purposely targeting media facilities to handicap coverage of the distressing situation in Gaza (Farzan et al., 2021; Jewish Institute for National Security of America [JINSA], 2021, p. 49). In particular, Al Jazeera called the strike "barbaric," claiming that "the aim of this heinous crime is to silence the media and to hide the untold carnage and suffering of the people of Gaza" (Al Jazeera, 2021; Reuters, 2021). Rallying media and human rights institutions, its acting director general maintained that the strike "aims to silence the truth by killing the messenger."

In fact, the allegations that the media was the target prompted several states to offer reassurances and call for the safety and protection of independent journalists and media organisations (Reuters, 2021). These criticisms or rhetorical attacks threatening its image generated for Israel both a 'predicament of image protection' and, at the same time, an 'opportunity of image enhancement' as highlighted in the literature review. For the most part, while Israel's public diplomacy strategy generally attends to the domestic population in Gaza and Hamas itself, the researchers are of the opinion that more efforts were directed at states, international organisations, and NGOs, keeping in mind that these interactions are worthwhile only within a normative setting of a shared standard of responsibility between actors. In other words, the actions of terror organisations reveal that they do not subject themselves to these standards.

Therefore, in responding to the mounting international criticism and growing calls for Israel to end its strikes by states, multilateral institutions, and NGOs, Israel's public diplomacy appeals relied heavily on the communication strategies of blame avoidance, blame imposition, and moral differentiation, at times interlocking these approaches to justify its actions by framing Hamas's behaviour as the genesis of the undesirable event. Foremost, utilizing a strategy of blame avoidance, Israeli officials sought to reframe the

legitimacy of its strikes through appeals to self-defence, a move consistent with what Mor describes as a predicament of image protection. The argument was that Israel's resort to force was not a proactive choice but a necessary and norm-aligned response to unprovoked aggression. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu emphasised this point by stating that "Israel didn't initiate this conflict—We were attacked in an unprovoked manner" (Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2021a). This statement positions Israel as acting under constraint, evoking the principle of self-defence under international law to ward off reputational damage.

Simultaneously, Israel deployed blame imposition by shifting moral and legal responsibility to Hamas, thereby reframing the escalation as not only unavoidable but also morally necessitated. A press statement from Israel's Ministry of Foreign Affairs reinforced this message: "The full responsibility for this escalation lies with the Hamas terrorist organisation, which chose to initiate rocket fire at Israel cities" (Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2021a). Another official communication added, "Hamas started the violence against Israel as part of a power struggle after the Palestinian Authority cancelled its elections" (Harkov, 2021). These statements aim to delegitimise Hamas's role by presenting it as the aggressor whose actions left Israel with no alternative but to respond militarily. This rhetorical interlocking, denying responsibility while simultaneously assigning it to another party, allowed Israel to justify the continuation of its strikes even amid international appeals for restraint. By embedding its narrative in legal and normative frameworks, Israel positioned itself not only as a reactive actor but also as one defending order and principle against unlawful violence.

A more targeted rhetorical appeal emerged, directed specifically at state actors and sovereign governments. Statements by several officials illustrate a rhetorical strategy rooted in comparative justification, a subset of blame avoidance, where Israel's military response is framed not as exceptional but as a universal sovereign prerogative. Defence Minister Benny Gantz remarked that "There isn't a sovereign country anywhere that would accept incoming rocket fire" (TV7, 2021). Also, Foreign Minister Gabi Ashkenazi's echoed this sentiment in a tweet: "We don't accept it either…. We will ensure we preserve our freedom to act," encouraged states to view Israel's situation through a lens of shared sovereignty and reciprocal standards. The rhetorical power of this strategy lies in its appeal to common state behaviours and its normalisation of retaliatory action as a matter of protecting civilian populations, thus pre-emptively deflecting criticism by asserting that no other rational and responsible state would act differently.

Ashkenazi's further emphasis that "millions of residents are forced to spend nights in bomb shelters," adds significant rhetorical weight to this justification. It anchors Israel's narrative in emotional urgency and humanitarian concern, painting a vivid picture of civilian life under threat. This appeal serves multiple functions: it re-centres Israel as a victim of unprovoked attacks and indiscriminate violence, enhances the proportionality of its response, and heightens the moral stakes. By stressing the human cost of inaction, the statement underscores the necessity of the strikes and reinforces the framing that Israel's actions are not only legitimate but also compelled by its duty to protect its population. Importantly, this sentiment anticipates and counters international criticisms by portraying Israel as reactive and protective, not aggressive.

A return to assertive, principle-driven rhetoric follows this emotional pivot. While several representatives declared that "we will make no apologies for defending our citizens" (Times of Israel, 2021b; UNHCR, 2021), the Prime Minister is quoted in a press statement just after the strike on the tower saying "we will continue to respond forcefully until the security of our people is reinstated and restored" (Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs,

2021c; Jewish News Syndicate, 2021). Both phrases not only reinforce Israel's stance of moral clarity but also mark a shift from justification to moral differentiation. This rhetorical posture emphasises Israel's adherence to the norms of international law and humanitarian restraint while presenting its adversary, Hamas, as a rogue actor that weaponises civilian suffering, keeping in mind its alleged use of its own population as human shields. The unapologetic tone signals that Israel views its actions as not only defensible but also morally imperative, even under intense scrutiny.

Further reinforcing this distinction, Gabi Ashkenazi asserted, "We expect the entire international community to condemn Hamas terrorist activities and the rocket fire from #Gaza & not to reward terrorism." This call to the global audience is more than a condemnation of Hamas; it functions as an appeal to normative alignment, inviting other states and international institutions to take a moral stance consistent with Israel's framing of the conflict. In doing so, Israel positions itself as the normative centre, upholding shared values of security, lawfulness, and civilian protection, while simultaneously delegitimising its adversary as unworthy of international sympathy and diplomatic parity. These interconnected rhetorical moves consolidate Israel's defence posture by combining blame avoidance and moral differentiation, thus constructing a coherent narrative that sustains its legitimacy amid intensifying scrutiny and calls for restraint. Together, these appeals serve to bolster Israel's legitimacy in the eyes of international peers, particularly those with democratic constituencies who might relate to the dilemma of balancing national defence with humanitarian responsibility.

Having framed its conduct within the boundaries of democratic responsibility and moral self-restraint, Israel's public diplomacy advanced into a more structured rebuttal phase, one that directly addressed the swelling international concern over the legality and legitimacy of the Al-Jalaa Tower strike. The communication moved from generalised normative appeals to targeted, claim-specific responses, particularly as global media outlets accused Israel of deliberately targeting journalists and press facilities days after, prompting allied states to issue urgent calls for the protection of the free press. In response to this intensifying criticism, several official Israeli statements invoked valid counterclaims anchored in the known modus operandi of Hamas, embedding military operations within civilian infrastructure. These appeals strategically deployed the rhetorical strategies of blame avoidance and blame imposition, asserting that the presence of Hamas military intelligence within the Al-Jalaa Tower, not the media, was the actual target of the IDF operation. By reframing the incident in terms of operational necessity, Israel aimed to deny intent to harm media infrastructure and instead emphasised the building's transformation into a dual-use object, thus invoking a legally grounded excuse-based defence.

For example, the following IDF statement foregrounds this strategic pivot: "This event should be put into context—Hamas intentionally operates within the civilian population of Gaza and does so in order to hamper the IDF's operational activity" (Magid, 2021). The appeal invites the audience to assess the strike not as an act against journalism but as a necessary action within the broader complexities of asymmetric warfare. Here, blame avoidance is enacted through the contextualisation of the operational environment and the constraints it imposes on lawful targeting. Meanwhile, the claim that "the media is not the target... it contained Hamas military intelligence" (Reuters, 2021) further reinforces a norm-based justification, aligning the action with the LOAC principles of proportionality and distinction. These appeals signal that Israel's conduct was not arbitrary but grounded in legal assessments and real-time intelligence.

This rhetorical framing draws directly on legal and normative concerns regarding the unlawful use of civilian objects for war-sustaining efforts. That is "objects that by their

nature, location, purpose, or use contribute effectively to military action (i.e., military objectives) are lawful targets." In this case, Hamas is accused of embedding military objectives within civilian infrastructure, thereby projecting legal immunity onto illegitimate assets. As discussed in the literature, the mere presence of civilians or protected functions does not render the target immune rather but subject to proportionality assessment. Thus, the justification of the Al-Jalaa strike hinges on this interpretive logic, framing it as an attack on a dual-use object whose military character warranted engagement, not an assault on the press *per se*.

This logic is amplified in another IDF tweet: "Hamas chooses to hide among civilians as it carries out attacks against Israel. This choice does not grant Hamas terrorists immunity from IDF strikes. We will continue to operate in order to defend the people of Israel." This statement explicitly emphasises that Hamas's tactic of using civilians as shields does not override Israel's right and perceived duty to act in defence of its population. It serves to simultaneously deflect blame for civilian harm by attributing the risk to Hamas's own choices and to assert legal–moral authority for continued military engagement. It reinforces the idea that civilian presence, while regrettable as collateral harm, does not nullify military necessity when the target retains its lawful status under international law. As such, this rhetorical move weaves blame avoidance with blame imposition, shifting moral and legal responsibility to the adversary while reaffirming compliance with the LOAC framework.

In parallel, blame imposition becomes evident through statements that frame Hamas as deliberately engineering civilian harm to achieve propaganda objectives. Lieutenant Colonel Jonathan Conricus's remark that "Hamas might have calculated that by placing their 'assets' inside a building with news media offices in it they probably hoped that would keep them safe from Israeli attack" (Reuters, 2021) asserts that culpability lies squarely with Hamas for co-locating military assets within protected civilian structures. This tactic is described as not only a violation of international law but also a strategic manipulation of humanitarian sensitivities, a means to provoke international condemnation against Israel while shielding its own operatives. In doing so, Israel shifts moral accountability to Hamas, portraying it as the primary violator of normative conduct and reinforcing a moral differentiation between the two actors.

Building directly on this strategy, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu extended the moral framing to a targeted diplomatic audience in a meeting with foreign ambassadors, some of whom represented countries whose citizens had been killed by Hamas rocket fire. Beginning with a gesture of condolence to the victims' families, Netanyahu framed the attacks as indiscriminate and morally egregious: "They murder everyone, any civilian they can get their hands on... They use civilians. They target civilians while hiding behind civilians, using them as human shields. This is the problem that we face" (Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2021d). This statement skilfully combines blame imposition, by assigning sole responsibility to Hamas for endangering civilian life, with blame avoidance, by portraying Israel's actions as necessary responses to systematic violations of international norms. Situating Hamas as the root of the crisis, Netanyahu shifts both moral and legal responsibility away from Israel and towards its adversary.

Netanyahu further deepens this rhetorical approach by placing Israel's actions within a comparative framework aimed at democratic states: "Democracies have a choice... we can absorb attacks… or we can level the cities" (Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2021d). By rejecting both inaction and disproportionate response, Israel is cast as occupying the tactical middle ground: "We do something different. We try to target those who target us with great precision" (Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2021d). This articulation not only reflects justificatory logic emphasising proportionality and constraint but it also encourages

the ambassadors, as representatives of fellow democracies, to identify with Israel's predicament. It signals a shared burden among states: the challenge of maintaining legitimacy while confronting adversaries who exploit humanitarian norms. Ultimately, this rhetorical manoeuvre appeals to a community of practice (Adler, Bremberg, and Sondarjee 2024, p. 2; Adler and Pouliot, 2011; Adler-Nissen, 2012), drawing on the assumption that sovereign actors constrained by international norms will recognise the difficult balance between ethical restraint and effective deterrence. In this light, Israel's public diplomacy frames its military strategy not merely as self-defence but as a model of responsible conduct under asymmetric threat.

Further intensifying this differentiation, the IDF's spokesperson Hidai Zilberman said, "If Hamas and the Islamic Jihad think that the media are their shield… we'll find that media outlets' offices are going to be popping up as covers for terrorist assets" (Gross, 2021). This statement serves as both a warning and deterrent, painting Hamas as an actor who abuses the laws of war to manufacture legitimacy crises. By framing Hamas's behaviour as an intentional exploitation of normative ambiguity, Israel leverages public diplomacy not just to defend a specific strike but also to contest the interpretive space in which legitimacy itself is assessed. This rhetorical move, utilised several times, elevates Israel's legal and moral standing while delegitimising Hamas as an actor that endangers not only civilians but also the very normative structure regulating armed conflict. It echoes what some scholars, like Schimmelfennig (2001), describe as rhetorical entrapment reversed, turning the adversary's manipulation of norms into evidence of its own illegitimacy. It asserts that the erosion of legal and moral clarity is itself a strategy employed by terrorist organisations in asymmetric warfare.

Within this broader legitimacy contest, Gilad Erdan, Ambassador to the UN and the United States, made this assertion: "Israel does not suspect its [AP's] employees were aware a covert Hamas unit was using the building in this way" (Magid, 2021). The statement offers a crucial rhetorical manoeuvre. Drawing on Mor's categorisation, this appeal functions as a rhetorical excuse, a strategy that mitigates blame by removing intent or culpability from the affected party, in this case, the media outlet. Unlike justifications, which assert the rightness or necessity of an action, excuses emphasise the absence of moral failing on the part of the individuals involved. By making it clear that APstaffs were not complicit or even aware of Hamas's alleged use of their building, the Israeli appeal dissociates journalistic actors from the military rationale that led to the strike. This dissociation allows Israel to acknowledge harm to civilians or civilian institutions without accepting that such harm was the product of Israeli intent or negligence, at the same time reinforcing its claim that Hamas bears full responsibility for entangling protected objects within a combat zone.

Importantly, these remarks were not delivered in a vacuum; they were made during a visit to one of the affected media outlets Associate Press. The setting itself adds symbolic weight to the rhetorical appeal, signalling a deliberate effort to engage empathetically and transparently with the journalistic community. It is in this context that Ambassador Erdan's broader affirmation, "Israel upholds the importance of press freedom and strives to ensure the safety of journalists wherever they are reporting" (Magid, 2021), serves as a reputational pivot that complements the operational justifications outlined above. In rhetorical terms, it operates across both blame avoidance and moral differentiation strategies. On one hand, it seeks to assuage global concern by reinforcing Israel's normative alignment with freedom of the press, pushing back against accusations that the IDF deliberately targeted journalists. On the other hand, it contrasts Israel's public commitments with the purported conduct of Hamas, reinforcing an ethical divide between the two actors.

This rhetorical gesture goes beyond textual denial or justification; it is symbolically communicative, acknowledging the sensitivities triggered by the incident while projecting transparency and accountability. The timing and setting amid international backlash and media outrage suggest a deliberate move to reclaim the moral high ground by distancing Israeli conduct from regimes known to suppress journalistic freedoms. It subtly recasts Israel as a reluctant actor operating under duress, reinforcing that the targeting decision was exceptional, not habitual, and shaped by adversary's behaviour, rather than institutional hostility towards the media. In doing so, Gilan's intervention reinforces the narrative that Israel's military conduct remains bound by legal and moral restraint and that any perceived deviation from press freedom principles was circumstantial rather than systemic.

Building upon this, further appeals to justify the Al-Jalaa strike were anchored in the language of military necessity, particularly invoking the presence of sensitive electronic warfare equipment within the building. For example, the IDF stated that "Hamas operatives had been using an office in the building to develop an electronic jamming system to be used against the Iron Dome defence system" (Fabian, 2021; Magid, 2021). This claim suggests that the Al-Jalaa Tower posed a real-time operational risk that could diminish Israel's ability to intercept rockets, thereby raising the urgency of military engagement. The IDF's X account echoed this claim, stating that while in the building, Hamas "gathered intel for attacks against Israel, manufactured weapons, and positioned equipment to hamper IDF operations." In this context, these claims fall under blame avoidance, specifically justification, with appeals recalibrating audience perception of the strike from an aggressive overreach to a necessary pre-emptive defence.

Complementing these appeals, another statement by Erdan noted that "the building posed such an imminent threat to Israeli civilians and was therefore prioritised by the IDF." This assertion sharpens the temporal urgency tied to military necessity, reinforcing the notion that the strike was not merely lawful in principle but also imperative in timing. By emphasising imminent threat and proportionality, officials sought to demonstrate that targeting decisions, even when controversial, were based on real-time assessments of risk, not broad animosity or disregard for civilian structures. In other words, justification here hinges on the framing of imminence: that failure to act would have directly jeopardised civilian lives. More so, the description of its utility as "disrupting the efficiency of the Iron Dome system, which saves lives on both ends" repositions the tower from a mere civilian object to a high-value military asset. The statement ties the military necessity of the strike to humanitarian logic, subtly implying that targeting the jamming system not only defends Israeli civilians but also minimises retaliatory escalation that would affect Palestinians.

Yet, an ancillary problem arises when the inherent ambiguity of dual-use targets is combined with the expectations that intelligence would be made publicly available and intelligence sources and methods would be simultaneously preserved. Addressing this issue in an interview while reacting to questions following the Committee to Protect Journalists' demands for a "detailed and documented justification" a day after the strike, PM Netanyahu responded as follows: "We share with our American friends all that intelligence and here's the intelligence we had," restating the use of the towers by Palestinian terrorist organisations; he ends his response by saying that "it's a perfectly legitimate target." The statement operates as a rhetorical justification designed to balance competing demands. On one hand, it addresses international and journalistic pressure, particularly the expectation for transparency and public disclosure, by suggesting that the strike was based on credible and vetted intelligence. On the other hand, it stops short of publicly revealing sensitive information, instead outsourcing credibility to a 'trusted ally' (the United States), thereby preserving the confidentiality of intelligence sources and methods.

Rather than disclosing classified intelligence to the broader international public, which could compromise operational methods, sources, and ongoing capabilities, Israel appeals to the credibility of a powerful and trusted ally functioning as the validating proxy. This move seeks to transfer legitimacy from a potentially contested domestic narrative to an international actor perceived as neutral or at least independently capable of verification. It is a calculated form of blame avoidance, particularly when full disclosure is infeasible. However, this approach simultaneously reveals a strategic vulnerability. Proxy validation may not fully satisfy public or institutional demands for transparency, especially in highly contested targeting operations involving dual-use infrastructure, such as a building housing both media and alleged military assets; the burden of proof becomes heavier precisely because of the potential for misinterpretation or misuse.

While the appeal to proxy validation sought to uphold the legitimacy of the strike through external corroboration, Israel's rhetorical strategy did not rely solely on external actors or classified intelligence. A complementary dimension of its blame avoidance approach involved reshaping the perceived nature of the operation itself, by foregrounding operational measures and contextual nuances that downplayed cruelty and reinforced normative restraint. This pivot reflects what Mor (2009, p. 236) identifies as a common tactic in blame avoidance: reframing actions to appear less aggressive or harmful within the bounds of moral and legal expectations. This move was not only strategic but also timely, as it emerged in the immediate aftermath of human rights organisations raising concerns that the strike on Al-Jalaa Tower constituted a war crime and fits into a broader pattern of collective punishment. The appeals deployed repositioned the nature of the strike, not as indiscriminate or punitive but as discriminating, proportional, and preventative. The IDF's statement that "prior to the strikes, the IDF warned the civilians in the building and gave them sufficient time to evacuate" (IDF, 2021, Magid 2021) is a powerful example of this.

Within the logic of blame avoidance, this claim serves multiple discursive functions. First, it implies that the military operation was targeted at an objective, not at civilians, thereby pre-emptively undermining accusations of deliberate civilian targeting. Second, the reference to advance warning fulfils a legal and moral expectation under IHL to take all feasible precautions to spare civilians. Since collective punishment inherently implies a disregard for civilian distinction, the emphasis on prior warning works to disaggregate civilians from the intended target and reframe the strike as discriminating, not punitive. This line of appeal was not isolated. Ambassador Erdan's statement during his visit to the media outlet follows this rhetorical trajectory but amplifies it through contrastive moral framing: "Israel did everything to ensure no employees or civilians were hurt during this operation... In contrast, Hamas is a genocidal terrorist organisation that purposely places its terror machine in civilian areas" (Magid, 2021).

Here, the rhetorical structure employs a dual strategy: excuse (no intent to harm) and moral differentiation. The first clause affirms adherence to humanitarian norms and signals that the resulting absence of casualties was not accidental but the result of deliberate precautionary measures. The second clause explicitly attributes the presence of civilians to Hamas's strategic positioning, invoking the widely condemned tactic of using human shields. This rhetorical move transfers responsibility for civilian risk from the IDF to Hamas, thereby undermining the claim that Israel engaged in collective punishment, as collective punishment implies that the civilian population was targeted because of their association with a political entity. Erdan's appeal insists that the danger to civilians was manufactured by Hamas, not imposed by Israeli policy.

Prime Minister Netanyahu furthers this line of argument stating, "As always, Israel is doing everything possible to protect our civilians and keep Palestinian civilians out of

harm's way—by yet again warning civilians to vacate the building… unlike Hamas, the absence of casualties are as a result of special care taken" (Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2021c). This statement performs three simultaneous functions. First, it reinforces the narrative of consistency in Israel's conduct, highlighting that the use of warnings is part of a standard operating procedure, rather than a one-off reaction. This consistency is crucial to disproving allegations of systemic civilian targeting. Second, it introduces a causal link between Israel's 'special care' and the lack of civilian casualties, again working to refute the core element of collective punishment—intentionally causing civilian suffering. Lastly, by contrasting Israeli care with Hamas's recklessness, it places Israel on the moral high ground, thus invoking moral differentiation to reposition the entire military campaign as defensive, lawful, and restrained. Essentially, the emphasis on pre-strike warnings, evacuations, and careful targeting denies intent to harm civilians and nullifies the legal and moral basis of collective punishment accusations. These remarks not only affirm normative standards but are also calibrated to resonate with audiences whose support for military action is contingent on minimal civilian harm.

Another dimension of Israel's rhetorical defence emerged in statements acknowledging the operational costs it was willing to absorb to minimise civilian harm. For instance, noting the operational effect of the advance warning, the IDF tweeted: "Hamas & Islamic Jihad used this time to take items out of the building—We were willing to pay that price to not harm any civilians." This appeal highlights that humanitarian considerations tempered military necessity. The rhetorical function here is to defuse accusations of disproportionate force or targeting civilians, by presenting the strike as both precautionary and principled—even when that meant sacrificing military advantage. However, immediately after this tweet, critics questioning the legality of the attack argued that Hamas had effectively made the building a civilian object by "simply moving their equipment out" (Haque, 2021).

This narrative brings to attention the quandary associated with switching status from civilian objects to military objectives or continuous combat function in the case of individuals, which contends that the tower must remain a military objective at the precise time of attack. For critics, the notification enabling the movement of equipment neutralised the immediate threat, making the attack unlawful. By challenging norms in a way that creates a slippery slope, this interpretation seems to test the idea of advance warnings, in the sense that it questions if the precautionary measure should serve only a deterrence and further lethal actions are unnecessary once activated. What then are the implications? On the one hand, it could further incentivise terror actors to continue to base operations within civilian objects, counting on protection either with or without effective warnings. On the other hand, since "proportionality in attack are inherently subjective determination" and warnings based on circumstances, such interpretation could unintentionally disincentivise states from issuing effective advance warnings, for example, decreasing the timing of evacuation (Cohen and Shany, 2021). Needless to say, both outcomes increase the lethal threshold of civilians and civilian objects.

Such dilemmas do not remain confined to battlefield ethics or legal debate; they inevitably spill into the realm of international legitimacy, where narrative framing plays a decisive role. The normative ambiguity surrounding the strike, which formed part of a broader military operation, was swiftly drawn into a wider political arena. The delegitimisation of Israel's military operations acquired renewed traction when the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) passed a resolution establishing a permanent Commission of Inquiry, a mechanism regarded as the Council's most robust investigative tool. Brought forward by the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) and the Palestinian delegation, and adopted with 24 votes in favour, nine against, and 14 abstentions, the resolution

marked a pivotal moment in the escalation of legal and political scrutiny. Israel's rhetorical response to this development would reflect not only its defensive posture but also an assertive effort to challenge the moral and procedural legitimacy of international actors it deemed biased.

Israeli officials immediately framed the resolution as a morally inverted move that punished a democracy defending itself while excusing a terrorist organisation. Prime Minister Netanyahu's statement, "the automatic majority at the council whitewashes a genocidal terrorist organisation that deliberately targets Israeli civilians while turning Gaza's civilians into human shields" (Times of Israel, 2021b), provides a stark example of blame imposition. Here, responsibility is not just deflected from Israeli conduct but also redirected towards both Hamas and the international community. This reflects the logic of rhetorical entrapment reversal: Israel accuses Hamas of systematically abusing legal norms while accusing international actors of enabling this abuse by misattributing guilt and contributing to the erosion of normative order. Netanyahu's follow-up statement, "while depicting as the 'guilty party' a democracy acting legitimately to protect its citizens from thousands of indiscriminate rocket attacks—this travesty makes a mockery of international law and encourages terrorists worldwide" (Times of Israel, 2021b), adds another dimension. This appeal furthers moral differentiation by presenting Israel's actions as justified and normatively constrained while portraying the resolution as a distortion of justice that fuels impunity. The suggestion that such resolutions "encourage terrorists worldwide" draws on a slippery slope argument: that mislabelling legal military responses as crimes undermines the entire global legal framework, diminishing deterrence against terrorism.

The rhetorical strategy extended to Israel's representation at the UN. Ambassador Meirav Eilon Shahar emphasised the moral disparity between Israel and Hamas stating: "What will be presented today by many nations is an immoral equivalent between a democracy [Israel] that seeks peace and abides by international law and a murderous extreme terrorist organisation [Hamas] that kills indiscriminately (even their own citizens)" (UNHCR, 2021). Here, moral differentiation is used to present the UNHRC's stance as false equivalence. The stark dichotomy paints the resolution as not merely inaccurate but also morally compromised, especially regarding those states that endorsed it. This framing draws a sharp moral boundary between Israel and Hamas, positioning the resolution as not merely legally flawed but also ethically misguided in its failure to differentiate between state self-defence and indiscriminate terrorism.

This critique is further reinforced by a statement already acknowledged in the methodological section, where Ambassador Shahar expands the moral argument with a pointed rhetorical inversion: "You cannot be pro-Palestinian if you do not condemn Hamas for using its own people (the Palestinian people) as human shields. You cannot be pro-Palestinian if you continue to allow Hamas to use the international aid to build terror infrastructure in its schools, residential buildings, and hospitals" (UNHCR, 2021). Here, Shahar questions the moral coherence of those who claim to support Palestinian rights while ignoring the tactics that endanger Palestinian civilians. The strategy deflects blame from Israel and reorients accountability towards both Hamas and the states perceived to be absolving and enabling its actions through silence or complicity. Put differently, this rhetorical device does not simply aim to deflect criticism but to also expose what it portrays as a failure of moral discernment among the resolution's supporters. It suggests that such states have, either knowingly or inadvertently, legitimised asymmetric warfare tactics that exploit civilians and violate the laws of armed conflict. Shahar's concluding challenge crystallises the moral stakes: "Choose to stand with a terrorist organisation that glories death or with a democracy that cherishes life." This final dichotomy transforms the debate from one of legal interpretation to a matter of existential moral choice. Rather than

merely defending Israel's actions, the appeal also confronts the resolution's supporters with an ethical ultimatum: that siding against Israel in such contexts amounts to endorsing actors who systematically violate humanitarian norms. Crucially, the rhetoric not only positions these endorsers as undermining international legal standards, but it also frames them as inadvertently contributing to the erosion of protections necessary for the survival of the Palestinian people themselves. By failing to condemn Hamas's tactics, the implication is that such states empower a governance model that exploits civilians and thrives on perpetual conflict.

Through these layered rhetorical moves, Israel's UN representation shifted the focus from legal technicalities to moral clarity, framing the resolution and, by extension, its endorsers as complicit in legitimising a cycle of violence that endangers both Israeli and Palestinian lives. In doing so, Israel seeks to reframe the vote not as a principled stand for human rights but as a politicised gesture that undermines the very norms it purports to uphold. As a result, this escalating rhetorical posture culminated in a more structural rejection of the UNHRC itself. Defence Minister Benny Gantz's assertion that the decision "ends all legitimacy for the Human Rights Council's continued existence" illustrates an effort to delegitimise the institutional framework behind the resolution. Gantz's statement does not engage in legal debate over specific facts but challenges the entire legitimacy of the Council's actions and authority. This serves as both blame avoidance and normative contestation, asserting that Israel cannot and should not accept judgement from bodies it views as politically biased and strategically misused.

In sum, Israel's public diplomacy during and after the Al-Jalaa Tower strike reflects a layered and adaptive rhetorical posture, one that strategically deployed blame avoidance, blame imposition, and moral differentiation to contest allegations of illegitimacy. The appeals reviewed in this analysis, ranging from claims of military necessity to assertions of humanitarian precaution and democratic values, were calibrated to navigate both legal critique and reputational threat. Crucially, these rhetorical forms were not simply reactionary but embedded in a broader discursive framework that seeks to reassert Israel's legitimacy as a rule-abiding actor operating within the bounds of international law. This is especially important, given the layered complexities of asymmetric conflict and the strategic ambiguity often present in dual-use targeting scenarios.

Moreover, the targeting controversy surrounding the Al-Jalaa Tower became a prism through which larger questions of international judgement, normative consistency, and institutional bias were contested. The subsequent UNHRC resolution and Israel's response to it reflect this broader struggle over the interpretation and application of legal norms. In this context, public diplomacy functions not merely as a tool of image management but as a central mechanism for shaping the discursive environment in which legitimacy is both granted and withdrawn. As such, this case underscores the significance of rhetorical practice in contemporary conflict, where the legitimacy of military action is increasingly adjudicated not only on the battlefield but also in the arena of global public discourse.

Conclusions

This study set out to examine the rhetorical strategies employed by Israel in the aftermath of the Al-Jalaa Tower strike during Operation Guardian of the Walls, with a specific focus on public diplomacy and the broader contestation over legitimacy following reputational challenges. The central research question asked how states construct public diplomacy appeals to justify targeted strikes, particularly when those strikes involve

dual-use civilian infrastructure. Underpinning this inquiry is the assumption that in asymmetric warfare, where some adversaries often exploit the principle of distinction to provoke reputational harm, state actors respond with strategically framed appeals designed to reinforce perceived compliance with IHL. These appeals emphasise both necessity and legality of military actions, particularly in their rhetorical framing.

The study approached public diplomacy as a discursive battleground shaped by strategic communication, where legitimacy and public opinion are actively contested during moments of acute geopolitical tension. The research reveals that over time, rhetorical intensity was closely tied to the conflict's escalation and the amplification of criticism following the strike. Israel's messaging initially emphasised blame avoidance, grounded in legalistic appeals to self-defence and operational necessity. This approach evolved into a more assertive strategy combining blame imposition and moral differentiation. As international condemnation mounted, particularly from UN institutions and human rights organisations, rhetorical tone shifted from defensive justification to proactive contestation. Statements invoking military necessity gave way to arguments about institutional bias, normative hypocrisy, and the strategic manipulation of humanitarian law by adversaries. The findings indicate that public diplomacy in this context functions more as a means of maintaining legitimacy in the face of normative contestation than as a form of persuasion.

In terms of source diversity, rhetorical appeals were consistently echoed across multiple levels of the Israeli government and military apparatus. From Prime Minister Netanyahu to Defence Minister Gantz, Foreign Minister Ashkenazi, IDF spokespeople, and UN representatives, like Ambassador Meirav Eilon Shahar, there was a unified communicative front. This institutional coherence bolstered the credibility of Israel's narrative and minimised the possibility of counter-narratives taking hold in the discursive space both domestically and internationally. Particularly notable is the deliberate layering of rhetorical appeals across actors, with higher officials focusing on moral differentiation and sovereignty-based arguments, and military spokespeople foregrounding operational justification and tactical nuance.

Equally revealing was the diversity of target orientation. While much of the messaging was directed at Hamas, portraying it as the originator of violence and a manipulator of international norms, a significant share of rhetoric was aimed at third-party actors, namely states that voted in favour of the UNHRC resolution, NGOs, multilateral institutions, media organisations whose offices were affected, and foreign governments, including those whose citizens were the casualties of Hamas's indiscriminate rocket fire. This external orientation highlights a dual-track strategy: defending actions on the ground and simultaneously contesting the legitimacy of global mechanisms of judgement. The emphasis on democratic values, normative alignment, and institutional fairness was a calculated effort to isolate critics and rally sympathetic state actors who might relate to similar security dilemmas.

The strategy of blame avoidance was structured around legal and humanitarian framing. Central to this was the positioning of Israel not as an aggressor but as a state compelled to protect its population in response to unprovoked and indiscriminate rocket attacks. Furthermore, Israel repeatedly asserted that advance warnings, intelligence-based targeting, and efforts to minimise civilian casualties underscored its compliance with IHL. The narrative of proportionality was not merely legalistic but also emotionally laden, as seen in references to Israeli civilians sheltering from rockets. These emotional appeals, aimed particularly at fellow democracies, invoked shared vulnerability and common defence imperatives, seeking to reframe Israeli actions as aligned with universal state practice.

Blame imposition, on the other hand, was framed through accusations of systematic misconduct by Hamas, particularly its embedding of military assets within civilian infrastructure. By repeatedly invoking the use of human shields and the deliberate provocation of the media-targeting controversy, Israel portrayed Hamas not only as the primary violator of humanitarian norms but also as an actor exploiting the very standards designed to protect civilians. This strategy sought not only to shift legal responsibility but also to undermine Hamas's moral standing in the eyes of the global public and institutional arbiters.

Moral differentiation emerged as a central rhetorical pillar, particularly in diplomatic arenas. Statements by Ambassador Shahar and Prime Minister Netanyahu did not merely defend Israeli conduct but constructed an ethical binary between a democracy that "cherishes life" and a terrorist organisation that "glorifies death." This form of moral storytelling sought to elevate Israel above the political fray, portraying it as a beacon of restraint and legality amid a sea of orchestrated civilian endangerment by its adversary. The appeal was not only to legality but also to conscience, positioning the international community's support for Hamas as a betrayal of both Palestinian welfare and global moral standards.

This framing reached its peak in the response to the UNHRC resolution, which Israel cast not as a legal assessment but as a moral failure. The emphasis shifted to the complicity of third-party states and institutions that, by focusing solely on Israeli actions, were seen as enabling terror and undermining the very norms they claim to uphold. This argument was particularly salient in Shahar's statement highlighting that one cannot be pro-Palestinian without condemning Hamas's exploitation of its own civilians. This rhetorical inversion placed the burden of moral responsibility on critics, framing them as enablers of civilian suffering, rather than protectors of rights.

Importantly, the analysis found that such appeals to third parties often fused moral differentiation with strategic deterrence. Statements warning that Hamas would continue to embed itself within civilian infrastructure if such tactics were rewarded highlighted the potential unintended consequences of institutional critique. In this way, Israel argued that by censuring Israeli strikes without acknowledging Hamas's violations, the international community risked incentivising the very tactics it seeks to eliminate. Ultimately, the findings suggest that Israel's public diplomacy employed a layered strategy that adapted to evolving criticisms while maintaining thematic consistency. The integration of self-defensive logic, humanitarian precaution, moral dichotomy, and strategic deterrence constituted a sophisticated communicative arsenal aimed at not just defending the Al-Jalaa strike but also contesting the frameworks through which such actions were judged.

This study contributes to the understanding of how rhetorical strategies function within conflict diplomacy, particularly in asymmetric settings where legal and moral standards are deeply contested. It highlights the performative nature of public diplomacy, where legitimacy is not merely asserted but enacted through sustained narrative construction. Through the case of Israel's rhetorical response to the criticisms emanating from the Al-Jalaa Tower strike, the study illustrates how state actors mobilise discursive resources to frame their actions as lawful, necessary, and morally grounded. For policymakers and observers, the findings underscore the centrality of narrative framing in shaping the international reception of military conduct and the strategic importance of communicative coherence across institutional actors.

Nonetheless, the study acknowledges several limitations. It focuses on a single incident within a broader and deeply entrenched conflict, which may constrain the generalisability of its findings. Furthermore, the analysis is limited to textual discourse, excluding visual and multimodal forms of communication, such as imagery, symbols, and video content,

which are becoming increasingly integral to contemporary public diplomacy. These exclusions may overlook how such non-textual elements shape perception and influence global opinion. Additionally, the lack of audience reception analysis means that the study cannot assess how the public or decision-makers interpreted or responded to Israel's rhetorical strategies. Without insight into reception, the effectiveness or resonance of the messages remains speculative.

Looking forward, future research might explore how such strategies are received across different international audiences, including media ecosystems, civil society organisations, and domestic constituencies. It may also consider how adversarial actors respond rhetorically, and how these discursive dynamics evolve in long-term legitimacy contests. Also, comparative case studies involving other states conducting strikes on dual-use infrastructure could help determine whether similar legitimisation patterns recur or not. Finally, incorporating visual rhetoric and social media analysis would deepen our understanding of how public diplomacy unfolds across different communicative platforms in real-time crisis environments. In any case, what remains clear is that rhetorical strategy has become a vital component of statecraft in modern conflict, where the battle for legitimacy is waged not only through military action but also through language, narrative, and symbolic contestation.

References

Adler, E., Bremberg, N. and Sondarjee, M. (2024) 'Communities of Practice in World Politics: Advancing a Research Agenda', *Global Studies Quarterly*, 4(1), pp. 1–13. doi: 10.1093/isagsq/ksad070

Adler, E. and Pouliot, V. (2011) *International Practices*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Adler-Nissen, R. (2012) *Bourdieu in International Relations Rethinking Key Concepts in IR*. London: Routledge.

Al Jazeera (2021) 'Al Jazeera condemns in the strongest term the Israeli Governments' destruction of its offices in Gaza', May 15. Available at https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/5/15/al-jazeera-strongly-condemns-israels-destruction-of-gaza-offices (Accessed: 23 January 2025).

Amnesty International Palestine Tweet (2021) https://twitter.com/IOTPA/status/1393983460688207874 (Accessed: 23 January 2025).

Amnesty International (2015) "Strangling Necks' Abductions, Torture and Summary Killings of Palestinians by Hamas Forces during the 2014 Gaza/Israel Conflict', Index: MDE 21/1643/2015. Available at: https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde21/1643/2015/en/ (Accessed: 13 December 2024).

Associated Press (2011) 'President Obama's Speech, Praising the killing of Al-Awlaki', *AP,* September 30. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x43omN1yhxw (Accessed: 16 December 2024).

Banks, W.C. and Raven-Hansen, P. (2003) 'Targeted Killing and Assassination: The U.S. Legal Framework' *University of Richmond Law Review,* 37(3), pp. 667–749.

BBC (2021) 'Israel says Gaza Tower it Destroyed was Used by Hamas to Try to Jam Iron Dome', June 9, Available at: https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-57404516 (Accessed: 23 January 2025).

BBC (2019) 'Somali Forces End Day-Long Mogadishu Siege', March 1, Available at: https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-47412700 (Accessed: 16 December 2024).

BBC (2013) 'US drone strike killings in Pakistan and Yemen 'unlawful'', *BBC,* October 22 Available at: https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-24618701#:~:text=CIA%20drone%20attacks%20in%20Pakistan,number%20of%20victims%20were%20unarmed (Accessed: January 2025).

Belkis, W. and Solvang, O. (2015) 'Targeting Saada: Unlawful Coalition Airstrikes on Saada City in Yemen', *Human Rights Watch Publication.* Available at: https://www.hrw.org/report/2015/06/30/targeting-saada/unlawful-coalition-airstrikes-saada-city-yemen (Accessed: 16 December 2024).

Bergman, R. (2018) *Rise and Kill First*: *The Secret History of Israel's Targeted Assassinations,* New York: Random House Penguin.

Bering, J. (2019) 'Legal Explainer: German Court Reins in Support for U.S. Drone Strikes', *Just Security.* Available at: https://www.justsecurity.org/63336/legal-explainer-german-court-reins-in-support-for-u-s-drone-strikes/ (Accessed: 16 December 2024).

Blank, L.R. (2010) 'Finding Facts but Missing the Law: The Goldstone Report, Gaza and Lawfare', *Case Western Reserve Journal of International Law*, 43 (143), pp. 279–305.

B'tselem, (2021), 'Bombing Civilian Objects is a War Crime', May 20. Available at: https://www.btselem.org/gaza_strip/20210520_bombing_civilian_objectives_is_a_war_crim (Accessed: 23 January 2025).

CBS News (2021) 'Transcript: Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on 'Face the Nation'', May 16. Available at: https://www.cbsnews.com/news/benjamin-netanyahu-israel-prime-minister-face-the-nation-transcript-02-25-2024/ (Accessed: 23 January 2025).

Chernobrov, D. (2022) 'Strategic Humour: Public Diplomacy and Comic Framing of Foreign Policy Issues', *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 24(2) pp. 277–296. doi: 10.1177/13691481211023958.

Chesney, M. Reshetar, G. and Karaman, M. (2011) 'The Impact of Terrorism on Financial Markets: An Empirical Study,' *Journal of Banking & Finance*, 35(2), pp. 253–267. doi: 10.1016/j.jbankfin.2010.07.026

Cohen, A. and Shany, Y. (2021) 'Israel, IHL, and the Al-Jalaa Tower', *Article of War*, Jun 17. Available at: https://lieber.westpoint.edu/israel-ihl-al-jalaa-tower/ (Accessed: 20 October 2023).

Coren, A. Hollingsworth, J. Sidhu, S. and Cohen, Z. (2021) 'US Military Admits it Killed 10 Civilians and Targeted Wrong Vehicle in Kabul Airstrike', *CNN Politics*, September 17; Available at: https://edition.cnn.com/2021/09/17/politics/kabul-drone-strike-us-military-intl-hnk (Accessed: 23 January 2025).

Cowan, G. and Arsenault. A, (2008) 'Moving from Monologue to Dialogue to Collaboration: The Three Layers of Public Diplomacy', *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 616(1), pp. 10–30. doi: 10.1177/0002716207311863.

CNN (2014) 'Is Hamas using Human Shields in Gaza? The Answer is Complicated', July 22. Available at: https://edition.cnn.com/2014/07/23/world/meast/human-shields-mideast-controversy (Accessed: 16 December 2024).

Committee to Protect Journalist (2021) 'Israel Bombs Building in Gaza City Housing AP, Al-Jazeera Offices', May 15 Available at: https://cpj.org/2021/05/israel-bombs-building-in-gaza-city-housing-ap-al-jazeera-offices/ (Accessed: 23 January 2025).

Dinstein, Y. (2007) 'The ICRC Customary International Humanitarian Law Study', In: Helm, A. (ed.). *The Law of War in the 21st Century. Weaponry and the Use of Force*, pp. 99–112. Annapolis, MD: Naval War College Press.

Dinstein, Y. (2011), 'Concluding Remarks: LOAC and Attempts to Abuse or Subvert It', *International Law Studies,* 87, pp. 483–494.

Dinstein, Y. (2021), 'Keynote Address: The Recent Evolution of the International Law of Armed Conflict: Confusions, Constraints, and Challenges', *Vanderbilt Law Review*, 51(3), pp. 701–712.

Doswald-Beck, L. (2006) 'The Right to Life in Armed Conflict: Does International Humanitarian Law Provide All the Answers?', *International Review of the Red Cross,* 88(864), pp. 881–904. doi: 10.1017/S1816383107000823.

Elysée (2018) 'Press statement by the President of the French Republic on the intervention of the French armed forces in response to the use of chemical weapons in Syria', 14 April. Available at: https://www.elysee.fr/en/emmanuel-macron/2018/04/14/press-statement-by-the-president-of-the-french-republic-on-the-intervention-of-the-french-armed-forces-in-response-to-the-use-of-chemical-weapons-in-syria-1 (Accessed: 7 March 2025).

Entman, M.R. (1993) 'Framing: Toward Clarification of a Fractured Paradigm', *Journal of Communication*, 43(4), pp. 51–58. doi: 10.1111/j.1460-2466.1993.tb01304.x.

Fabian, E. (2022) 'IDF Exposes 'Hamas sites' in Gaza Civilian Areas, in Bid to Explain Future Strikes', *Times of Israel,* July 27. Available at: https://www.timesofisrael.com/idf-exposes-hamas-sites-in-gaza-civilian-areas-in-bid-to-explain-future-strikes/ (Accessed: 23 January 2025).

Farzan, A.N. Morris, L. and DeYoung, K. (2021) 'An Israeli Warning, an Airstrike and then Outrage over hit on Gaza Media Building', *Washington Post,* May 15. Available at: https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2021/05/15/israel-airstrike-media/ (Accessed: 23 January 2025).

Faul, M. and Moki, K.E (2015) 'Official: Boko Haram Using Civilians as Human Shields', *AP News*; Available at: https://apnews.com/article/f027f3f5e92a43b0a413a0853a2c4540 (Accessed: 16 December 2024).

Feith J.D. (1985) 'Law in the Service of Terror—The Strange Case of the Additional Protocol', *National Interest*, 1, pp. 36–47.

France 24 (2018) 'Emmanuel Macron, quoted in "Macron Says Has 'Proof' of Syrian Chemical Attack, Vows Response', April 12. Available at: https://www.france24.com/en/20180412-macron-says-has-proof-syrian-chemical-attack-vows-response (Accessed: 7 March 2025).

Gelpi, C. Feaver, P. and Reifler, J. (2009), *Paying the Human Costs of War: American Public Opinion and Casualties in Military Conflicts*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Gilboa, E. (2001) 'Diplomacy in the Media Age: Three Models of Uses and Effects', *Diplomacy & Statecraft*, 12(2), pp. 1–28. doi: 10.1080/09592290108406201.

Gilboa, E, (2006) 'Public Diplomacy: The Missing Component in Israel's Foreign Policy', *Israel Affairs*, 12(4), pp. 715–747. doi: 10.1080/13533310600890067.

Goodman, R. (2015) "New Poll: American Support for Drone Strikes Plummets When Innocent US Civilians Killed," *Just Security*. Available at: https://www.justsecurity.org/22795/poll-american-support-drone-strikes-plummets-civilians-killed/ (Accessed: 16 December 2024).

Gross, E. (2002a) 'Democracy in the War against Terrorism: The Israeli Experience', *Loyola of Los Angeles Law Review*, 35(4), pp. 1161–1216.

Gross, E. (2002b) 'Use of Civilians as Human Shields: What Legal and Moral Restrictions Pertain to a War Waged by a Democratic State against Terrorism', *Emory International Law Review,* 16, pp. 445–524.

Gross, J. A. (2021) 'IDF Defends Strike on Gaza Media Building, Noting Hamas, PIJ Assets in Building', *Times of Israel*, May 16. Available at https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog_entry/idf-defends-strike-on-gaza-media-building-noting-hamas-pij-assets-in-building/ (Accessed: 23 January 2025).

Gross, L.M. (2004) 'Assassination: Killing in the Shadow of Self-Defense', *War and Virtual War: The Challenges to Communities*, Brill: Lieden, pp. 99–116.

Gross, L.M. (2006) 'Assassination and Targeted Killing: Law Enforcement, Execution or Self-Defence?' *Journal of Applied Philosophy*, 23(3), pp. 323–355. doi: 10.1111/j.1468-5930.2006.00347.x.

Gross, L.M. (2010) *Moral Dilemmas of Modern War: Torture Assassination and Blackmail in an Age of Asymmetric Conflict,* Cambridge University Press.

Gross, L.M. (2014) 'Public Diplomacy, Propaganda, and Media Warfare', *The Ethics of Insurgency: A Critical Guide to Just Guerrilla Warfare*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Guiora, A. (2013) *Legitimate Target: A Criteria-Based Approach to Targeted Killing,* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Haque, A.A. (2021) 'The IDF's Unlawful Attack on Al Jalaa Tower', *Just Security*, May 27. Available at: https://www.justsecurity.org/76657/the-idfs-unlawful-attack-on-al-jalaa-tower/ (Accessed: 16 December 2024).

Harkov, L. (2021) 'Israel Showed US 'Smoking Gun' on Hamas in AP Office Tower, Officials Say', *Jerusalem Post,* May 15, Available at: https://www.jpost.com/israel-news/israel-showed-us-smoking-gun-on-hamas-in-ap-office-tower-officials-say-668303 (Accessed: 23 January 2025).

Hegghammer, T. (2010) *Jihad in Saudi Arabia: Violence and Pan-Islamism since 1979*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010. doi: 10.1017/CBO9780511809439.

Hopkins, N. (2013) 'US Drone Attacks 'Counter-Productive', Former Obama Security Adviser Claims', *The Guardian*, January 7. Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/jan/07/obama-adviser-criticises-drone-policy (Accessed: 16 December 2024).

Human Rights Watch (2003) 'Briefing Paper: International Humanitarian Law Issues in a Potential War in Iraq', Feb. 20, Available at: https://www.hrw.org/reports/Iraq%20IHL%20formatted.pdf (Accessed: 13 December 2024).

Human Rights Watch (2021) 'Gaza: Israel's May Airstrikes on High-Rises', August 23, Available at: https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/08/23/gaza-israels-may-airstrikes-high-rises (Accessed: 23 January 2025).

International Committee of the Red Cross (2008) *Interpretive Guidance on the Notion of Direct Participation in Hostilities under International Humanitarian Law*, (Geneva, Switzerland). https://www.icrc.org/sites/default/files/external/doc/en/assets/files/other/icrc-002-0990.pdf

International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) (1899) Regulations concerning the Laws and Customs of War on Land, annexed to Convention (II) with Respect to the Laws and Customs of War on Land, The Hague, 29 July 1899. Available at: https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/en/ihl-treaties/hague-ii-1899 (Accessed: 24 January 2025).

Israel Defense Forces (IDF) (2021) We warned civilians in the building about our strike out of concern for their safety. [Tweet]. Twitter, May 16, 2021. Available at https://twitter.com/IDF/status/1393797087104483333 (Accessed: 24 January 2025).

Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2004) 'Ahmed Yassin, Leader of Hamas Terrorist Organization', Available at https://www.mfa.gov.il/mfa/foreignpolicy/terrorism/palestinian/pages/ahmed%20yassin.aspx; Available at: (Accessed: 16 December 2024).

Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2015) 'The 2014 Gaza Conflict: Factual and Legal Aspects', *Official Report*, https://www.gov.il/en/pages/2014-gaza-conflict-factual-and-legal-aspects (Accessed: 16 December 2024).

Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2021a) 'PM Netanyahu's Remarks at the Defense Ministry in Tel Aviv', May 21. Available at: https://www.gov.il/en/pages/pm-netanyahu-s-remarks-at-the-defense-ministry-in-tel-aviv-21-may-2021 (Accessed: 24 January 2025).

Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2021b) 'MFA Response to UNSC Announcement', May 22 Available at: https://www.gov.il/en/pages/mfa-response-to-unsc-announcement-22-may-2021 (Accessed: 24 January 2025).

Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2021c) 'Statement by PM Netanyahu', May 15. Available at: https://www.gov.il/en/pages/statement-by-pm-netanyahu-15-may-2021 (Accessed: 24 January 2025).

Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2021d) 'PM Netanyahu Briefs Foreign Ambassadors', May 19, Available at: https://mfa.gov.il/MFA/PressRoom/2021/Pages/PM-Netanyahu-briefs-foreign-ambassadors-19-May-2021 (Accessed: 24 January 2025).

Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2021e) 'PM Netanyahu Comments on the UN Human Rights Council Decision', May 27. Available at: https://www.gov.il/en/pages/pm-netanyahu-comments-on-the-un-human-rights-council-decision-27-may-2021 (Accessed: 24 January 2025).

Jewish News Syndicate, (2021), 'Netanyahu: Israel to Continue Gaza Operation Until 'Security of our People is Restored', May 16. Available at: https://www.jns.org/netanyahu-israel-to-continue-gaza-operation-until-security-of-our-people-is-restored/ (Accessed: 23 January 2025).

Jewish Institute for National Security of America (2021), 'Gaza Conflict 2021 Assessment: Observations and Lessons', JINSA Gemunder Center Gaza Assessment Policy Project, pp. 49 October 28. Available at: https://jinsa.org/jinsa_report/gaza-conflict-2021-assessment-observations-and-lessons/ (Accessed: 23 January 2025).

Johns, R. and Davies, G.A.M. (2019) 'Civilian Casualties and Public Support for Military Action: Experimental Evidence', *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 63(1), pp. 251–281. doi: 10.1177/0022002717729733.

Krauss, J (2021) 'Explainer: Are Israel, Hamas Committing War Crimes in Gaza?', *Associated Press*, May 18. Available at: https://apnews.com/article/israel-hamas-gaza-war-crimes-explainer-87fc72d73fae1664d3a42a8bf79d10b5 (Accessed: 23 January 2025).

Kreps, S. (2014) 'Flying Under the Radar: A Study of Public Attitudes towards Unmanned Aerial Vehicles', *Research and Politics,* 1(1), pp. 1–7. doi: 10.1177/2053168014536533.

Levitt, M. (2006) *Hamas: Politics, Charity and Terrorism in the Service of Jihad*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Magid, J. (2021) 'Israeli Envoy Tells AP: Hamas Sought to Jam Iron Dome from your Gaza Tower', *The Times of Israel,* June 8. Available at: https://www.timesofisrael.com/israeli-envoy-tells-ap-hamas-sought-to-jam-iron-dome-from-your-gaza-tower/ (Accessed: January 2025).

Mullen, J. (2013) 'Rights groups challenge U.S. on drone strikes in Pakistan, Yemen', *CNN*, October 22. Available at: https://edition.cnn.com/2013/10/22/world/asia/us-drone-strikes-reports (Accessed: 16 December 2024).

Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center (2024) 'Evidence of the Terrorist Organizations' use of Civilian Facilities in the Gaza Strip', *ITIC Report*, January 3. Available at: https://www.terrorism-info.org.il/en/the-terrorist-organizations-in-the-gaza-strip-exploit-the-civilian-infrastructure-for-terrorist-activities/. (Accessed: 7 June 2024).

Manheim, B.J. (1994) *Strategic Public Diplomacy and American Foreign Policy: The Evolution of Influence,* New York in Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Meisels, T. and Waldron, J. (2020) *Debating Targeted Killing: Counter-Terrorism Or Extrajudicial Execution?* New York: Oxford University Press.

Meisels, T. (2014) 'Assassination: Targeting Nuclear Scientists', *Law and Philosophy*, 33(2), pp. 207–234.

Melissen, J. (2005). 'The New Public Diplomacy: Between Theory and Practice', *The New Public Diplomacy Soft Power in International Relations*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 3–27.

Milshtein, M. (2021) 'Hamas is Striving to Change the Rules of the Game with Israel', *Insight Paper*, IDC Herzliya's Institute for Policy and Strategy.

Mishal, S. and Sela, A. (2000), *The Palestinian Hamas*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Mor, B.D. (2006) 'Public Diplomacy in Grand Strategy', *Foreign Policy Analysis*, 2(2), pp. 157–176. doi: 10.1111/j.1743-8594.2006.00025.x.

Mor, B.D. (2007) 'The Rhetoric of Public Diplomacy and Propaganda Wars: A View from Self-Presentation Theory', *European Journal of Political Research*, 46(5), pp. 661–683. doi: 10.1111/j.1475-6765.2007.00707.x.

Mor, B.D. (2009) 'Accounts and Impression Management in Public Diplomacy: Israeli Justification of Force during the 2006 Lebanon War', *Global Change, Peace & Security*, 21(2), pp. 219–239. doi: 10.1080/14781150902872125.

Mor, B.D. (2014) 'The Structure of Rhetorical Defense in Public Diplomacy: Israel's Social Account of the 2010 Turkish Flotilla Incident', *Media, War & Conflict*, 7(2), pp. 250–265. doi: 10.1177/1750635214538621.

Mor, B.D. (2012) 'Credibility Talk in Public Diplomacy', *Review of International Studies*, 38(2), pp. 393–422. doi: 10.1017/S0260210511000489.

Ne'eman, Y. (2016) *Hamas Jihad: Antisemitism, Islamic World Conquest and the Manipulation of Palestinian Nationalism,* White Hart Press.

Olsson, E.K. (2013) 'Public Diplomacy as a Crisis Communication Tool', *Journal of International Communication*, 19(2), pp. 219–234. doi: 10.1080/13216597.2013.838906.

Orion, A. (2021) 'Sword of Jerusalem vs. Guardian of the Walls: Gaza and the Next Lebanon War', *Policy Analysis Watch 3501*, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Jun 15. Available at: https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/sword-jerusalem-vs-guardian-walls-gaza-and-next-lebanon-war (Accessed: 23 January 2025).

Orde, K. (2021) 'Hold Hamas Accountable for Human-Shields Use During the May 2021 Gaza War', *Research Memo,* Foundation for Defence of Democracy, pp. 1–7. Available at: https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2021/06/23/hold-hamas-accountable-for-human-shields-use-during-the-may-2021-gaza-war/ (Accessed: 23 January 2025).

Patterson, M. and Monroe, K.R. (1998) 'Narrative in Political Science', *Annual Review of Political*, 1(1), pp. 315–332. doi: 10.1146/annurev.polisci.1.1.315

Pew Research Survey (2013) 'On Eve of Elections, A Dismal Public Mood in Pakistan', *Pew Research Report*, May 25. Available at: https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2013/05/07/on-eve-of-elections-a-dismal-public-mood-in-pakistan/ (Accessed: 16 December 2024).

Pew Research Survey (2014) 'A Less Gloomy Mood in Pakistan', *Pew Research Report*, August 27. Available at: https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2014/08/27/a-less-gloomy-mood-in-pakistan/ (Accessed: 16 December 2024).

Protocol Additional to the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949, and relating to the Protection of Victims of International Armed Conflicts (Protocol I), 8 June 1977. Available at: https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/protocol-additional-geneva-conventions-12-august-1949-and (Accessed: 16 December 2024).

Reuters (2021) 'Israel Destroys Gaza Tower Housing AP and Al Jazeera Offices', May 15. Available at: https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/gaza-tower-housing-ap-al-jazeera-collapses-after-missile-strike-witness-2021-05-15/ (Accessed: 23 January 2025).

Rothenberg, D (2021) 'The US Military Needs to do More than Apologize for its Deadly 'Mistake' in Kabul', *CNN Opinion*, September 19. Available at: https://edition.cnn.com/2021/09/19/opinions/us-drone-strike-in-kabul-rothenberg (Accessed: 16 December 2024).

Schimmelfennig, F. (2001) 'The Community Trap: Liberal Norms, Rhetorical Action and the Eastern Enlargement of the European Union'. *International Organization* 55(1), pp. 47–80. doi: 10.1162/002081801551414.

Schmitt N.M. (2009) 'Human Shields in International Humanitarian Law', *Columbia Journal of Transnational Law,* 47(2), pp. 292–338. doi: 10.1163/9789004219120.

Schmitt N.M. (2010) 'Deconstructing Direct Participation in Hostilities: The Constitutive Elements', *International Law and Politics,* 47, pp. 697–739.

Schmitt N.M. (2006) 'Targeting and Humanitarian Law: Current Issues', *International Law Studies*, 80(1), pp. 151–194.

Schmitt N.M. (2021a) 'Legal Protection of the Media in Armed Conflict: Gaza', *Article of War.* Available at: https://lieber.westpoint.edu/legal-protection-media-armed-conflict-gaza/ (Accessed: 23 January 2025).

Schmitt N.M. (2021b) 'Targeting Dual-Use Structures: An Alternative Interpretation', *Article of War.* Available at: https://lieber.westpoint.edu/targeting-dual-use-structures-alternative/ (Accessed: 23 January 2025).

Signitzer, H.B. and Coombs, T (1992) 'Public Relations and Public Diplomacy. Conceptual Convergences', *Public Relations Review*, 18 (2), pp. 137–147.

Statman, D. (2004), 'Targeted Killing', *Theoretical Inquiries in Law*, 5(1), pp. 179–198. doi: [10.2202/1565-3404.1090](10.2202/1565-3404.1090).

Times of Israel, (2021a) Photos Show Hamas Tunnel Dug Underneath Courtyard of UNWRA School in Gaza', June 11. Available at: https://www.timesofisrael.com/photos-show-hamas-tunnel-dug-underneath-courtyard-of-unwra-school-in-gaza/ (Accessed: 23 January 2025).

Times of Israel (2021b) 'UN Rights Council Orders Unprecedented Open-Ended Probe of Israel", May 27. Available at: https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog-may-27-2021/ (Accessed: 23 January 2025).

Tuch, H.S. (1990) *Communicating with the World: U.S. Public Diplomacy Overseas*. New York: St. Martin's Press.

UNHCR (2021) '1st Meeting - 30th Special Session of Human Rights Council', *UN Web TV*, Speech Time: 1:08:15 – 1:13:53 Available at: https://webtv.un.org/en/asset/k1i/k1ig7zatio (Accessed: 20 January 2025).

UNRWA (2014) 'UNRWA Condemns Placement Of Rockets, For A Second Time, In One Of Its Schools', July 22, Available at: https://www.unrwa.org/newsroom/press-releases/unrwa-condemns-placement-rockets-second-time-one-its-schools (Accessed: 7 June 2025).

UNSC (2021) "Senseless Cycle of Bloodshed, Destruction between Israel, Palestinians in Gaza Must Stop Now, Secretary-General Tells Security Council" Security Council Press Release SC/14521, May 2021. Available at: https://www.un.org/unispal/document/senseless-cycle-of-bloodshed-destruction-between-israel-palestinians-in-gaza-must-stop-now-secretary-general-tells-security-council-press-release-sc-14521/ (Accessed: 23 January 2025).

US Army Combined Arms Center (2014) 'FM 3-24 MCWP 3-33.5 insurgencies and countering insurgencies', Marine Corp Warfighting Publication. Available at: https://www.marines.mil/portals/1/mcwp%203-33.5_part1.pdf (Accessed: 23 January 2025).

Yarchi, M. Wolfsfeld, G. Sheafer, T and Shenhav R.S. (2013) 'Promoting Stories about Terrorism to the International News Media: A Study of Public Diplomacy', *Media, War & Conflict,* 6(3), pp. 263–278. doi: [10.1177/1750635213491179](10.1177/1750635213491179).

Appendix

Appendix: Rhetorical Classification of Statements

Actor/ Institution	Statement	Rhetorical Strategy
Benjamin Netanyahu (Prime Minister)	'Israel didn't initiate this conflict – We were attacked in an unprovoked manner by the Hamas terrorist organization that fired four thousand rockets into our capital and into our cities'.	Blame Imposition
Benjamin Netanyahu (Prime Minister)	It has been five days since Hamas brazenly fired rockets at Jerusalem and other Israeli cities in a totally unprovoked attack'.	Blame Imposition
Benjamin Netanyahu (Prime Minister)	"…..we were attacked by Hamas on our National Day, Jerusalem Day, attacked- unprovoked attacks on Jerusalem and then thousands of rockets and missiles on our cities... And I think any country has to defend itself. It has a natural right of self-defense."	Blame Imposition
Benjamin Netanyahu (Prime Minister)	"They deliberately target our cities, deliberately target our civilians. They glorify the death of children and civilians and old people. They are happy with it. I think they're happy with any deaths that are caused to them. We grieve for every non-combatant loss in Gaza and we grieve for all our civilians who died."	Moral Differentiation
Benjamin Netanyahu (Prime Minister)	"we share with our American friends all that intelligence and here's the intelligence we had, it's about Palestinian terrorist- an intelligence office for the Palestinian terrorist organization housed in that building that plots and organizes the terror attacks against Israeli civilians. So it's a perfectly legitimate target."	Blame Avoidance
Benjamin Netanyahu (Prime Minister)	"I mean, just imagine what would have happened if you had 2,900 rockets fired on Washington and New York and others. I think you would understand our position. I think you do actually."	Blame Avoidance
Benjamin Netanyahu (Prime Minister)	"I also want to use this opportunity to ask the ambassadors of Thailand and India to extend my personal condolences to the families of their citizens who were killed, murdered by Hamas rockets."….."This is just one more manifestation of the fact that Hamas indiscriminately targets everyone. They murder everyone, any civilian they can get their hands on. They use civilians. They target civilians while hiding behind civilians using them as human shields. This is the problem that we face. "	Blame Imposition
Benjamin Netanyahu (Prime Minister)	"Because Hamas is embedded deeply in civilian areas, because it uses civilian human shields. Democracies have a choice. They can say there is nothing we can do. We will absorb attacks against our cities. We can do that or we can level the cities."	Blame Imposition
Benjamin Netanyahu (Prime Minister)	"There is no army in the world that does more than the Israeli army, in the Israeli security services, in Israeli intelligence to prevent collateral damage. To have Israel criticized for that is absurd. Not only is absurd and unjust and untrue, it does enormous damage to democracies that are fighting this kind of evil. It says you cannot protect yourself."	Blame Avoidance
Benjamin Netanyahu (Prime Minister)	"this is not our response to the firing of thousands of rockets on our cities. We do something different. We try to target those who target us with great precision.	Moral Differentiation
Benjamin Netanyahu (Prime Minister)	"Instead of having the perpetrators who commit double war crimes, who are hiding behind civilians and firing on civilians, not having them criticized but having you criticized is the height of hypocrisy and stupidity. What that does is in fact encourage the terrorists. It gives support, it gives encouragement to the terrorists and that is something that is bad for each one of us."	Blame Imposition

Actor/ Institution	Statement	Rhetorical Strategy
Benjamin Netanyahu (Prime Minister)	the council, with its "shameful decision," had shown a "blatant anti-Israel obsession,"….. "automatic majority at the council whitewashes a genocidal terrorist organization that deliberately targets Israeli civilians while turning Gaza's civilians into human shields."	Blame Imposition
Benjamin Netanyahu (Prime Minister)	"As always, Israel is doing everything possible to protect our civilians and keep Palestinian civilians out of harm's way. We demonstrated this yet again today when we warned civilians to vacate the building used by the Hamas terror intelligence. They vacated the premises before the target was destroyed and that's why you don't hear of casualties from these collapsing terror towers because we take special care to avoid these civilian casualties, exactly the opposite of Hamas."	Moral Differentiation
Benjamin Netanyahu (Prime Minister)	"You see these high rise towers that are used by Hamas over and over again... They collapse and no one is killed... we, unlike Hamas, take special precautions to tell people, leave the building, leave the premises.... that's the difference between Israel and Hamas".	Moral Differentiation
Benjamin Netanyahu (Prime Minister)	"if Hamas thought that they could just fire rockets and then sit back and enjoy immunity, that's false... We are targeting a terrorist organization that is targeting our civilians and hiding behind their civilians, using them as human shields."	Blame Imposition
Benjamin Netanyahu (Prime Minister)	"I want to remind the world that in firing on our cities, Hamas is committing a double war crime. They're targeting our civilians and hiding behind Palestinian civilians, effectively using them as human shields.	Blame Imposition
Benjamin Netanyahu (Prime Minister)	"No one should have any equivocation about the choice that is so clear here ….... You cannot equate a democracy that values life with a terror organization that glorifies death."	Moral Differentiation
Benjamin Netanyahu (Prime Minister)	"This past week, millions of Israelis were forced into bomb shelters as missiles rained down on our cities. Several Israelis have been killed. Many more have been wounded. You know and I know, no country would tolerate this. Israel will not tolerate this.	Blame Avoidance
Benjamin Netanyahu (Prime Minister)	"Israel has responded forcefully to these attacks and we will continue to respond forcefully until the security of our people is reinstated and restored.	Blame Avoidance
Benny Gantz (Defence Minister)	"There isn't a sovereign country anywhere that would accept incoming rocket fire on its citizens and population centers. We don't accept it either. It is our right and responsibility to act, and that is what we will do."	Blame Avoidance
Benny Gantz (Defense Minister)	the decision "ends all legitimacy for the Human Rights Council's continued existence," ... "any peace-loving country" would target Hamas the way Israel has.	Blame Imposition
Gabi Askenazi (Foreign Minister)	"We will ensure we preserve our freedom to act. No country would accept rockets fired at its capital, parliament and international airport while millions of residents are forced to spend nights in bomb shelters"	Blame Avoidance
Gabi Askenazi (Foreign Minister)	"Hamas started the violence against Israel as part of a power struggle after the Palestinian Authority canceled its elections. "They are a terrorist organization trying to take control of the Palestinian discourse and position itself among Palestinians...."	Blame Imposition
Gabi Askenazi (Foreign Minister)	"The terrorists of #Hamas fired more than 600 rockets in the last 24 hours, targeting civilian populations in Israel's capital center & southern towns, killing 3 citizens and injuring dozens. We expect the entire international community to condemn Hamas' terrorist activities and the rocket fire from #Gaza & not to reward terrorism.	Blame Imposition

Actor/ Institution	Statement	Rhetorical Strategy
Gabi Askenazi (Foreign Minister)	"With every rocket fired, #Hamas is committing a double war crime. They fire at Israeli citizens from within population centers in #Gaza, using the entire population of Gaza as human shields. Israel uses proportionate force while doing all it can to avoid harming civilians."	Moral Differentiation
Gilad Erdan (Israeli Ambassador to the US and UN)	Hamas sought to jam Iron Dome from your Gaza tower.	Blame Avoidance
Gilad Erdan (Israeli Ambassador to the US and UN)	"outrageous."..."This appalling, one-sided, antisemitic resolution has effectively predetermined the results of the so-called investigation. It ignores the rockets fired at Israeli civilians and equates Israel with Hamas, a terrorist organization, thereby legitimizing Hamas and other terrorist organizations worldwide,"	Blame Imposition
Gilad Erdan (Israeli Ambassador to the US and UN)	Hamas operatives had been using an office in the building to "develop an electronic jamming system to be used against the Iron Dome defense system."	Blame Avoidance
Gilad Erdan (Israeli Ambassador to the US and UN)	the "building posed such an imminent threat to Israeli civilians and was [therefore] prioritized by the IDF."	Blame Avoidance
Gilad Erdan (Israeli Ambassador to the US and UN)	"Israel upholds the importance of press freedom and strives to ensure the safety of journalists wherever they are reporting."	Moral Differentiation
Gilad Erdan (Israeli Ambassador to the US and UN)	"Israel did everything to ensure no employees or civilians were hurt during this operation. In contrast, Hamas is a genocidal terrorist organization that purposely places its terror machine in civilian areas, including in buildings being used by international media outlets."	Moral Differentiation
Hidai Zilberman (IDF Spokesperson)	"We're in the midst of an operation. They are firing wherever they want, on a civilian population, on cities that have tens and hundreds of thousands of people. ...imagine what they would say if one rocket — one! — were fired at Washington. I want to know what they would say,"	Blame Avoidance
Hidai Zilberman (IDF Spokesperson)	"A building that has Hamas and Islamic Jihad assets in it needs to be brought down"	Blame Imposition
Hidai Zilberman (IDF Spokesperson)	If Hamas and the Islamic Jihad think that the media are their shield, then in the next operation in Gaza, we'll find that media outlets' offices are going to be popping up as covers for terrorist assets	Blame Avoidance
Israeli Defense Forces (IDF)	"The target was of high military value to Hamas and was vetted according to rigorous procedures within the IDF, and in accordance with international law,"	Blame Avoidance
Israeli Defense Forces (IDF)	"Inside the building were multiple military units used by Hamas, including headquarters used for military research and development, military intelligence offices and more."	Blame Imposition
Israeli Defense Forces (IDF)	the tower was an "important base of operations for Hamas' military intel" ... The base gathered intel for attacks against Israel, manufactured weapons & positioned equipment to hamper IDF operations.	Blame Avoidance
Israeli Defense Forces (IDF)	"The purpose of the IDF strike was to curtail these enemy capabilities, including destroying special equipment, and preventing their use during the operation. According to IDF assessments, the equipment was in the building at the time of the strike. The strike was designed to collapse the building in order to ensure the destruction of the special means."	Blame Avoidance

Actor/ Institution	Statement	Rhetorical Strategy
Israeli Defense Forces (IDF)	Significant efforts were made to enable civilians to evacuate the building.	Blame Avoidance
Israeli Defense Forces (IDF)	We warned civilians in the building about our strike out of concern for their safety & gave them enough time to safely evacuate. Hamas & Islamic Jihad used this time to take items out of the building. We were willing to pay that price to not harm any civilians.	Moral Differentiation
Israeli Defense Forces (IDF)	"This event should be put into context – Hamas intentionally operates within the civilian population of Gaza and does so in order to hamper the IDF's operational activity,"	Blame Imposition
Israeli Defense Forces (IDF)	"Hamas chooses to hide among civilians as it carries out attacks against Israel. This choice does not grant Hamas terrorists immunity from IDF strikes. We will continue to operate in order to defend the people of Israel"	Blame Imposition
Israeli Defense Forces (IDF)	The Hamas terror group intentionally locates its military assets in the hearts of civil populations in the Gaza Strip	Blame Imposition
Israeli Defense Forces (IDF)	this unit included "subject matter experts (SMEs) which constitute a unique asset to the Hamas terrorist organization. These SMEs operate the most valuable Hamas technological equipment against Israel."	Blame Avoidance
Israeli Defense Forces (IDF)	"One of the main goals of these efforts was to develop a system that would disrupt the Iron Dome aerial defense system,"	Blame Avoidance
Lieutenant Colonel Jonathan Conricus (Israeli Military Spokesman)	That is totally false, the media is not the target... it contained Hamas military intelligence... Hamas might have calculated that by placing their "assets" inside a building with news media offices in it "they probably hoped that would keep them safe from Israeli attack	Blame Avoidance
Lieutenant Colonel Jonathan Conricus (Israeli Military Spokesman)	There was no way of taking down only the Hamas facilities that were in the building. They occupied several floors in the building and it was impossible only to take down those floors. It was deemed necessary to take down the whole building.	Blame Avoidance
Lt. Gen. Aviv Kohavi (Military Chief of Staff)	"Hamas used various floors of the Jalaa Tower for "significant electronic warfare" meant to disrupt Israeli air force GPS communications, ….the building was destroyed justly ….I have no gram of regret."	Blame Avoidance
Meirav Eilon Shahar (Israeli Envoy to the UN)	Hamas terror group had fired 4,300 rockets at Israeli civilians from "from Palestinian homes, hospitals, and schools. Each one of these rockets constitutes a war crime…. What would you do if rockets were fired at Dublin, Paris, or Madrid?"	Blame Avoidance
Meirav Eilon Shahar (Israeli Envoy to the UN)	Hamas leader Fathi Hammad said, cut off the head of Jews with knives, just three days later, Hamas a racist, genocidal terrorist organisation, launched an unprovoked unjustified attach against civilian population in Israel while cynically hiding military infrasture in the midst of Gaza civilians population. This constitute a double war crime'...... We will make no apologies for defending our citizens...	Blame Imposition
Meirav Eilon Shahar (Israeli Envoy to the UN)	"What will be presented today by many nations is an immoral equivalent between a democracy [Israel] that seeks peace and abides by international law and a murderous extreme terrorist organisation [Hamas] that kills indiscriminately (even their own citizens)."	Moral Differentiation
Meirav Eilon Shahar (Israeli Envoy to the UN)	"choose to stand with a terrorist organisation that glories death or with a democracy that cherishes life."	Moral Differentiation

Actor/ Institution	Statement	Rhetorical Strategy
MFA Spokeman	"The full responsibility for this escalation lies with the Hamas terrorist organization, which chose to initiate rocket fire at Israel's capital of Jerusalem, the areas surrounding the Gaza Strip, and other cities in Israel."	Blame Imposition
MFA Spokeman	" Hamas uses the people of Gaza as a human shield, cynically exploits their suffering…. "	Blame Imposition
Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA)	Israel will "continue to defend itself against politically biased entities (UNHRC) that seek to undermine the legitimacy of legal and justified activity." The move ,completely ignores the 4,300 rockets toward Israeli citizens' fired from Gaza during the recent bout of fighting... the decision is a "moral stain on the international community and the UN."	Blame Imposition
Ofir Gendelman (Prime Minister's Arab-Language Spokesman)	Hamas targets civilians deliberately. It fired up till now 2300+ rockets at Israeli cities, aiming to kill thousands of Israelis. At the same time, it hides behind Palestinian civilians and used them as human shields….That's a double war crime	Blame Imposition
Reuven Rivlin (President)	"inexplicable decision against Israeli citizens who faced the criminal fire of thousands of missiles against innocent civilians... The world turned upside down"	Blame Imposition