

Threat, Victimhood and Peace: Debating the 2011 Palestinian UN State Membership Bid

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ABSTRACT

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict has been described as one of the most intractable in the world. This article firstly provides an overview of the socio-political events that led up to the Palestinian UN state membership bid in September 2011, and secondly as a case study, it examines how the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was constructed in speeches delivered by Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu regarding the state membership bid to the UN General Assembly in September 2011. Despite their opposing agendas, there are some significant discursive similarities in the two speeches. The most salient shared discourses concern that of ingroup victimhood, on the one hand, and that of outgroup threat, on the other. It is argued that the speeches unwittingly dispel support for intergroup reconciliation between Israelis and Palestinians by aggravating grievances on both sides and accentuating intergroup suspicion. This article highlights the importance of examining political speeches in order to better understand the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

INTRODUCTION

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict has been described as one of the most intractable in the world (Nets-Zehngut and Bar-Tal, 2007). Although originally opposed to the existence of the State of Israel, in the 1993 Oslo Accords the Palestinian Liberation Organization officially recognised Israel and accepted the proposal of a Palestinian state based on the pre-1967 borders with (East) Jerusalem as its capital. Similarly, Israel, once absolutely opposed to the establishment of a Palestinian state, agreed to negotiate with the Palestinian Liberation Organization and, subsequently, recognised the newly-founded Palestinian (National) Authority as the sole representative of the Palestinian people. Yet fundamental disagreements remain which impede the two-state solution and peace, leading to uncertainty, mistrust and desperation on both sides. On 23 September 2011, the Palestinian National Authority (PNA), led by President Mahmoud Abbas, took the step of seeking state membership of the United Nations (UN). This move was vehemently opposed by Israel and the United States.

There has been some important research on aspects of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in history (Karsh, 2011; Rotberg, 2006; Tessler, 1994) and the social and political sciences (Bar-Tal and Teichman, 2005; Brown, 2003; Maoz and McCauley, 2005). However, this has not been matched by a systematic analysis of political speeches on the conflict. Political speeches provide important insight into the development, continuities and discontinuities of intractable conflict: they reflect the ideological positions of relevant groups and provide insight into the social representations that these groups seek to disseminate (Schäffner, 1996; van Dijk, 1997). This paper firstly provides an overview of the socio-political events that led up to the UN state membership bid in September 2011 and, secondly, as a case study, it examines how the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was constructed in speeches delivered by PNA President Mahmoud Abbas and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to the UN General Assembly in September 2011.

Obstacles to peace

Although the 1993 Oslo Accords (or 1993 Declaration of Principles) established mutual recognition between Israel and the PNA (Brown, 2003), neither a Palestinian state nor peace between the two political entities resulted from the Accords. There are numerous obstacles to peace but four are particularly salient in contemporary political debate: the status of Jerusalem; Israeli settlements in the West Bank; the Palestinian refugee problem; and Israeli national security.

The first obstacle to peace concerns the status and sovereignty of Jerusalem. In the 1967 Six-Day War, Israel captured East Jerusalem and the West Bank, which had been under direct Jordanian rule since 1948. On 30 July 1980, the Israeli Knesset incorporated the Jerusalem Law into Israel's Basic Laws. The law authorised the annexation of East Jerusalem to Israeli territory and declared that "Jerusalem, complete and united, is the capital of Israel."¹ The PNA regards East Jerusalem (which includes the Old City and, thus, the holiest sites of Judaism) as the capital city of a future independent Palestinian state. The international community does not recognise Israeli sovereignty over East Jerusalem and regards this as occupied Palestinian territory.² The PNA refuses to negotiate with Israel until there is a moratorium on Israeli settlement-building in East Jerusalem.

The second, and perhaps most salient, obstacle to peace concerns Israel's settlement policy in the West Bank. Following its capture of the West Bank and East Jerusalem (from Jordan), Gaza and the Sinai Peninsula (from Egypt) and the Golan Heights (from Syria), Israel implemented a policy of Jewish civilian settlement in these territories. In Israel, these territories were widely represented as being "liberated" from foreign (Arab)

¹ http://www.mfa.gov.il/MFA/MFAArchive/1980_1989/Basic%20Law-%20Jerusalem-%20Capital%20of%20Israel

² UN Resolution 1980 <http://unispal.un.org/UNISPAL.NSF/0/DDE590C6FF232007852560DF0065FDDB>

control, as contributing to Israel's security, and as strengthening Israel's position in future peace talks (as demonstrated in the Israel-Egypt peace treaty which saw Israel withdraw from Sinai). Although Israel disengaged from the Gaza Strip and uprooted all 21 Jewish settlements in 2005, it has continued to build settlements in the West Bank. Currently, the total Jewish Israeli civilian population of Judea and Samaria (the name that Israel gives to the West Bank) is approximately 350 000. The PNA demands a complete halt to Jewish settlements in both East Jerusalem (its desired capital) and the West Bank before peace talks can resume. However, Israel's construction of a barrier physically separating Israeli and Palestinian population areas seems to indicate to the Palestinians that Israel wishes to perpetuate its occupation of the West Bank rather than curtail it (Christison and Christison, 2009). Conversely, Israel believes that the Palestinians deny Israel's right to exist (Bar-Tal and Teichman, 2005). Indeed, it has been found that the PNA repeatedly represents present-day Israel as "Palestinian territory." For instance, the Palestinian Liberation Organization's logo on the PNA's Mission to the UN website depicts the whole of present-day Israel as Palestinian territory,³ and various official PNA videos, documentaries, and songs refer to cities in present-day Israel as Palestinian cities.⁴ Both the Israelis' physical act of building settlements in East Jerusalem/the West Bank and the Palestinians' symbolic act of representing present-day Israel as Palestine serve to undermine faith in the outgroup's commitment to the two-state solution and, thus, each other's right to exist.

Disagreement regarding the Palestinian "right of return" constitutes a third obstacle to peace. Following the 1948 Israeli-Arab war, thousands of Palestinians were forced to leave their homes in Israel and the Palestinian territories (Karsh, 2011). Today, the Palestinian refugees and their descendants number in the region of approximately 5 000 000.⁵ Both the Palestinians and Israelis claim to seek a "just" solution to the Palestinian refugee problem. The PNA and proponents of the Palestinian right of return generally believe that the refugees and their descendants should be permitted to re-settle in the areas that they left (including present-day Israel). However, the Israeli government and opponents of the Palestinian right of return are staunchly opposed to the re-settlement of Palestinian refugees and their descendants within Israel's borders. They claim that this policy would undermine the demographic vitality of the Israeli Jewish population and, consequently, threaten the Jewish character of Israel (Bourhis et al., 1981). They argue that the Palestinian refugees should settle within the borders of their own future independent state. Many critics of the right of return compare the Palestinian refugee problem to the exodus of approximately 1 000 000 Jews from Arab lands between 1948 and the 1970s (Shulewitz, 2001), arguing that the Jews too were forced to leave their homes in Arab/Muslim countries. While the PNA regards the right of return as an "inalienable right," the Israeli government views it as an ambit claim designed to threaten the existence of Israel.

Fourthly, the State of Israel is deeply concerned about its national security and the threat of terrorism. National security is viewed as the key to national continuity, and terrorism as an existential threat to it (Jaspal and Yampolsky, 2011). Despite the complete dismantlement of all Jewish settlements and the withdrawal of Israeli troops from the Gaza Strip in 2005, the Hamas regime (which governs the Gaza Strip) and its collaborators have fired over 8000 rockets into civilian areas in Israeli territory.⁶ Hamas never condemns these acts but rather views them as a necessary aspect of its resistance strategy (Mishal and Sela, 2000). Since Fatah (which dominates the PNA) was ousted by Hamas from the Gaza Strip, the Israeli government regards it as powerless to curtail Hamas' acts and to guarantee Israel's security. Moreover, it is widely believed in Israel that the PNA makes little attempt to prevent Palestinian 'terrorism' and that it sometimes actively *encourages* acts of terrorism (Keinon, 2012). For instance, President Abbas has been accused of glorifying and sympathising with Palestinian violence against Israel, for example through the naming of public places after Palestinians found guilty of attacks against Israeli civilians, and the PNA's silence on Hamas' rocket attacks from the Gaza Strip.

These obstacles to peace have caused suspicion, at both political and societal levels, concerning the outgroup's "true" intentions. Although both Israel and the PNA claim to adhere to the two-state solution, the actions of the Israeli government and PNA, respectively, seem to indicate a lack of commitment. Indeed, suspicion, mistrust, and despair led to a breakdown in peace talks in September 2010.

The UN Membership Bid

The breakdown in peace talks and Israel's refusal to halt settlement-building led the PNA to pursue long-term political change through another route. Despite Israeli and US opposition, on 23 September 2011 President Abbas submitted to UN Secretary General Ban-Ki Moon the Palestinian application for an upgrade in status from "non-member observer entity" to state membership of the UN. Its submission was preceded by a speech delivered by President Abbas, which provided a rationale for the bid, and then a speech by Prime Minister

³<http://www.un.int/wcm/content/site/palestine/pid/11543>

⁴http://www.palwatch.org/site/modules/videos/pal/videos.aspx?fld_id=latestanddoc_id=5011

⁵ <http://www.unrwa.org/etemplate.php?id=86>

⁶ <http://www.idfblog.com/facts-figures/rocket-attacks-toward-israel/>

Netanyahu, which contested its legitimacy. In order to have been successful, the bid would have required approval from the UN Security Council and from two thirds of the UN General Assembly. However, the US, in its capacity as a permanent member of the UN Security Council, vetoed the bid, resulting in its rejection.

Subsequently, the Palestinian leadership decided to pursue a downgraded request for Palestine to obtain an upgrade in status from “non-member observer entity” to “non-member observer *state*.” On 29 November 2012 UN General Assembly Resolution 67/19 was passed (by a vote of 138 to 9) which conferred upon Palestine the status of “non member observer state.” This was described as “de facto recognition of the sovereign state of Palestine” by the UN (Charbonneau and Nichols, 2012). Israeli ministers (including the Israeli Prime Minister) condemned the upgrade in status, describing it as a “unilateral step,” as contrary to the Oslo Accords, and as counter-productive in the absence of direct negotiations between Israel and the PNA. Israel was clear in its statement that the upgrade was “a meaningless decision that will not change anything on the ground.”⁷

Yet, the result of the vote had considerable symbolic and practical clout. On a symbolic level, it marked a diplomatic defeat for Israel and the US, which had opposed the upgrade in status, and it provided greater international attention and legitimacy to the Palestinian cause. On a practical level, the upgrade in status now enabled Palestine to participate in debates in the General Assembly; to join UN treaties and specialised agencies, such as the International Criminal Court; to initiate war crimes charges against Israel in the International Criminal Court; and to take cases to the International Court of Justice. More generally, the UN is the highest-level international body and the leading authority on international law. Thus, the request for a change in status of Palestine in the UN constitutes an important milestone in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and how each side represents it is worthy of study.

Political Speeches

This paper examines two political speeches on the 2011 state membership application. A political speech is a vehicle for communicating politicized messages and for persuading people of their validity and truthfulness. Political courses of action, regardless of their actual legal or moral underpinnings, can be made to appear reasonable and necessary (van Dijk, 1997). Accordingly, speeches perform important political and societal functions: they aim to describe and explain events in terms of *political* implications and typically possess an action orientation in that they can implicitly or explicitly specify “appropriate” patterns of action in response to particular events. Political speeches can influence societal thinking and action by garnering support for, or encouraging rejection of, particular political projects.

In his overview of political discourse analysis, van Dijk (1997) identifies a multitude of discursive strategies that speeches can draw upon in order to construct particular versions of events. Firstly, semantic and ideological polarization establishes firm and stringent boundaries between ingroup and outgroup on the basis of politically and ideologically derived positions and opinions. For instance, the Iranian press represents Iran as Islamic and thus benevolent and the Israelis as Zionist occupiers and thus malevolent (Jaspal, in press). Secondly, (de-)emphasis of ingroup and outgroup actions usually serves to accentuate the positivity of the ingroup and the negativity of the outgroup. Israeli politicians tend to emphasise the efforts that Israel has made in establishing a lasting peace and to de-emphasise those made by the Palestinian leadership. Thirdly, speeches tend to make strategic use of metaphor by providing a culturally and psychologically “tangible” image of an abstract phenomenon, thereby providing a particular lens for regarding and evaluating it (Lakoff, 1980). For instance, while Israel speaks of Palestinian “terrorists,” the Palestinians use the metaphor of “martyr” which, conversely, evokes religious imagery and righteousness (Allen, 2012).

These discursive strategies are consistent with the central tenets of the social identity approach, which posits that human beings engage in self-other categorization and ingroup favouritism in order to facilitate ingroup self-esteem (Pehrson and Reicher, 2013). Yet, political speeches typically aim to downplay overt displays of ingroup favouritism and outgroup discrimination. Speeches are usually planned and speechwriters are mindful of how the speech is likely to be “heard” by particular audiences (van Dijk, 1997). This paper examines the intricacies of political discourse around a highly contentious political development in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which would have been “heard” differently by particular stakeholders in the conflict.

There is now a growing body of discourse analytic research on political rhetoric. More recently, there has been some research into political discourse in the Middle East. Using the discourse-historical approach, Gholizadeh and Hook (2012) show how Ayatollah Khomeini’s deployment of historical and religious discourses led to a “hegemonic [societal] stance” against the Shah of Iran, culminating in his overthrow. More generally, their analysis shows how political actors can invoke and re-construct history to serve particular long-term political ends. In the context of the Israeli-Arab conflict, there have been some recent analyses of Israeli political rhetoric surrounding particular aspects of the conflict. Tessler (1989) examines political discourse surrounding

⁷ <http://www.pmo.gov.il/English/MediaCenter/Spokesman/Pages/spokeUN291112.aspx>

the first Intifada, and compares the discourses of territorial maximalism (retaining control of the West Bank) and territorial compromise (giving up land for peace) as a response to the Palestinian uprising. More recently, Gavriely-Nuri (2008) has examined “war-naturalizing” in political discourse concerning the 2006 Lebanon War, which constructed war as a normal aspect of daily life in Israel, thereby making it appear more reasonable and acceptable. Using a similar approach, Gavriely-Nuri (2010) has shown how Israeli political discourse attempts to enhance Israel’s self-image as a peace-seeker while delegitimising outgroups. Similarly, there has also been some discourse analytic research into Hamas’ absolutist rhetoric on Israel and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which shows how Hamas leaders resist categories bound up with terrorism in interviews (McKinlay et al., 2011).

The few studies that have examined the political discourse of Middle Eastern leaders tend to have focussed upon either interviews with political leaders (e.g. McKinlay et al., 2011), which elucidate how political figures manage sensitive issues in spontaneous talk, or speeches directed primarily at ingroup members (e.g. Badran, 2010), which provide insight into how discourses are drawn upon in ‘societal thinking’ within ingroup contexts. Conversely, this study examines two political speeches delivered at the UN General Assembly, which aimed to convince the international community (largely outgroups) of the (il)legitimacy of the statehood bid.

METHOD

The Speeches

This study focuses upon two political speeches – one delivered by President Abbas and the other by Prime Minister Netanyahu – to the UN General Assembly in order to justify and contest, respectively, the membership bid. These particular speeches were selected for analysis over and above many other possible texts because (1) they were delivered by the highest-ranking officials in the State of Israel and PNA, who are recognised representatives of their respective peoples; (2) they were directed at an international audience within and beyond the UN and therefore had great reach and influence; (3) they were explicitly performative in that they sought to elicit support for their respective positions from the (diverse) international community.

A corpus of two political speeches can be sufficient for discourse analysis. Discourse analytic studies have focused on a single text in order to demonstrate how particular social and political effects can be achieved through language use. As Potter and Wetherell (1987, p. 161) have pointed out, in discourse analysis “one is interested in language use rather than the people generating the language” and thus “the success of a study is *not* in the least dependent on sample size.” A deliberately small but well-selected corpus can enable the analyst to conduct a fine-grained, detailed analysis, which can address research questions with depth and precision.

The aim of the study was to provide an analysis of two speeches on a highly contentious event rather than to provide any generalisable overview of political discourse in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Since the creation of the State of Israel, there have been fluctuations in Israeli-Palestinian relations, such as the Intifadas in the 1980s and 2000s and the signing of the Oslo Accords in 1993. This study focuses on just one development in the conflict, namely the Palestinian UN membership bid, as a case study. Accordingly, the principal aim of this study was theoretical, focusing on *how* constructions of Israel, the PNA, the statehood bid and the conflict, more generally, are worked up, disseminated, and contested.

Critical Discourse Analysis

This study employs critical discourse analysis, which is a language-oriented analytic approach for identifying patterns of meaning within a data set that aims to integrate discourse, cognition, and power, and to bridge the epistemological positions of social constructionism and realism. When applied, the method provides insight into how social reality is constructed in talk and text, acknowledging the possibilities offered by, and potential constraints imposed by, social power relations (van Dijk, 1993). In this case, it helps to reveal the discursive strategies for affirming and contesting particular versions of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Critical discourse analysis was considered particularly useful due to its theoretical foci, which lie in describing (i) control, that is, how groups exert control over others through persuasion or by constructing their agenda as “natural”; (ii) social cognition, namely that discourse can create and feed into ‘societal thinking’; and (iii) rhetorical strategies, namely the ways in which stakeholders rationalize and contest particular discourses surrounding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. These theoretical foci were well-aligned with the research aims of examining how the speeches construct the conflict and how these constructions are presented as reasonable.

Procedure

The authors accessed both Prime Minister Netanyahu’s speech, which was delivered in English, and the translation of President Abbas’ speech, which was delivered in Arabic, on the UN website.⁸ The left margin of

⁸ <http://www.un.org/en/members/index.shtml>

each speech was used to note preliminary codes which captured relevant discursive aspects of the speeches. These initial codes included *inter alia* general tone, categorization, positioning, particular forms of language, and emerging patterns within each speech. Subsequently, the right margin was used to collate these initial codes into potential themes, which captured discursive patterns. The emerging themes were pieced together to create superordinate themes for each speech. Superordinate themes were then compared and a final list of master themes, focusing on the differences and similarities between the discursive aspects of each speech, was developed. The themes were reviewed rigorously against the corpus in order to ascertain their compatibility and numerous extracts were listed against each corresponding theme. Specific extracts, which were considered vivid, compelling, and representative of the discursive themes, were selected for presentation in this article. Despite space constraints, the authors have attempted to provide sufficient contextual information in the analysis section, in order to enhance the reader's understanding of the socio-political context in which the extracts ought to be considered.

ANALYSIS

Constructing Ingroup Victimhood

In the speeches, both President Abbas and Prime Minister Netanyahu construct their respective national ingroups as victims, both historically and in the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The construction and accentuation of ingroup victimhood (the plight of Palestine and the vulnerability of Israel) function to elicit support for the ingroup's position.

The "Plight" of Palestine

Throughout his speech, President Abbas invokes the Israeli Declaration of Independence which occurred in 1948 but focuses attention on the negative outcomes of this for the Palestinians, such as their displacement:

1. The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees in the Near East [...] embodies the international responsibility towards the plight of the Palestinian refugees, who are the victims of Al-Nakba (Catastrophe) that occurred in 1948.

A variety of terms have been used to describe the events surrounding the Israeli Declaration of Independence, such as "al-ightisab" (the rape), and "al-hijra" (the exodus). Use of the term "Al-Nakba" has become popular in Palestinian and Arab discourse around the establishment of the State of Israel because it affectively constructs the consequences for the Palestinian people as devastating (Sadi and Abu-Lughod, 2007). The term "Al-Nakba" constructs Israeli statehood negatively as a "catastrophe" and the term "plight" foregrounds Palestinian suffering. Later in the speech, Abbas refers to the establishment of Israel as a "grave historical injustice committed against our people." This highlights the victimhood of the Palestinian people. The invocation of 'international responsibility' and the construction of this in quasi-material terms as embodied in a UN agency explicitly addresses the immediate UN audience and the focus of the speech which urges this audience to apply that responsibility and respond to the Palestinian 'plight' in a new way, that is, by agreeing to the application for state membership of the UN.

The discourse of ingroup victimhood is strategically coupled with that of ingroup sacrifice:

2. When we adopted this program [of peace], we were taking a painful and very difficult step for all of us, especially those, including myself, who were forced to leave their homes and their towns and villages, carrying only some of our belongings and our grief and our memories and the keys of our homes to the camps of exile and the Diaspora in the 1948 Al-Nakba, one of the worst operations of uprooting, destruction and removal of a vibrant and cohesive society.

Abbas begins by positioning the Palestinian people within the discourse of peace, and constructs the peace programme as a Palestinian "creation." The peace programme, which was approved by the Palestinian National Council in Algeria in 1988, is referred to as a "painful and very difficult step for all of us," entailing ingroup sacrifice. Since it accepted a Palestinian state based on the pre-1967 borders, the programme paved the way for the 1993 Oslo Accords. The "forced" departure of Palestinians, "our grief and our memories", and symbolic reference to "the keys of our homes", which were kept as mementos by many displaced Palestinians, collectively accentuate Palestinian victimhood. In this extract, Al-Nakba is more elaborately described as a superlatively destructive historical event; it is made to symbolise displacement, nostalgia, and suffering. This is consistent with Abbas' later invocation of the "horrors of the Nakba," which qualifies it as an event marked by intense dismay and victimhood. This marks Palestinian victimhood and suffering as exceptional in the world's history, which consequently constructs the Palestinian contribution to the peace process as exceptionally large and commendably sacrificial.

Abbas represents Palestinian suffering as incessant and continual and extends Al-Nakba temporally into the present by describing it as “ongoing”:

3. after 63 years of suffering of the ongoing Nakba: Enough. It is time for the Palestinian people to gain their freedom and independence. The time has come to end the suffering and the plight of millions of Palestinian refugees in the homeland and the Diaspora, to end their displacement and to realize their rights, some of them forced to take refuge more than once in different places of the world.

The invocation of a 63-year time frame, during which there has been “ongoing” suffering affecting “millions of Palestinian refugees in the homeland and the Diaspora” constructs a substantial temporal continuity of victimhood. Later in the speech, other duration indicators are invoked as he makes reference to “*decades* of displacement and colonial occupation and *ceaseless* suffering” (emphases added). Palestinian suffering is attributed to their displacement and refugee status. Crucially, the Palestinians are described as having been displaced repeatedly and to diverse locations, which represents them as perpetually “homeless.”

Despite the ingroup’s “plight,” the Palestinians are said to be engaged in “peaceful resistance to the Israeli occupation”:

4. [The popular peaceful resistance reflects] an impressive, inspiring and courageous example of the strength of this defenseless people, armed only with their dreams, courage, hope and slogans in the face of bullets, tanks, tear gas and bulldozers.

Abbas refers to the Palestinian people as “defenseless” and to Palestinian resistance as exclusively peaceful, which obscures another more violent facet of Palestinian resistance that involves attacks against civilians (Moghadam, 2006). This is consistent with van Dijk’s (1997) observation that ingroup benevolence tends to be accentuated, while ingroup negativity is completely attenuated, particularly in contexts of contentious intergroup conflict. The Palestinians are metaphorically constructed as being “armed” only with abstract “weapons”, namely “dreams, courage, hope and slogans.” Use of the metaphor “armed” does resonate with a discourse of Palestinian violence but it serves to contest it through a re-configuration of its meaning. In short, the Palestinians may be armed but *not* with deadly weapons. Conversely, the Israeli outgroup is discursively militarized and represented in terms of “bullets, tanks, tear gas and bulldozers” with the two four-part lists placing the groups in parallel but substantively contrasting positions. These constructions position the Palestinian ingroup as the innocent, non-violent victim of violent Israeli aggression (Jaspal, 2013).

The Vulnerability of the Jewish State

Prime Minister Netanyahu similarly works up a compelling account of Jewish Israeli victimhood, drawing on both historical and contemporary narratives. Firstly, Netanyahu begins by constructing Israel primarily as a victim of unfair, biased criticism from the UN, which he refers to as “the theatre of the absurd”:

5. After all, it was here in 1975 that the age-old yearning of my people to restore our national life in our ancient biblical homeland – it was then that this was braided, branded rather, shamefully as racism [...] And it’s year after year that Israel is unjustly singled out for condemnation. It’s singled out for condemnation more often than all the nations of the world combined. Twenty-one out of the 27 General Assembly resolutions condemn Israel – the one true democracy in the Middle East.”

Netanyahu is referring to UN General Assembly Resolution 3379, which “determine[d] that Zionism is a form of racism and racial discrimination.”⁹ He begins by constructing Zionism as a reasonable, “age-old” national aspiration of the Jewish people which normalizes the national ideology and thereby represents the UN’s response to it as “shameful.” This perspective is further bolstered by the fact that the resolution was subsequently revoked by the UN in 1991.¹⁰ This is provided as just one example of how “Israel is unjustly singled out for condemnation [...] more often than all the nations of the world combined,” constructing a sense of ingroup victimhood. The Prime Minister depicts Israel as the *innocent* victim of biased criticism by reiterating in exceptionalist terms the democratic character of Israel (and implicitly contrasting it with other non-democratic countries in the region).

The constructed victimisation of Israel in the UN allows Netanyahu to problematize this institution:

⁹[http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/3379\(XXX\)andLang=EandArea=RESOLUTION](http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/3379(XXX)andLang=EandArea=RESOLUTION)

¹⁰http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/46/86andLang=EandArea=RESOLUTION

6. He [the Chabad-Lubavitch Rebbe] said to me, “You’ll be serving in a house of many lies” [...] Today I hope that the light of truth will shine, if only for a few minutes, in a hall that for too long has been a place of darkness for my country.

In extract 6, Netanyahu recounts a conversation with the late Chabad-Lubavitch Rebbe (the leader of a Hasidic movement), Menachem Mendel Schneerson, in which the rebbe, who became a naturalised US citizen in the 1940s, referred to the UN General Assembly as “a house of many lies.” If this invocation can be seen as extending the audience for whom Netanyahu speaks to include part of the Jewish diaspora, the weight of his negative evaluation of the credibility of the UN General Assembly, which has allegedly singled out and unfairly undermined the State of Israel, is enhanced. The metaphorical construction of the UN as a “place of darkness” for Israel evokes imagery of evil and sinisterness, of which Israel is a lone victim. Furthermore, Netanyahu later constructs Israel as a victim of negative “labels and libels” from the international community, which evokes imagery of anti-Semitic libels which have historically pervaded European and Middle Eastern culture (Lindemann and Levy, 2010).

A principal rhetorical aim in Netanyahu’s speech is to de-construct the criticism that has been levelled against the State of Israel on the international stage. He does so firstly by constructing Israel as a victim of negative labels and libels (e.g. an Apartheid state; ethnic cleansing; racism) and, secondly, by de-constructing the discourses of ethnic cleansing and racism, which were the cornerstones of Resolution 3379:

7. They [Palestinian officials] said the Palestinian state won’t allow any Jews in it. They’ll be Jew-free – Judenrein. That’s ethnic cleansing. There are laws today in Ramallah that make the selling of land to Jews punishable by death. That’s racism. And you know which law this evokes.

Here, the Prime Minister contests the discourse of Israeli ethnic cleansing by contrasting it with an apparently more overt example of ethnic cleansing: the Palestinian government is represented as guilty of “true” ethnic cleansing. Netanyahu’s argument that the Palestinian authorities wish to render a Palestinian state “Judeinrein” evokes imagery of Nazi anti-Semitism which culminated in the Holocaust, the historical epitome of ethnic cleansing (Neimark, 2001). Furthermore, he draws attention to the existence of “laws” that prohibit the sale of property to Jews, which is “punishable by death.” Netanyahu makes implicit reference to the 1935 Nuremberg Laws which prohibited various forms of social contact with Jews in Nazi Germany (Gilbert, 1987). The invocation of Palestinian “racism” and “ethnic cleansing” and their anchoring to Nazi anti-Semitism serve to construct Palestinian anti-Semitism as a continuation of Nazi anti-Semitism and Jews/Israelis as the continued victims of it (Jaspal and Yampolsky, 2011).

The discourse of Jewish victimhood is coupled with that of the legitimacy of the Jewish connection to Israel:

8. And for those Jews who were exiled from our land, they never stopped dreaming of coming back: Jews in Spain, on the eve of their expulsion; Jews in the Ukraine, fleeing the pogroms; Jews fighting the Warsaw Ghetto, as the Nazis were circling it. They never stopped praying, they never stopped yearning. They whispered: “Next year in Jerusalem. Next year in the Promised Land.”

In seeking to illustrate the legitimacy of the Jewish connection to Israel, the prime minister invokes the historical victimhood of the Jews and their persecution over many centuries and in distinct national contexts. The Jews are represented as having been exiled from *our* land, reiterating a sense of ownership. This is in stark contrast to Abbas’ speech, which conversely represents the Palestinian people as being in exile from *their* land (see extract 2). Similarly, Netanyahu refers to “a hundred generations of Jews” who have suffered both displacement “throughout the lands” and “every evil under the sun,” which discursively supersedes Abbas’ assertion that the Palestinians have suffered “decades of displacement.” Here Netanyahu accentuates the historical victimhood of the Jews – they are represented hyperbolically as victims of “evil” itself – and implicitly attenuates that of the Palestinians. Moreover, in extract 8, Netanyahu reiterates the historical vulnerability of the Jews by the employment of particular verbs and verb forms: “exiled”, in the passive voice, reiterates that the Jews suffered an action that was beyond their control; the participle “fleeing” indicates the defencelessness of the Jews; “praying” and “yearning” suggest hope, with the participles (also ‘dreaming’, ‘coming’, ‘fighting’, and ‘circling’) invoking the temporal ongoing-ness of the processes of persecution, resistance and hope. The extract culminates in a quotation taken from the end of the Passover Seder (a ritual meal through which the Biblical story of Jewish liberation from slavery in Egypt is annually retold) and used by Jews in the diaspora as an expression of spiritual hope: ‘Next year in Jerusalem’. Through these powerful resonances, oriented to the UN audience and to Israeli and Jewish audiences, the very existence of the State of Israel is represented as the miraculous outcome of praying and yearning and as a solution to Jewish victimhood.

The *continuity* of Jewish victimhood is an important theme in the speech. This surfaces when discussing the case of the Israeli soldier, Gilad Shalit, who was kidnapped and held by Hamas for five years (Shalit was released a month after these speeches were made):

9. Gilad Shalit is the son of Aviva and Noam Shalit. He is the grandson of Zvi Shalit, who escaped the Holocaust by coming to the – in the 1930s as a boy to the Land of Israel. Gilad Shalit is the son of every Israeli family.

In his Biblically-resonant genealogy, Netanyahu's observation that Zvi Shalit escaped the Holocaust and found refuge in Israel serves to construct a continuity of suffering in the same Israeli family (from the Nazi Holocaust to the Hamas kidnapping). Incidentally, this scenario is generalised to "every Israeli family." Moreover, Netanyahu accentuates ingroup victimhood by drawing attention to the continued persecution and danger faced by Jews even in their homeland, exemplified by the Hamas kidnapping. Indeed, it has often been observed that the Holocaust can constitute an important interpretative lens for the Israeli-Arab conflict (Jaspal and Yampolsky, 2011).

Accentuating Outgroup Threat

The discourse of victimhood, to which both the Palestinian and Israeli leaders lay claim, heralds the introduction of the construction of outgroup threat. While Abbas constructs Israel as a threat to peace and the Palestinians, Netanyahu positions the Palestinians within a larger, global threat to Israel and the world.

The Occupying Power: A Threat to Peace and Palestine

President Abbas' speech constructs Israel as a multi-faceted threat. The speech represents the Palestinians as eager for peace and the Israelis as threatening the peace process, which has international support:

10. But all of these sincere efforts and endeavours undertaken by international parties were repeatedly *wrecked* by the positions of the Israeli government, which quickly *dashed* the hopes raised by the launch of negotiations last September.
11. Every initiative and every conference and every new round of negotiations and every movement was *shattered* on the rock of the Israeli settlement expansion project.

Abbas constructs the international community as having worked laboriously and sincerely in order to facilitate peace between the Israelis and Palestinians but argues that these "efforts and endeavours" were deliberately undermined by Israel. This implicitly constructs Israel as insincere and positions it outside of international consensus as a rogue state (Joffe, 2004). Use of the metaphors "wrecked," "dashed," and "shattered" in reference to the Israeli government's response to these "sincere efforts and endeavours" (note the repeated use of 'every' in extract 11) suggests that Israel forcefully and aggressively dismantled them in an undifferentiated way, opting for insincerity and violence rather than sincerity, negotiations, and peace. These metaphors of systematic force and destruction serve to negativise Israel and to represent it as a threat to peace.

Accordingly, Abbas employs terms such as "Occupying Power" and "Occupation Army" in reference to the Israeli government and its military, respectively. This constructs the State of Israel first and foremost as an occupier but also as an occupier that deliberately victimizes the Palestinian people:

12. The occupying power also continues its incursions in areas of the Palestinian National Authority through raids, arrests and killings at the checkpoints. In recent years, the criminal actions of armed settler militias, who enjoy the special protection of the occupation army, has intensified with the perpetration of frequent attacks against our people targeting their homes, schools, universities, mosques, fields, crops and trees.

The term "incursions" is coupled with the three-part list, "raids, arrests and killings", which suggests that Israeli military actions are thoroughly malicious in intention and have as their principal goal physical harm to the Palestinian people. This is further reinforced through the emphasis on "armed settler militias" who are said to engage in "criminal actions." Abbas employs the term "militia" in reference to the Israeli settlers in the West Bank, which militarises this population and constructs their actions as complementing those of the Israeli army. Indeed, the "militarization" of the Israeli civilian population has similarly been observed in the Iranian press (Jaspal, in press). The observation that the settlers "enjoy the special protection of the occupation army" serves to crystallise their alleged complicity in threatening the local Palestinian population. Thus, the aversive actions of Israeli settlers as a category, which, through the seven-part list at the end of the extract, are constructed as adversely and comprehensively affecting Palestinian lives, are generalized to Israel.

Later in the speech, the State of Israel is said to embrace “Apartheid policies,” which serves to anchor Israeli policy to racial segregationist policy in White-dominated South Africa (Poller, 2012). This particular case of anchoring evokes imagery of Israel as advocating ethnic segregation between Jews and Arabs, Jewish supremacy and Jewish subjugation of the Palestinians and is oriented towards the achievement of taint by analogy. This imagery is further reinforced through the categorization of the Israeli West Bank separation barrier as “the racist annexation Wall that is eating up large tracts of our land.” The metaphor of “eating up” Palestinian land depicts the wall as an aggressive, consuming entity designed to harm the Palestinians. Moreover, the invocation of race in relation to the Wall constructs it as a means of segregating two races, which resonates with South African Apartheid. It is noteworthy that the West Bank barrier is referred to in different ways on either side of the divide: Israelis tend to view it as a “security fence” that safeguards Israeli security, while Abbas’ speech refers to it as a “racial annexation Wall” (Gavrilis, 2004).

Abbas constructs harm to Palestinians as the primary aim of Israel:

13. It [Israel] intensifies its decades-long campaign of demolition and confiscation of homes, displacing Palestinian owners and residents under a multi-pronged policy of ethnic cleansing aimed at pushing them away from their ancestral homeland.

The speech represents demolition and confiscation as the building-blocks of Israeli policy, and the displacement and ethnic cleansing of Palestinians as its underlying intentions. Displacement is an important theme that permeates Abbas’ speech (and, as was noted in the consideration of extract 8, also featured in Netanyahu’s speech) and resonates with the issue of the Palestinian right of return. The highly emotive term “ethnic cleansing” (which was used by Netanyahu in extract 7) evokes well-known examples such as the Rwanda Genocide and the Nazi Holocaust (Ahmed, 1995). Crucially, ethnic cleansing is represented not as a passive outcome of Israeli actions but rather as an active “multi-pronged policy,” which constructs it as deliberate, calculated and multifarious.

Israeli settlements are said to form part of this policy: they are constructed as posing a threat to Palestinians since they “entrench” the occupation of Palestinian land, unfavourably alter the demographic vitality of Palestinians (Bourhis et al., 1981), and unilaterally “alter the borders.” In short, the settlements introduce negative, unwanted social, demographic, and geo-political changes, which undermine the Palestinian national cause. Yet, settlements are said to lie at the “core” of Israeli policy:

14. Settlement activities embody the core of the policy of colonial military occupation of the land of the Palestinian people and all of the brutality of aggression and racial discrimination against our people that this policy entails.

Settlements are said to be threatening because of the “brutality of aggression and racial discrimination” that lies at the heart of the policy. Settlement activity is racialised and anchored to colonialism, which evokes imagery of negatively evaluated European colonialism in Africa and Asia. Moreover, it is represented as “brutal”; indeed, later in the speech, Abbas refers to the “*horrific* picture about the size of the settlement campaign”, suggesting that both the quality and scale of the settlements are deeply threatening. Consistent with the “militarization” of Israeli settlers, the President argues that Israel “continues to *besiege* the Holy sites with a ring of settlements.” This evokes imagery (with strong historical resonances) of the “settler militias” forcing the surrender of Jerusalem, the desired capital city of a future Palestinian state.

Through its actions, Israel is positioned as posing a superlative threat to the Palestinians: Abbas argues that, through its occupation of the West Bank and its continued settlement policy, Israel “is obstructing our whole destiny.” It is constructed as depriving Palestinians of any control over their lives and futures, which, through its coupling with disruption, aggression, and violence, represents Israel as a multi-faceted threat to peace and to the Palestinians.

An Existential Threat to Israel

Prime Minister Netanyahu’s speech highlights an existential threat to Israel from various outgroups, all of which are inter-related. These include militant Islamism (at the superordinate level), Iran (due to its anti-Zionist stance and nuclear programme), and the Palestinian leadership (due to its refusal to negotiate peace).

Having constructed the UN as unfairly biased against Israel, Netanyahu notes that the UN’s advice to vacate occupied territories such as South Lebanon and Gaza was misguided:

15. Hezbollah and Hamas fired thousands of rockets against our cities from the very territories we vacated.

Unilateral withdrawal from occupied territory is implied to have resulted in threats to Israel – threats that are abundant (“thousands”) and directed against civilians (“our cities”) rather than military targets. This depicts the

Hezbollah and Hamas organizations as threatening Israel, in much the same way as Abbas represented Israel threatening Palestinians. Against this backdrop, Netanyahu draws attention to Hezbollah's role in the UN Security Council and thereby problematizes the UN itself:

16. Hezbollah-controlled Lebanon now presides over the U.N. Security Council. This means, in effect, that a terror organization presides over the body entrusted with guaranteeing the world's security.

Hezbollah is widely regarded as a resistance organisation in the Arab world (Norton, 2007). Having attributed to Hezbollah activities which may be regarded as terrorist in nature, the Israeli leader explicitly refers to Hezbollah as a "terror organization." This reflects the common "terrorist versus freedom fighter" dichotomy in political discourse (Halmari, 1993). The terror designation evokes imagery of lawlessness and destruction which threatens the world, given that the "terror organization" is said to preside, paradoxically, over the UN Security Council. Furthermore, this ties in with the discourse of Israel as a victim of a biased UN and specifically grounds the claim that the UN is "the theatre of the absurd."

Hezbollah's presidency of the UN Security Council heralds the construction of a global "malignancy" that "threatens the peace of all":

17. It seeks not to liberate but to enslave, not to build but to destroy. That malignancy is militant Islam [...] it murders Jews, Christians and Muslims alike with unforgiving impartiality [...] Since 9/11 militant Islamists slaughtered countless other innocents – in London and Madrid, in Baghdad and Mumbai, in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, in every part of Israel. I believe that the greatest danger facing our world is that this fanaticism will arm itself with nuclear weapons. And this is precisely what Iran is trying to do.

Militant Islamism is represented as a threat not only to the State of Israel but to "us all." In order to construct this ubiquitous global threat, Netanyahu cites the examples of attacks in various geographical contexts across countries and continents, ending with the state of Israel. Moreover, three major religious groups (Jews, Christians and Muslims) are represented as victims of militant Islam, not just Jews. This serves to attenuate direct relevance to Israel and to construct militant Islam as an issue of paramount concern to the international community as a whole. The inclusion of 'Muslims' in the list of affected religious groups differentiates this category from 'militant Islam' and may defuse charges of generic anti-Muslim bias. Netanyahu constructs militant Islam as superlatively threatening through the use of verbs of oppression ("enslave" and "destroy") which are contrasted with verbs of freedom and progress ("liberate" and "build"). Later in the speech, he refers to "the insatiable crocodile of militant Islam" and "the militant Islamic storm that threatens us." Both the metaphors, "crocodile" (an aggressive predator) and "storm" (symbolizing unsettlement and darkness), are used to construct militant Islam as a dire threat. Having depicted militant Islamists as cruel, brutal and murderous, acting "with unforgiving impartiality," Netanyahu's escalating construction of threat culminates with apocalyptic imagery of militant Islamists in possession of nuclear weapons. Within this context, he invokes another (related) threat, namely the Islamic Republic of Iran, which is accused by the international community of seeking nuclear weapons:

18. If Iran is not stopped, we will all face the specter of nuclear terrorism, and the Arab Spring could soon become an Iranian winter. That would be a tragedy.

The term "nuclear terrorism" combines two distinct threats, which have come to form part of cultural consciousness particularly after 9/11 (Allison, 2004), and use of the metaphor "specter" evokes imagery of fear. The future, rather than the conditional, verb form ("if Iran is not stopped") constructs this as a certain consequence. Moreover, the positive construct of the 'Arab Spring' that was culturally salient at that time (Byman, 2011) is represented as threatened by the real possibility of an "Iranian [nuclear] winter."

Having represented militant Islam, in which Iran is said to play a central role [Are you relying on extract 17 here or on other sources? If the former, I don't think the 'central role' claim is substantiated by the data; if the latter, a supportive citation is needed.], as a global threat, Netanyahu proceeds to outline the specific threat to the state of Israel:

19. The world around Israel is definitely becoming more dangerous. Militant Islam has already taken over Lebanon and Gaza. It's determined to tear apart the peace treaties between Israel and Egypt and between Israel and Jordan. It's poisoned many Arab minds against Jews and Israel, against America and the West. It opposes not the policies of Israel but the existence of Israel.

Netanyahu draws attention to the dangers faced by Israel due to its geographical proximity to Lebanon and other potentially belligerent states. Militant Islam is represented as a growing threat and it is implied that other

countries will fall prey to it. Crucially, Netanyahu notes that a principal aim of militant Islamism is to “tear apart” (note use of a metaphor of destruction) existing peace treaties with Egypt and Jordan, which have been crucial to Israel’s security (Arian, 1995) and which are generally celebrated by the international community. Moreover, militant Islam is said to “poison Arab minds against Jews and Israel, against America and the West” (note the metaphor of toxicity); by extending the object of threat from ‘Jews and Israel’ to ‘America and the West’, the constituency of interest is greatly increased. Netanyahu constructs a distinction between the opposition to Israel’s policies, which is implicitly positioned as acceptable, and an anti-Israelism which opposes Israel’s existence; militant Islam is positioned in the latter camp.

While militant Islam is constructed as threatening the world including Israel, the Palestinian outgroup is said to pose a threat to peace and thus to Israel. Like Abbas, Netanyahu constructs the ingroup as willing to negotiate peace (“my door has always been open”) and to make “painful compromises.” Netanyahu argues that, in response to a “sweeping peace offer that met virtually all of the Palestinian demands,” the Palestinians “launched a terror attack [the Intifada] that claimed a thousand Israeli lives.” This serves to represent the Palestinians as unequivocally opposed to peace with Israel and as almost inherently prone to violence and terrorism against Israel. As in extract 15, this constructs Israel’s compromises for peace as counter-productive and implicitly rationalises its measures against the Palestinians. Later in his speech, Netanyahu derisively engages with an aspect of Abbas’ speech, which argued that Palestinians had only “dreams, courage, hope and slogans” in the face of Israeli violence (see extract 4):

20. Yeah, hopes, dreams and 10,000 missiles and Grad rockets supplied by Iran, not to mention the river of lethal weapons now flowing into Gaza from the Sinai, from Libya, and from elsewhere. Thousands of missiles have already rained down on our cities.

Netanyahu implicitly represents Abbas as sidestepping and misrepresenting the actions of the Palestinians in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict by adding “10,000 missiles and Grad rockets” to the emotive list of aspirations invoked by Abbas in his speech. The metaphors of “river,” “flowing into” and “rained down” used in relation to the weapons represent them as being in overwhelmingly abundant supply. This again illustrates and heightens the threats faced by Israel. Accordingly, Netanyahu depicts security matters, which the UN allegedly fails to take seriously, as “life-and-death matters” for Israelis.

Yet, the threat to Israel is not just a violent one from militant Islam, Palestinian terrorism or the Iranian government that allegedly sponsors it. The threat is a multi-faceted one that includes the allegedly unrealistic preconditions for peace talks put forward by the Palestinian leadership, one of which includes “the fantasy of flooding Israel with millions of Palestinians.” The use of the ‘flooding’ metaphor, which is commonly used in critical accounts of immigration (for example, Charteris-Black, 2006) in relation to the Palestinian right of return constructs it as adversely and damagingly overwhelming the State of Israel. The threat here emanates from the negative outcomes that this would have for Jewish demographic vitality in Israel (Bourhis et al., 1981). Use of the term “fantasy” represents the right of return as implausible and impossible.

More generally, Netanyahu invokes an existential threat to Israel by casting doubt on President Abbas’ commitment to the two-state solution and Palestinian recognition of the state of Israel:

21. I guess the settlements he’s [Abbas] talking about are Tel Aviv, Haifa, Jaffa, Be’er Sheva [...] the core of the conflict has always been and unfortunately remains the refusal of the Palestinians to recognize a Jewish state in any border.
22. We will know that they’re ready for compromise and peace [...] when they stop denying our historical connection to our ancient homeland.

Netanyahu elucidates the existential threat by problematizing the meaning of the term “settlements” in Palestinian discourses. Although the term is habitually used in relation to Israeli communities in the Occupied Territories, here Netanyahu argues that in Palestinian discourse it refers to cities within the borders of Israel. The argument is that Palestinians do not accept the existence of Israel, which is a core prerequisite for peace. In extract 22, he explicitly notes that the prospect of peace is inhibited by the Palestinian failure to recognise the Jewish “historical connection”, which is treated as the ultimate criterion for conferring ownership. This constructs the Palestinians as opposed to the very existence of Israel and, thus, as an existential threat to the Jewish State.

DISCUSSION

This article provides a critical discourse analysis of speeches by the Israeli and Palestinian leaders regarding the Palestinian UN state membership bid. It is argued that, despite their opposing agendas, there are some

significant discursive similarities in the speeches of Prime Minister Netanyahu and President Abbas. The most salient shared discourses concern ingroup victimhood on the one hand and outgroup threat on the other. These discourses contribute to an irreconcilable intergroup “binarism” between ingroup and outgroup (Lazar and Lazar, 2004).

This article shows the strategic deployment and mobilization of the discourses of victimhood and threat in order to construct the ingroup as vulnerable and the outgroup as dangerous. These discourses enable both leaders to deflect accusations of “ethnic cleansing” and “racism” from the ingroup and to attribute them to the outgroup; to accentuate the ingroup’s “connection” to the disputed territory; and to advocate a particular form of “peace” that meets the ingroup’s agenda. The mobilization of these discourses serves to elicit support for the ingroup’s agenda and to encourage rejection of the outgroup’s agenda. Accordingly, Abbas urges the international community to accept the Palestinian application for state membership, arguing that this will safeguard the peace process and reduce Palestinian “victimhood” and the Israeli “threat.” Conversely, Netanyahu urges the international community to reject the Palestinian application, arguing that “premature” statehood will inhibit the peace process and *increase* Israeli victimhood and the Palestinian (and Islamist) threat. In short, both leaders highlight negative socio-political and intergroup consequences of contravening their respective positions on the bid (Dunmire, 2005).

Both speakers draw upon historical imagery in bolstering the victimhood and threat discourses. Netanyahu invokes Jewish suffering over centuries and anchors the current suffering of Israelis to the Holocaust, the most destructive act of persecution against the Jews (Gilbert, 1987). This serves to construct contemporary threats to Israel as a *continuation* of historical Jewish suffering and invites a sympathetic response from the audience (Jaspal and Yampolsky, 2011). Similarly, Abbas represents the Palestinian people as having consistently suffered displacement, statelessness and “ethnic cleansing” over the last century – suffering that is “ongoing.” Through the invocation of emotive metaphors such as “Holocaust” and “ethnic cleansing” in both speeches, there is an attempt to construct ingroup victimhood as historically exceptional and thus in urgent need of international attention.

In both speeches, the victimhood discourse is closely entwined with the threat discourse. Both Abbas and Netanyahu identify the “cause” for, or rather “culprit” behind, the ingroup’s temporally pervasive and “ongoing” victimhood. The Palestinian leader represents Israel as the sole threat, while the Israeli leader constructs the Palestinian threat as being “embedded” within a superordinate Islamist/Iranian threat. Abbas’ speech resonates with hegemonic societal discourses concerning the power imbalance between the Israelis and Palestinians, and the vulnerability of the Palestinians (McKinlay et al., 2011; Poller, 2012). Conversely, the Israeli Prime Minister contests such hegemonic societal discourses by positioning the Palestinian threat within discourses concerning militant Islam and, more recently, Iranian nuclear aspirations (Poller, 2012). Netanyahu explicitly invokes Hamas on three occasions in his speech in order to accentuate the threat allegedly posed by the Palestinian outgroup. Moreover, both speeches construct their respective “Other” as a threat at a local level, that is, a threat specifically to the ingroup, but also at the superordinate level, that is, as a threat to the world or to “world peace”. There is consistent manoeuvring between these two levels of threat in orienting to positions of ingroup victimhood, in accentuating the construction of threat, and in realizing its mobilizing potential in the UN. By representing their respective outgroups as a *global* threat, Abbas and Netanyahu orient towards ensuring that their agendas retain international relevance and capture the attention of the international community.

Not unexpectedly, there is a desire for positive self-presentation in the speeches (van Dijk, 1993, 1997). Both leaders attribute positive characteristics to their respective ingroups. The ingroup is constructed as fair, prepared to make sacrifices, and relentless in the pursuit of peace, while the outgroup is represented as aggressive, belligerent, and unequivocally opposed to peace. In both speeches, there is an exclusive focus upon the negative actions of the outgroup and the positive, peace-building efforts of the ingroup. For instance, Abbas does not explicitly invoke the Hamas organization in his speech or Palestinian intragroup conflict, possibly as a means of safeguarding ingroup self-presentation, although he does refer to the establishment of “national reconciliation”, itself a positive development. Conversely, the outgroup is subjected to the process of “out-casting” and is represented as “all that is bad and aberrant” (Lazar and Lazar, 2004, p. 239). Despite the potential for collective apologies to repair intergroup relations that have been damaged by historical misdoings (Edwards, 2010), neither speech acknowledges negative ingroup actions or any positive outgroup actions. This could plausibly feed into the intergroup suspicions that have hitherto characterized the peace process.

Discourses of victimhood and threat serve to bolster and perpetuate these negative intergroup dynamics. Both the Palestinian and Israeli leaders accuse each other of undermining the two-state solution to the conflict, rather than acknowledging the obstacles to peace that their respective ingroups have imposed. Indeed, both are keen to demonstrate their own commitment to the two-state solution, which can be attributed to its widespread popularity in the UN. It is socially desirable to adopt, or adhere to, the majoritarian, consensual position, namely, to endorse the two-state solution. In their speeches, both Netanyahu and Abbas attempt to maintain a positive self-image (van Dijk, 1993): Netanyahu attempts to deflect any potential suspicion that Israel is not serious about the two-state solution by arguing that he would be the “first” to welcome a Palestinian

state, while Abbas reiterates that his intention is not to “isolate” or “delegitimize” Israel but rather to establish a Palestinian state “alongside” Israel. In short, blame is systematically attributed to the outgroup (cf. Edwards, 2010).

This article shows that, although Abbas and Netanyahu speak from distinct politico-ideological positions, there is considerable overlap in the discursive strategies employed. Both accentuate intragroup solidarity and intergroup difference and neither employs the language of reconciliation or peace. The constructions offered and the discourses drawn upon in the speeches collide with one another: both Abbas and Netanyahu compete for the position of victim and both identify their outgroup “Other” as the threat. This can be regarded as a “framing contest” (Krebs and Jackson, 2007, p. 57). Moreover, there is a clash of mutually exclusive dreams and aspirations, which appear to be far removed from geo-political realities on the ground. It is easy to see how this “collision” can provide negative feelings on both sides of the conflict and undermine optimism regarding the prospect of a peaceful solution. In seeking to elicit support for their respective agendas, Abbas and Netanyahu (intentionally or unwittingly) sabotage support for intergroup reconciliation between Israelis and Palestinians by aggravating grievances on both sides. It is hoped that future research will acknowledge the powerful role of political speeches in shaping the development of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and examine how it can be used to convince, mobilise and silence.

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