The *New York Times* Distorts the Palestinian Struggle
A Case Study of Anti-Palestinian Bias in American News Coverage of the First and Second Palestinian Intifadas

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Abstract

In this study, I prove a history of bias against Palestine in a newspaper of international importance — the *New York Times* — during the First and Second Palestinian Intifadas. Using state-of-the-art natural language processing toolkits as well as a regression model with over 90% accuracy based on a carefully-validated word bank, I analyze over 33,000 NYT articles for (1) their use of active/passive voice and (2) the objectivity, tone, and violent sentiment of the language used. I follow up my quantitative analysis with a qualitative validation step, analyzing biased articles in each period. In conjunction with historical context, I show that anti-Palestinian bias persisted disproportionately in the *New York Times* during both periods and, in fact, worsened from the First Intifada to the Second. Finally, I connect my findings to current events in Palestine and challenge readers to be critical of the sources they reference.

1 Introduction

In this study, I will identify bias against Palestine in a newspaper of international importance – the *New York Times* – as a case study in the scope of a larger problem of anti-Palestinian bias in American news coverage. I will center my analysis on two important periods in the modern history of the Palestinian struggle – the First and Second Intifadas – both marked by periods of rapid change and an increase in global conversation about Israel and Palestine. From this analysis, I intend to, first, provide a more rigorous computational and qualitative analysis of rhetorical bias in the *Times* than other content analysis studies have to date and, second, develop an accurate measure of how bias in the *Times* evolved between the Intifadas.

2 Background

2.1 A Framework for Studying Bias

Orientalism – an ideological framework for studying bias against predominantly Arab, Muslim countries like Palestine – is a term first coined by Edward Said in his 1978 book by the same name [Said, 1978]. Said defines the term as the West's stereotyped perception of the Middle East – based in Western domination, both colonial and postcolonial, of the East [Said, 1978]. Core to Said's definition is the use of "representations, rhetoric, and images" to control the perception of Arab people [Said, 2001, p.1]. Orientalism thus helps define a toolset – that may include techniques such as selective reporting, rhetorical devices, and decontextualization – that can be used to analyze bias into news reports.

Similar frameworks have been defined for other studies of systemic bias and have proved useful analytical tools. *War Without Mercy* by John Dower delves into the treatment and perception of Japanese people during World War II [Dower,

1986]. *War Without Mercy* shows how "songs, slogans, propaganda reports, secret documents, Hollywood movies, the mass media and quotes from soldiers, leader and politicians" were used to control the perception of Japanese people in the States [Kitano, 1986]. Dower delves into how "nonhuman or subhuman representation" [Dower, 1986, p.81] and ape-like imagery [Dower, 1986, p.87] were used to show how WWII was a race war. Brooks and Hébert use a similar toolset to analyze racism and sexism, deconstructing media representations of minority (and majority) groups to characterize bias [Brooks and Hébert, n.d.]. Both of these studies effectively use parallel frameworks to Said – with revealing results.

2.2 Orientalism in American Media

Studies have shown there is clear Orientalist bias in mainstream US reporting on Palestine. In *The Israel Lobby*, Mearsheimer and Walt argue, "The American media's coverage of Israel tends to be strongly biased in Israel's favor" [Mearsheimer and Walt, 2007, p.169]. The authors claim there is intentional and organized support for Israel in the US – driven by formal and informal groups that influence media, politics, and news. The bias in American news coverage is in part due to these groups' concentrated effort to intentionally spread pro-Israel sentiments.

In *Blaming the Victims: Spurious Scholarship and the Palestinian Question*, Edward Said and Noam Chomsky comment on bias in news reports, especially with regard to discussion of Palestinian resistance. In Chomsky's chapter "Middle East Terrorism and the American Ideological System," he discusses the sanitization of news about violence in Israel and Palestine, frequently citing the *New York Times* and criticizing its blind esteem for Israelis and unfounded demonization of Palestinians. "As in the rule of properly sanitized history, Palestinians carry out terrorism, Israelis then retaliate, perhaps too harshly. In the real world, the truth is often rather different" [Chomsky, 2001, p.109]. Chomsky explains Israeli terrorism has rarely been criticized in mainstream media and is often even celebrated. Meanwhile, Palestinians are blamed for instigating attacks without evidence or context provided [Chomsky, 2001, pp.134–136].

In Said's chapter "The Essential Terrorist," he comments on the same Orientalist phenomenon, "Most writing about terrorism is brief, pithy, totally devoid of the scholarly armature of evidence, proof, argument" [Said, 2001, p.150]. News coverage of Palestinian violence is marked by Orientalist stereotype rather than evidence of humanitarian crimes committed.

2.3 Existing Literature on Content Analysis

While many scholars have called attention to patterns of bias against Palestine in American media sources [Zelizer *et al.*, 2002, Bazian, 2015, Mearsheimer and Walt, 2007, Chomsky, 2001, Said, 2001], only a few studies have done large-scale content analysis on bias against Palestine. Such technical analyses of Orientalism may be sparse since commentary sympathetic to the Palestinian struggle frequently results in intense backlash [Roy, 2010, p.23]. Sara Roy comments on such censorship in academia, "The climate of intimidation and censorship surrounding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, both inside (at all levels of the education hierarchy) and outside the U.S. academy, is real and longstanding" [Roy, 2010, p.24]. As a result, many content analysis studies are performed by advocacy groups and non-profit organizations.

One example is a report published by a Canadian research lab titled "50 Years of Occupation: A Sentiment and N-Gram Analysis of U.S. Mainstream Media Coverage of the Israeli Occupation of Palestine" [Siddiqui and Zaheer, 2018]. In this report, the authors used natural language processing (a machine learning technique) to analyze the diction in headlines of five major American newspapers from 1967 to 2017 (including the *New York Times*) [Siddiqui and Zaheer, 2018]. In this fifty-year period, the authors found "over four times more Israeli centric headlines than Palestinian ones" [Siddiqui and Zaheer, 2018, p.2]. In addition, they discovered that these news sources were 2.5 times more likely to reference Israeli sources than Palestinian sources [Siddiqui and Zaheer, 2018, p.3]. They performed a computational analysis to identify common combinations of key words and phrases. Their analysis revealed Israeli-centric "headlines were statistically more significantly positive than Palestinian ones by for all publications, except for the *Washington Post*" [Siddiqui and Zaheer, 2018, p.2]. Their findings serve as quantitative evidence of patterns of bias, which could be postulated about from qualitative observation of news coverage during the same periods.

Another important analytical work was done by American activist Alison Weir's non-profit organization *If Americans Knew*. The organization's report, titled "Off the Charts: Accuracy in Reporting of Israel/Palestine, *The New York Times*," compares mentions of Palestinian and Israeli deaths in *New York Times* articles during two periods in the Second Intifada. Overall, the report finds that from September 2000 to 2001, "The *Times* reported Israeli deaths at a rate 2.8 times higher than Palestinian deaths" [Weir, 2005, p.1]. In addition, only 18% of Palestinian children's deaths were reported, while 125% of Israeli children's deaths were reported (there were multiple references to the same deaths) [Weir, 2005, p.11]. From January through December 2004, Israeli deaths were reported at 3.6 times the rate of Palestinian deaths, and Israeli children's deaths were reported at 7.3 times the rate of Palestinian children's deaths (even though "22 times more

Palestinian children were killed than Israeli children" during this period) [Weir, 2005, p.1]. The report includes a brief analysis of the impact of such disproportionate reporting,

> The *Times* reported Palestinian deaths along a curve that largely replicated the Israeli death count, despite the fact that the curve for actual Palestinian deaths was both considerably different and far higher than the Israeli curve... Such reporting gives readers a substantially incorrect impression of the conflict [Weir, 2005, p.5].

While the report is specific – focusing on quantitative reports of death statistics – rather than bias presented through rhetoric, its findings are both concise and revealing.

The organization *Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting* (FAIR) has also completed a number of reports on bias in American news. In one study from the Second Intifada, the authors found the word "retaliation" was used 79% of the time to describe Israeli violence towards Palestinians, while only 9% of the time to characterize Palestinian violence towards Israelis [FAIR, 2002]. The word "retaliation" carries implicit motive, and its disproportionate use to describe Israeli violence baselessly implies that Israelis were more justified in their attacks than Palestinians. FAIR conducted a number of other short reports on pro-Israeli bias, including a 2009 report revealing only 2% of American news organizations had referred to the Israeli occupation using the phrase "occupied territories" and a 2002 report exposing NPR for reporting on Israeli casualties more than Palestinian casualties [Ackerman, 2009, Abunimah, 2002].

Additionally, some academic reports have provided analysis of bias surrounding coverage of specific events in the history of the Israeli occupation of Palestine. Caballero analyzed the *New York Times* reporting on Operation Cast Lead, "the 3-week Israeli military assault on the Gaza Strip that resulted in the death of nearly 1,400 Palestinians and 13 Israelis" [Caballero, 2010, p.iv]. He focused on discrepancies in death statistics, frequently referencing Weir's *If Americans Knew* report [Caballero, 2010]. Aziz analyzed bias in coverage of the Lebanon war specifically in 2006 [Aziz, 2007]. Al-Sarraj and Lubbad used supervised machine learning to identify pro-Israeli bias in reporting mainly on the Gaza War in summer 2014 [Al-Sarraj and Lubbad, 2018].

2.4   Conflicting Perspectives on the Evolution of Bias

It is clear from the secondary literature that there is bias against Palestine in American news coverage. However, it remains unclear how this bias is evolving. A few scholars have commented on changes in public opinion, but none have directly traced a change in news coverage. In "Reflections on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in U.S. Public Discourse: Legitimizing Dissent," Sara Roy – Harvard scholar in Middle Eastern Studies – comments on an increase in public sympathy for Palestine and criticism of Israel since the Second Intifada [Roy, 2010]. She argues the increase has been sparked by a number of factors, such as prominent Israeli and American figures denouncing Israeli humanitarian crimes and films that show a more realistic portrayal of Israeli occupation [Roy, 2010, pp.25–27]. She explains these factors "have been essential to creating a substantive foundation for intellectual and political challenges of the mainstream discourse on Israel/Palestine; they have also given U.S. Jews permission to criticize Israel" [Roy, 2010, p.25]. In general, Roy believes Americans have grown more sympathetic to the Palestinian cause and more critical of Israeli actions since the First Intifada.

While Roy argues public opinion has leaned in favor of Palestine since the Second Intifada, other literature poses contradictory arguments. In *The Hundred Years' War on Palestine*, Rashid Khalidi – a professor of Middle Eastern Studies at Columbia University– argues that public opinion towards Palestine was more positive during the First Intifada. While Khalidi criticizes bias in news coverage of the First Intifada, he comments that "its unifying effect and largely successful avoidance of firearms and explosives... helped to make its appeal widely heard internationally, leading to a profound and lasting positive impact on both Israeli and world public opinion" [Khalidi, 2021, p.74]. During the Second Intifada, Khalidi argues public opinion of Palestine took an overwhelmingly negative turn:

> In stark contrast to the first, the Second Intifada constituted a major setback for the Palestinian national movement...With horrifying scenes of recurrent suicide bombings transmitting globally (and with this coverage eclipsing that of the much greater violence perpetrated against the Palestinians), Israelis ceased to be seen as oppressors, reverting to the more familiar role of victims of irrational, fanatical tormentors [Khalidi, 2021, pp.214–215].

In a brief mention of news coverage, Khalidi notes disproportionate coverage of Palestinian violence during the Second Intifada and claims it contributed to a decrease in sympathy for Palestinians. These sources leave us with a disjointed and incomplete understanding of the evolution of bias.

2.5   Content Analysis

While there is a body of existing literature that identifies bias against Palestine in US media and performs content analyses, few studies dive into more than superficial statistics [Siddiqui and Zaheer, 2018, FAIR, 2002] and many are specific to isolated events [Caballero, 2010, Aziz, 2007, Al-Sarraj and Lubbad, 2018]. While the literature shows there are discrepancies in the number of reports about death and attacks [Weir, 2005, Caballero, 2010], it for the most part does not address discrepancies in how this reporting is done. In addition, there is no clear consensus on how bias is evolving over time [Khalidi, 2021, Roy, 2010]. These gaps in existing literature necessitate a thorough content analysis that reaches farther than metadata but also spans a period during which a change in bias (or lack thereof) is distinctly identifiable.

I will use content analysis to focus on bias in the language of reporting over two distinct periods. Content analysis allows researchers to analyze larger quantities of material more efficiently [Grimmer and Stewart, 2013, p.2]. Combined with a supporting qualitative analysis, it will allow breadth in my bias analysis of the *New York Times*. My analysis will identify two key features of *New York Times* articles about Israel and Palestine. First, I identify whether actions by Israeli and Palestinian groups are being described in the active and passive voice. For every verb, I identified the perpetrator and recipient of the action (i.e. whether they were a Palestinian or Israeli group or individual). An analysis of voice is common in other studies of bias because the passive voice, which is often discouraged in formal writing, allows the writer to de-emphasize or entirely omit the perpetrator of an action in a sentence [Frazer and Miller, 2008, Söğüt, 2018, Kazenin, 2008]. Second, I classify the objectivity and tone of language – especially that used to report on violence – based on pre-trained natural language processing (NLP) toolkits as well as my own regression model based on a carefully-validated word bank.

I perform my analysis on an archived version of the concretely-annotated *New York Times* [Ferraro *et al.*, 2014]. All my content analysis was performed in Python using state-of-the-art natural language processing libraries on a 16-core Ubuntu 18.04 machine [spacy, n.d., nltk, n.d., scikit-learn, n.d., keras, n.d.]. In order to analyze sentence voice, I utilized part-of-speech tagging and parse tree toolkits from spaCy and NLTK to identify sentence subjects and their associations as well as distinguishing between active and passive voice [Jagota, 2020]. To analyze tone, I used built-in tools to classify associated sentiment of words throughout the corpus of articles on Israel and Palestine. These scores are assigned using the NLTK interface with SentiWordNet – a popular, high-coverage sentiment classification resource that assigns words three scores measuring their positivity, negativity, and objectivity (which "indicates the presence of opinion") [Esuli and Sebastiani, 2007, p.1]. In addition, I sampled 500 articles randomly throughout both periods and blindly tagged key words describing the behavior of Israeli and Palestinian groups and individuals as either violent or nonviolent. This classification produced a word bank I use to train a logistic-regression model augmented with TF-IDF (see Figure 1), closely following methods from Ameisen [2019]. My model had an accuracy of 90.6% and a precision of 80.6%. I used my regression model to classify the violent sentiment of words with an objectivity score less than 1. I have posted my code free and open-source on Github. [1]

While content analysis can be useful, it is never meant to be a substitute for qualitative research. Experts in content analysis expound that the results of any quantitative analysis must be validated with statistics and qualitative measures since they can otherwise be misleading [Grimmer and Stewart, 2013, pp.4–5]. Some studies have noted bias in content analysis studies of Palestine and Israel – since selective methods and unsound analyses can be used to manipulate results in anyone's favor [Kressel, 1987].

To account for this, I take three precautions. First, I use pre-trained, well-tested natural language processing models for the majority of my NLP pipeline [spacy, n.d., nltk, n.d.]. Second, I limit bias during my analysis by using a manually-constructed, data-driven word bank from a representative set of key words tagged blindly. Finally, I follow up my quantitative analysis with a qualitative validation step, analyzing biased articles in each period by hand.

Finally, it is important to contextualize that pre-trained natural language processing models do not provide unbiased metrics. Since they are trained on a corpus of texts that have Orientalist sentiments, the classifiers themselves carry this same anti-Arab, anti-Muslim bias. Studies have found persistent sexist, racist, and Islamophobic bias in highly-used natural language processing toolkits [Abid *et al.*, 2021, Bolukbasi *et al.*, 2016, Bordia and Bowman, 2019, Lu *et al.*, 2020, Nadeem *et al.*, 2020, Shearer *et al.*, 2019, Sheng *et al.*, 2019]. I attempt to reduce the influence of engrained bias in available models in my study. First, I used pre-trained natural language processing toolkits mainly for syntactical parsing (i.e. finding sentence structure). Second, I employ pre-trained sentiment classifiers on individual words only. I do not reveal the subject to the classifier. Third, I train my own model to classify references to violence instead of using pre-trained models. However, these steps alone cannot mitigate bias in these models. As a result, all following content analysis results should be considered in the context of anti-Palestinian bias in artificial intelligence tools, indicating anti-Palestinian bias is likely deeper than these results are capable of measuring.

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[1] https://github.com/hollyjackson/NYT_Content_Analysis
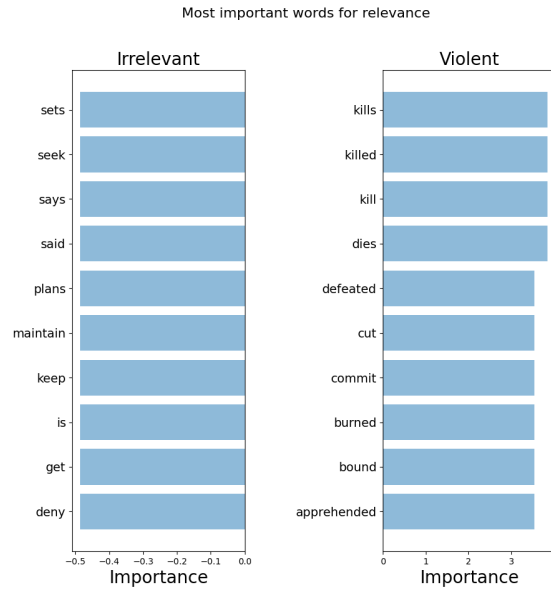
Most important words for relevance

Figure 1: Violent words of top ten importance identified by my logistic regression model.

3 The First Intifada

3.1 Historical Context

The First Intifada began in December 1987 and lasted until September 1993. The Intifada was initially sparked by the killing of four Palestinians by an Israeli army vehicle but quickly grew into a prominent movement [Khalidi, 2021, pp.168–169]. The movement was largely organized by first-time activists enraged by Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza for the past twenty years [Beinin and Hajjar, 2014, pp.8–9]. The Israeli government responded with excessive force to the popular movement. Khalidi describes the consequences:

> From the beginning of the First Intifada to the end of 1996—nine years, including six when the intifada was ongoing—Israeli troops and armed settlers killed 1,422 Palestinians, almost one every day. Of them, 294, or over 20 percent were minors sixteen and under. One hundred and seventy-five Israelis, 86 of them security personnel, were killed by Palestinians during the same period [Khalidi, 2021, p.172].

Most American news coverage (including the *New York Times*) did not reflect the true nature of the movement and its human toll [Khalidi, 2021, p.172].

3.2 Possible Sources of Bias

During the First Intifada, the *New York Times* staff in control of reporting on Israel and Palestine generally appeared to have pro-Israel biases. Some of the most frequent contributors on articles relating to Israel and Palestine during the First Intifada were A. M. Rosenthal and Thomas L. Friedman. Mearsheimer and Walt call A. M. Rosenthal one of many "passionate defenders of Israel" [Mearsheimer and Walt, 2007, p.170]. In addition, Rosenthal had a reputation for inaccurate reporting, after his botched reporting of the Genovese incident [Levy, 2014]. Noam Chomsky criticizes flaws in Friedman's reporting, including his obsessive focus on analyzing the effects of suicide bombings by Palestinian groups – despite any evidence of the events in their aftermath – and ignorance of Israeli terrorism against Palestinians [Chomsky, 2001, pp.107–108]. Mearsheimer and Walt also note that Friedman "almost never takes the Palestinians' side or advocates that the United States distance itself from Israel" [Mearsheimer and Walt, 2007, p.170].

During the entirety of the First Intifada, Max Frankel served as executive editor of the *New York Times* – and had final editing privileges on all articles published. Frankel has even admitted his own pro-Israel bias in his memoir:
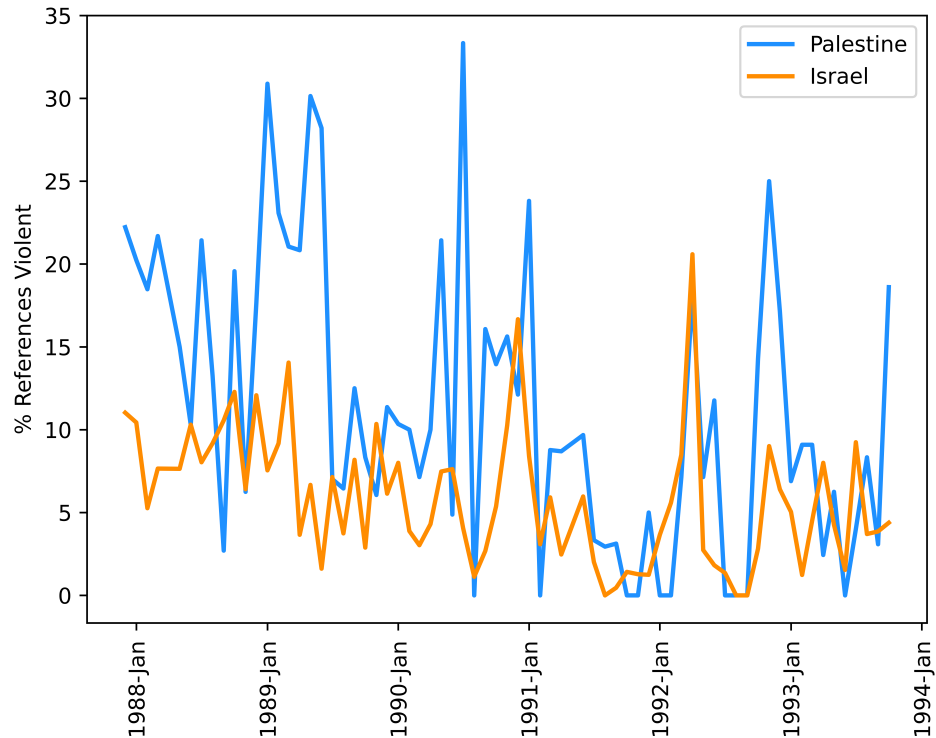
Figure 2: Percent of references to Palestinians and Israelis that used violent language during the First Intifada.

> I was much more deeply devoted to Israel than I dared to assert. . .Fortified by my knowledge of Israel
> and my friendships there, I myself wrote most of our Middle East commentaries. As more Arab than
> Jewish readers recognized, I wrote them from a pro-Israel perspective [Frankel, 1999, pp.401–403],
> cited by [Mearsheimer and Walt, 2007, p.172].

A pro-Israel bias in those reporting on Israel and Palestine is glaring.

3.3   Content Analysis Results

The *New York Times* published over 16,000 articles related to Israel and/or Palestine during the First Intifada. Of these, around 40% reference Palestinian groups or individuals, while around 93% reference Israeli groups or individuals. According to the results of the logistic regression, 11.9% of all references to Palestinians used violent language, while only 5.9% of all references to Israelis used violent language. Figure 2 shows how the percentage of references that used violent language in the *New York Times* evolved over the First Intifada. At the beginning of the period, violent language was used significantly more in references to Palestinians than references to Israelis. These statistics became slightly closer towards the end of the Intifada. It is important to note that Israeli violence was actually significantly higher than Palestinian violence during this period [Khalidi, 2021, Beinin and Hajjar, 2014], so equality of metric does not mean equity of representation in this case.

The *Times* reports referred to Palestinians in the passive voice 15.7% of the time. On the other hand, reports referred to Israelis using the passive voice only 6.4% of the time. This means the Times referred to Palestinians in the passive voice more than twice as often as they did Israelis. Figure 3 shows the tone and objectivity scores of these passive voice references. In addition to being referenced more frequently in the passive voice, references to Palestinians were also generally more negative in tone, and references to Israelis in the passive voice were generally more objective. The use of passive voice de-emphasizes or hides those perpetrating such negative action on Palestinians; this has the rhetorical effect of minimizing the responsibility of Israeli aggressors in causing Palestinian suffering.
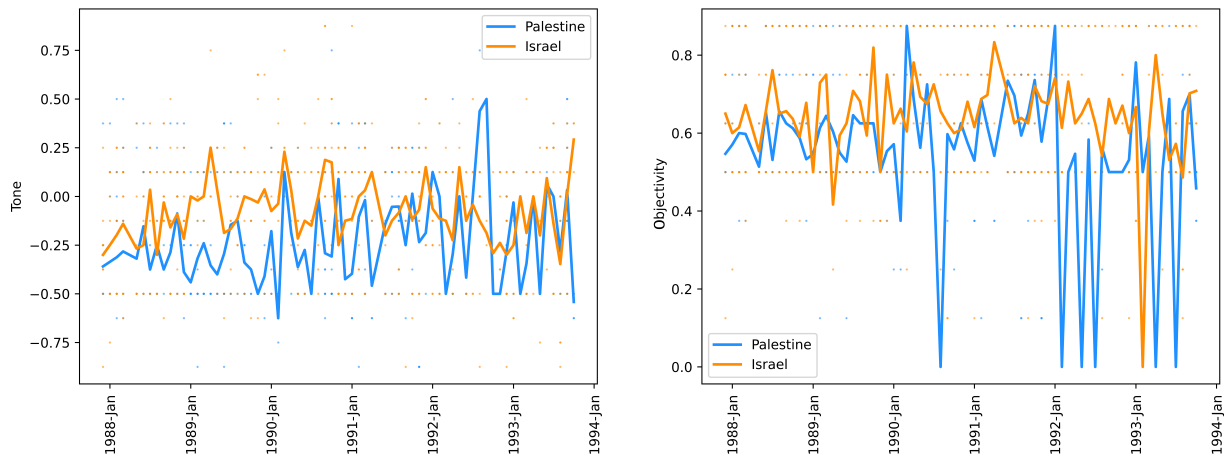
Figure 3: Tone (left) and objectivity (right) of passive voice references to Palestinians and Israelis during the First Intifada. Positive values indicate positive tone, negative values indicate negative tone, and zero values indicate neutrality. More positive objectivity values indicate higher objectivity (i.e. less presence of opinion) in the reference.

3.4   Qualitative Review of Content Analysis Results

A deep dive into articles highlighted by my content analysis confirms the identified bias and reveals additional biases that take less quantifiable forms. An October 1988 article – "Proposals for Peace" – by Thomas L. Friedman contained the highest uses of the active voice with respect to Israeli subjects and the passive voice with respect to Palestinian subjects in the First Intifada. In his article, Friedman proposes a "solution" for peace through the lens of several Israeli individuals (no Palestinian individuals or groups are quoted in the article). Friedman begins by introducing a Jewish grocer Sasson – who he believes "is the key to a Palestinian-Israeli peace settlement" [Friedman, 1988]. Sasson has a clear negative bias against Palestinians. Friedman describes,

> Everything Sasson had learned, smelled and touched his whole life had led him to the conviction that the Arabs would never willingly accept a Jewish state in their midst and that any concessions to the Palestinians would eventually be used to destroy the Jewish state. To emphasize this point, Sasson would hold up the index finger of his right hand and pretend that his left hand was a butcher knife...he would then pretend to chop off bits of his finger until he got down to the knuckle...he would pronounce with great conviction... 'That's what the Palestinians will do to us if we give them a chance.' [Friedman, 1988].

Despite Sasson's violent claims, Friedman proceeds to enthusiastically highlight Sasson's perspective throughout his article.

Meanwhile, Friedman talks of the Palestinian characters in his news story much less sympathetically. Most of the time, he, or Israeli individuals he quotes in his article, refer to Palestinians in the passive voice. For example, when proposing solutions to the conflict, he quotes an Israeli leader who says "'only after Palestinians' rights....have been recognized will they be able to focus on their interests'" and "'the Palestinian government would be granted autonomy'" in his plan [Friedman, 1988]. Neither quote specifies the actor who has the responsibility of recognizing the Palestinians' rights or allowing their government autonomy – although it is clearly that of the Israeli government.

On the other side of the spectrum, a December 1990 article contained the highest uses of the active voice with respect to Palestinians and the passive voice with respect to Israelis in the First Intifada. Despite a high use of the active voice to refer to Palestinians, a qualitative analysis still reveals strong anti-Palestinian sentiment. This qualitative analysis shows anti-Palestinian bias goes far beyond my quantitative results.

The article, titled "Divided Loyalties" by Joel Brinkley, frames Palestinians living in Jordan as violent and depraved. Brinkley makes overarching, inconsistent claims about the beliefs of all Palestinians, such as "Palestinians seem intent on dragging Jordan into political and economic ruin," and "Palestinians are not only openly hostile to the United States, they also want a war" [Brinkley, 1990]. His "evidence" for these claims comes from sporadic quotes from Palestinian sources; it is unclear why he chooses to highlight the individuals he does, and he often qualifies their statements with negative implication. One gratuitous quote Brinkley includes is from a young Palestinian woman: "'We are ready to fight anyone, kill anyone – Israelis, Americans,' says 20-year-old Selwa Farhan, green eyes burning, as she steps off the

practice field" [Brinkley, 1990]. Brinkley makes no attempt to prove Selwa's statement is representative of millions of other Palestinians' beliefs, but he nonetheless treats her quote as a causal link. In addition, the animalistic language he uses to describe Selwa further undermines her out-of-context quote. "Green eyes burning" sounds more reminiscent of the behavior of a predatory animal than a 20-year-old girl [Brinkley, 1990].

Brinkley dehumanizes other Palestinians in his article, using subtle but destructive Orientalist techniques. From cult-favorite movie *American Sniper* to the Samuel Jackson classic *Rules of Engagement*, one common form of Orientalist bias is to erode the humanity and trustworthiness of the seemingly innocent Arab. Brinkley's article shows this same technique pervades even the *New York Times* front page. In his article, Brinkley describes Yousef Hamden, a Palestinian lawyer: "Dressed in a white shirt and gray silk necktie, hair carefully coiffed, he leans forward in a high-back leather chair behind a rosewood desk. But Palestinian rage burns just below his proper establishment surface" [Brinkley, 1990]. Despite his stately appearance, Hamden still "burns" with rage [Brinkley, 1990]. This description reflects a toxic narrative that no Palestinian, no matter how kind or innocent they appear, can be trusted. Scholar Dr. Jack Shaheen contextualizes exactly why this form of media bias is so dangerous in documentary *Reel Bad Arabs*.

> Why does this matter? Because in the end, the massacre of even women and children has been justified and applauded. It's a slaughter, yes. But it's a righteous slaughter. The humanity is not there. And if we cannot see the Arab humanity, what's left? If we feel nothing, if we feel like Arabs are not like us, and not like anyone else, then let's kill them all [Jhally, 2006].

While Shaheen's quote specifically references the bias in American film *Rules of Engagement* – which parallelly demonizes Yemeni protestors who are originally portrayed as innocent and nonthreatening in the film – he implies this Orientalist technique is far-reaching and how similar framing could be used to justify the massacre of others. Brinkley's language communicates this exact message – even the "prosperous. . .Palestinian lawyer" is an insurgent [Brinkley, 1990]. His words chip away at trust in all Palestinians – no matter who they are.

This qualitative analysis not only confirms the bias recorded by my content analysis metrics, but also shows us even articles that do not employ passive voice as a major communicator of bias still convey anti-Palestinian sentiment. My content analysis results scratch the surface of a much deeper chain of anti-Palestinian bias.

3.5   Qualitative Review of Other Sources

A survey of other articles from this period is not shy of blatantly biased headlines; from opinion pieces and approved letters to the editor – inflammatory examples instantly appear. A 1991 letter-to-the-editor "Israel and Arab Neighbors Must Bend a Little; No More Palestine" claims Palestine has not existed since 1948 [Neustadter, 1991]. A 1993 Opinion piece "Israel Has Controlled Little of Palestine" claims Israel has only ever controlled 22 percent of Palestinian land [Klein, 1993]. A 1994 article written by an NYU professor "Retaliation Won't Deter Islamic Terrorists" claims young radicalized Muslim men are incorrigible [Majzlin, 1994]. The arguments in these articles are quickly disproven with a quick cross-reference to a historical source [Beinin and Hajjar, 2014, Khalidi, 2021].

Additionally, articles with Orientalist content hide behind less conspicuous headlines. Throughout the First Intifada, a number of *New York Times* reports were marked by a disproportionate focus on seemingly minor political events in Israel and Palestine. These reports highlighted petty disputes between Palestinian groups or brought up contradiction in Palestinian leaders' logic and strategy in order to frame Palestinians as disorganized and illogical [Hijazi, 1987, 1988, New York Times, 1989]. This is contrary to the true nature of the Intifada which, as Khalidi describes, "was driven by a broad strategic vision and a unified leadership, and it did not exacerbate internal Palestinian divisions" [Khalidi, 2021, p.174]. For example, a 1995 article titled "20 Jailed Arab Women Say No to Israeli Offer of Freedom" is particularly inflammatory [Schmemann, 1995]. As is eventually detailed in the article, readers learn these 20 jailed women refused freedom as part of a coordinated protest of Israel's imprisonment of other Palestinian women [Schmemann, 1995]. But the headline immediately draws doubt to the Palestinian cause, propagating a toxic narrative that – even when offered something as undeniable as freedom – Palestinians are bound to respond irrationally.

4   The Second Intifada

4.1   Historical Context

Worsening conditions in the Occupied Territories and dissatisfaction with the Oslo "peace" accords sparked the Second Intifada in September 2000. The Second Intifada was significantly more deadly than the First [Beinin and Hajjar, 2014]. It lasted until February 2005, and was marked by more disunity in Palestinian leadership [Khalidi, 2021]. In addition, suicide bombings became more common as a Palestinian retaliation tactic [Khalidi, 2021, Beinin and Hajjar, 2014].

However, Israeli violence far exceeded the extent of Palestinian violence, and, in fact, far exceeded the extent of the First Intifada. Khalidi explains,

> The eight years of the Second Intifada left 6,600 dead, an average of 825 per year – about 1,100 Israelis (just under 17 percent) and 4,916 Palestinians, who were killed by Israeli security forces and settlers (over 600 Palestinians were also killed by other Palestinians). . .Israel turned to heavy weapons, including helicopters, tanks, and artillery, producing even higher Palestinian casualties [Khalidi, 2021, p.213].

Despite this disparity in death rate, Palestinians were still scapegoated in American news [Khalidi, 2021, 215–216].

4.2   Possible Sources of Bias

Many of the same reporters who covered the First Intifada (e.g. Serge Schmemann, Joel Greenberg) were frequent contributors to coverage during the Second Intifada as well. However, some newer reporters emerged such as popular Opinion columnist David Brooks. "Today, David Brooks consistently defends Israel's position," claim Mearsheimer and Walt in *The Israel Lobby* [Mearsheimer and Walt, 2007, 170]. David Brooks is not the only *New York Times* reporter Mearsheimer and Walt criticize during the Second Intifada. In fact, they claim, "No one in the *Times*'s stable of regular columnists is a consistent defender of the Palestinians" [Mearsheimer and Walt, 2007, 170]. Despite this, some progress in representation was made; during the Second Intifada, Marwan Bishara – a Palestinian journalist – regularly guest wrote for the *Times* [Al Jazeera, 2021].

4.3   Content Analysis Results

The *New York Times* published over 17,000 articles related to Israel and/or Palestine during the Second Intifada. Of these, around 49% reference Palestinian groups or individuals, while around 93% reference Israeli groups or individuals. According to the results of the logistic regression, 15.9% of all references to Palestinians used violent language, while 11.7% of all references to Israelis used violent language. Figure 4 shows how the percentage of references that used violent language in the *New York Times* evolved over the Second Intifada. The *Times* referenced Palestinians using violent language far more often than they did Israelis throughout the entire period.

While both percentages decreased from the First Intifada, Palestinians were still referred to using the passive voice twice as often as Israelis (12.6% and 6.3%, respectively). References to Israelis in the passive voice had more positive tone and were generally marked to be more objective (see Figure 5).

4.4   Qualitative Review of Content Analysis Results

A qualitative analysis of the article with one of the most biased marks from my content analysis confirms its Orientalist tone. The article, by Douglas Frantz and James Risen, "A Secret Iran-Arafat Connection Is Seen Fueling the Mideast Fire" from March 2002, has the highest uses of the active voice for Israelis and the passive voice for Palestinians in the Second Intifada. In the article, Frantz and Risen postulate about a weapons exchange between Iran and Palestine. However, when discussing accusations that Iran is transporting weapons to Palestine, they rarely directly cite Palestinian individuals. They mainly refer to Palestinian groups in the passive voice and often indeterminately refer to "Palestinian terrorists" [Frantz and Risen, 2002]. In fact, Frantz and Risen both start and end their article with claims endorsing Israeli officials' accusations with positive rhetoric – thus framing the entire article from a pro-Israeli perspective. The first sentence of the article states, "American and Israeli intelligence officials conclude that Yasir Arafat has forged new alliance with Iran that involves shipments of heavy weapons and millions of dollars to Palestinian terrorists" – beginning the report with an assumption of truth to the accusations [Frantz and Risen, 2002]. The article ends explaining, "Secretary Powell and Mr. Bush chastised Mr. Arafat publicly over the shipment, but the United States did not end its relations with the Palestinian leader" [Frantz and Risen, 2002]. This statement also presumes that the shipment truly was a collusive effort – despite Palestinian leaders' firm counterarguments.

One of Frantz and Risen's major concerns in their report is the purported effect of Palestinians receiving Iranian weaponry. These could include "antitank weapons that could neutralize one of Israel's main military advantages over the Palestinians and rockets that could reach most cities in Israel" [Frantz and Risen, 2002]. Frantz and Risen accuse Palestinians of trying to acquire weapons more powerful than "homemade explosives" out of fear they may be able to match Israel's artillery power [Frantz and Risen, 2002]. By expressing concern over this claim, they reveal they do not believe the "conflict" between Israelis and Palestinians should be fairly handled and, in fact, inadvertently provide support for the military domination under which Israel keeps Palestine.
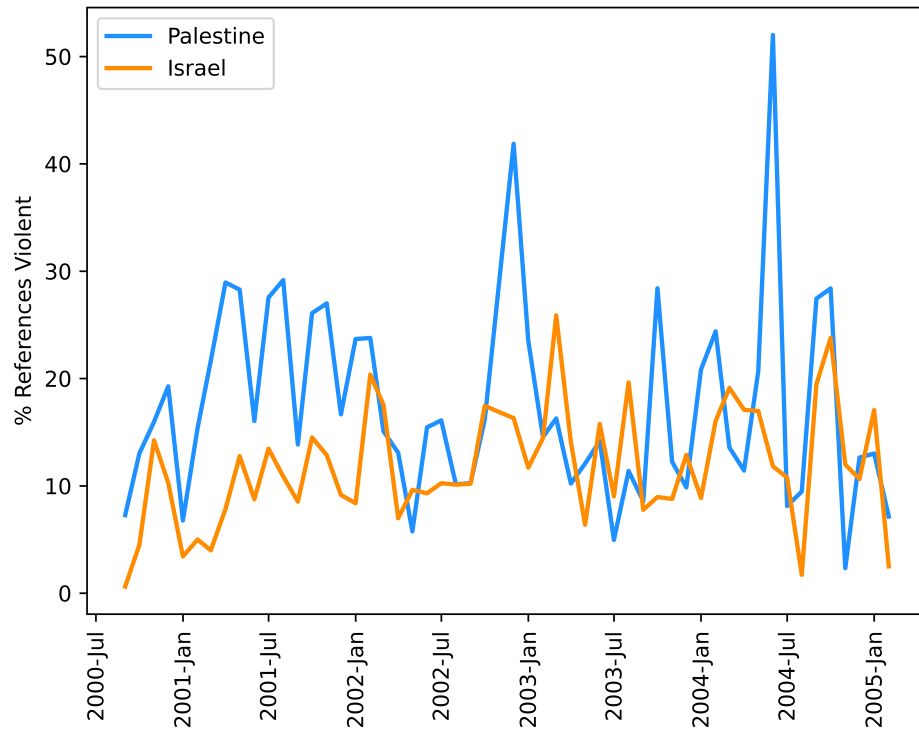
Figure 4: Percent of references to Palestinians and Israelis that used violent language during the Second Intifada.
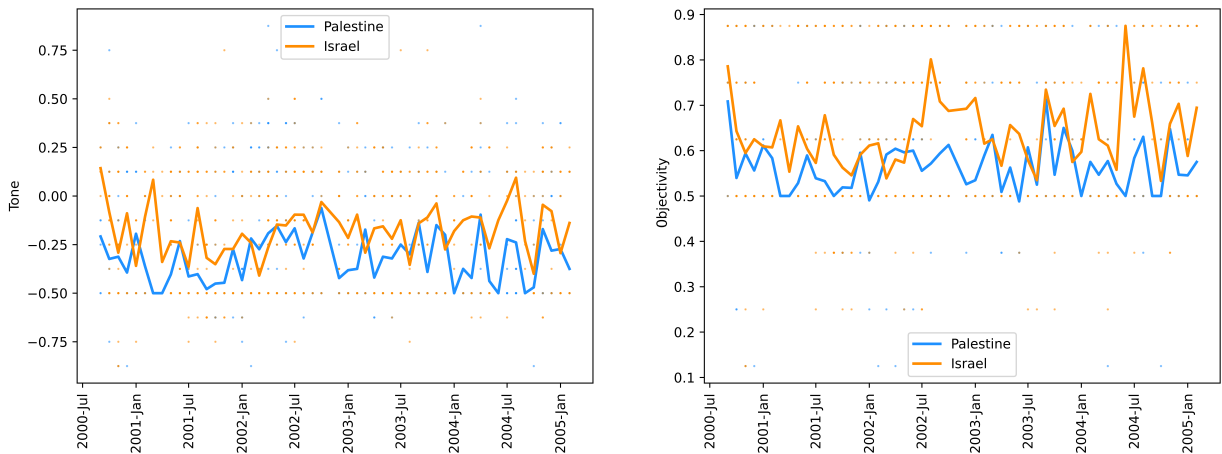

Figure 5: Tone (left) and objectivity (right) of passive voice references to Palestinians and Israelis during the Second Intifada. Positive values indicate positive tone, negative values indicate negative tone, and zero values indicate neutrality. More positive objectivity values indicate higher objectivity (i.e. less presence of opinion) in the reference.

While the bias in Frantz and Risen's articles is clear from both quantitative and qualitative results, even articles that use more active voice to describe Palestinians and more passive voice to describe Israelis teem with anti-Palestinian bias. James Bennet's July 2004 article "Isolated and Angry, Gaza Battles Itself, Too" contains the highest uses of active voice for Palestinians and passive voice for Israelis in the Second Intifada. However, Bennet employs the active voice to highlight disorganization between Palestinian groups and misrepresent Palestinian opinion. Bennet's article focuses on potential political leaders that could rise to power in Gaza after Israeli began its withdrawal [Bennet, 2004]. He clearly favors Muhammad Dalhan; he mentions Dalhan is "favored by Israeli, European and American officials as strong enough to run Gaza" and quotes Dalhan exclusively, practically ignoring the other candidates [Bennet, 2004]. It is clear he hides the opinions of those who dissent with Dalhan – who spouts a pro-Israeli perspective. One woman attempts to question Dahlan during a discussion forum, "The moderators tried to avoid the woman in black, but she would not be denied, seizing the microphone to stridently challenge what she saw as a muddled speech" [Bennet, 2004]. With all the dramatic lead-up to her question, Bennet does not even tell readers what it was; he only includes Dahlan's defensive response. Consequently, Bennet's report presents only one perspective – a pro-Israeli one.

4.5   Qualitative Review of Other Sources

Throughout the Second Intifada, bias persisted in the *New York Times* coverage – masquerading itself behind more innocent headlines. Two examples in particular stand out from this period. David Brooks' 2005 Opinion piece "What Palestinians?" provides a grossly oversimplified analysis [Brooks, 2005]. After arguing Israel has begun to "disengage" from Palestinian affairs without much more than anecdotal evidence, Brooks comments, "The Palestinians richly deserve to be left behind. Even now they expect Israel to allow Palestinian trucks to cross its border, even though both sides know some significant portion will contain bombs designed to kill Jews" [Brooks, 2005]. Brooks' brazen, unsubstantiated accusation that a "significant portion" of Palestinians crossing the border (which is in fact monitored by the Israeli army) want to murder Jews quickly renders his Opinion piece no more than a racist rant.

Another example of biased reporting during the Second Intifada is one of Steven Erlanger's reports – titled "Teenage Suicide Bomber Kills 3 in a Market in Tel Aviv" – which appeared in the *Times* in 2004 [Erlanger, 2004]. Erlanger describes the aftermath of the bombing in dramatic diction, "The scene at the Carmel market was grisly, with scattered cartons, bits of metal and crushed fruit in pools of blood, the pungent sweet odor of guavas mixed with the rusty tang of blood and explosive. . . [a volunteer] reached down for a potato, covered in blood, then discarded it. He stared off into the distance, as if in shock, then slowly ate a sandwich" [Erlanger, 2004]. Erlanger's article is difficult to distinguish from a tragic poem. While his descriptions may have been appropriate for an impassioned speech, it is ridiculous to imagine this appeared as an "objective" report on the third page of the international news.

Despite these glaring examples of bias, the *Times* has featured a number of articles that were more sympathetic to the Palestinian cause, especially during the Second Intifada. These include articles such as John Dugard's 2003 Op-Ed "An Illegal Annexation: Tear down Israel's Wall" and Marwan Bishara's 2003 report on "The Israelization of American policy," both criticizing American media and foreign policy [Dugard, 2003, Bishara, 2003]. Mearsheimer and Walt comment on some of the *Times'* more sympathetic reports, "To its credit, the *New York Times'*s editorials sometimes criticize Israeli policies, and in recent years, the criticism has occasionally been strongly worded. . . Still its treatment of the two sides over the years has not been evenhanded" [Mearsheimer and Walt, 2007, pp.171–172]. Unfortunately, these few positive reports did little to outweigh the pro-Israel bias of the remainder of the *Times'* reporting.

One of the most interesting sources is a 2005 Opinion piece by Daniel Okrent, the Public Editor of the *New York Times* itself. The piece – called "The Hottest Button: How *The Times* Covers Israel and Palestine" – is the *Times'* embarrassing attempt at a self-defense in response to Alison Weir's accusations of selective reporting in "Off the Charts" [Okrent, 2005]. Okrent begins by explaining the *Times'* reporting is well-respected by both Palestinian and Israeli groups – but cites quotes from only two organizations, Partners for Peace and the Committee for Accurate Middle East Reporting in America (which he describes as a "muscular pro-Zionist media monitor") [Okrent, 2005]. He proceeds to complain that no matter the content the *Times* publishes, it is met with an "instant and intense response" from either pro-Palestinian or pro-Israeli supporters [Okrent, 2005]. Next, he excuses missing context in the *Times'* reports, claiming it is not their responsibility to "provide history lessons" [Okrent, 2005]. He also excuses selective reporting and attempts to justify disproportionately focusing on Palestinian violence by saying "terrorists have a horrifying way of influencing news coverage, but it works" [Okrent, 2005]. He concludes by repeating that it is impossible to write objectively – saying "I don't think any of us can be objective about our own claimed objectivity. . . It's only a newspaper. . . It's not reality, but a version of reality" [Okrent, 2005]. Overall, his writing is marked by slippery-slope arguments, overgeneralizations, and reactionary language. In the end, Okrent's analysis of Orientalism serves as just another instantiation of it.

5   A Devolving Perspective of Palestine

Over the First and Second Intifadas, the content analysis results reveal a disproportionate anti-Palestinian sentiment. Between the periods, the nature of the results remains similar with a slight increase in positive representation of Palestinians in the Second Intifada. However, in both periods – of all articles relating to Israel and/or Palestine – less than fifty percent referenced Palestine while over ninety percent of the articles referenced Israel. The Israeli narrative dominates the discourse in both periods. In addition, during both periods, references to Palestinians were greater than 1.5 times as likely to use violent language than references to Israelis (about two times in the First Intifada and about 1.5 times in the Second). Finally, Palestinians were consistently referred to more frequently in the passive voice than Israelis (about 2.5 times more than Israelis in the First Intifada and about two times more than Israelis in the Second Intifada).

The qualitative analysis of the articles additionally confirmed biased content during both periods. In addition, my qualitative analyses began to explore how anti-Palestinian bias in the *New York Times* reaches even further than my content analysis results. While my analyses revealed a number of telling factors, there are many Orientalist techniques – such as decontextualization and selective reporting – that even state-of-the-art content analysis methods cannot yet identify.

During the Second Intifada, there was an increase in the diversity of the writing staff at the *New York Times*. Unlike the First Intifada, the *Times* had a reporter of Palestinian descent as a regular guest writer. However, the overall panel still had a lot of authors with known biases, and many of the reporters stayed at the *Times* between both Intifadas.

While the content analysis may show a slight improvement in representation of Palestinians, considering the historical context of the periods negates any positive progress. While casualty statistics do not provide a wholly reflective perspective, the difference in casualty numbers between the periods is striking. Overall casualties (both Palestinian and Israeli) during the Second Intifada exceeded the First Intifada by over 4.6 times [Khalidi, 2021, 172, 213]. Despite this increase, there were still hundreds more Palestinian casualties during the First Intifada and thousands more Palestinian casualties during the Second Intifada than Israeli casualties during the Second Intifada [Khalidi, 2021, 172, 213]. The magnitude of anti-Palestinian violence increased significantly during the Second Intifada. However, the *Times* reporting of this violence did not increase proportionally. The stagnation of the content results contrasted with the stark increase in violence between the Intifadas suggests that the *Times* reporting became more biased against Palestinians during the Second Intifada.

Consequently, these content analysis results support the theory that American news coverage painted a more negative picture of Palestinians during the Second Intifada than the First, unfortunately at a time when Palestinians may have needed international support the most.

6   Implications

Throughout the Israeli occupation of Palestine, the United States has been a key political player in the region – providing financial and military support to Israel. Analysis of American news coverage is critical to understanding the politics of the Palestinian struggle since news coverage directly and indirectly influences US foreign policy.

The link between news coverage and foreign policy has been widely studied by scholars. First, there is an indirect link from news coverage to foreign policy, through public opinion. While it is very difficult for a single newspaper to individually effect drastic change of public opinion, studies have suggested mass media coverage content could be a good indicator of public opinion [McLeod *et al.*, 1974, Mutz and Soss, 1997, p.432]. On issues of foreign policy, studies have shown news coverage has an even higher impact on US public opinion, since Americans cannot necessarily rely on personal experience to inform their opinions [Soroka, 2003]. Soroka claims, "Mass media content is the most likely source of over-time changes in individuals' foreign policy preferences" [Soroka, 2003, 28]. While the exact effect of mass media is an active and subjective field of study, scholars agree news coverage to some extent drives public opinion.

Additionally, public opinion has a direct link to foreign policy. This link has been established in much preceding literature [Holsti, 1992, Monroe, 1979, Page, 1994], including quantitative analyses, such as one by Page and Shapiro which finds "a great deal of congruence between changes in policy and changes in [public] opinion" [Page and Shapiro, 1993, p.177]. Intuitively, a democratic government (like the US government) ideally is responsive to issues of public opinion, so changes to public opinion will directly influence foreign policy [Soroka, 2003]. This establishes an indirect chain between news coverage, public opinion, and foreign policy.

One excellent example of this connection is "Vietnam syndrome." Vietnam syndrome was popularized by Ronald Reagan during the Vietnam War to explain the powerful effect negative reporting by major American news outlets

on the war had on American public opinion [Giovannini, 2020]. During the Vietnam War, reporters traveled with the military and recorded violent front-line footage [Aday, 2014, p.6]. The strong anti-war sentiment propagated in the news had an overwhelming effect on public opinion that put political pressure on the American government to withdraw from Vietnam [Giovannini, 2020]. Consequently, since the Vietnam War, the US government has placed obstacles to such forms of journalism [Aday, 2014, p.6], which underscores the significance of its effects on policy.

Second, news coverage has also been directly linked to foreign policy. Extensive study of the CNN effect – the theory that television news strongly influences foreign policy – shows this direct link [Livingston, 1997, Robinson, 2013, Aday, 2014, p.9]. Studies of the CNN effect claim reporting with an implicit political agenda induces a "perceived public opinion" policymakers feel obligated to address, even if it is not reflective of true public perspectives [Gilboa, 2005, Livingston and Eachus, 1995, Robinson, 1999, Bahador, 2007, pp.48–50].

These connections from a wide body of existing literature strongly suggest that the news influences how Americans perceive the Palestinian struggle. Americans' perspectives then determine if they will hold their politicians accountable for pro-Israel foreign policy. Finally the news induces a perceived public opinion that influences foreign policy regardless of the true American public opinion. American news coverage of Israel and Palestine likely influences American foreign policy in the region both directly and indirectly. Consequently, it is very impactful if news coverage is biased or misleading.

7   Relevance to Current Events

This study finds renewed relevance in light of events in Israel and Palestine during May 2021 (which are actively developing as it is published). Starting May 8, 2021, Israeli forces raided the Al-Aqsa mosque compound and forcibly dispossessed Palestinian families in Sheikh Jarrah – a predominantly Palestinian neighborhood in East Jerusalem [Bishara, 2021]. In addition, Israel has repeatedly bombed the Gaza Strip. Overall, fifty-five Israeli air raids have been perpetrated against Palestinian – destroying business, media offices, and residences [Uras and Siddiqui, 2021]. As of May 16, 2021, almost 200 Palestinians have been killed as a result of these attacks. Uras and Siddiqui of Al Jazeera report, "At least 192 people, including 58 children and 34 women, have been killed in the Gaza Strip since the latest violence began a week ago... Three Palestinian children [are] injured every hour on average" [Uras and Siddiqui, 2021]. In addition, over 30,000 Palestinians have been displaced by the Israeli attacks [Uras and Siddiqui, 2021]. Meanwhile, ten Israelis have died, two of which were children [Uras and Siddiqui, 2021].

In contrast to the true nature of the events, the last week of headlines from the *New York Times* on the raids and airstrikes is marked by ambiguity and bias. Patrick Kingsley and Isabel Kershner write, "More Than 30 Dead in Gaza and Israel as Fighting Quickly Escalates," on May 11, 2021 [Kingsley and Kershner, 2021]. Their article fails to clarify this included 28 Palestinians and two Israelis [Akram and Federman, 2021]. Most headlines refer to recent tragedies as the "Israel-Hamas Fight" or "Gaza Conflict" or "Israeli-Palestinian Strife" – propagating a false narrative that both sides incite equivalent violence or withstand equivalent strife [Abuheweila and Kingsley, 2021, Associated Press, 2021, Yee, 2021]. While the *Times* failed to highlight the deaths of fifty-eight Palestinian children, they made sure to highlight one of the two Israeli children who were killed in a headline: "Gaza Rocket Finds a Rare Gap in Israeli Armor, and a Boy Is Killed" [Kershner, 2021]. These are only a few examples of bias in recent *NYT* reports. As violence continues to unfold, it is more important than ever to be critical of the sources we reference.

Palestinian Foreign Minister Riyad al-Maliki said in a recent interview, "there are no words to describe the horrors our people are enduring...Israel is killing us" [Al Jazeera, 2021]. Meanwhile, the *New York Times* reporting upholds the oppressor and spreads a false perception of the situation. In 2021, the *New York Times* continues its legacy of Palestinian erasure.

8   Conclusion

This study provides a broad overview of the evolution of bias in the *New York Times* coverage of Palestinians and Israelis during the First and Second Intifadas. The content analysis revealed clear patterns of bias against Palestinians in the *Times*' coverage through two main linguistic features: (1) a disproportionate use of the passive voice to refer to negative or violent action perpetrated towards Palestinians and (2) use of more negative and violent rhetoric in reference to Palestinians compared to Israelis. In conjunction with the historical context of the increased violence towards Palestinians in the Second Intifada, the minimal change in content analysis results between the two periods implies an increase in overall anti-Palestinian sentiment in the *Times* news coverage. The *New York Times* is a highly influential newspaper to many Americans – from civilians to government officials – and the sentiment of American news coverage towards Palestine is truly a life-or-death matter since the United States is such a powerful foreign entity

in the region. This paper serves as a case study of how Orientalist bias is pernicious in American news coverage – and is farther-reaching than many may anticipate.

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