

# Embassy of the State of Palestine

The General Delegation of Palestine  
to Australia, Aotearoa New Zealand  
and the Pacific



INTERN POLICY REPORT

Mainstream and Social Media Framing  
of the May 2021 Assault on Palestine:  
Is There a Role for Social Media in  
Palestinian Advocacy?

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## **Table of Contents:**

Introduction	<b>2</b>
Literature Review	<b>2</b>
Methodology	<b>4</b>
Palestine in May 2021	<b>4</b>
Mainstream Media Narratives	<b>5</b>
Media Framing Theory	5
Palestinian Mainstream Media Framing	6
Israeli Mainstream Media Framing	7
Australian Mainstream Media Framing	9
Social Media Narratives	<b>11</b>
The Limitations of Social Media	<b>13</b>
Conclusion	<b>16</b>
References	<b>17</b>

## **Introduction**

Many Australians have never accessed a Palestinian news source. Instead, discourse on the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories is circulated through traditional and social media. Articles and posts on this topic are often rife with terms such as ‘conflict’ and ‘clashes’ that detract from the Palestinian struggle, or almost equally as erroneously, describe conflict as inherent to the region. In May 2021, Israel’s violent colonial expansion into Palestinian territories made international news when Israeli forces launched airstrikes on Gaza that killed at least 256 Palestinians and injured thousands of others. Simultaneously, Palestinians in the Sheikh Jarrah and Silwan regions of East Jerusalem faced forced evictions. Mainstream Palestinian, Israeli and Australian media each framed this assault differently, with Israeli and wider international media demonstrating a strong anti-Palestinian bias. The inaccessibility and vested geopolitical interests of mainstream media make it averse to campaigning against the Israeli occupation of Palestine. In contrast, many believe social media is more capable of amplifying the voices of Palestinians and aiding the peace process. Social media displays a wider range of opinion than mainstream media, however, online advocacy and awareness do not necessarily translate into meaningful change. This report seeks to gain an understanding of what the predominant media narratives surrounding the occupation are; to provide a comparison of the difference in portrayal of the occupation by mainstream and social media; and to strategise how social media can be better used as a tool for education and advocacy.

## **Literature Review**

The Israeli occupation of Palestine has been discussed in both academic literature and traditional media for decades. Literature on media framing theories is extensive, with texts such as Erving Goffman’s book ‘Frame Analysis’ taking centre stage.<sup>1</sup> The application of media framing theory to assess media perceptions of the occupation, is dominated by American perspectives. A notable example is Alkalliny’s study of American news using theoretical frameworks, which found a strong anti-Palestinian bias.<sup>2</sup> She states that coverage of the ‘conflict’ is determined by the

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<sup>1</sup>Erving Goffman, *Frame Analysis : An Essay on the Organization of Experience* (Boston: Northeastern Univ. Press, 1974), 1–45.

<sup>2</sup>Suzan Alkalliny, “Framing of Media Coverage of the Palestinian -Israeli Conflict in CNN and FoxNews,” *International Journal of English Literature and Social Sciences* 2, no. 4 (2017): 161–65, <https://doi.org/10.24001/ijels.2.4.20>.

political context of the state in which the news channels belong to.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, Stawicki analysed the framing of the occupation through three American newspapers, analysing 149 articles using seven identified frames.<sup>4</sup> In an article by Steele titled ‘Palestinian-Arab Media Frames and Stereotypes of Israeli-Jews’ the author performed detailed analysis of three prominent online Palestinian newspapers informed by media frames, an approach which informed my own methodology.<sup>5</sup>

Many sources have assessed Australian perceptions of the occupation of Palestine, and refer to the effects of Australian news websites on public opinion. A Guardian article by Adler states, ‘For Zionists the Australian media is a hot bed of biased, leftwing enmity, for Palestinians the lack of a fair hearing and accurate reporting is a given.’<sup>6</sup> Articles such as these are common and often published surrounding specific incidents in the region, generally providing little quantitative or qualitative analysis. There appears to be a paucity of research analysing the perceptions of Palestine as portrayed by Australian media.

There is an abundance of academic literature directed at understanding social media and its effects, as well as its potential role in activism. A study on Twitter arguments and published in Nature highlighted that ‘Despite all that has already been written about Twitter, there has been scant attention to the nature of political argument we find there.’<sup>7</sup> Foster et al.’s research on ‘Slacktivism’ looks into the collective power of social media. Overall there is room for more research on the intersection of mainstream and social media in the context of the Israeli occupation.

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> Melanie Stawicki, “Framing the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict: A Study of Frames Used by Three American Newspapers” (Graduate Thesis, 2009).

<sup>5</sup> Suzan Alkalliny, “Framing of Media Coverage of the Palestinian -Israeli Conflict in CNN and FoxNews,” *International Journal of English Literature and Social Sciences* 2, no. 4 (2017): 161–65, <https://doi.org/10.24001/ijels.2.4.20>.

<sup>6</sup> Louise Adler, “Why Are Australia and Its Media so Fearful of Debate on Israel’s Treatment of Palestinians?” *The Guardian*, October 9, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/oct/09/why-are-australia-and-its-media-so-fearful-of-debate-on-israels-treatment-of-palestinians>.

<sup>7</sup> Elliott-Maksymowicz, Katarzyna, Alexander Nikolaev, and Douglas Porpora. “How Much Can You Say in a Tweet? An Approach to Political Argumentation on Twitter.” *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications* 8, no. 1 (May 14, 2021). <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-021-00794-x>.

## **Methodology**

This paper employs two key methodological processes; case study research and media analysis. Case study research provides detailed analysis of a specific event within a defined time frame. This report centers around an 11-day Israeli assault on Palestinian territories, a part of the ongoing Nakba. Mainstream media analysis was informed by Steele's journal article, which analysed 30 articles from three Palestinian mainstream media sources and categorised them depending on topic and then media frame. I chose to analyse 30 articles posted during or immediately after the May assault, 10 each from Palestinian, Israeli and Australian mainstream broadcasters. In order to encompass multiple perspectives, each group of 10 was comprised of two groups of five articles representing two prominent media sources. Analysis of key words and language throughout each article allowed me to note the key themes and how they were framed. Analysis of social media posts was then performed through advanced searches. This research posits a small sample size and could be improved with the analysis of a larger data sample.

## **Palestine in May 2021**

In 2021, the illegal and violent Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories is ongoing. On May 10th, Israeli defence forces carried out an 11-day assault on Gaza. According to the UN, Israeli airstrikes killed 256 Palestinians, of which 128 are believed to be civilians, 62 being members of armed groups, and 66 of undetermined identity.<sup>8</sup> Almost 2,000 Palestinians were injured, including more than 600 children and 400 women, with thousands forced to leave their homes to find shelter and access to necessities.<sup>9</sup> Concurrently, Palestinians in the Sheikh Jarrah and Silwan regions of East Jerusalem faced forced evictions and over 29 Palestinians were killed in the wider West Bank including East Jerusalem.<sup>10</sup> This has been described as the deadliest escalation in Gaza in the past 7 years.<sup>11</sup> During May Hamas' armed wing also fired rockets and mortars

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<sup>8</sup> UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, "Occupied Palestinian Territory (OPT): Response to the Escalation in the OPT - Situation Report No. 3: 4-10 June 2021," *Relief Web*, June 10, 2021, <https://reliefweb.int/report/occupied-palestinian-territory/occupied-palestinian-territory-opt-response-escalation-opt-1>.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, "Response to the Escalation in the OPT | Situation Report No. 1 (21-27 May 2021)," May 27, 2021, <https://www.ochaopt.org/content/response-escalation-opt-situation-report-no-1-21-27-may-2021>.

<sup>11</sup> United Nations Security Council, "Senseless Cycle of Bloodshed, Destruction between Israel, Palestinians in Gaza Must Stop Now, Secretary-General Tells Security Council," May 16, 2021, <https://www.un.org/press/en/2021/sc14521.doc.htm>.

directed at Israel, killing 12 Israeli civilians and injuring dozens. Some of these rockets also misfired, landing in Gaza, killing and injuring an unknown number of Palestinian civilians.<sup>12</sup> These events, which I will refer to as the ‘May assault,’ form the basis of the case study for my research.

## **Mainstream Media Narratives**

### **Media Framing Theory**

Assuming that the above information provides an accurate representation of the May 2021 assault on Gaza, we can compare this to a small compilation of mainstream media outputs from prominent Australian, Palestinian and Israeli news sources. As already established, this analysis involved the assessment of 30 articles by analysis of their key words and themes. This analysis was informed by media framing theories pioneered by Goffman in the 1970s,<sup>13</sup> which have been widely developed since then.<sup>14</sup> Framing theories posit that the media, both intentionally and unintentionally act as gatekeepers in providing their audience with a frame of understanding. The media have the ability to do more than provide saliency by choosing what to include or exclude from a story: they define the problems, diagnose the causes, provide moral judgements and suggest remedies for the issue at hand.<sup>15</sup> For example, prominent media outlets accuse Palestinians of ‘inciting violence’ in the same article that Israelis are considered self-defenders.<sup>16</sup> To perform a comparison between mainstream media sources, I have identified five consistent themes across all news outlets analysed: media bias and representation; international involvement; land rights; violence; and historical references. The following section presents a description of how each of these themes are framed in the Palestinian, Israeli and Australian media.

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<sup>12</sup> Human Rights Watch, “Palestinian Rockets in May Killed Civilians in Israel, Gaza,” Human Rights Watch, August 12, 2021, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/08/12/palestinian-rockets-may-killed-civilians-israel-gaza#>.

<sup>13</sup>Goffman, *Frame Analysis*

<sup>14</sup> Robert M. Entman, “Framing: Toward Clarification of a Fractured Paradigm,” *Journal of Communication* 43, no. 4 (December 1, 1993): 51–58, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.1993.tb01304.x>. P52.

Entman provides a definition; ‘To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and to make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, casual interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described.’

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> Alistair Bunkall, “ Hamas Warns Israel Another War Is Inevitable Unless It Ends Occupation of Palestine,” Sky News, October 19, 2021, <https://news.sky.com/story/hamas-warns-israel-another-war-is-inevitable-unless-it-ends-occupation-of-palestine-12437236>.

## **Palestinian Mainstream Media Framing**

To represent Palestinian media sources, I analysed five articles, on the May 2021 assault, from *The Palestine Chronicle* (PC) and *The Electronic Intifada* (EI). Both seek to raise global awareness of the Palestinian struggle and to give a voice to Palestinians, in part to counter Israeli-bias amongst much of mainstream media globally. The *Palestine Chronicle*, founded in 1991, is an online, non-profit, independent newspaper.<sup>17</sup> Similarly, *The Electronic Intifada*, founded in 2001, exists as an independent online news source focused on educating audiences and sharing Palestinian news and opinions.<sup>18</sup>

Media bias was framed as the censoring of Palestinian voices, non-existent academic freedoms, inadequate news coverage of Israeli atrocities, and the erosion of free speech. Terms such as ‘censoring’ and ‘suppression’ were commonly used to refer to the stifling of Palestinian voices and allies.<sup>19</sup> The EI criticised US Senator Ilhan Omar’s ‘both sideism’ when she tweeted that atrocities have been committed by US, Hamas, Israel, Afghanistan and the Taliban. Palestinian news outlets criticised Omar for failing to acknowledge the inequality in the occupation of Palestinian territories.<sup>20</sup> These exhaustive criticisms of media bias suggest that misrepresentations of the occupation are perpetuating a pro-Israeli bias that continues to deny international support to Palestine.

The topic of international involvement was framed to highlight the failings of international law and the importance of global solidarity in supporting Palestine. An article by The EI criticises both the UN and the United States as being ‘active participant[s] in Israel’s crimes.’<sup>21</sup> Articles also focused on exposing Israeli war crimes, and international organisations, such as the Red Cross Committee, which have recognised such crimes.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>17</sup>The Palestine Chronicle, “About the Palestine Chronicle,” Palestine Chronicle, accessed November 2, 2021, <https://www.palestinechronicle.com/about/>.

<sup>18</sup> Ali Abunimah, “About the Electronic Intifada,” The Electronic Intifada, July 9, 2011, <https://electronicintifada.net/content/about-electronic-intifada/10159>.

<sup>19</sup> Rifat Kassis, “Boycott Is a Right and a Duty,” The Electronic Intifada, May 12, 2021, <https://electronicintifada.net/content/boycott-right-and-duty/32981>.

<sup>20</sup> Ali Abunimah, “It’s Time to Change Liberal Discourse about Hamas,” The Electronic Intifada, June 10, 2021, <https://electronicintifada.net/content/its-time-change-liberal-discourse-about-hamas/33376>.

<sup>21</sup> Maureen Clare Murphy, “Stop Punishing Palestinians for Resisting Oppression,” The Electronic Intifada, June 14, 2021, <https://electronicintifada.net/content/stop-punishing-palestinians-resisting-oppression/33246>.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

The topic of land rights was framed around the forced eviction of Palestinians from their homes in Sheikh Jarrah and neighborhoods in East Jerusalem.<sup>23</sup> The PC provided an in-depth explanation of the history of Jewish settlers' acquisition of Palestinian properties, arguing that the occupation as a whole was not the product of a few extremists but a 'state-run project.' Thus, Sheikh Jarrah and the occupation of Palestinian territories is deemed a direct expression of the ethnic cleansing of Palestine by Israeli settlers.<sup>24</sup>

'Violence' in Palestinian sources was framed as excessive and colonial. Articles called out the unequal violence and consequent loss of lives. An article published in the PC stated that 'Israel has once again gone on a killing spree.'<sup>25</sup> It continues to highlight the trauma caused by 'repeated massacres' in Gaza throughout 2006, 2009 and 2014, which non-Palestinian media label as 'conflict' or 'conventional warfare.'<sup>26</sup>

Historically significant terms, such as 'apartheid' and 'ethnic cleansing' appeared frequently throughout the articles analysed for this study, indicating the authors' use of an occupier/coloniser frame of reference. The EI states plainly that 'Israel is a state which has operated a system of apartheid for many decades'<sup>27</sup> and the PC concurs that 'Israeli society is a system of apartheid.'<sup>28</sup> Comparing the occupation to historically oppressive systems helps the audience relate to and understand the significance of the issue.

### **Israeli Mainstream Media Framing**

I chose to analyse five articles each from both *The Jerusalem Post* (JP) and *The Australia/Israel and Jewish Affairs Council* (AIJAC) to exemplify Israeli mainstream media. The JP was founded

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<sup>23</sup> Ramzy Baroud, "Muna Is Palestine, Yakub Is Israel: The Untold Story of Sheikh Jarrah," Palestine Chronicle, May 12, 2021, <https://www.palestinechronicle.com/muna-is-palestine-yakub-is-israel-the-untold-story-of-sheikh-jarrah/>.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> Jamal Juma, "'Operation Guardian of the Walls' Will Not Fix Israel's Apartheid Walls," Palestine Chronicle, May 13, 2021, <https://www.palestinechronicle.com/operation-guardian-of-the-walls-will-not-fix-israels-apartheid-walls/>.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> Nour Khalil AbuShammala, "We Could Be Next," The Electronic Intifada, May 19, 2021, <https://electronicintifada.net/content/we-could-be-next/33101>.

<sup>28</sup> Juma, "'Operation Guardian of the Walls' Will Not Fix Israel's Apartheid Walls,"



in 1932 proclaiming to provide centrist and pluralistic perspectives.<sup>29</sup> AIJAC aims to recognise and address anti-Israel media bias, including racism and antisemitism.

These sources framed media bias as having a significant impact and causing harm to the Israeli community. AIJAC disputes population statistics to assert that international organisations such as Human Rights Watch are ‘ignoring’ the fact that ‘Nearly 2 million [Palestinians] enjoy precisely the same rights of citizenship as their Jewish fellow-Israelis.’<sup>30</sup> In direct opposition to the Palestinian media’s framing of this topic, these sources maintain that Israel is the true victim of the violence, stating ‘All we want is for Israel to be treated the same way any other country would be in this situation.’<sup>31</sup>

International involvement was discussed less than in Palestinian sources, yet still framed as important considering the perceived, widespread ‘demonisation of Israel.’<sup>32</sup> The importance of diplomacy during the May siege was emphasized, as ambassadors were told to ‘pass on strong messages’ whilst Palestinians were blamed for a ‘deterioration in security.’<sup>33</sup> AIJAC also writes that a Human Rights Watch report provides ‘gross distortions’ of international law, arguing that Palestinian claims are unjustified as the occupation is presented as ‘A black-and-white story of the oppressed requiring international support to defeat their criminal Israeli oppressors.’<sup>34</sup>

The topic of land rights was also less prevalent, with authors generally assuming that their readers regarded Palestinian claims to land as illegitimate. AIJAC states that ‘Israel’s concern with its survival as a Jewish homeland and refuge is cynically recast as a sinister plan to dominate and oppress the Palestinians.’<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> The Jerusalem Post, “The Jerusalem Post - about Us,” [www.jpost.com](http://www.jpost.com), accessed November 2, 2021, <https://www.jpost.com/landedpages/aboutus.aspx>.

<sup>30</sup> Judy Maynard, “A ‘Human Rights’ Group Assaults Both Rights and Hopes for Peace,” AIJAC, May 13, 2021, <https://aijac.org.au/op-ed/a-human-rights-group-assaults-both-rights-and-hopes-for-peace/>.

<sup>31</sup> Jamie Hyams, “Provocation and Retaliation at Heart of Gaza War,” AIJAC, May 17, 2021, <https://aijac.org.au/op-ed/provocation-and-retaliation-at-heart-of-gaza-war/>.

<sup>32</sup> Maynard, “A ‘Human Rights’ Group Assaults Both Rights and Hopes for Peace,”

<sup>33</sup> Lahav Harkov, “Ashkenazi Shortens Diplomatic Trip to Korea amid Gaza Rocket Attacks,” The Jerusalem Post, May 11, 2021, <https://www.jpost.com/israel-news/ashkenazi-shortens-diplomatic-trip-to-korea-amid-gaza-border-escalation-667823>.

<sup>34</sup> Ahron Shapiro, “Gross Distortions of HRW Apartheid Slur,” AIJAC, May 13, 2021, <https://aijac.org.au/op-ed/gross-distortions-of-hrw-apartheid-slur/>.

<sup>35</sup> Maynard, “A ‘Human Rights’ Group Assaults Both Rights and Hopes for Peace,”

Violence was framed as only being harmful to Israeli civilians, and its impact on Palestinian civilians was wholly overlooked. Article titles such as ‘IDF strikes more than 130 terrorist targets in the Gaza Strip’ not only collate the terms ‘Gaza’ and ‘terrorist,’ but use instances of violence as a show of strength.<sup>36</sup> It notes the 15 Hamas ‘terrorists’ killed in direct comparison to the seven IDF soldiers injured, leaving the mention of 21 Palestinians (including children) who were killed and 75 injured until later on in the article.<sup>37</sup> Furthermore, the term retaliation is used to justify and legitimise this violence; the same violent attacks that killed at least 256 Palestinians.<sup>38</sup> It praises rockets fired at Hamas headquarters, assuring readers that ‘the operation would last “several days” and would deal a hard blow to Hamas.’<sup>39</sup>

In contrast to the Palestinian media which embraced the use of historical terms such as ‘apartheid’ to describe the occupation, Israeli media emphatically rejected these labels.<sup>40</sup> In an article titled ‘Gross distortions of HRW apartheid slur,’ AIJAC strongly opposed Human Rights Watch’s ‘apartheid slander’ and implies that the ‘historical context’ of the occupation instead demonstrates Israel’s rights to land.<sup>41</sup>

### **Australian Mainstream Media Framing**

To represent the Australian mass media’s perceptions of the occupation, I chose to analyse five articles each, from two prominent Australian news sources: ABC News and Sky News. Whilst generally regarded as providing opposing viewpoints,<sup>42</sup> together, they provide a comprehensive overview of the range of media available to Australian audiences.

In comparison to Palestinian and Israeli media, the Australian media took a less nuanced, more populist approach to the framing of the May assault. This can be attributed to Australia’s political ties with US and the Israeli governments, a failure to acknowledge and understand the

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<sup>36</sup> Anna Ahronheim, “IDF Strikes More than 130 Terrorist Targets in the Gaza Strip,” *The Jerusalem Post Blogs*, May 11, 2021,

<https://www.jpost.com/breaking-news/idf-strikes-more-than-130-terrorist-targets-in-the-gaza-strip-667824>.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, “Occupied Palestinian Territory (OPT): Response to the Escalation in the OPT - Situation Report No. 3: 4-10 June 2021,”

<sup>39</sup> Anna Ahronheim, “IDF Strikes More than 130 Terrorist Targets in the Gaza Strip,”

<sup>40</sup> Maynard, “A ‘Human Rights’ Group Assaults Both Rights and Hopes for Peace,”

<sup>41</sup> Ahron Shapiro, “Gross Distortions of HRW Apartheid Slur,”

<sup>42</sup> ABC News is regarded as center left leaning, and Sky News is understood as more politically right wing.

inequality of the occupation, as well as a lack of formal obligation to support Palestine. Overall, Australian media struggled to produce articles that provided audiences with insight into occupation beyond that of defining it as a ‘conflict’ and describing the violence as two-sided.

The topic of media bias was rarely discussed in the Australian media and thus not framed as an issue. At the time of the May assault, the Australian media was overwhelmingly focused on issues closer to home,<sup>43</sup> with remarkably few articles on the occupation of Palestine.

International involvement in the occupation was framed to praise US involvement in the ceasefire that followed the May assault. An ABC article reduced the ceasefire to a product of American diplomacy, stating that ‘The decision came after heavy US pressure to halt the offensive.’<sup>44</sup> Similarly, a Sky News article centered around President Biden’s point of view, detracting from the acknowledgement of Palestinian oppression and the autonomy of the whole region.<sup>45</sup> Australian mainstream media failed to discuss the occupation as anything beyond a ‘conflict’ being solved by America. ABC and Sky news were reluctant to explicitly support either Israel or Palestine (some demonised both), emphasizing the distance between Australia and the Middle East. This distinction also absolves readers from feeling that their opinions have any effect on the occupation.

The Australian media framed land rights as a sterile and distant disagreement far removed from Australia. Almost every Australian article analysed concluded that peace in the region is inherently unattainable. They ignored solutions or framed them as unsustainable. This was exemplified in a Sky News article where the author was shocked to hear that an Israeli chef was not seeking violent revenge after his restaurant was set alight by ‘Arab-Israeli rioters’.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the Upper Hunter byelection

<sup>44</sup> ABC News, “Gazans Take to the Streets in Celebration after Israel, Hamas Ceasefire Begins,” *ABC News*, May 20, 2021, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-05-21/israel-gaza-conflict-ceasefire-announced/100154602>.

<sup>45</sup> Sky News, “Joe Biden Says Two-State Solution Only Route to Peace as Israel-Hamas Ceasefire Holds,” *Sky News*, May 22, 2021,

<https://news.sky.com/story/joe-biden-says-two-state-solution-only-route-to-peace-as-israel-hamas-ceasefire-holds-12313261>. The article also stated that ‘US President Joe Biden has said a two-state solution is the only answer to resolving the conflict between Israel and the Palestinian people.’

<sup>46</sup> Mark Austin, “Jewish Chef Whose Restaurant Was Torched by Arab-Israeli Rioters ‘Feels No Anger and No Desire for Vengeance,’” *Sky News*, May 18, 2021,

<https://news.sky.com/story/jewish-chef-whose-restaurant-was-torched-by-arab-israeli-rioters-feels-no-anger-and-no-desire-for-vengeance-12310171>.

Lastly, the historically significant language used by the Palestinian and Israeli media was not referred to by Australian media. Instead, sources reverted to language that audiences might perceive as neutral, such as ‘conflict’ and ‘long-running tensions,’ which fail to address the unequal reality of the Israeli occupation of Palestine.<sup>47</sup> Rather than succinctly outlining the Israeli apartheid, an ABC article generalises it as ‘a long history of occupation, oppression and violence’ to ‘the region,’ stating that ‘it's impossible to explain it all in one concise article.’<sup>48</sup> Overall, Australian media’s attempt to use non-biased language is consistently ineffective and only aids the Zionist narrative.

### **Social Media Narratives**

Whilst understanding the frames used by the mainstream media can provide insight into the opinions of media corporations and opinion leaders, analysing social media posts can help grasp how this translates to public opinion. The relationship between social media and activism is ever-evolving and increasingly studied; many perceive social media as being able to circumvent the constraints of mainstream media by giving a direct voice to those impacted by violence. This is echoed by a number of Palestinian activists and diaspora, and should not be overlooked.<sup>49</sup> However, there is room to reassess how social media can be best utilised for social change and the recognition of Palestinian rights, beyond simply spreading awareness online. New terms such as ‘slacktivism,’ ‘armchair activism,’ and ‘hashtag activism’ have been coined to highlight how social media activism often doesn’t result in action beyond the online sphere.<sup>50</sup> ‘Information activism’ has also been used to describe the ‘#MeToo’ and ‘#Blacklivesmatter’ movements, confirming social media’s arguably unmatched power to diffuse information.<sup>51</sup> It should also be acknowledged that ascertaining an overview of the social media response to the May assault is extremely difficult, thus this report attempts to provide a thorough assessment of the response by

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<sup>47</sup>Emily Clark, “Confused about What’s Happening in Israel and the Palestinian Territories? Let’s Catch You Up,” ABC News, May 13, 2021, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-05-14/israel-palestinian-territories-gaza-explained/100134296>.

<sup>48</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>49</sup>Kathryn Lewis, “‘Calling for Justice’: Palestine Rally Draws Hundreds to Parliament House,” The Canberra Times, May 23, 2021, <https://www.canberratimes.com.au/story/7265155/calling-for-justice-palestine-rally-draws-hundreds-to-parliament-house/>.

<sup>50</sup> Mindi D. Foster et al., “Can ‘Slacktivism’ Work? Perceived Power Differences Moderate the Relationship between Social Media Activism and Collective Action Intentions through Positive Affect,” *Cyberpsychology: Journal of Psychosocial Research on Cyberspace* 13, no. 4 (November 7, 2019), <https://doi.org/10.5817/cp2019-4-6>.

<sup>51</sup>*Ibid.*

identifying the most popular twitter posts, and most outspoken and followed instagram accounts, posted during May.

My analysis of Twitter involved searching for the most liked posts which covered the May assault and included the following themes: media bias and representation, international involvement, land rights, violence, and historical references. Twitter consists primarily of individuals expressing their own opinions, with strongly worded arguments coming from all directions. Unsurprisingly, the themes and topics aired were similar to those published in mainstream media, with tweets referencing international law, the lack of global support, unequal media bias, civilian deaths, fears of violence, and the United States' involvement.<sup>52</sup> Verified users, celebrities such as Gal Gadot and politicians such as President Joe Biden all expressed their opinions via Twitter during the May assault. Statements on Twitter were distinctly more forward in their approach to discussing the occupation, and thus the framing of information intensified alongside the language used.<sup>53</sup> There was no clear dominating argument on Twitter, rather hundreds of users trying to get their own individual point across. A common Twitter argument involves a tweet such as, 'Israel continues to flout international law, evict Palestinian families, annex Palestinian land, brutalise and bombard Palestinian communities...'<sup>54</sup> with a slew of comments such as, 'Palestine has sent 337 FUCKING BOMBS in the last 24 hours.'<sup>55</sup> A 'both sides' argument was prevalent, with users arguing that either Palestinians or Israelis are the real victims.<sup>56</sup> Complaints of media bias and references that likened Hamas to the 9/11 attacks were prevalent, often with accompanying videos or cartoons.<sup>57</sup> Below every tweet declaring that 'Israel is breaking international law...' lives a number of angry comments arguing the opposite.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> @MehboobaMufti, 2021, Twitter

<sup>53</sup> Katarzyna Elliott-Maksymowicz, Alexander Nikolaev, and Douglas Porpora, "How Much Can You Say in a Tweet? An Approach to Political Argumentation on Twitter," *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications* 8, no. 1 (May 14, 2021), <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-021-00794-x>. A study by Elliott-Maksymowicz et al, published in *Nature*, into the impact of Twitter's character limit on making effective arguments, found that most users underutilised the 280 character limit and only used single speech acts; thus finding that arguments made on Twitter are generally simplistic in nature.

<sup>54</sup> @MaryLouMcDonald, 2021, Twitter

<sup>55</sup> @Axiolie, 2021, Twitter

<sup>56</sup> @PakadMeriDaali, 2021, Twitter

<sup>57</sup> @UsamaKhilji, 2021, Twitter

<sup>58</sup> @\_kayayem, 2021, Twitter

I also chose to analyse posts on Instagram from accounts that were notably active during the May assault. One of these was the Instagram account @HiddenPalestine. Hidden Palestine has over 148,000 followers and a website, explaining their mission to display Palestinian society, art, culture and peaceful resistance. The site recognises that ‘media outlets around the world have embraced a narrative that solely focuses on either the suffering of Palestinians or their portrayal as violent fundamentalists...It seems that the media has limited Palestine to tragedy and terror.’<sup>59</sup> The account features hundreds of high quality scenic photographs, interspersed during May with protest pictures, videos of destructive airstrikes on Gaza, and public figures using terms such as ‘apartheid’ to explain the occupation. Hidden Palestine also wrote a detailed 6-part series on Sheikh Jarrah.<sup>60</sup> Posts on Hidden Palestine about the occupation continued into June, until the owner of the account announced in July that they had been locked out of the account. After that, Hidden Palestine returned to posting scenic shots with no mention of the occupation.

Other accounts on Instagram, such as @Eye.On.Palestine, @PalestinianYouthMovement and @JewishVoiceforPeace, have been providing educational graphics, tools of resistance, donation links and information surrounding the occupation since their creation. They contributed to the over 1 million posts, since mid March, to the hashtag #SaveSheikhJarrah. With hundreds of thousands of followers each, both these accounts receive a majority of positive and agreeable comments, in stark contrast to any posts made on Twitter. Pro-Israeli Instagram accounts were seemingly less active than major pro-Palestinian accounts during May, yet accounts such as the Israeli Defence Force (@IDF) and @StandWithUs posted infographics that demonized Hamas and dismissed Palestinian concerns.

### **The Limitations of Social Media**

Although social media clearly lends itself to activism and a greater variety of opinions than mainstream media, it has some limitations that should be acknowledged. Palestinian-Australian diaspora spent all of May ‘lobbying, educating, organising, and calling out inadequate responses to the current humanitarian crisis,’ all whilst urging other Australians to show up in support or

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<sup>59</sup> Hidden Palestine, “Mission - Hidden Palestine,” Hidden Palestine, accessed November 2, 2021, <https://hiddenpalestine.com/pages/mission>.

<sup>60</sup> @hiddenpalestine 2021, Instagram. Comments across the account were overwhelmingly supportive, with one user replying, ‘Thank you so much for posting these beautiful images of Sheikh-Jarrah. It has been emotionally taxing to keep up with the news of the ongoing tragedy. It is beautiful to be reminded of the humanity that [is] behind it all...’

share information about the occupation.<sup>61</sup> Whilst thousands of people showed up to vigils across Australia, after coming across local event pages on Instagram or Facebook, the social media response to the May assault was short lived, and ultimately failed to extend beyond the immediate response.<sup>62</sup> Further, the ease of users being able to repost Instagram infographics to their stories, feeds into a cycle of performative activism that creates an illusion of momentum and support. Fox argues that sharing these infographics might merely be a form of weak ‘hashtag activism’ but nonetheless it aids in guiding public opinion.<sup>63</sup> It is perhaps due to fears of being labelled as antisemitic, or a lack of understanding of the occupation which is presented as an extremely complicated topic, that many Australians were less willing to post their own words online in May and instead chose to continually repost the same infographic. There must be a distinction between activism that utilises social media to spread important information and organise collective action against wrongdoings, and the performative activism that arises from the empty sharing of posts and infographics. Foster et al argue that overall ‘Social media activism is ineffective for social change, and instead serves only to make us feel good.’<sup>64</sup> Therefore to combat this, we must refocus activism efforts to center actual and decisive action, as opposed to merely educating and spreading awareness.

### **What Does Real Action Entail?**

This research project has highlighted the limited abilities of social media and mainstream media to effectively advocate for Palestinian rights. Spending valuable time and resources fighting to be heard above the multitude of other social media users for the sole purpose of raising awareness seems like a never ending battle. Thus, real action may no longer be about providing awareness; there are countless reliable, Palestinian resources that provide first hand information on the occupation of Palestine, and Israel’s colonial incursions. We must instead work to identify where pressure must be focused to enact change, and use social media to help redirect resources there.

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<sup>61</sup>Millie Roberts, “How Palestinian Australians Changed the Conversation on Israel in Just a Week,” Junkee, May 18, 2021, <https://junkee.com/palestinian-australian-diaspora/295345>.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>63</sup> Mira Fox, “Are Instagram Infographics Driving the Narrative around the Israeli-Palestinian Crisis?,” The Forward, May 13, 2021, <https://www.google.com/url?q=https://forward.com/culture/469509/instagram-infographics-social-media-influencers-make-israel-gaza-news/&sa=D&source=docs&ust=1635860057234000&usg=AOvVaw1OLihJZCIZWnoGVOeKz1Yf>.

<sup>64</sup>Mindi D. Foster et al., “Can ‘Slacktivism’ Work? Perceived Power Differences Moderate the Relationship between Social Media Activism and Collective Action Intentions through Positive Affect,”

Using social media to provide ‘calls to action’ will force followers to take action beyond the performative activism of empty reposts. There are two key actions, highlighted to me by the General Delegation of Palestine to Australia, New Zealand and the Pacific (GDOP), that I recommend supporting: (1) increasing both the Australian government and citizen’s endorsement of the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement targeting Israel, and (2), the establishment of a strong Palestinian lobby in Australia.

The BDS movement is known for its targeting of consumer boycotts of companies and products that profit from the Israeli occupation of Palestine.<sup>65</sup> Since its creation in 2005, BDS has been gaining worldwide support, yet will not be fully successful in its aims of ending the Israeli occupation until all support for Israeli’s apartheid regime has been completely withdrawn.<sup>66</sup> In a study on Social Media Rhetoric surrounding BDS, Hitchcock found that ‘Even though social media platforms have been useful to many Palestinian and international supporters of BDS, they have not yet helped to orchestrate a protest movement with as much coherence and success as was found in the First Intifada.’<sup>67</sup> Whilst the BDS movement maintains active and action-focused social media accounts, other Palestinian and advocacy accounts and organisations such as the GDOP and @Eye.On.Palestine can, and should, do more to highlight calls to action, as opposed to spreading awareness. This could take the form of explanations of products consumers can boycott and other alternatives, pressuring the Australian government to label goods as manufactured in occupied Palestinian territories, requests for monetary donations and explanations on how to divest in companies that help sustain Israeli apartheid.

The establishment of a Palestinian lobby in Australia is challenging, but necessary. Multiple policy reports written for the GDOP provide greater insight into both Palestinian and Israeli lobbying, with Findell-Aghnatiotis finding five major hurdles to implementing stronger Australian/Arab lobbying.<sup>68</sup> These included the lack of organisational body, lack of funding,

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<sup>65</sup> BDS, “Get Involved, BDS Movement,” [bdsmovement.net](https://bdsmovement.net/get-involved/action-alerts), accessed November 2, 2021, <https://bdsmovement.net/get-involved/action-alerts>.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>67</sup> Jennifer Hitchcock, “Social Media Rhetoric of the Transnational Palestinian-Led Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions Movement,” *Social Media + Society* 2, no. 1 (January 6, 2016): 205630511663436, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305116634367>.

<sup>68</sup> Andrew Findell-Aghnatiotis, “The Efficacy of Lobbying in Australian-Arab Communities in Relation to the Israel-Palestine Conflict” (The General Delegation of Palestine to Australia, New Zealand and the Pacific, May 2015).



weak connections between organisations and youth, reactive nature of action, and the prevailing political and social pro-Israeli bias. Kirupakaran's research for the GDOP also found that 'The Palestinian community and advocacy groups lack resources in terms of capital and manpower to implement strategies similar to Jewish organisations.'<sup>69</sup> A number of these hurdles can be addressed by using social media to organise and publicise events, to bring communities together, and to draw attention to anti-Palestinian bias. This will only become a reality if there is sufficient funding: the lack of funding for Palestinian activism beyond raising awareness is a critical issue that must be addressed through other channels.

## **Conclusion**

Israel's May assault on Palestinian territories attracted international media attention. The common themes of media bias and representation, international involvement, land rights, violence, and historical references were framed significantly differently by Palestinian, Israeli and Australian mainstream media. Israeli and Australian mainstream media displayed a pro-Israeli bias that ignored the unequal reality of the occupation. Analysis of social media found that it could not be more different from mainstream media. Posts were unsophisticated and emotional, and users held unproductive arguments over the same themes as found in the mainstream media. Although it is commonly assumed that social media leads to social and political change, it is important that we still assess how best to utilise social media's strengths (of accessible information, community building, fundraising etc.) to end the occupation of Palestine. Raising awareness must no longer be mistaken for meaningful change; social media should be better employed to further the objectives of the BDS movement and to form and fund advocacy groups to lobby for Palestinian rights. The Israeli occupation of Palestine cannot cease until Palestinians gain the same rights as the rest of the world.

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<sup>69</sup> Thevini Kirupakaran, "Lobbying Strategies Of Australian Jewish Organisations in Regards to the Israel-Palestine Conflict" (The General Delegation of Palestine to Australia, New Zealand and the Pacific, May 2015). p20.

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