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Independent Media and Contemporary Military Doctrines

Governments often take unpopular measures. To minimize the political cost of such measures policy makers may strategically time them to coincide with other newsworthy events, which distract the media and the public. We test this hypothesis using data on the recurrent Israeli-Palestinian conflict. We show that Israeli attacks are more likely to be carried out when the U.S. news are expected to be dominated by important (non-Israel-related) events on the following day. In contrast, we find no evidence of strategic timing for Palestinian attacks.



The role of media in today's conflicts is enormous. Parties to conflicts use propaganda in state-sponsored media and enroll state-sponsored trolls in social media to gain domestic public support for their military campaigns and, more generally, to raise own popularity. Involvement of Russia in Syria and Eastern Ukraine and its coverage on Russia-sponsored TV is a forceful illustration of this. Some most devastating conflicts used state media to enroll paramilitary. For example, Yanagizawa-Drott (2014) estimated that 51,000 perpetrators in Rwandan genocide were persuaded to participate in mass killings by RTLM radio.

Not all the media are under control of parties involved in conflicts. What is the role of independent media during conflicts? It is one thing to use the dependent media to portray one's participation in conflict in a slanted manner; it is another to change one's military strategy in order to improve one's image in the independent media. Do military choose the timing and the weapon for their offences depending on the expectation of how their actions will be portrayed by the independent media? A statement on June 4, 2002, by Major General Moshe Ya'alon, then the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) chief of staff designate and until recently the defense minister of Israel, strongly suggests this is the case for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Mr. Ya'alon said: "This is first and foremost a war of ideology, and as such the media factor, the psychological impact of our actions, is critical. If we understand that a photograph of a tank speaks against us on CNN, we can take this into account in our decision as to whether or not to send in the tank. We schedule helicopter operations for after dark so they cannot be photographed easily. ... Such considerations are already second nature to us. Officers ... must understand that there are strategic media considerations. The tension between the need to destroy a particular building or to use a tank or helicopter, and the manner, in which the world perceives these actions, can

affect the ultimate success or failure of the campaign. Even if we triumph in battle, we can lose in the media and consequently on the ideological plane."

Our recent paper "Attack When the World Is Not Watching? U.S. News and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict" (Durante and Zhuravskaya, 2017) forthcoming in the *Journal of Political Economy* investigates how Israeli military changes the planning of its operations in Gaza and the West Bank in the face of coverage by US media. In particular, we test whether Israeli authorities choose the timing of their attacks strategically to coincide with other newsworthy events so as to minimize the negative impact of their actions on U.S. public opinion by avoiding U.S. media coverage of their military operations, especially when they might lead to civilian casualties.

Methodology

We compile a list of fully exogenous events from forward-looking political and sports calendars in the U.S. between 2001 and 2011 and verify which of these events actually dominate US TV news, leaving little or no time to coverage of other events. Then, we compare the timing of these events to the timing of Israeli attacks on a daily basis.

We also use another, more continuous measure of whether the U.S. media and the public are distracted by other important events, namely the length of top three non-conflict-related news stories during evening news on three U.S. TV networks, where the evening newscasts are limited to 30 minutes, namely ABC, CBS, and NBC. As Eisensee and Stromberg (2007) point out, due to the competition between networks for audience, we can measure the importance of newsworthy events featured on the evening broadcasts because more important stories appear before less important stories, and they are longer.

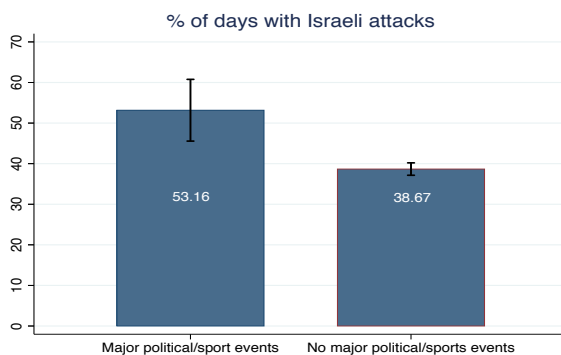


Results

Timing of Israeli attacks and their coverage in US media

We find that both the incidence and the severity of Israeli attacks increased sharply when U.S. news were dominated by other events, such as US primaries and caucuses, general elections, and Presidential inaugurations. The probability that Israel carried out an attack against Palestinians rose to 53.2% one day before these important U.S. events from 38.7% on days that did not coincide with these events (over our observation period of 11 years, which includes heavy fighting during the Second Intifada). Figure 1 illustrates this finding. Attacks which coincide with the major political and sports events are also more deadly; as a consequence, the number of victims of Israeli attacks per day is 1.51 times higher during the days that coincide with major political and sports events compared to days that do not coincide with major events.

Figure 1. IDF attacks and exogenous predictable newsworthy events in the U.S.



Source: Durante and Zhuravskaya, 2017.

Using another measure, the length of top three non-conflict-related news stories during evening news on three U.S. TV networks, we also find that Israeli attacks are significantly more likely to occur and are more deadly when top three non-conflict-related news are longer on the following day.

Does it matter which military operation?

As some military operations are more costly to postpone than others, one should expect that only attacks that are less costly to more be strategically timed to other important events. This is exactly what we find: the timing of special targeted-killing operations, which are considered as extremely urgent by IDF, is not related to U.S. news cycle. In addition, one should expect military operations to be timed to other newsworthy events only when they are likely to generate negative publicity. As negative publicity about the conflict is mainly associated with civilian casualties, and civilian casualties are more likely when the operations are executed with heavy weapons, we find that the relationship between occurrence and severity of Israeli attacks and U.S. newsworthy events on the following day holds only for operations that involve the use of heavy weapons. We also check that the attacks are only timed to predictable newsworthy events.

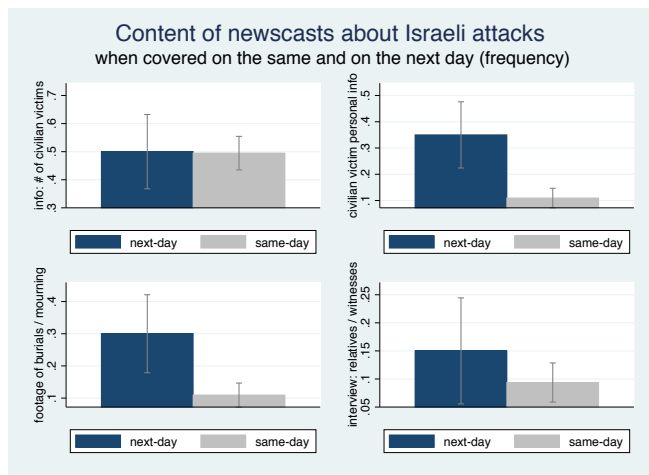
Why tomorrow's coverage matters more?

Israeli attacks get news coverage in U.S. media both on the day of the attack and one day later. Why, then, Israel times its attacks to news pressure on the following day rather than on the same day? To answer this question, we analyzed the content of news broadcasts and found that the type of coverage of Israeli attacks differs substantially between same-day and next-day reports. While the same-day and next-day news stories are equally likely to report information on the number of victims, news stories that appear on the day after the attack are much more likely to present personal stories of civilian victims and include interviews with their relatives or friends. Furthermore, next-day coverage is significantly more likely to include emotionally charged visuals of burial processions and scenes of mourning. Anecdotal evidence suggests that it is



both easier and safer for a foreign journalist to get details of the story on the next day; and that the next day affords an opportunity to produce emotionally charged videos of funerals. Figure 2 illustrates these findings.

Figure 2. Comparison of the content of newscasts about attacks that aired on the same day as an attack and on the day following the attack.



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Since people react more strongly to personal stories than to statistics and facts, and since information transmitted only through words is less likely to be retained than information accompanied by images, it is not surprising that Israel times its attacks to predictable international newsworthy events expected on the following day, as the next-day news stories are more damaging to Israel's public image.

Conclusion

These results have broader implications. Policy makers in other policy domains and other countries may also strategically manipulate the timing of their unpopular actions to coincide with other important events that distract the mass

media and the public. Examples of unpopular policies characterized by suspicious timing abound: Silvio Berlusconi's government passed an emergency decree that freed hundreds of corrupt politicians on July 13, 1994, the day Italy qualified for the FIFA World Cup final. Russian troops stormed into Georgia on August 8, 2008, the opening day of the Beijing Summer Olympics. Political spin-doctors often release potentially harmful information in tandem with other important events. This is exemplified by a notorious statement from the former UK Labour Party's spin doctor, Jo Moore, who, in a leaked memo sent to her superiors on the afternoon of 9/11, said that it was "a very good day to get out anything we want to bury" (see <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/1358985/Sept-11-a-good-day-to-bury-bad-news.html> (accessed on July 7, 2015) and <http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2001/oct/10/uk.Whitehall>, accessed on July 7, 2015).

Overall, policy makers' strategic behavior may undermine the effectiveness of mass media as a watchdog, thus reducing citizens' ability to keep public officials accountable

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Zhuravskaya is Associate editor of the *Journal of Public Economics* and the *Journal of Comparative Economics*, and has served as panel member in the *Economic Policy* in the past. She has a Ph.D. in Economics from Harvard University, and her research fields are political economics, public economics, development economics, and economics of transition.

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