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The Dialectic of Opportunities and Threats and Temporality of Contention: Evidence from the Occupied Territories

EITAN Y. ALIMI

ABSTRACT. Analysis of Palestinian contention in the years leading to the first Intifada illustrates how state action aimed at demobilizing challengers can have the opposite effect. The Palestinian construction of a shared perception of opportunities and threats (a process best thought of as a meaning-laden dialectic of opportunities and threats) can explain this inverse relation between repression and contention. Content analysis of the Palestinian print media suggests that the newspapers' coverage of events in Israel, reflecting deepening domestic Israeli divisions about the continuation of the occupation, framed perceptions of opportunities and threats in a way that called Palestinians to action. This analysis supports the idea that opportunities and threats are not objective features of a political environment, but are, instead, constructed by movement activists.

Keywords: • Contention • Framing process • Intifada • Opportunities
• Repression • Social movement • Threats • Transformative events

Introduction

Is it possible for social movement activists to increase contention in the face of increased repression? How is it that in certain situations state repression aimed at demobilizing challengers produces the opposite effect? For proponents of the resource-mobilization approach to the study of social movements, as articulated by McCarthy and Zald (1977), this possibility would be an anomaly. The rise in state repression, so it is argued, would lower mobilization, for it increases the risk entailed in contention.¹ Still, recent works have shown the opposite, suggesting that an answer to the ebb and flow of contention is to be found in factors and aspects that are not necessarily cost–benefit oriented.

For Rasler (1996), using the case of the Iranian Revolution, the Shiite insurgents' increased contention despite increased repression by the state may be explained

by patterns of action and reaction, moves and countermoves, and contentious dynamics between the regime and its challengers. McAdam's (1999) analysis of the US civil rights movement demonstrates that a major factor responsible for the rise in contention against "Bull" Connor's police force's repression has to do with favorable shifts in the structure of political opportunity. For Kurzman (1996, 2004a, 2004b), the Iranian protesters did not adapt their protests to take advantage of opportunities offered by the monarchy, rather, "it was the protesters' definition, not ours, that motivated them to mobilize" (2004b: 116). Khawaja (1993), analyzing the case of Palestinian contention in the West Bank, suggests that the rise in Palestinian contention despite the threat experienced is explained by the strengthening of collective identity and a sense of belonging caused by the Israeli crackdown. Last, but not least, works by Goldstone and Tilly (2001) and Tilly (2005) advise us to acknowledge the explanatory power of threat as an independent factor, not merely as the flip side of opportunity, and to focus on how both opportunities (measured by concessions) and threats (measured by repression) combine to shape the politics of contention – a mechanism of contention they label "opportunity/threat spirals." The combination of opportunities and threats may yield different repression–contention relations depending on how it concatenates with other mechanisms and processes of contention (for example, intra-factionalism or scale shift) (McAdam et al., 2001).

Heeding Tilly's joint and separate works, this article focuses on how opportunities and threats combine to shape contention as it applies to one scenario of the repression–contention nexus only: repression increases contention. It nevertheless remains connected with both McAdam's and Kurzman's attention to perceptual aspects in accounting for an increase or a decrease of contention. It seeks to add a perceptual layer (framing processes) to how opportunities and threats combine to shape contention by examining how both are collectively perceived and interpreted by movement framers. In doing that, this article is consistent with recent calls in the field of contentious politics to bridge structurally laden and culturally laden approaches (Benford and Snow, 2000; Diani, 1996; Goodwin and Jasper, 2004; Klandermans, 1997; Meyer, 2004; Ryan et al., 2005). It is suggested, however, that bridging of this type can be pursued by focusing on "transformative events" (McAdam and Sewell, 2001). This is so since movement activists are engaged in framing processes regarding their surroundings, processes which are sensitive to events and occurrences, and hence subjected to tampering and reframing. While no causal claim is made in regard to the influence of these interpretive processes and events, both are seen here as important mediators of the relationship between changes in the political conditions and the temporality of contention. It is suggested, then, that we can learn more about the process of how opportunities and threats combine to shape contention when this is examined from the point of view of movement members themselves in a particular historical setting – a process best thought of as the *meaning-laden dialectic of opportunities and threats* (MLDOT).

To illustrate the operation of MLDOT as it applies to the "repression breeds contention" nexus, I will use the case of Palestinian contention in the West Bank and Gaza Strip (that is, the occupied territories or OT) during the years preceding the 1987–92 Palestinian Intifada. As I will try to show, while activists and adherents of the Palestinian movement within the OT indeed experienced an existential threat, as argued by Khawaja (1993), such a threat was mediated by a shared

perception of opportunity: domestic divisions inside the Israeli polity concerning the continuation of the occupation. It is this combination of a shared perception of opportunity and threat that can add to our understanding of the developing Palestinian strategy of contention during the run-up to the Intifada.²

In what follows, I present the theoretical foundations of MLDOT and the rationale and logic of the proposed synthesis of political opportunities and threats, framing processes, and transformative events – how this synthesis provides a framework for analyzing the temporality of contention. I proceed by analyzing the contentious arena, that is, the OT and Israeli polity as shaped after the Israeli occupation of June 1967, focusing on those structures of opportunities and threats faced by the Palestinians in the OT. I then describe the research conducted and how the theoretical and historical discussion guided its strategy. In this part, attention is given to how opportunities and threats and Palestinian public discourse were operationalized and measured. The presentation and discussion of key findings will be followed by concluding remarks.

Temporality of Contention

Attempting to cope with the ebb and flow of contention, the political process model focuses on two interrelated questions. First, why is it that people lend support to social movements in particular historical periods and not others? Second, how can we account for the shift from sporadic, short-term contention to sustained, wide-scoped, and long-term contention? Drawing insights from earlier works in the field, McAdam's *Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency* (1999) further developed the dynamics between authorities and challengers by introducing the model's key variable: the "structure of political opportunity." According to McAdam, wars, political realignments, or prolonged unemployment may be disruptive to the political status quo, resulting in shifts that can facilitate increased political activism by challenging groups. In this case, while contentious politics may *begin* when ordinary people collectively make claims on other people, what *triggers* contentious politics is the effect of changes in the structure of political opportunity on social movement members' definition of these changes as favorable political conditions – what he labels "*cognitive liberation*."³ Thus, if we are to agree with McAdam, changes in the political environment perceived by movement members as conducive would encourage them to trigger contention. Conversely, the shared perception of changes in the political process as a threat would discourage movement members from attempting to increase contention.

The political process model has guided numerous works and efforts to refine and classify changes in the structure of political opportunities: Brockett (1991), Della-Porta (1995), Gamson and Meyer (1996), Kitschelt (1986), Meyer and Minkoff (1997), Rucht (1996), and Tarrow (1998), to name only a few. While the concept of political threat has been fairly neglected, it is nonetheless possible to treat each type of political opportunity as a political threat. Thus, for example, Tarrow (1998) and Meyer (2004) have suggested distinguishing *long-term and general* opportunities from *short-term and issue-actor-specific* opportunities respectively. While *long-term and general* opportunities are about authorities' decisions that may affect a social movement's prospects and strategies of contention, *short-term and issue-actor-specific* opportunities are about authorities' decisions that may relate to a specific issue or actor, or both, such as the decision by Louis XVI to open up the French

political system to broader participation. This distinction can be seen as equivalent to Goldstone and Tilly's (2001) suggestion of a distinction between *repressive threats* (that is, costs of repression if protest is undertaken) and *current threats* (that is, avoiding threats that are currently being experienced or anticipated).

Despite the compelling logic of inquiry, a growing number of works have argued for the need to strengthen further the perceptual aspect in the study of contention, according to which social movement members not only perceive structural changes as conducive, but also come to a shared definition of political opportunity or threat, or both. This focus on the ways movement members fashion a shared understanding of their environment in order to legitimate and motivate their actions has been the thrust of the framing-processes approach (Gamson, 1988, 1992; Gamson and Modigliani, 1989; Ryan, 1991; Snow and Benford, 1988; Snow et al., 1986). While the possible influence of events and occurrences on people's frames and the ensuing process of framing, whether for reinvigorating the predominantly held frame or for engaging in a process of reframing, has been a recurring theme in the study of social movements and contentious politics, the conceptual and empirical integration of the two approaches has tended to be the exception rather than the rule.

Recently, scholars in the field of social movements and contentious politics have been calling for such a conceptual and empirical bridging (Benford and Snow, 2000; Diani, 1996; Goodwin and Jasper, 2004; Kurzman, 2004a, 2004b; McAdam et al., 2001; Meyer, 2004). Yet it seems that despite a shared acknowledgment regarding the importance of bridging the divide, tension between the more culturally laden and the more structurally laden approaches still exists.

Indeed, a critical pending question is whether changes in political conditions are objective features of the world or are ultimately what social movement activists and adherents make of them. McAdam and Sewell (2001) provide a possible middle ground by arguing for the role of events (transformative events) in influencing the temporality of contention. For the authors, transformative events should be conceived as "specific and systematically explicable transformations and rearticulations of the cultural and social structures that were already in operation before the event [becoming] turning points in structural change, concentrated moments of political and cultural creativity" (McAdam and Sewell, 2001: 102). Specifically, events may serve as catalysts by apparently distilling and expressing the potential for contention inherent in a particular environment.

McAdam and Sewell's reluctance to speak of the catalytic role of events in influencing the ebb and flow of contention with greater confidence is explained by a shortcoming they identify in the prevalent conception of framing. They remind us that Snow and Benford's conception of framing, for example, is that of "an activity pursued by groups that already define themselves as engaged in struggle" whereas what is needed for grounding the role of events is an analysis of the "earlier processes of collective interpretation and social construction" (McAdam and Sewell, 2001: 119). They go on to conclude that "there is no single causal pathway to these interpretive breakthroughs, but transformative events would seem to be among the most common mediators of the change/protest relationship" (McAdam and Sewell, 2001: 119).⁴ It follows, then, that only through an analysis of the ways movement framers provide meaning for events can we assess their transformative potential in shaping the outcome of how opportunities and threats are framed – whether they serve as a catalyst by actually projecting the potential for contention in a given political setting.

In short, opportunities and threats are relational, that is, meaningful and tangible, only in relation to one another, depending on the specific political location of social movement members. Moreover, opportunities and threats are meaning-laden concepts, that is, they are perceptual constructs. Movement members and leaders do not react automatically to changes in political conditions, nor do they necessarily perceive repression or concession as a threat or an opportunity, respectively. It may well be the case that movement leaders would frame political conditions as a threat to their situation even in the face of state-sponsored concessions or as an opportunity even in the face of increased state repression. For certain movements operating in nondemocratic, non-liberal political settings and prevented from participating in the political process, as is the case with the Palestinian movement, state concessions such as allowing for the organizing of trade unions says little about the movement's ability to exert influence politically. In like manner, repressive and oppressive measures, whether overt or covert, are an integral part of the daily lives of these movement members and adherents. In this kind of political setting, state repression or concession may not reflect any kind of significant restructuring of existing power relations.

Framing changes in the political environment as an opportunity or as a threat, however, is not entirely a matter of social construction. Events matter! As perceptual constructs, frames, as Ryan (1991) insightfully argues, are vulnerable less to facts than to communication, which, in turn, governs experience. In this case, it is possible that the frame promoted does not necessarily correspond to what has *actually* occurred. Yet, for a frame to remain viable, movement framers have the task of constructing meaning over time and in response to transformative events. These events are transformative not only because they express rearticulations of cultural and social structures, but also because they engender reframing processes.

Before describing how the process of MLDOT was measured in the case of Palestinian contention, it is important to analyze the restructuring of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict resulting from the 1967 War according to those structures of opportunities and threats that the Palestinians in the OT faced. This is so since the decision as to what would count as political opportunities or threats (or both) and, subsequently, what would count as transformative events was contingent upon the historical specificity of the case study at hand.

Delineating the Arena of Contention

Israel's decision to extend its domination over the West Bank and Gaza Strip following the 1967 War brought about a significant change not only in the structure of the deep-rooted conflict, but it also changed its dynamics by restructuring the relationship between the two antagonists. Beginning in June 1967 Israel became the sovereign power, while the Palestinians became an occupied national minority lacking any civic or political rights and deprived of most human rights. Concomitantly, the Palestinians' space for action became, primarily, contingent upon Israel's policy for the OT as implemented mainly through military orders and regulations. This structural change made the political setting of the Israeli polity critical in the sense that it conditioned, to a large extent, the influence of regional and international factors during the time frame under study. The Israeli occupation turned out to be the fulcrum of the would-be Palestinian national-social movement, the one that gradually developed within the OT (Hiltermann, 1991; Taraki, 1990).

The post-1967 contentious arena generated new opportunities and threats from the vantage point of the occupied Palestinians. In spite of various Israeli acts designed to promote Palestinian acquiescence to its rule, the Palestinians experienced multidimensional oppression and repression. For example, Israel acted to strengthen political forces that were considered less threatening to its interest in maintaining its hold on the territories (Ma'oz, 1984) and allowed the formation of workers' unions, voluntary social organizations, the establishment of higher education and media institutions throughout the territories, monetary inflow from outside the OT, and the operation of private voluntary organizations.

At the same time, oppressive and repressive measures included systematic land confiscation, the rapid expansion of Jewish settlements throughout the OT, restrictions on freedom of movement and freedom of expression, and punitive measures against whoever was suspected of resistance activity such as the demolition of houses, deportation, and detention (Tamari, 1988). Additionally, as of the late 1970s, Israel's deepening involvement in Lebanon, as part of its systematic attempt to repress Palestinian national sentiment and the presence of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) in the region, brought about harsher policy measures. Such were Defense Minister Sharon's "strong hand" policy during the early 1980s, the gradual dismissal of several West Bank mayors and the abolition of the Gaza municipality in 1982, the expulsion of the PLO from Lebanon in the summer of 1982, and Rabin's "iron fist" policy of August 1985.

Nonetheless, by deciding to keep its domination over the OT and by allowing numerous Palestinian workers to enter Israel on a daily basis, Israel practically enabled Palestinians to gain first-hand knowledge of their occupier. Unlike Palestinians and Arab people residing outside the contentious arena, the Palestinians in the OT gradually acquired a more sophisticated approach in regard to Israel and the conflict. For Daud Kuttab (1987: 15), a prominent Palestinian journalist, many Palestinians went into Israel on a daily basis, mastered the Hebrew language, and were familiar with the democratic system in general, with Israeli social and political institutions, and with the values and norms upon which Israeli society was founded.

Israel's decision to maintain its hold over the OT was critical in a second, but no less important, sense. The occupation of the territories held the seeds of what has developed into the Israeli stasis, namely, a deepening system-wide domestic crisis concerning the continuation of the military occupation and the future status of the OT. This deepening conflict resulted in a bold challenge to the authority of the political system and the democratic framework as a whole, and was manifested in the rise of political violence, distrust in the system, and unprecedented violation of the rule of law (Alimi, 2003; Barzilai, 1987; Sprinzak, 1995; Wolfsfeld, 1988).

The Research

The research analyzes the processes of Palestinian framing and reframing of potentially transformative events (here referred to as "crisis events"), which expressed and concretized the developing shifts in the Israeli structure of political opportunity. Drawing on Gamson's (1988, 1992; Gamson and Modigliani, 1989) work on media and public discourse, these transformative events were treated as "critical discourse moments" that made the discourse on the issue of the OT's

future status especially visible. I have focused on a sequence of transformative events inside the Israeli polity that were related to one another in a particular historical configuration: the contentious arena as structured following the 1967 military occupation. I was interested in examining how Palestinian framers interpreted and constructed the meaning of these events – whether they were framed as projecting political opportunity or threat and as conditions ripe for triggering contention. In that context, it is important to note that I make no causal claim regarding the relationship between framing and contention, nor do I see a straightforward relationship between talk and action. Like Gamson, I do not see a ready-at-hand and fully shaped political consciousness as a necessary condition for engaging in action: political consciousness of the type that supports participation in contention is forged in the process of contention.⁵

Israeli Structure of Political Opportunity

By “crisis event,” I refer not just to a private or public occurrence, but also to manifestations of an issue culture (the status of the occupied territories) with sociopolitical ramifications both for the political system specifically and for society as a whole. In all, eight Israeli crisis events were chosen for analysis: four right-wing-related crisis events, representing one side of the division (that is, a new division of Israel west to the River Jordan with the establishment of a Palestinian state), and four left-wing-related crisis events representing the other side of the division (that is, full annexation of the territories). The decision to focus on these particular crisis events rested on numerous works by Israeli scholars who share the opinion that these events reflected most markedly the system-wide crisis that Israel has experienced post-1967 (Alimi, 2003; Barzilai, 1987; Sprinzak, 1995; Wolfsfeld, 1988).

Each crisis event (all of which took place between 1974 and 1986) was classified according to its corresponding type of political opportunity/threat structure (Gamson and Meyer, 1996; Tarrow, 1998). As an example of a right-wing-related crisis event, I operationalized the *implementation of collective goals* as challenges to authoritative decisions, as was the case with the violent struggles over attempts to settle Sebastia (1974–75) between the Israeli army and the right-wing movement known as the Block of the Faithful, who had been calling for the expansion of the Jewish presence throughout the OT. As an example of a left-wing-related crisis event, I operationalized *legitimacy and trust* as the strength of state institutions, as was the case with the mass demonstrations initiated by the left-wing Peace Now movement against the war in Lebanon and over the Sabra and Shatilla massacre during 1982. A more detailed description of the crisis events is found in the Appendix.

Measuring the Palestinian Public Discourse

The research relied on West Bank print news media to examine patterns and trends in Palestinian collective perceptions and their construction over the series of Israeli crisis events. The decision to use media discourse for measuring shared perceptions rested also on the tenets and guidelines of the constructionist approach, according to which, media discourse and public discourse are seen as two interacting systems (Gamson and Modigliani, 1989). This is so because media content does not simply sink in, rather, readers take in those things that actively engage them: “they tune in, rather than tune out” (Gamson, 1988: 170). When

analyzing media discourse, Gamson and Modigliani suggest it is useful to focus on the relative prominence of a given media frame that not only suggests what the issue is, but also suggests how to think about the issue and what should be done about it (Gamson and Modigliani, 1989; Snow and Benford, 1988).

For Najjer (1994) and Shinar (1987), who studied the issue of the mass media in the occupied territories, Palestinian print-media institutions, most of which were founded during the early 1970s, became an important asset in the development and propagation of national awareness where topics of liberation and identity were strongly emphasized. They should be seen as a “committed political press that is a tool for liberation” (Najjer, 1994: 215), as embedded in and deeply preoccupied with the sociopolitical setting found in the occupied territories.⁶

Still, no matter how promising the West Bank media is, media discourse is only one forum of public discourse. “Talking politics” involves other sources of information, such as personal experience, face-to-face conversations, and popular wisdom (Gamson, 1992). A second caveat concerns the repressive setting in which the newspapers operated. All newspapers that were allowed to operate experienced restrictions under Israeli military censorship, including limitations on journalists’ ability to travel, seizure of materials, the arresting of journalists, and so on (Falloon, 1986). Nevertheless, various techniques developed for coping with such constraints. For instance, Palestinian editors used translated Israeli articles that expressed what they were trying to promote (Shinar and Rubinstein, 1987). Geographical location was used as another technique. Several newspapers located their offices in East Jerusalem, where censorship regulations were less strict as Israeli law had already been implemented in East Jerusalem by 1968, which meant political instead of military censorship (Hofnung, 1991). Additionally, when a specific newspaper was banned from distribution in the occupied territories, it was often available in East Jerusalem. On such occasions, and as is the case in societies with an oral culture, the latest news was collectively shared in public places and thoroughly discussed (Ayalon, 2000; Longrigg and Stoakes, 1970).

Data, Sampling, and Measurement

West Bank print news media is the only systematic, available source of data that can serve as a cultural time capsule offering a brief glimpse of public discourse during the period under examination. The research involved a content analysis of news articles published during the week following Israeli media attention on a specific crisis event.⁷ The analysis focused on the amount and nature of coverage, as well as on changes during the series of events and on differences among the various newspapers.

The content analysis was based on a sample of newspaper articles that were published in the occupied territories between 1974 and 1986. The news articles were obtained from three daily newspapers: *a-Sha’ab* (*The People*), the Fatah organ *al-Fajr* (*The Dawn*), and *Al-Quds* (*Jerusalem*).⁸ All three newspapers were published and distributed within the territories or East Jerusalem, or both. They were also the most widely distributed and circulated newspapers in the territories, with an overall readership of approximately 35,000 per day (Najjer, 1994). The accessibility of the newspapers was advantageous, coupled with the fact that all three were published on a daily basis with only a few rare exceptions, resulting, for instance, from Israel’s decision to shut down a specific newspaper’s offices. Readership patterns tended to correspond to ideological preferences, although it was not

infrequent, say, for the more moderate and older readers of the pro-Jordanian-oriented *Al-Quds* to exchange it for other newspapers, whether *al-Fajr* or *a-Sha'ab*, which were more popular among the younger generation (Shinar, 1987).

The sampling time frame was set to a week of coverage (that is, seven newspaper issues) following the focusing of Israeli media attention on a specific crisis event, during which I randomly sampled three issues from each newspaper for each crisis event. I decided to focus on the front page since I was trying to analyze “news,” but also, as studied by Shinar and Rubinstein (1987), because the majority of topics dealing with Palestinian–Israeli and West Bank affairs appeared on the front page. The unit of analysis was a combination of an article’s headline, subhead, and first paragraph. This seemed like a reasonable choice given my interest in capturing more than the informative style of headlines. Additionally, unlike opinion articles, news articles tend to convey the main idea in a much more straightforward manner and usually at the beginning of the article.⁹

Articles were selected if they linked, implicitly or explicitly, internal Israeli affairs and Palestinian affairs in the occupied territories. For example, an article from July 1974 dealing with Palestinian threats to strike in response to Israeli right-wing activists’ plan to settle in Jericho was included, yet an article published on the same day that dealt with regional Arab politics was rejected. A total of 188 articles constituted the sample upon which coding was performed.

The analysis of the news content focused on the framing content that the article tried to promote. An analysis of framing requires more than attentiveness to the technical informative items of the text, such as the size of a given article. This type of analysis seeks to identify the syntactical content of utterances and other framing devices¹⁰ and map them onto the general and more prominent properties of the text.¹¹ The results of the coding were quantified for statistical analysis purposes, constituting a coding sheet which comprised a total of 21 coding questions and variables.

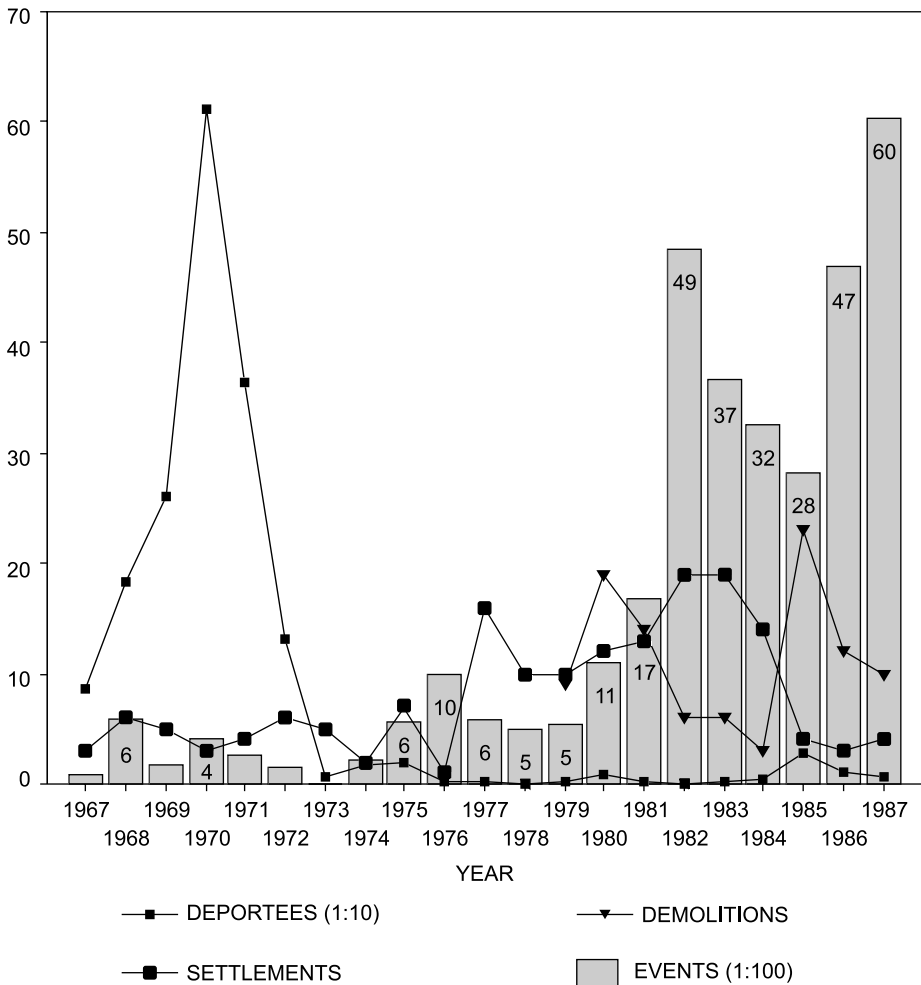
Two independent coders performed a pilot test on 30 randomly selected articles. Both received guidance and specific instructions on the coding process, and went through a training session of coding based on several articles. Following the pilot, several changes, such as adding or omitting categories, were made. The two coders then performed an inter-coder reliability test. Two coding sessions of 50 randomly sampled, different articles for each round, using the Scott’s Pi coefficient as our statistical index, were performed. The results of the raw agreement percentage and the Scott’s Pi for the variables used showed high and acceptable levels of agreement (an agreement percentage of more than 75 percent and an index value of greater than 0.69).

The Findings

The analysis below is divided into two parts. The first part provides an overview of patterns of Israeli repression and Palestinian contention between 1967 and 1987 based on circumstantial evidence. The second part focuses on the ways the Palestinians framed domestic Israeli division as a developing, favorable, political-opportunity structure and as conditions ripe for triggering contention.

A Circumstantial Understanding of Contention

Figure 1 presents a multivariable distribution of various Israeli repressive measures (shown by lines) exerted against Palestinians in the OT together with data on what



Sources: B'tselem Report (1995), Hiltermann (1988), Israel Central Bureau of Statistics (1988), Shalev (1990).

Notes: Sources on public disturbances use the same criteria, which are stone throwing, illegal demonstrations, mounting barricades, distribution of leaflets, terrorist activities, and hoisting PLO flags.

figure 1. Levels of Contention in the Occupied Territories

Israel labeled as Palestinian “public disturbances” (showed by bars). I shall use the term “contentious events” as I find it to be more bias-free and representative of the various types of actions.

Despite the lack of systematic data on additional repressive measures (for example, administrative detention or town arrest) and while being too crude,¹² the overall distribution is revealing for two major reasons. First, no clear pattern exists between the levels and types of repression, on the one hand, and the level of contentious events, on the other. While there seems to be an inverse relationship

between the level of deportees and the level of contentious events, the data also seem to suggest, at least in part, a positive relationship between the level of contentious events and the level of settlement building. Specifically, between 1980 and 1985 changes in the level of settlement building seem consistent with changes in the level of contentious events; an increase in the number of new settlements is not followed by a decrease in the number of contentious events, and vice versa.¹³

How can we account for such a mixed pattern? Following Goldstone and Tilly (2001), it is possible to account for the positive relationship between the level of settlement building and level of contentious events by treating the Israeli settlement policy as a “current threat” (that is, avoiding threats that are currently being experienced or anticipated). This seems consistent with Khawaja’s (1993) argument that this mode of Israeli repression, rather than deportations and house demolitions, resulted in strengthening the Palestinians’ collective identity, sense of belonging, and identification with and commitment to existing movement organizations. It is possible to suggest, further, that it is the combination of concessive and repressive measures which explains this mixed pattern. That is to say, the Palestinians considered Israeli policy changes (for example, the higher levels of foreign income allowed into the OT as of 1981/82) and the significant decrease in house demolitions and deportations (that is, “repressive threat”) as facilitating measures, while at the same time suffering from repression.

However, this explanation falls short of accounting for the inverse relationship between the number of new settlements and the number of contentious events in 1976 and 1977 or between 1985 and 1987. An alternative explanation would be that the political opportunity in the case of the Palestinian movement should be traced not in the structural changes *within* the OT, but, rather, in those political changes and developments unfolding *inside* their occupier’s arena. Thus, despite the “current threats” of repression, the Palestinians had a growing sense of there being an opportunity to act (a shared perception regarding the ripeness of conditions for triggering contention) due to their “reading” of the deepening domestic Israeli divisions concerning the continuation of occupation.

Indeed, and this is the second pattern that can be obtained from the data, there is an interesting relationship between crises in the Israeli polity (for example, the Sebastia settlement attempts of 1974–75, the 1982 mass protest against the war in Lebanon, and the General Security Service affair of May 1986) and level of contentious events in the OT. Taking into consideration the series of crisis events inside Israel reveals an interesting correlation between a given crisis event and the subsequent level of contention between the two contenders. As of 1975–76, seen by various scholars as the beginning of OT-driven Palestinian contentious politics (Ma’oz, 1984; Tamari, 1988),¹⁴ it is possible to see a series of cycles, in which every cycle of contention seems to reach a higher level than the previous one. There is a gradual increase from one cycle to the next, indicating a cumulative pattern.

A Motivational Understanding of Contention

To illustrate the process of MLDOT, the presentation of the findings is divided into three parts: (1) variations in media *attention* by type of Israeli crisis event and over time, (2) variations in the *nature* of media coverage by type of Israeli crisis event and over time, and (3) variations in calls to action by type of Israeli crisis event and over time.

Media Attention on Israeli Crisis Events

Of the 188 articles sampled, 85 (45.2 percent) dealt with Israeli crisis events, 67 (35.6 percent) did not, and 36 (19.2 percent) were considered “unclear,” as they dealt with issues and events that indirectly related to a particular crisis event. Thus, an article dealing with tension between settlers and Palestinians near Nablus due to a settlement attempt seen by the Israeli government as illegal was treated as a “reference.” However, when an article contained no reference to the Israeli government’s view of the settlement attempt, it was treated as “unclear.”

Such a distribution does not tell us a great deal, however. After all, it is plausible that heavier Israeli repression would result in tougher censorship over the newspaper coverage, as was the case during the early 1980s following Defense Minister Sharon’s introduction of heavy repressive measures to diminish the PLO’s presence in the region.

When the amount of attention is examined over time, as shown in Figure 2, it is possible to get a better sense of how media attention varies in relation to Israeli crisis events. The first thing to note is that the number of “unclear” references steadily decreases along the various crisis events. As one moves in time toward the Intifada, the number of articles dealing with crisis events directly and explicitly increases. This pattern is even more marked regarding articles with no reference at all. With the exception of a marked prominence during the Sebastia crisis event, the portion of articles with no reference decreases sharply and steadily.

Revealingly, even during the settlement expansion in 1982 and 1983 and the increase in the number of house demolitions in 1986, two developments that took place under harsher Israeli policies (Sharon’s “heavy hand” and Rabin’s “iron fist”), of the portion of references made to Israeli crisis events, those that can be classified as left-wing related dominate. Indeed, an interesting pattern concerns the shifting ratio between references and lack of references to crisis events according to whether they involve progressive left-wing challenges to the Israeli government or challenges by conservative right-wing groups.

Contrasting references to left-wing-related challenges and right-wing-related challenges reveals a statistically significant difference: references to left-wing

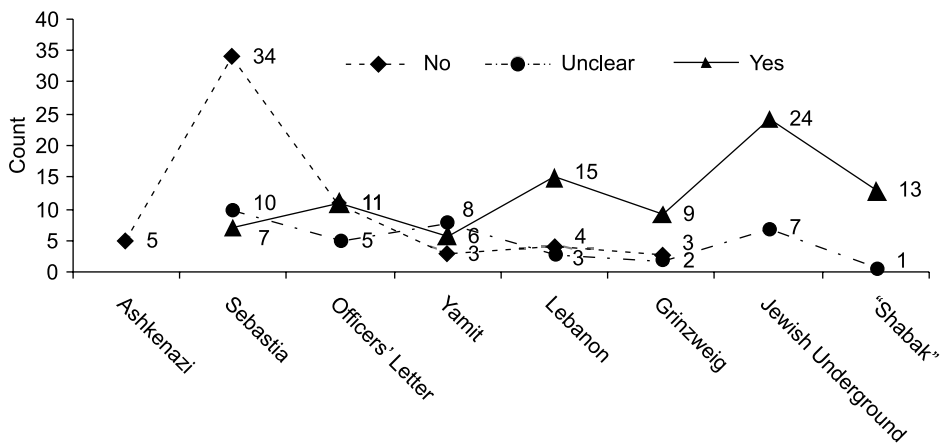


FIGURE 2. *Palestinian Media References to Israeli Crisis Events Over Time*

challenges such as the Officers' Letter, the mass protests against the war in Lebanon, and the public uproar over the involvement of high-ranked public and security officials in the killing of Palestinian hijackers during the Shabak Affair are significantly more frequent than references to right-wing challenges to the Israeli government such as the struggle against the government's decision to evacuate Yamit or the assassination of Grinzwieg by a right-wing-movement supporter in 1983 ($\chi^2 = 67.85$, $p < .05$, and Cramer's $V = .68$).

A shift in this pattern starts to develop following the uncovering of the Jewish Underground. Following both the Jewish Underground and "Shabak" crisis events, the newspapers' coverage is divided between the "reference" and "unclear" categories (the "no reference" category disappears). A possible explanation of this shift would be that the degree of attention gradually increases as we move in time toward the Intifada. Yet, variations in the degree of attention say little about the quality of news, that is, how the Palestinians perceive the changes unfolding inside their occupier's arena, which leads us to the analysis of the nature of the media coverage.

Nature of Media Coverage of Israeli Crisis Events

Throughout the 1980s the Palestinians in the OT, as reflected in the newspapers' coverage, were interested in both types of challenges to the Israeli government. While Israel's sociopolitical scene during the 1970s witnessed the rise of right-wing, noninstitutional political forces calling for the annexation of the OT and the fulfillment of the Greater Israel vision, the ascendancy of left-wing opposition to the government's policy toward the OT engendered a shift in the newspapers' attention. Due in large part to the foundation of Peace Now in 1978 and the growing magnitude of left-wing-related opposition, the newspapers' coverage gradually paid more attention to this type of opposition.

To learn more about variations in media attention, the second step in the analysis focused on the quality of news – the nature of media coverage as it varies by type of Israeli crisis event and over time. At this stage, the content of the news articles was analyzed according to whether it framed domestic Israeli occurrences following a specific crisis event as encouraging or discouraging political developments for the Palestinian situation.

As an example, an article in *a-Sha'ab* (April 29, 1984) is coded as "discouraging," for it seems to emphasize the threat posed by the Jewish Underground to the Palestinians in the following manner:

Headline: "Details on the new Jewish terrorism network."

First Paragraph: "On the arrest of the group that is accused of trying to detonate seven buses in Kalandia refugee camp, Israeli officials say that these attempts are related to what is called 'the Jewish Underground in the West Bank,' which is a serious organization to which Jewish residents of Hebron and a group of people who were evacuated from Yamit belong."

Another article in *a-Sha'ab* (March 8, 1978) is coded as "encouraging," for it seems to stress opposition to the government's settlement policy led by a sector inside Israel seen as sensitive to the Palestinian issue:

Headline: "The Settlement Turbulence."

First Paragraph: "The objection to the settlements goes far beyond the pressure of [the] U.S. administration on Begin's government ... we hear these days of a

sensitive sector among Israelis that condemns the settlement policy, and thinks it is a hindrance to a just peace in the region. The letter sent by 300 reserve military officers and soldiers ... is the ultimate proof of our just cause.”

When the nature of coverage (coded as “prognosis of the Palestinian situation”) is cross-tabulated with a series of crisis events, as can be seen in Figure 3, a statistically significant pattern between left-wing-related and right-wing-related crisis events and “prognosis” framing surfaces.

It is possible to suggest that an “encouraging” framing is more likely to be associated with left-wing-related crisis events and, conversely, a “discouraging” framing is more likely to be associated with right-wing-related crisis events. Whereas during the unprecedented protest campaign led by military officer Ashkenazi against the government’s incompetence following the October 1973 war all the framing is “discouraging,” following the Officers’ Letter of 1978 (marking the foundation of Peace Now) it is evident that an “encouraging” framing gradually dominates – a pattern that becomes even clearer during the mass protests against the Israeli venture in Lebanon.

While it is possible to detect a temporary shift back to a “discouraging” framing following the evacuation of Yamit, the difference between the relative portions of “encouraging” framing and “discouraging” framing is less marked compared to such a difference following the violent struggle over Sebastia. Indeed, even after the uncovering of the Jewish Underground in 1984, unquestionably an anti-Palestinian development inside Israel, and at a time when government policy was

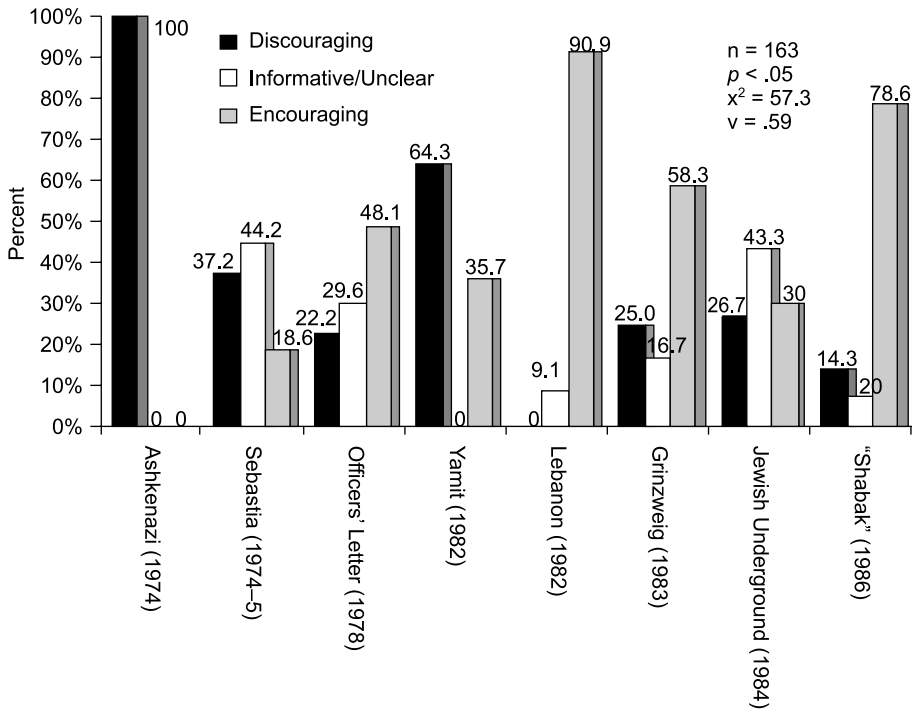


FIGURE 3. *Prognosis of the Palestinian Situation with Reference to Israeli Crisis Events*

supportive of settlement expansion, the newspapers' coverage employed a more informative style.

Israeli Crisis Events and Action Calls

It seems, then, that as reflected in the newspapers' discourse, the Palestinians paid attention to both types of domestic Israeli crisis event. It is also possible to suggest that they gradually came to consider left-wing-related crisis events as more newsworthy and perceived them as more encouraging to their situation. This shared perception became prevalent even in the face of crisis events such as the Jewish Underground or the assassination of Grinzwieg, the type of crisis events that reflected the political agenda of right-wing forces in Israel.

Nevertheless, shifts in the framing of the structure of political opportunities and threats as favorable are not necessarily associated with action framing, nor does discouraging framing necessarily imply submission. Threat or deprivation may well yield a collective perception that action might turn out to be self-defeating. It is possible that in a repressive, high-risk political setting, as is the case of the Palestinians under military occupation, a process of action framing would be insinuating.

Action framing is about a call to arms or rationale for engaging in ameliorative action; action framing is about the reasoning for action, the rationale that provides the motivational impetus for participation, which is contingent upon the development of motivational frames that function as prods to action (Snow and Benford, 1988). One such motivation or rationale for action is a framing that suggests the possibility that conditions are ripe and that change is possible and within reach.

An example of an "encouraging" coding that is not coded as rationalizing action is found in the following excerpt that appeared in *a-Sha'ab* (March 8, 1978) and relates to the political crisis that the Begin-led government experienced over the issue of settlement policy during the Camp David Accord of 1978:

Headline: "Begin's cabinet is in crisis."

Subhead: "Following threats made by both Weitzman and Sharon to resign."

First Paragraph: "Tel-Aviv: Israeli sources reveal that although information concerning Weitzman's threat is not confirmed, it appears this information is true."

This article is coded as "encouraging" since the reader is informed about discord within Begin's right-wing-oriented cabinet, a cabinet known to be supportive of the expansion of Jewish settlements in the occupied territories. Still, the article seems to pay equal attention to both Sharon's position promoting the settlement enterprise and Weitzman's that the settlement policy will be detrimental to the peace initiative with Egypt. Hence, it is coded as "no action" with regard to whether it rationalizes action.

Another article from *Al-Quds*, appearing on July 28, 1974, is coded as "discouraging" for the Palestinians since it describes the relentless attempts by Jewish settlers to build new settlements. It is nonetheless coded as rationalizing action given its emphasis on the urgent need for Palestinian action:

Headline: "Nablus threatens to call on a general strike."

Subhead: "Widespread rage in Bank's cities and villages."

First Paragraph: “It is the extremists’ intention to settle Siluwan, Jericho and Ma’ale Adomim. Nablus – A general strike is expected. The strike will continue until the Jewish settlers [have been] evacuated ... widespread rage amongst residents of Nablus, Jenin, Tul-Karem and Kalkilya in [the] face of the unstoppable provocations by Israeli extremists who trampled Arab’s [*sic*] sentiments and damaged land and properties.”

The results of cross-tabulating the action rationale with the series of crisis events are shown in Figure 4. As with the analysis of the association between “encouraging” framings and left-wing-related events, it is possible to say that “action” framing is more likely to be associated with left-wing-related crisis events and, conversely, “no action” framing is more likely to be associated with right-wing-related crisis events. This pattern is even clearer when comparing the framing following Sebastia and that following Lebanon: whereas following Sebastia “no action” framing clearly dominates, the opposite is true following Lebanon.

Moreover, viewing the overall distribution there seems to be an interesting cumulative pattern. As we move forward in time, that is, along the series of crisis events, the dominance of “no action” framing following right-wing-related crisis events lessens. Specifically, already following the left-wing-related Officers’ Letter crisis event, seen as an encouraging domestic Israeli development (see Figure 3), “action” framing equals “no action” framing. Furthermore, the newspapers’ coverage dealing with the right-wing-related Yamit-evacuation crisis event of April 1982 shows a larger portion of “action” framing. This pattern becomes even more marked pertaining to subsequent right-wing-related crisis events such as the assassination of Grinzweig and the exposure of the Jewish Underground. It is possible to suggest that the ascendancy and growing magnitude of the left-wing

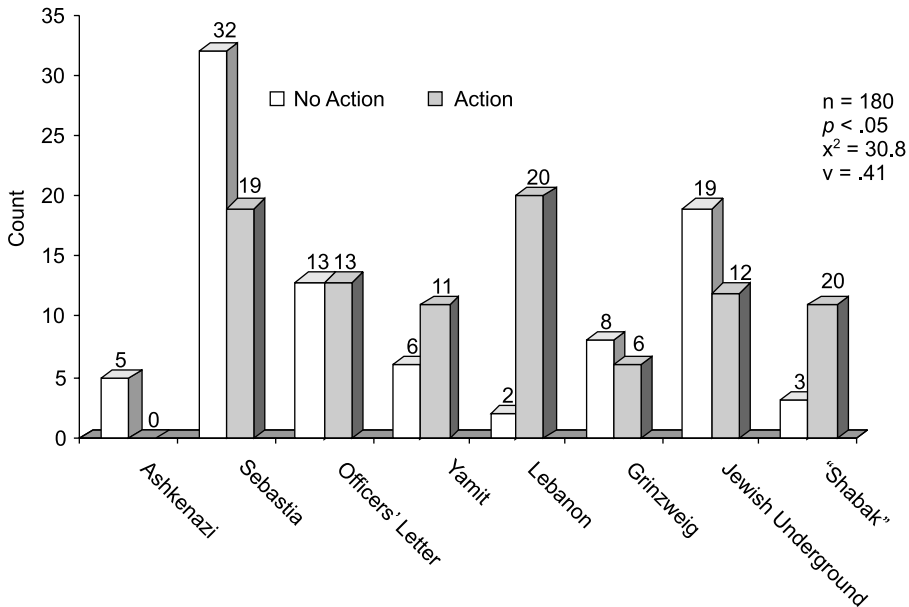


FIGURE 4. Rationalizing Action by Israeli Crisis Events

opposition influenced the perceived ratio between the Palestinians' collective sense of opportunity and threat, and was collectively framed as meriting action.

Conclusions

In this article, I have tried to account for the inverse relationship between state repression and contention – the “repression breeds contention” nexus. Drawing on Goldstone and Tilly's (2001) relational approach to political opportunities and threats, I suggested, first, that we should focus on how both combine to shape contention. I have further sought to add to their framework by arguing that both threats and opportunities are best thought of as perceptual constructs, and that they gain meaning only from the vantage point of a deprived group and the historical specificity in which it is situated. Concomitantly, this suggested that the reliance on circumstantial data on repression and concession as indicators of opportunities and threats might be insufficient; it is likely that movement members would frame political conditions as a threat to their situation even in the face of state-promoted concessions or as an opportunity even in the face of increased state repression. Nonetheless, I suggested, finally, that treating the framing of political conditions as opportunity or as threat is not purely a matter of social construction. As perceptual constructs, framed opportunities and threats are sensitive to potentially transformative events, and hence vulnerable to tampering and reframing – a logic that guided the research. It is here that incorporation of the conceptual and methodological guidelines of the constructionist approach was useful in bridging culturally laden and structurally laden approaches in the field of contentious politics and social movements. I suggested naming this process the “meaning-laden dialectic of opportunities and threats.”

To illustrate the operation of MLDOT, I used the case of Palestinian contention during the years preceding the “first” Intifada. I suggested that it is possible to account for the rise in Palestinian contention, despite Israeli repression, by analyzing the Palestinians' perceived ratio between opportunities and threats. Specifically, I suggested that while the Palestinians were indeed experiencing an existential threat, arguably a major factor in their decision to increase contention, it was, rather, their shared perception of opportunity (domestic divisions in Israeli society concerning the continuation of the occupation) that outbalanced the repression they faced and motivated them to increase contention.

Drawing on a content analysis of Palestinian print-media news articles and analyzing the coverage over a series of Israeli crisis events during the 1970s and 1980s, I have examined the ways Palestinian framers in the OT constructed meaning for these domestic Israeli developments. While inclusion of additional indicators of public discourse may have strengthened the analysis, the findings nonetheless show that the Palestinians gradually became more attentive to and interested in domestic Israeli, left-wing-related occurrences; they gradually perceived domestic Israeli developments as favorable political conditions due to the ascendancy and increased opposition of left-wing political forces to both right-wing forces and the Israeli government; and the perceived changing ratio between a sense of opportunity and threat was collectively framed as providing a motivation for action.

Is MLDOT generic enough to be applied to other conflicts? I would say that it is, yet warn against any attempt at discovering general laws at all cost. All three theoretical aspects (the relational approach to opportunities and threats, the

importance of treating both as meaning-laden concepts, and the role of transformative events) are, in fact, relevant to other case studies. Turning to the case of the Iranian revolutionary movement, for example, it is possible that applying MLDOT would cast light on those transformative events that engendered shifts in the Shiite insurgents' shared perception of the ratio between opportunities and threats despite the increase in casualties (Kurzman, 1996). Similarly, as already pointed out by Oberschall (1973), it is possible that National Liberation Front (FLN) activists were encouraged by the support of leftist parties in metropolitan France despite the heavy crackdown by French forces during the Algerian War of Independence.

However, we should avoid squeezing out uniformity. The historical specificity of opportunities and threats and the need to analyze their properties and manifestations as developed in particular political circumstances is a useful reminder that we should talk, at best, of regularities of contentious mechanisms and processes and examine how they concatenate with each other in contentious episodes (McAdam et al., 2001). In that context, the process of the opportunity and threat dialectic as perceived by social movement activists and adherents can contribute to a more agency-laden analysis of contentious politics by preserving the dialectical tension between structure and agency. That is to say, in analyzing the collective meaning constructed by movement activists in relation to changes in the structure of political opportunities and threats, we can learn more about what sorts of opportunity and threat may actually be germane to what sort of mobilizing effort (Flacks, 2005). An incorporation of framing processes would certainly advance our understanding of the role of the political agent in developing an agreed strategy, unquestionably a contentious endeavor in itself, and of realizing that strategy through specific contentious tactics.

As an illustration, it may well be that the tactical innovation of restricting the use of deadly weapons, the ability to cope with intra-factionalism and detrimental competition within the movement, and the ability to create a favorable international climate for their struggle were all rooted in a deliberate attempt by Palestinian insurgents to strengthen left-wing, anti-occupation forces inside Israel. The importance of investigating this line of argument speaks for itself in light of the striking differences between the two Intifadas (the 1987–92 Intifada and the 2000 *Al-Aqsa* Intifada), but this is beyond the scope of this article.

Appendix

TABLE 1A. *Operationalizing the Israeli Political Opportunity Structure*

Political opportunity structure	Operationalization	Crisis events
Centrality of the political system	Extra-parliamentarism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> (1974) Protest campaign led by military officer Ashkenazi against the government's misconduct of the 1973 war expanded within days into a broad wave of unrest in Israeli public opinion.

(TABLE 1A continued)

(TABLE 1A continued)

Political opportunity structure	Operationalization	Crisis events
Depth of social cleavages	Political violence among collective actors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> (1978) A group of combat reserve officers, later to be known as Peace Now, drafted a letter to Prime Minister Begin during his stay at Camp David expressing their objection to fighting any war that was not a threat to Israel's existence. (1983) Assassination of peace activist Emil Grinzwieg by an Israeli right-winger during a Peace Now demonstration against the war in Lebanon in front of Prime Minister Begin's office.
Implementation of collective goals	Challenges to authoritative decisions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> (1974–75) The violent struggle over the evacuation of the unauthorized, illegal settlement in Sebastia in the West Bank. (April 1982) As part of the implementation of the Camp David Accord, the Yamit evacuation represented the strongest violent expression of right-wing opposition to government policy.
Illegalism/ social control	Resistance to the rule of law	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> (1984) A Jewish Underground acting in the territories against Palestinian targets was uncovered. All Underground members were put on trial and convicted.
Legitimacy and trust	Strength of state institutions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> (July and September 1982) The Israeli left-wing movement Peace Now organized two massive demonstrations in Tel-Aviv expressing the growing public debate over the deepening involvement in Lebanon and the massacre in the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps. (1986) General Security Service (Shabak) Affair: Secret Service and high-level officials are involved in the illegal killing of two Palestinian terrorists before their trial. There is also public uproar over the concealment of information and perjury during the work of the investigating committee into the event.

Source: Alimi (forthcoming).

Notes

- I am using the definition of contentious politics provided by McAdam et al. (2001: 5): "episodic, public, collective interaction among makers of claims and their objects when (a) at least one government is a claimant, an object of claims, or a party to the

- claims and (b) the claims would, if realized, affect the interests of at least one of the claimants.”
2. While acknowledging the importance of numerous works dealing with other aspects of the Palestinian case (for example, Palestinians’ shared hardships and grievances) and integrating additional factors to explain the Intifada (for example, regional and international factors), the analysis in this article is limited in a twofold manner: first, it deals only with the influence of Israeli politics on the Palestinian strategy of contention (a topic that has received surprisingly scant attention) and, second, it focuses only on the Israeli political setting, seen here as central to our understanding of the Intifada. I shall say more on the latter in the historical discussion below.
 3. It is noteworthy that McAdam’s (1999) analysis draws on surveys to measure collective attribution, which is problematic for two main reasons. First, we are forced to attribute the existence of collective, shared perceptions based on an aggregated set of individual responses and, second, surveys provide snapshot-like evidence (even when carrying a panel survey), which makes it difficult to measure processes.
 4. A different conception of framing, one that is closer to what McAdam and Sewell have in mind and to the approach used in this article, can be found in Morris’s (2000) concept of “frame lifting,” which deals with how movement leaders graft collective action onto the cultural and emotional schemata of activists.
 5. In this case, it is noteworthy that both “event” and “time” (that is, the sequence of events) were treated as a way of examining the possibility of a developing, cumulative process of Palestinian framing and reframing, allowing us to examine both changes and trends in the Palestinian discourse over the issue of Israel’s system-wide crisis.
 6. In this respect, the West Bank print media differ from the PLO’s print media (for example, *Filastin al-Thawra* [*The Palestinian Revolution*]) based outside the territories, which has tended to reflect the issues and concerns of the PLO specifically and of the Palestinian people broadly defined.
 7. When a crisis event had various manifestations, I treated each as a crisis event in its own right, analyzing it independently unless its coverage overlapped with another crisis event. In such cases, the episode of the crisis event did not receive a distinct coding.
 8. No attempt is made here to provide an analysis of differences and variations among these newspapers. This theme is studied elsewhere (Alimi, forthcoming).
 9. Maintaining caution, I nevertheless checked for consistency between the unit of analysis and the entire body of the articles. Conducting a consistency check on 30 randomly selected articles resulted in 26 articles showing high consistency, while the other four slightly diverged from what the headline suggested.
 10. Framing devices include metaphors, historical exemplars, catchphrases, depictions, and visual images, but also devices that suggest or imply action, such as roots (that is, causation ordering), consequences, and appeals to principle (that is, a set of moral claims). See Gamson and Modigliani (1989).
 11. Subjectivity is doubtlessly unavoidable in this type of coding. Nevertheless, an attempt was made to structure and systemize the coding procedure according to the framing devices. Testing for inter-coder reliability and deciding to use a fairly conservative statistical index were seen as safety measures in this regard.
 12. This is so mainly because stone throwing and demonstrations receive equal weight and because no systematic data exists on house demolitions before 1979. According to Frisch (1996), levels of house demolition were much higher during the first four years of occupation than subsequently: 16,578 demolitions in 1967–70, dropping to 2474 between 1971 and 1974, and then to 1000 between 1975 and 1978. Data on administrative detention reveals a similar pattern to that of deportations.
 13. Such a relationship holds even when the number of Jewish settlers in the OT is used.
 14. Between 1967 and 1974 Palestinian contention was led and driven mainly from outside the OT, by PLO forces based in Jordan and later in Lebanon.

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