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Global Media Narratives on the Gaza Flotilla as a Strategic Issue in Mass Communication

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Abstract

The 2025 Gaza flotilla missions became contested communicative events in which humanitarian, legal, and security claims competed for international legitimacy. Previous research on flotilla coverage has relied mainly on text-based analysis of the 2010 Mavi Marmara incident, and studies of Gaza news rarely compare narrative structure and visual design across outlets with different institutional models. This study compares how Al Jazeera English (AJE) and BBC News constructed the 2025 flotilla through textual and visual narratives, treats The New York Times (NYT) as an exploratory third case, and interprets the public-diplomacy meanings of those constructions. Using qualitative, critical-constructivist multimodal narrative analysis, we examined 33 news items (AJE = 23, BBC = 7, NYT = 3) published between 1 June and 31 October 2025, selected from 38 candidates. Claude Sonnet 5.5 (Anthropic), accessed through claude.ai, was used as an AI coding assistant to generate initial codes with supporting excerpts; both authors verified every code against the source text and made all final coding decisions. The analysis integrated Fisher's narrative coherence and fidelity, Riessman's structural narrative analysis, and Kress and van Leeuwen's visual grammar. AJE framed the missions predominantly as humanitarian action obstructed by Israel (18 of 23 items), drew mainly on activist sources, and asserted illegality in its own voice in 7 items. The BBC structured every item around competing, attributed claims and reported Israeli officials' dismissive labels while also qualifying the aid as "symbolic" or "token". The limited NYT material foregrounded Israeli government statements and is reported as indicative only. The study proposes a Narrative Diplomacy Framework (narrative selection, multimodal legitimization, and diplomatic circulation) that treats news narratives as interpretive resources within public diplomacy, not as evidence of state control or audience effects.

KEYWORDS

gaza flotilla; multimodal narrative analysis; public diplomacy; strategic narrative; conflict communication; global news media.

Introduction

Humanitarian interventions in armed conflicts are contested not only at sea or on land but also in the news, where competing actors define who is a victim, who is a violator, and what counts as lawful action (Evans, 2010; Iqbal & Farukh, 2025). This article treats the 2025 Gaza flotilla as a communicative event: a humanitarian initiative that is also a narrative object around which organizers, governments, and news organizations construct meaning. Following Roselle et al. (2014), a strategic narrative is a means by which political actors construct shared meaning of past, present, and future to shape audiences' behaviour.

The flotilla organizers (the Freedom Flotilla Coalition and the Global Sumud Flotilla), the Israeli government, and the states whose citizens were aboard all issued competing accounts of the missions. Transnational news outlets then selected, combined, and visualized these accounts for global audiences, which is why news coverage is a relevant site for studying public diplomacy (Gilboa, 2008; Nye, 2008).

Research on Israel–Palestine news shows that outlets differ systematically in the actors they quote, the labels they apply, and the moral evaluations they imply. Evans (2010) compared *The New York Times*' coverage of army sieges of two Palestinian refugee camps and showed that similar events were framed very differently in both the volume of coverage and the language used to describe actors. El Damanhoury et al. (2025) applied critical discourse analysis to Al Jazeera English and BBC online reporting on the 2023 Gaza war and documented contrasting representations of Israeli and Palestinian actors. Comparable contrasts have been reported between Kompas.id and the BBC (Putra, 2024) and among Kompas.id, Republika, CNN, and Aljazeera.com in coverage of the 2024 Israel–Lebanon conflict (Ainani & Yudiansyah, 2025). Iqbal and Farukh (2025) further showed how metaphors encode ideological positions in conflict reporting, and audience-oriented studies in Jordan indicate that humanitarian and moral narratives dominate digital conversations on Gaza (Alsharairi et al., 2025). These studies establish that framing differences exist, but most analyse a single mode (text), two outlets, or the 2023–2024 wars rather than humanitarian missions such as flotillas.

Scholarship on earlier flotillas offers the closest comparison. Research on the 2010 Mavi Marmara raid found that Israel's account dominated English-language international coverage, whereas Turkey's account gained ground mainly in media from Muslim-majority countries (Bayram, 2015). A content analysis of 156 online stories from *Haaretz*, *The Guardian*, and *The New York Time*s found that the three newspapers differed in their use of war- and peace-journalism frames (Fahmy & Eakin, 2014). Legal scholarship shows that the lawfulness of intercepting flotilla vessels under the law of naval blockade is itself contested (Buchan, 2011). Studies of mediated public diplomacy show that transnational broadcasters can carry foreign-policy meanings: Samuel-Azran (2013) analysed Al Jazeera within Qatar's state-sponsored media diplomacy, and Fahmy (2012) examined how Arab satellite news relates to audience perceptions. Entman's cascading activation model explains how elite frames may flow from governments to news media, while also showing that journalists can contest them (Entman, 2003). However, this literature has focused mainly on textual frames and on the 2010 incident. The narrative and visual construction of the 2025 missions remains largely unexamined.

A third stream of research addresses narrative and multimodality. Public-diplomacy scholars increasingly argue that influence depends on the coherence and credibility of narratives rather than on isolated messages (Hobbs et al., 2025; Roselle et al., 2014; Saliu, 2023), and strategic narratives have been traced empirically across national information environments (Yanchenko & Humprecht, 2025). In visual communication, Rodriguez and Dimitrova (2011) distinguish denotative, stylistic-semiotic, connotative, and ideological levels of visual framing. Kress and van Leeuwen (2020) provide a grammar for analysing representational, interactive, and compositional meanings, and Cheema et al. (2023) show that image–text relations shape the news values of online stories. These tools have rarely been combined with structural narrative analysis to compare outlets reporting the same humanitarian–security event.

Taken together, prior studies leave three gaps. Empirically, no study has compared how transnational outlets with different institutional models narrated the 2025 flotilla missions. This study compares a state-funded transnational broadcaster (Al Jazeera English) with a public-service broadcaster (BBC News). A commercial elite newspaper (*The New York Time*s) is included as an exploratory case: only three of its items met the inclusion criteria, all of them available only in paywall-truncated form, so it is used to examine whether the two main patterns extend to a third institutional model, not as a full third comparison. Methodologically, research on flotilla and Gaza coverage has relied mainly on textual framing or discourse analysis and has not explained how narrative roles and visual design reinforce or contradict one another. Theoretically, public-diplomacy research has not specified the narrative mechanisms through which news coverage turns a humanitarian event into a resource for international legitimacy. Accordingly, *this study aims to compare how Al Jazeera English and BBC News constructed the 2025 Gaza flotilla through textual and visual narratives, to explore how the available NYT coverage relates to these patterns, and to explain how those constructions articulate public-diplomacy meanings.* It addresses three research questions. RQ1: How did AJE and BBC News construct the narrative elements of the 2025 flotilla (setting, protagonists, antagonists, conflict, moral evaluation, and resolution), and how does the available NYT material compare? RQ2: Which lexical, sourcing, and visual strategies did they use, and how did text and image interact? RQ3: What public-diplomacy meanings can be interpreted from these constructions? Because the study analyses media content, it does not measure audience reception or policy effects. Statements about public diplomacy are therefore interpretive propositions grounded in the coded content, not claims about effects.

Three theoretical resources guide the analysis. First, Fisher's narrative paradigm proposes that people judge stories by narrative probability (coherence) and narrative fidelity (Fisher, 1984). In this study, coherence was identified through structural coherence (a logically ordered sequence of events), material coherence (consistency with facts acknowledged across outlets), and characterological coherence (consistent motives attributed to actors). Fidelity was identified through explicit or implied "good reasons," that is, appeals to humanitarian, legal, security, or sovereignty values. Second, Riessman's structural approach to narrative analysis (Riessman, 2008) organizes stories into orientation, complicating action, evaluation, and resolution. We translated these into six narrative elements: setting, protagonist/victim, antagonist, conflict, moral evaluation, and resolution. Third, Kress and van Leeuwen's visual grammar specifies representational (participants and actions), interactive (gaze, social distance, angle), and compositional (information value, salience, framing) meanings (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2020). Strategic narrative theory (Roselle et al., 2014) connects these levels to public diplomacy by treating the resulting stories as resources that actors can use to claim legitimacy. In short, Fisher supplies the evaluative criteria, Riessman the structural units, and Kress and van Leeuwen the visual categories. The three were integrated in a single codebook (Table 2).

Methods

This study adopts a qualitative, critical-constructivist design. It is constructivist because news narratives are treated as constructions of reality rather than mirrors of events. It is critical because the analysis asks whose perspectives are amplified or marginalized, and how narrative choices relate to unequal power between state and non-state actors (Entman, 2007). This critical orientation shaped the coding of sourcing asymmetries and legal labels. However, interpretations were constrained by explicit coding rules and by applying the same dimensions to all three outlets. Multimodal narrative analysis was chosen because the research questions concern both narrative structure and the interaction of words and images (Cheema et al., 2023; Rodriguez & Dimitrova, 2011). The design also incorporated an AI-assisted coding stage. Claude (Anthropic), a large language model accessed through the claude.ai web interface, was used as a coding assistant, not as an independent coder: it applied the codebook to the archived text of each item and returned candidate codes with supporting excerpts, which both authors then verified (see Coding Framework). The interpretation, the development of higher-order categories, and the Narrative Diplomacy Framework were carried out by the authors.

The three outlets were selected purposively as English-language transnational news organizations with distinct institutional models: Al Jazeera English (state-funded, Doha-based), BBC News (public-service, London-based), and *The New York Times* (commercial, New York-based). The analysis period ran from 1 June to 31 October 2025. It covers the departure of the Madleen (1 June 2025), the interception of the Handala (26–27 July 2025), the voyage and interception of the Global Sumud Flotilla (31 August–3 October 2025), and the subsequent detention and deportation coverage. Candidate items were identified on 1 November 2025, after the end of the analysis period, through each outlet's website search and site-restricted Google searches (e.g., site:aljazeera.com) using the keywords "flotilla," "Gaza flotilla," "Madleen," "Handala," "Global Sumud Flotilla," and "Freedom Flotilla." Because outlet search engines and Google results are neither exhaustive nor fully reproducible, some items may have been missed; this limitation is acknowledged in the Conclusion. Updated or re-published versions of the same story, identified by URL, headline, and date, were counted as one item. The full texts of all candidate items were archived as PDFs on 13 October 2026, when the corpus was retrieved again for the AI-assisted coding described below; because live pages can be edited after publication, the archived versions are the texts analysed. The latest coded item was published on 7 October 2025 (A035). One later candidate (A038, 8 October 2025), reporting the interception of a separate Freedom Flotilla Coalition convoy, was identified but could not be archived, and was therefore not coded (Appendix A).

Items were included if they (a) were published within the analysis period; (b) had the flotilla as their main topic, i.e., mentioned in the headline or lead paragraph; (c) were news reports, explainers, or live-blog summaries produced by the outlet's own newsroom; and (d) contained at least one visual element on the live page. Items were excluded if they were opinion columns, op-eds, or letters; duplicated or syndicated wire copy; video-only items without accompanying text; or items that mentioned the flotilla only in passing. The search identified 38 candidate items (AJE = 28, BBC = 7, NYT = 3). After full-text screening, 33 items were retained (AJE = 23, BBC = 7, NYT = 3): two AJE items were excluded because the flotilla was a sub-item of wider Gaza coverage, two because they were video-only, and one (A038) because it could not be archived (Table 1; Appendix A). The three NYT items could be retrieved only in paywall-truncated form (headline, standfirst, and two to three opening paragraphs). In two of them (A021, A022), the lead visual shown on the live page was not captured in the archived, paywall-truncated version. Because they met criterion (d) on the live page, both items were retained, but their visual codes are reported as not codable (n.c.) in Tables 1 and 3. The NYT findings are therefore reported separately and with caution, and the NYT is treated as an exploratory case. The corpus allows the same events to be compared across outlets but is not statistically representative of all flotilla coverage.

Each item was archived as a PDF together with its metadata (outlet, headline, author, date, URL) and assigned an identifier (A001–A038; Appendix A). The lead visual of each item was analysed from the archived page. Embedded social-media posts and photo captions inside an article were treated as part of that article's multimodal text. Reader comments were not collected, and no separate social-media dataset was compiled. Documents from governments, the United Nations, and human-rights organizations were used only to check factual context and were not coded as part of the corpus. Appendix A lists every candidate item with its identifier, outlet, date, headline, URL, and screening decision. The item-level coding sheet, with the coding instrument, the AI-generated codes, the supporting excerpts, and the authors' corrections, is provided as Supplementary File S1.

Coding followed a hybrid deductive–inductive approach guided by the codebook presented in Table 2. The unit of analysis was the individual news item for narrative, lexical, and sourcing codes, while the lead visual served as the unit of analysis for visual codes. Throughout the coding process, a clear distinction was maintained between statements expressed in the outlet's editorial voice and those attributed to external sources

Table 1. Composition of the Analysed Corpus

Outlet	Institutional model	Candidate items identified	Items analysed	Lead visuals analysed	Date range of analysed items
Al Jazeera English	State-funded transnational broadcaster (Doha)	28	23	23	3 Jun–7 Oct 2025
BBC News	Public-service broadcaster (London)	7	7	7	10 Jun–4 Oct 2025
The New York Times	Commercial elite newspaper (New York)	3	3	1 (n.c.: 2)	9 Jun–1 Oct 2025
Total		38	33	31 (n.c.: 2)	3 Jun–7 Oct 2025 (search period: 1 Jun–31 Oct 2025)

Source: Authors' corpus (Appendix A). Five AJE candidates were excluded at screening (two items in which the flotilla was not the main topic; two video-only items; one item, A038, that could not be archived). NYT items were available only in paywall-truncated form. n.c. = lead visual not captured in the archived, paywall-truncated version.

Table 2. Codebook for Multimodal Narrative Analysis

Dimension	Code	Operational definition and coding rule	Example indicator
Narrative (Riessman)	Setting	Spatial, temporal, and historical location of the event, including references to earlier flotillas or to the blockade in place since 2007.	"international waters"; reference to the 2010 Mavi Marmara
	Topic actor	Main actor of the headline or lead, i.e., whom the story is about (recorded as "main protagonist" in the coding sheet).	"Greta Thunberg deported, Israel says" (topic actor: activists)

Dimension	Code	Operational definition and coding rule	Example indicator
		Records the topic, not whose perspective organizes the narrative.	
	Protagonist / victim	Actor whose goals, perspective, or suffering organize the narrative. Coded from two coded indicators: the conflict definition in the headline and lead, and the topic actor. Activists = conflict defined as obstruction of aid (or as harm to participants) with activists as topic actor; balanced = conflict defined as competing claims, so that activist and Israeli accounts share the narrative; state actors = third states or diplomats as topic actor.	activists as "peace activists"; Gaza civilians
	Antagonist	Actor presented as obstructing the protagonist or causing harm.	"Israeli Occupation Forces"; activists as "provocation"
	Conflict	Central problem as defined by the item.	aid obstructed vs. security threat
	Resolution	Outcome or remedy reported or implied.	deportation; end of blockade; diplomatic deal
Evaluation (Fisher)	Moral evaluation / fidelity	Values invoked as "good reasons": humanitarian, legal, security, sovereignty. Multiple values may be coded.	"urgent humanitarian aid"; "prevent weapons smuggling"
	Coherence	Structural (ordered sequence), material (consistency with facts acknowledged across outlets), and characterological (consistent motives) coherence.	motives of activists described consistently
Lexis and sources	Legal framing	Label for the blockade or interception in the outlet's own voice: illegal / lawful / contested (attributed) / absent.	"illegal blockade"; "lawful naval blockade," attributed
	Sourcing	Number, type, and order of quoted sources (activists, Israeli officials, third states, UN/NGOs, legal experts); position of the first quoted source.	first source in lead paragraph
	Qualifier	Word in the outlet's own voice that limits the scale or seriousness of the aid or mission ("symbolic," "token," "trying to deliver"). Coded present/absent; uses in quotation marks are noted as possibly echoing a source.	a "token amount of aid"
	Dismissive label (reported)	Delegitimizing label for the mission or its participants attributed to officials (e.g., "selfie yacht," "publicity stunt," "provocateurs," alleged Hamas links). Coded present/absent.	"selfie yacht," attributed to Israel's Foreign Ministry
Diplomatic context	Reported state reactions	Statements or actions of third states, intergovernmental bodies, or participants' home states reported in the item (condemnation, support, consular action, criticism of the flotilla). Coded present/absent.	condemnation by a foreign ministry; Meloni's criticism of the flotilla
Visual (Kress & van Leeuwen)	Representational	Participants and actions depicted (vessels, activists, soldiers, maps, symbols such as flags).	vessel with Palestinian flags
	Interactive	Gaze (demand/offer), social distance (close-up, medium, long shot), and angle.	long shot at eye level
	Compositional and provenance	Information value (top/bottom, left/right), salience, framing; source of the image (outlet, agency, Israeli government, flotilla).	map at top; "AFP via Getty Images"
	Text–image relation	Relation between the lead visual and the headline/lead: reinforcement, elaboration, or tension.	sympathetic image under an attributive standfirst (elaboration)

Source: Authors' codebook, based on Fisher (1984), Riessman (2008), and Kress and van Leeuwen (2020).

Coding proceeded in two stages. In the first stage, Claude Sonnet 5.5 (Anthropic, 2026), a large language model accessed through the claude.ai web interface, was used as an AI coding assistant on 13 October 2026. It was given the coding instrument (the instructions and the codebook reproduced in Supplementary File S1) and the archived PDF of each candidate item (A001–A037). For each item it recorded the screening decision, assigned every narrative, evaluative, lexical, sourcing, and visual code in the coding sheet, and quoted one to three supporting excerpts. Only published journalistic texts were entered into the tool. In the second stage, both authors checked every screening decision, code, and excerpt against the original article; corrections were recorded in the notes column of the coding sheet, and disagreements were resolved through discussion. The code for reported state reactions, added during revision, was assigned on 2 November 2026 with the same two-stage procedure (AI assistant: Claude, Anthropic), using the live versions of the articles where they could be retrieved and the archived texts otherwise, and was checked by the authors. The AI assistant was thus treated as a coding aid, not as an independent coder, and all final coding decisions are the authors' own. Because the design is qualitative, no inter-coder reliability coefficient was computed (see Trustworthiness, Reflexivity, and Ethics).

The analysis proceeded in five steps. (1) Each item was coded by the AI coding assistant, with every code verified by both authors, for narrative, lexical, and sourcing features, and its lead visual for representational, interactive, compositional, and provenance features. (2) Codes were entered into an item-by-code matrix, from which the descriptive frequencies reported in the Results were derived. These frequencies are used to show how widespread a pattern is, not to test hypotheses. (3) Text–image relations were classified as reinforcement, elaboration, or tension. (4) Patterns were compared across outlets on the same dimensions, with attention to negative cases that ran against the dominant pattern. (5) Higher-order categories were developed abductively into the Narrative Diplomacy Framework (see Discussion).

Consistent with the interpretive paradigm, rigour was established through qualitative trustworthiness criteria rather than a statistical index of inter-coder reliability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Credibility was supported by peer debriefing between the two authors on all interpretive categories and by negative-case analysis, for example the BBC's and AJE's own use of "symbolic" to describe the aid. Dependability and confirmability were supported by an audit trail: the archived PDFs, the codebook, the item-level coding sheet with supporting excerpts (Supplementary File S1), which records the AI-generated codes and the authors' corrections, and the memos. Because an AI assistant can misread attribution or overlook implicit evaluation, no AI-generated code was accepted without checking its supporting excerpt against the original article. Every interpretive claim in the Results is linked to item identifiers listed in Appendix A. Transferability is supported by a detailed description of the corpus, period, and context. As Indonesian communication scholars writing in a country whose foreign policy supports Palestinian statehood, we acknowledge that our position may shape interpretation. We therefore applied identical codes to all outlets and distinguished outlet wording from our own synthesis.

The study analysed only publicly available, published journalistic content and involved no human participants. Images are reproduced for critical analysis with source attribution. Contested allegations reported in the coverage, such as claims of mistreatment in detention or of organizers' links to Hamas, are analysed as narrative claims attributed to their sources, not as facts established by this study.

Result and Discussion

The 2025 Flotilla Missions as Communicative Events

The corpus covers three missions. The Madleen departed from Catania, Sicily, on 1 June 2025 with 12 people aboard, including the climate activist Greta Thunberg and the MEP Rima Hassan, and was intercepted on 9 June in international waters (A001, A002). In July, the Handala, carrying 21 activists from 10 countries, was intercepted on its approach to Gaza (A006). The Global Sumud Flotilla left Barcelona on 31 August, was joined by boats from Tunisia and Italy, reported suspected drone attacks off Tunisia on 8–9 September and off Crete on 23–24 September, and was intercepted from 1 October (A006, A008, A010, A013, A027). According to AJE, the flotilla comprised at least 44 civilian boats carrying some 500 activists, with participants from 37 countries, including 30 from Spain, 22 from Italy, 21 from Turkiye, and 12 from Malaysia (A027). Israel's Foreign Ministry reported 461 detainees (A031), and the BBC reported about 470 arrests (A036).

The first boats were boarded about 70 nautical miles from Gaza and the last vessel, the Marinette, about 42.5 nautical miles away (A027, A036). The BBC stated that Israel "has been policing this area but does not have jurisdiction there" (A036). Whether intercepting vessels in international waters is lawful under the law of naval blockade is legally contested (Buchan, 2011). This study does not adjudicate that question. It analyses how each outlet framed it.

The three outlets, reporting on the same interceptions, constructed systematically different narrative versions of them. Table 3 summarizes the frequencies. The following subsections present representative evidence for each outlet; the patterns are interpreted in the Discussion.

AJE constructed the flotilla predominantly as legitimate humanitarian action obstructed by Israel. The conflict was defined as the obstruction of aid in 18 of 23 items, activists were the topic actor in 22 and the narrative protagonists in 18 (Table 3), and moral evaluation drew on humanitarian and legal values in 22. Headlines described the missions as attempts "to break Israeli siege" (A006) or to "break Gaza siege" (A008), and reported reactions to the Madleen's seizure under the headline "'Piracy'" (A003). In its own voice, AJE asserted the illegality of the blockade or the interceptions in 7 items, for example "Israel's illegal blockade of the Strip" (A001), a boat "illegally seized in international waters" (A002), and an explainer headlined "How Israel breaks international maritime law," which answered its own question about Israel's right to board ships with "The answer is no" (A029). The label "illegal blockade" itself appeared in AJE's own voice in only 2 items (A001, A005). More often the blockade was called a "siege" or "blockade" without qualification (18 items), while illegality claims were voiced by quoted sources. Contrary to a common assumption, AJE did not use "Israeli Occupation Forces" in its own voice. That phrase appeared only in quotations from activists (A028). AJE's usual labels were "Israeli forces" (14 items) and "Israeli military" or "navy" (6).

Mapped onto the codebook, the AJE narrative followed a consistent arc. The setting was the Mediterranean high seas and a Gaza described as facing famine. The protagonists were activists presented as a nonviolent transnational collective (A004, A009, A012). The antagonist was the Israeli state. The resolution, reported in 11 items, was detention and deportation. Activists were the first quoted source in 15 items, and activist testimony appeared in 17. Organizers described communications being jammed to block distress signals and livestreams as the boats were boarded (A027). This sequence is structurally coherent in Fisher's sense, with events unfolding in a clear order and the actors' motives remaining consistent (Fisher, 1984).

Testimony was a central narrative device in the detention coverage. AJE quoted David Adler, a US participant in the Global

Sumud Flotilla, as saying, "We were kidnapped, stripped, zip-tied, blindfolded … and for the next five days … we were psychologically tortured" (A035). Other items reported allegations that Thunberg was "dragged on the ground" and "forced to kiss the Israeli flag" (A032), and that detainees were treated "like monkeys" (A033). These are allegations attributed to the activists. In A032 and A033, AJE also reported the Israeli Foreign Ministry's rejection of them as "complete lies" and "brazen lies," together with Ben-Gvir's statement that he was "proud" of the harsh treatment (A033). Israeli officials were quoted or paraphrased in 12 of 23 AJE items. Analytically, the testimony supplies first-person victims and moral stakes, while the quoted denials keep the narrative formally two-sided.

AJE linked the 2025 missions to earlier flotillas or to the blockade in place since 2007 in 11 items, and published a dedicated map headlined "Israel has attacked, intercepted all Gaza-bound flotillas since 2010" (A011). It also gave extensive space to state reactions, cataloguing condemnations from more than a dozen governments and organizations (A003, A030). These reaction pieces also included critical voices, such as Italian Prime Minister Meloni's view that the flotilla brought "no benefit to the Palestinian people" (A027, A030). The selection therefore shows which reactions AJE chose to amplify rather than demonstrating an international consensus. A negative case is that AJE itself described the cargo as "symbolic humanitarian aid" (A027) and the voyage as a "symbolic mission" (A002), a wording otherwise associated with skeptical framing.

Visually, the AJE lead images were mostly photographs (17 of 23), followed by videos (4) and maps or infographics (2). In 16, participants were shown at medium distance, and 12 were produced by AJE's own journalists, including a reporter on board (A009, A012, A014). In Figure 1, the representational meaning is carried by a route map whose vectors converge on Gaza and by an AFP photograph of a moored vessel displaying Palestinian, Algerian, and Tunisian flags with the hand-painted slogan "Gaza we see u, we're coming." The map occupies the upper part of the composition (the "ideal" position) and the photograph the lower (the "real") (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2020). Image and text reinforced each other in 20 of 23 items.

Overall, AJE's coverage was sympathetic to the flotilla and critical of Israel's actions, mainly through the selection of protagonists, sources, and historical context rather than through legal labels in its own voice. This pattern corresponds with earlier research on Qatar's media diplomacy (Samuel-Azran, 2013). Funding alone, however, does not demonstrate that editorial content is directed by the state. This correspondence is examined as an interpretive question in the Discussion.

BBC News: A Procedural-Balance Narrative

BBC News constructed every item in the corpus (7 of 7) around competing claims, and its moral evaluation was procedural or mixed in all of them. Attribution was visible even in headlines: "Greta Thunberg deported, Israel says" (A015), "Greta Thunberg's Gaza flotilla hit by drones, organisers claim" (A019), and "Thunberg denies claims Gaza flotilla is a publicity stunt" (A020). In each, the contested claim is assigned to a named party rather than asserted by the outlet. The BBC called the blockade a "maritime" or "naval blockade" (2 items) or simply "blockade" (3), and attributed the phrases "illegal siege" to organizers and "lawful naval blockade" to Israeli officials (A017, A036).

Sourcing was balanced in presence but not in framing. Israeli officials were quoted in all 7 BBC items, and activists in 6. The first quoted source was Israeli in 3 items and activist in 4. All 7 items reported Israeli officials' dismissive characterizations of the missions, such as "selfie yacht" (A015, A016, A020), "publicity stunt" (A017–A020, A036), or "provocateurs" (A036). In 5 items, the BBC also qualified the aid or the mission in its own voice: a "symbolic" amount of aid (A015, A016, A017), a "token amount of aid" (A020), or a flotilla "trying to deliver aid" (A036). In A015 and A016 the word appears in quotation marks and may echo the organizers' own description. At the same time, the BBC used independent verification that cut against official accounts: BBC Verify authenticated the drone-strike footage, and an analyst's view that it "casts serious doubt on the Tunisian authorities' version of events" was reported (A019). The BBC also stated in its own voice that Israel lacks jurisdiction in the interception zone (A036).

Historical context appeared in 4 BBC items, through references to the 2007 blockade (A015, A016) or the 2010 Mavi Marmara raid (A017, A019). Violence was mostly reported in procedural terms of detention and deportation. Because the outlet seldom adjudicated between competing legal claims, its coverage left the legality of the blockade largely open. Following Entman's argument that the absence of evaluation can itself have framing consequences (Entman, 2007), one interpretation is that this ambiguity leaves the existing situation unchallenged. An alternative interpretation is that it reflects professional norms of attribution when facts are disputed and independent access is restricted. The BBC Verify item (A019) and the jurisdiction statement (A036) show that the BBC did intervene in its own voice where verification was possible.

Visually, BBC lead visuals were mostly videos (5 of 7) and long shots (4 of 7). The lead image in Figure 2 is an AFP/Getty photograph of a vessel in long shot, at eye level, against open sea and sky. The activists are small and cannot be identified, and no participant addresses the viewer. In Kress and van Leeuwen's terms, this is an "offer" image at public social distance, which invites observation rather than identification (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2020). Image and text were congruent in all 7 items, as both maintained emotional distance.

The New York Times: A Diplomatic-Skepticism Narrative (Exploratory Case

Because only paywall-truncated text was available for the three NYT items, the following observations are limited to headlines, standfirsts, and opening paragraphs, and they are offered as an exploratory check on the two main patterns rather than as a third full case. Within these, the NYT foregrounded Israeli government statements in all three items: "Israeli authorities called the voyage a public relations stunt" (A021), "The Israelis have asked that the aid be given to them to distribute" (A022), and "The Israeli government said it had detained activists who were trying to take humanitarian aid to the blockaded enclave" (A037). Like the BBC, the NYT attributed contested claims in its headlines, as in "Aid Flotilla Headed for Gaza Says It's Under Drone Attack" (A022).

The NYT described the participants as "activists" or "a protest group" (A022) and the Global Sumud mission as "widely publicized" (A037). It also gave background that Israel "has imposed stringent restrictions on the entry of humanitarian aid" and that the blockade "has been in place for nearly two decades" (A037). No activist testimony appeared in the available text. Visually, the explainer reproduced in Figure 3 opens with a video still, taken at eye level and medium distance, of a flotilla vessel displaying Palestinian, Algerian, and Tunisian flags (A037). The image is more sympathetic than the standfirst, so text and image stand in a relation of elaboration rather than reinforcement.

Table 3 compares the three outlets on the same coding dimensions. Two distinct narrative versions are clearly supported by the data, and a third is indicated more tentatively. In AJE, the flotilla was predominantly humanitarian action obstructed by Israel, told through activists' voices and a history of earlier flotillas. In the BBC, it was a disputed event in which every claim was attributed and Israeli and activist accounts were reported side by side. In the limited NYT material, it was

Table 3. Comparative Coding Summary of Narrative and Multimodal Dimensions

Dimension	Al Jazeera English (N = 23)	BBC News (N = 7)	The New York Times (N = 3, partial text; exploratory)
Conflict defined as obstruction of aid	18 (competing claims: 4; other: 1)	0 (competing claims: 7)	1 (competing claims: 2)
Moral evaluation: humanitarian/legal	22 (procedural/mixed: 1)	0 (procedural/mixed: 7)	0 (procedural/mixed: 1; none in available text: 2)
Activists as topic actor of the headline/lead	22 (states/diplomats: 1)	7	3
Narrative protagonist: activists / balanced / state actors	18 / 4 / 1	0 / 7 / 0	1 / 2 / 0
Illegality asserted in outlet's own voice	7 ("illegal blockade" label: 2)	0 (jurisdiction statement: 1)	0
Interception actor label	"Israeli forces" 14; "military/navy" 6; other 3	"Israeli forces" 5; other 2	"Israeli military/navy" 1; other 1; not named 1
Aid/mission qualified as symbolic, token, or "trying to"	3	5	1
Israeli dismissive labels reported (stunt, selfie yacht, Hamas links)	≥ 7	7	1
Activist testimony quoted	17	6	0
Israeli officials quoted or paraphrased	12	7	3
First quoted source: activists / Israeli officials	15 / 5 (third states: 2; UN/NGO: 1)	4 / 3	1 / 1 (UN/NGO: 1)
UN, legal, or human-rights sources	12	6	1
Reported state reactions	12	3	0
Historical context (2010 / 2007)	11	4	1
Lead visual: photo / video / map	17 / 4 / 2	2 / 5 / 0	0 / 1 / 0 (n.c.: 2)
Lead visual at medium or close distance	16	3	1 (n.c.: 2)
Text–image relation: reinforcement	20 (elaboration: 3)	7	0 (elaboration: 1; n.c.: 2)

Source: Authors' coding of the corpus (Appendix A). Values are the number of items containing the code out of the outlet total. NYT values are based on paywall-truncated text. For mutually exclusive codes, the categories shown sum to the outlet total; n.c. = not codable (lead visual not captured in the archived version). Codes that can co-occur, such as the sources quoted, are presence counts and need not sum to N.

an event introduced primarily through Israeli government statements.

The differences lie less in vocabulary than in narrative architecture. All three outlets mostly called the blockade a "blockade" or "siege" without qualification, and all three described the cargo as symbolic at least once (AJE 3 items; BBC 5; NYT 1). What differed was who was cast as protagonist, who spoke first, whether testimony was quoted, and whether historical continuity was supplied. Here the distinction between topic actor and protagonist matters. Activists were the topic actor of the headline or lead in almost every item (AJE 22 of 23; BBC 7 of 7; NYT 3 of 3), because the flotilla was what the stories were about. Their role as narrative protagonist differed: AJE organized 18 of 23 items around the activists' obstructed mission, whereas all 7 BBC items and 2 of the 3 NYT items were structured as competing claims in which activist and Israeli accounts shared the narrative. The third NYT item (A037) defined the conflict as obstructed aid but introduced it through an Israeli government statement. Activists were the first source in 15 of 23 AJE items and 4 of 7 BBC items. Testimony appeared in 17 of 23 AJE items, 6 of 7 BBC items, and none of the available NYT text. Historical context appeared in 11 of 23 AJE items and 4 of 7 BBC items.

Legal framing was the clearest point of divergence. AJE asserted illegality in its own voice in 7 of 23 items and quoted legal experts, UN rapporteurs, or human-rights organizations in 12. The BBC attributed legal positions to their sources, with one exception: its statement that Israel lacks jurisdiction in the interception zone (A036). Because the legal status of the blockade is itself disputed (Buchan, 2011), these choices matter. A narrative that treats the interception as illegal supports pressure to end the blockade, whereas one that treats legality as contested leaves the existing situation in place. The visual dimension added a further layer to these differences. AJE's on-deck photographs and maps placed viewers close to the activists, often through its own reporter on board. The BBC's long-shot images and short videos kept viewers at a distance. The single NYT lead visual available showed the flotilla sympathetically, in tension with its standfirst. Visual choices thus functioned as framing strategies that offer different positions of identification to viewers (Rodriguez & Dimitrova, 2011).

The findings extend prior research in three ways. First, they show that the sourcing differences documented for the 2023 Gaza war (El Damanhoury et al., 2025) and for the 2010 flotilla (Bayram, 2015; Fahmy & Eakin, 2014) also structure coverage of the 2025 missions. These differences operate at the level of whole narrative arcs rather than isolated labels: the outlets used largely similar vocabulary for the blockade, but differed in who was cast as protagonist, who spoke first, and which past

was invoked. Second, consistent with Evans (2010), small lexical choices still mattered where they occurred. Qualifiers such as "symbolic" or "token" aid, used most often by the BBC, weaken the fidelity of the humanitarian narrative in Fisher's sense (Fisher, 1984), because they question the good reasons the activists offer for acting.

Third, the evidence allows the term "counter-hegemonic" to be specified. We applied it only where three criteria were met: (a) the outlet challenged, in its own voice, the legal account offered by the more powerful state actor; (b) it quoted activist testimony; and (c) image and text reinforced each other. AJE met all three criteria in 4 of 23 items (A001, A002, A004, A031), the BBC in 1 of 7 (A036), and the NYT in none. AJE's alternative narrative therefore worked mainly through source selection, protagonist roles, and historical context rather than through explicit legal assertion. Given that Israel's account dominated English-language coverage of the 2010 flotilla (Bayram, 2015), this suggests that AJE's coverage functioned as an alternative to the dominant account, though in a more attributed and less declaratory form than is often assumed.

The relation between these narratives and state positions requires caution. The patterns correspond in part with known foreign-policy positions, and AJE's pattern is consistent with research on state-sponsored media diplomacy (Samuel-Azran, 2013) and with the cascading of elite frames to the press (Entman, 2003). Content analysis, however, cannot demonstrate state control, editorial intent, or coordination. Alternative explanations include professional sourcing routines that favour accessible official sources; unequal access, since activists were detained and their communications cut while Israeli authorities released footage; and diversity within each outlet, illustrated by the BBC's own verification work (A019). We therefore interpret the outlets' narratives as discursive correspondences with broader soft-power environments (Nye, 2008; Roselle et al., 2014), not as instruments of state diplomacy.

Multimodally, the outlets differed less in whether they used images than in how those images positioned viewers. AJE's medium-distance, often self-produced images and the BBC's long shots show that social distance and provenance are part of the narrative contest (Rodriguez & Dimitrova, 2011). This extends the analysis of image–text relations

(Cheema et al., 2023) by adding provenance and the reporter's physical position, on board or at a distance, as analytic dimensions.

The Narrative Diplomacy Framework

The Narrative Diplomacy Framework was derived abductively from the coding results (Figure 4). Each component is built from codes defined in Table 2, and Figure 4 shows the code-to-component mapping. Codes for topic actor, protagonist, antagonist, conflict, first source, and historical context (setting) clustered into a first component, *narrative selection*: decisions about which actors, conflicts, and pasts become part of the story. Codes for legal framing, moral evaluation, qualifiers, reported dismissive labels, text–image relations, and the representational and interactive meanings of visuals clustered into a second component, *multimodal legitimization*: the alignment of words and images to confer or withhold legitimacy. Codes for resolution, visual provenance, and reported state reactions clustered into a third component, *diplomatic circulation*: the points at which a narrative connects to the positions of states and international institutions. The framework differs from strategic narrative theory (Roselle et al., 2014), which centres on narratives projected by states, by treating the news organization as the actor that selects and assembles competing narratives. It also differs from mediated public diplomacy (Gilboa, 2008), which focuses on governments' use of media, by specifying the narrative and multimodal mechanisms that operate within the coverage itself.

Diplomatic circulation also differs from Entman's (2003) cascading activation model. Cascading activation explains how frames move downward, from a national administration through other elites to the news media and the public, and how far journalists resist that movement; its question is where a frame comes from. Diplomatic circulation describes a more horizontal movement: the points at which a news narrative, once assembled, connects to the positions of several states and international institutions at the same time, through reported state reactions (AJE 12 of 23 items; BBC 3 of 7; none in the available NYT text), through the provenance of images released by a government or by the flotilla, and through resolutions such as deportation that involve participants' home states. Its question is where a narrative can travel and whose diplomatic claims it can serve. The two are complementary: the outlets' reliance on Israeli government statements and footage can be read as cascading activation, whereas AJE's cataloguing of third-state reactions (A003, A030) is a form of diplomatic circulation.

Three propositions follow for future testing. *P1:* The more a news narrative casts humanitarian actors as protagonists and supplies historical continuity, the more interpretive resources it offers to actors seeking to delegitimize a blockade. *P2:* When verbal legal labels and visual provenance converge, a narrative's legitimizing function is stronger than when the two modes diverge. *P3:* Narratives that link an event to great-power diplomacy are more likely to recentre it around state interests than around humanitarian outcomes. These propositions concern how narratives may offer interpretive frames through which audiences and policymakers understand events. Testing their effects would require audience or policy data.

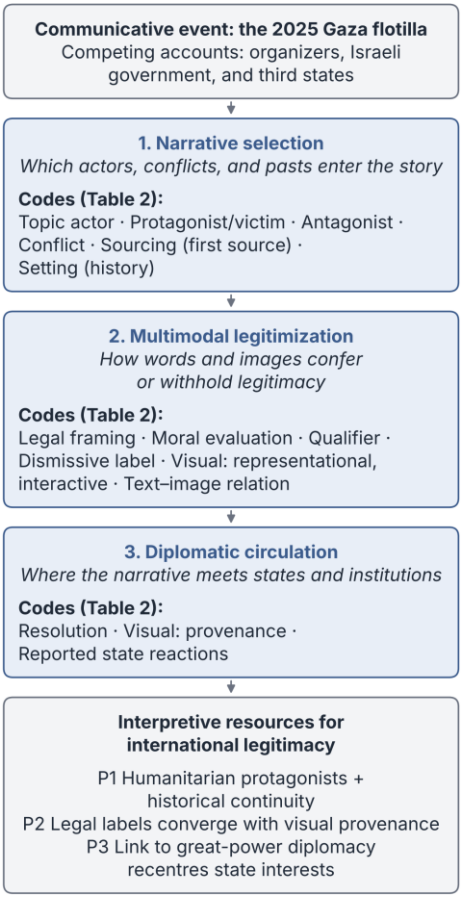


Figure 4. The Narrative Diplomacy Framework Derived from the Coding Results, with Code-to-Component Mapping
Source: Authors' analysis. Codes refer to Table 2.

Conclusion

This study compared how Al Jazeera English and BBC News constructed the 2025 Gaza flotilla, with *The New York Times* as an exploratory case. Regarding RQ1, AJE cast activists as protagonists confronting an antagonist state and defined the conflict as the obstruction of aid (18 of 23 items). The BBC structured all 7 of its items around competing, attributed claims. The limited NYT material introduced the events primarily through Israeli government statements. Regarding RQ2, the outlets differed less in their vocabulary for the blockade than in sourcing, testimony, historical context, qualifiers such as "symbolic" aid, and the social distance of their images. Regarding RQ3, these constructions can be interpreted as offering different public-diplomacy resources: AJE's narrative supports challenges to the legitimacy of the interceptions, while the BBC's attributive narrative leaves the dispute open and reproduces Israeli officials' dismissive labels alongside activists' claims.

The study makes two contributions. Empirically and methodologically, it provides a comparative, multimodal account of AJE and BBC coverage of the 2025 flotilla, with exploratory NYT evidence, that links narrative roles, legal labels, sourcing, and visual design within a single codebook, with every claim traceable to identified items (Appendix A; Supplementary File S1). Theoretically, it proposes the Narrative Diplomacy Framework, which specifies three mechanisms (narrative selection, multimodal legitimization, and diplomatic circulation) through which news coverage turns a humanitarian event into a resource for international legitimacy. For public-diplomacy practitioners, including those of middle powers such as Indonesia that support Palestinian statehood, the findings suggest that outlet-specific narrative logics need to be understood before humanitarian initiatives are communicated to international audiences.

The study has several limitations. The purposive corpus of 33 items is unevenly distributed (AJE 23, BBC 7, NYT 3), and the NYT items were available only in truncated form, so the NYT findings are indicative only, and the study is best read as a two-outlet comparison with an exploratory third case. The five-month period captures the 2025 missions but not their longer-term coverage, and non-English, regional, and social-media sources are excluded. Candidate items were identified through outlet search engines and site-restricted Google searches rather than a licensed news database such as Factiva or Nexis Uni, so retrieval may be incomplete, particularly for the BBC and the NYT, and the texts were archived about a year after publication, so later edits to live pages cannot be ruled out. Coding was AI-assisted, and although every code was reviewed by the researchers against the source text (see Coding Framework), the interpretation remains partly subjective. Finally, no audience or policy data were collected, so the study cannot claim effects on perceptions or diplomacy. Future research could obtain complete NYT coverage through a news database, test the framework's propositions across other conflicts, languages, and platforms, combine content analysis with audience experiments, and interview journalists about the editorial processes behind the observed patterns.

Author's Contribution Statement

Amin Aminudin conceptualized the study, designed the methodology and the codebook, curated the corpus, conducted the formal analysis, developed the Narrative Diplomacy Framework, prepared the figures, wrote the original draft, revised the manuscript, and served as corresponding author. Suwadi verified every screening decision, code, and supporting excerpt against the original articles, contributed to the formal analysis and interpretation, and reviewed and edited the manuscript. Both authors read and approved the final manuscript.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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