



Arab Media Watch

for objective British coverage of Arab issues

Monitoring Study:

The British Media & 'Retaliation' in the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

Author:

Shipra Dingare - AMW adviser

Contributors:

Sharif Nashashibi - AMW chairman

Guy Gabriel - AMW adviser

Contact details:

Tel: 07725 941 560

E-mail: info@arabmediawatch.com

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Introduction

The portrayal of retaliation in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is of crucial importance. Where a news outlet consistently represents one side as retaliating against the other, it promotes an understanding of that party as the victim of a conflict instigated by the other, and influences public opinion to be sympathetic with the former. Any action taken by the retaliating party is contextualised and potentially legitimised as defensive.

Where the 'retaliating' or 'responding' party is Israel, any such act is legitimised not only morally, but also with respect to Israel's claim in international law to the use of force in 'self-defence'.

For this study, Arab Media Watch examined coverage in all the British national daily and Sunday newspapers (except the Financial Times), as well as the Evening Standard, during the first half of 2008 (January to June).

The objective was to determine in what proportion Israel and the Palestinians are represented as retaliating in the conflict. The methodology comprised counting the number of uses of words and phrases carrying meanings approximately synonymous with 'retaliate', including 'respond', 'provoke', 'hit back' and others.

Results

Table 1: Number of instances Israel and the Palestinians are represented as retaliating

	(%)	(Raw)
Israel Retaliates	72	83
Palestinians Retaliate	28	33
Total	100	116

Table 2: Number of newspapers portraying Israel or Palestinians retaliating more often

	(%)	(Raw Figure)
Newspapers representing Israel as retaliating more often than the Palestinians	100	9

Table 3: Number of writers portraying Israel or the Palestinians retaliating more often

	(%)	(Raw Figure)
Writers representing Israel as retaliating more often than Palestinians	80	24
Writers representing the Palestinians as retaliating more often than Israel	20	6
Total	100	30

Summary of Results

When the British press represents a party as retaliating or responding in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, that party is Israel 72% of the time, comprising 83 of 116 instances. These figures vary sharply when considering tabloid and broadsheet coverage separately. When the tabloids represent a party as retaliating or responding in the conflict, that party is Israel 100% of the time (13 of 13 instances), while for broadsheets, the figure is 68% (70 of 103 instances).

Among broadsheets, the Independent portrays Israel as retaliating in the highest proportion at 80%, followed by the Times at 68%, the Daily Telegraph at 67%, and the Guardian at 59%. Not a single newspaper portrays the retaliating party as the Palestinians more often than Israel.

Only 20% of reporters and commentators portray the retaliating party as the Palestinians more often than Israel (six of 30), while 80% portray Israel retaliating more often.¹ Those reporters / commentators who portray Palestinians retaliating more often are confined to just three newspapers: the Guardian, the Independent, and the Times.

Among the reporters and commentators who use the language of retaliation at least five times, only Rory McCarthy in the Guardian portrays the Palestinians as retaliating more often than Israel (71% of his retaliation representations portrayed the Palestinians retaliating).

The others portray Israel as retaliating more often: Toni O'Loughlin (Guardian and Observer) 86%, Donald Macintyre (Independent) 75%, James Hider (Times) 70%, and Tim Butcher (Telegraph) 58%.

The figures are similar for headlines, where 73% of retaliation representations feature Israel retaliating (11 of 15). The figure is 100% for tabloids (three of three headlines) and 67% for broadsheets (eight of 12 headlines).

Detailed tables showing the results broken down by newspaper and by author appear in the appendix. Additionally, the complete annotated data and examples appear at:

<http://www.arabmediawatch.com/amw/Portals/0/documents/media/20090122AMW.RetaliationStudyData.html>

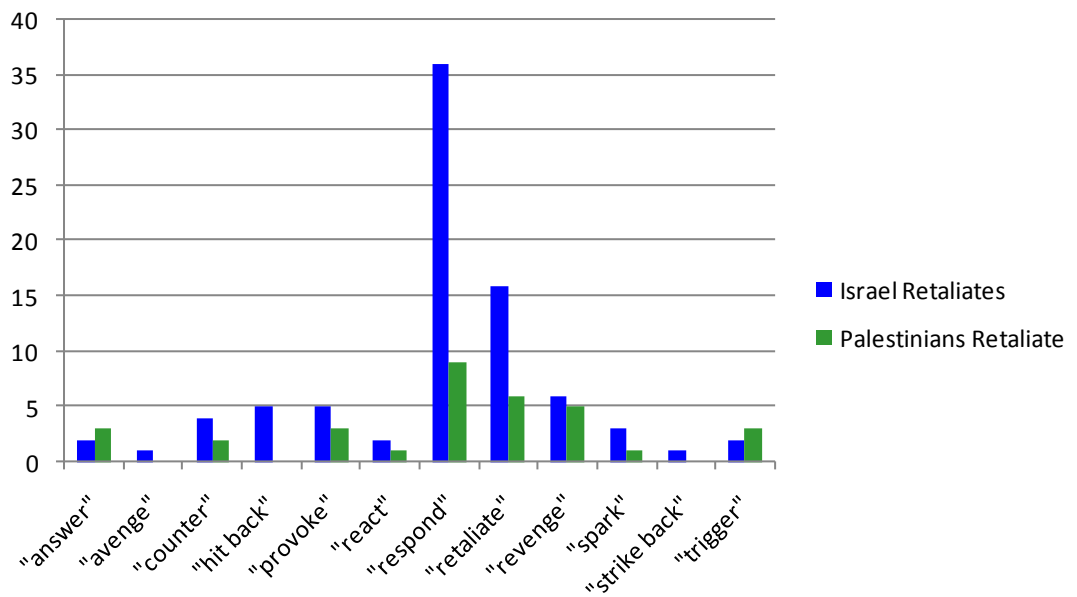
¹ While it should be noted that counts for individual authors were often low, the figure is in fact identical when considering only those authors who used language conveying retaliation at least five times.

Analysis

Distribution of words and phrases used to represent retaliation

The table below shows the distribution of words and phrases conveying the narrative of retaliation in the British press. 'Respond' and its variants (including 'response') is the most frequent word conveying this narrative, used four times as often to represent Israel as responding than Palestinians. 'Retaliate' is the next most frequent word, used more than twice as often to represent Israel as retaliating than Palestinians.

Figure 1: Words and phrases used to represent retaliation



Types of actions represented as retaliatory

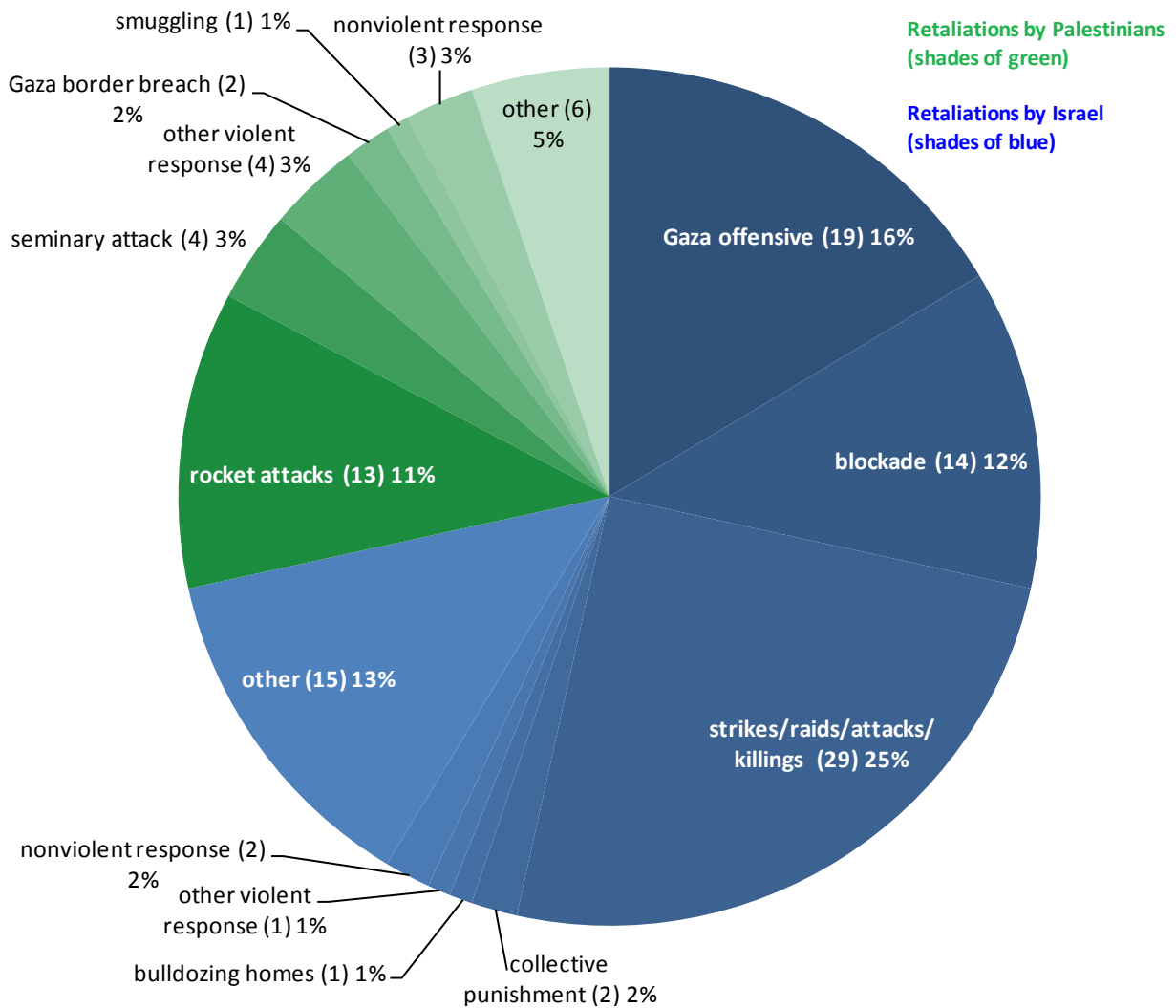
There are 83 representations of Israel retaliating, compared with 33 for Palestinians. A wide range of Israeli actions are represented as retaliatory, from actions of a military or otherwise violent nature (including air strikes, raids, incursions, assassinations, and the bulldozing of homes), to economic actions (such as blockades, power cuts, fuel cuts, and closure of border crossings).

Palestinian actions represented as retaliatory include rocket strikes, the Jerusalem seminary attack of 6 March 2008, the breaching of the Gaza-Egypt border, and smuggling.

Israeli actions of a military or otherwise violent nature are framed as retaliation in 50 instances, compared with 21 instances for Palestinian violence.

Of these, Israel's Gaza offensive of 27 February to 2 March 2008 is portrayed as retaliatory in 19 instances, or 16% of all retaliation examples. Israeli economic actions (such as the blockade, power cuts, fuel cuts, and closure of border crossings) are portrayed as retaliatory in 14 instances, or 12% of all retaliation examples.

Figure 2: Retaliation as Represented by the British Press



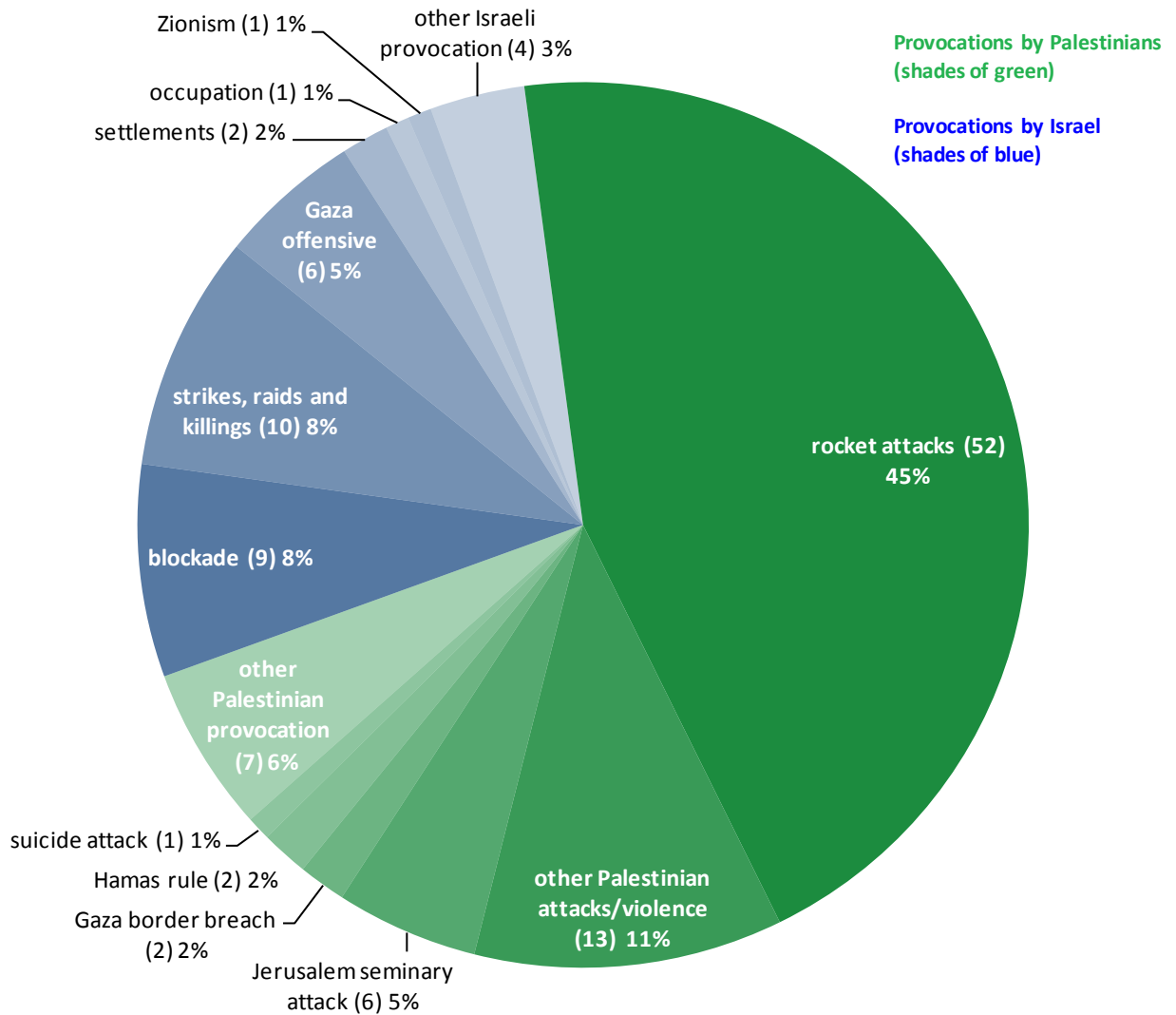
Types of actions represented as provoking retaliation

While many of the same actions represented by the British press as retaliatory by one side are also represented as provoking retaliation from the other side, there are substantial discrepancies in the distribution of these representations.

Israel's Gaza offensive is portrayed as retaliatory in 19 instances, but is portrayed as provoking the Palestinians in only six instances. Apart from the Gaza offensive, Israeli military or violent action is represented as retaliatory in 31 instances, but is represented as provoking Palestinians in only 10 instances.

Israeli economic actions - including the blockade and closure of Gaza, and the cutting of fuel and power supplies - are portrayed as retaliatory against Palestinian rocket attacks on 14 occasions, compared with nine occasions when such actions are portrayed as provocative to Palestinians.

Figure 3: Provocations as Represented by the British Press



The discrepancy is most apparent in representations of rocket attacks by the Palestinians. Israel is represented as retaliating to, or being provoked by, rocket attacks in 52 instances, comprising 63% of all Israeli retaliations and 45% of all retaliation representations. This is four times the 13 instances in which rocket attacks are represented as retaliations.

This is despite the fact that Islamic Jihad and Hamas have repeatedly characterised specific attacks as responses to assassinations and killings of Palestinians. Additionally, as documented by Human Rights Watch, militant leaders have repeatedly characterised rocket attacks as measures taken in self-defence and in response to the Israeli occupation of, and military operations in, the West Bank and Gaza.²

The strong tendency to represent Israel as retaliating in respect of rocket attacks and overall is probably linked to the near-absence of representations of factors forming the backdrop to the conflict, such as the continuing occupation, ongoing settlement building and lengthy blockade, as provocations to Palestinians or as triggering Palestinian responses.

² 'Indiscriminate Fire: Palestinian Rocket Attacks on Israel and Israeli Artillery Shelling in the Gaza Strip' 30 June 2007. Available at: <http://www.hrw.org/en/node/10911/section/1>

The following example is the sole instance in which the occupation is represented as a provocation to Palestinians:

"What else can Israel do to stop the rockets, its supporters ask. The answer could not be more obvious: end the illegal occupation of the Palestinian territories and negotiate a just settlement for the Palestinian refugees..." (Seumas Milne, Guardian, 5 March 2008)

Similarly, settlements are represented as provocations to Palestinians on only two occasions, both involving non-violent Palestinian responses, including efforts by a Palestinian committee to counter the economic effects of the settlements. Palestinian violence or militant action is never contextualised as a response to settlement building.

The Emergent Narrative: Palestinians Attack, Israel Responds

The absence of representations of the occupation as giving rise to Palestinian militant or otherwise violent action is one factor leaving Palestinian actions largely unexplained, causing them to appear as seemingly unprovoked 'aggression'. It also makes plain that the British press largely rejects a narrative of 'occupation and resistance' in covering the conflict.

Nor, however, does the British press adopt a 'neutral', 'cycle of violence' narrative in which one would expect to see the retaliatory actions of each side portrayed equally as provocations to the other. The sizeable asymmetries set out above tend to establish this.

Rather, the British press appears to have largely settled on an ahistorical narrative in which Palestinians instigate violence and Israelis respond. That narrative is expressed clearly in the following extract from one Middle East correspondent:

*"Violence between the two sides has been going on for decades. Put crudely, Palestinian militants launch attacks against targets inside Israel - often using primitive rockets aimed at civilians - and Israel **responds** hard and heavy." (Tim Butcher, Daily Telegraph, 23 April 2008)*

This underlying framework for understanding the conflict remains unquestioned, even where large numbers of Palestinian civilians are killed by Israeli 'retaliation', and it causes debate and potential criticism to centre entirely around the 'proportionality' of the action. The following example illustrates this pattern in describing the Gaza offensive, in which 110 Palestinians were killed (at least 53 civilians)³:

*"The disproportionate **response** to Palestinian rocket attacks by Israel needs widespread condemnation." (David Pamment, Guardian, 4 March 2008)*

This pattern of reporting also tends to place the blame for even 'disproportionate retaliation' on the Palestinians. This is particularly apparent in the following excerpt by a Middle East correspondent:

*"The fighting escalated as Hamas launched long-range missiles at the Israeli city of Ashkelon, **provoking** Israel to invade Gaza and kill at least 107 people." (Toni O'Loughlin, Guardian, 14 March 2008)*

The passage partially or fully removes responsibility from Israel for its invasion of Gaza and subsequent killing of 107 people by stating clearly that Israel was provoked into this action.

³ United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs Gaza Humanitarian, 'Situation Report: Escalation in Violence 27 Feb – 3 March 2008' Available at: http://www.ochaopt.org/documents/Gaza_Situation_Report_2008_02_30_Final2.pdf

Taking this reasoning to its natural conclusion, even the ethnic cleansing of Palestinians can be conceived as a response to provocation, as expressed in the following passage:

*"In response to the terrorist attack that left eight Jewish students dead at a Jerusalem seminary on Thursday night, the policy options open to Israel include:
...2 Clamp down on East Jerusalem Arabs: the terrorist on Thursday came from the 200,000-strong Arab population of East Jerusalem.
...5 Decide to redraw the map of Israel forever, **transferring the country's 1.2 million Israeli Arab population to an altered West Bank...**This policy enjoys the support of some Israeli parliamentarians although it would be regarded as a doomsday option by many in the international community." (Tim Butcher, Daily Telegraph, 8 March 2008)*

The easy consideration in the above passage of 'population transfer' as a 'policy option' open to Israel 'in response' to Palestinian violence demonstrates the dangers of a narrative in which Israel can only be understood as 'retaliating.'

Conclusions

The data suggests that in covering the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the British press almost entirely avoids a narrative of occupation and resistance, but nor does it adopt a 'cycle of violence' narrative in which both sides are portrayed equally as initiators.

Rather, the British press largely favours a narrative in which Israeli actions are portrayed as reactions to largely unexplained and therefore effectively gratuitous or aggressive Palestinian violence.

Our results show similar tendencies in newspaper coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to those found by the Glasgow University Media Group in its study of BBC and ITV television coverage of the second intifada.

That study found that Israel is shown as retaliating three to six times as often as Palestinians.⁴ It also linked the trends in TV news coverage to audience understandings of the conflict, finding that one focus group of students believed the Palestinians to be the occupiers.⁵

The fatality statistics of the Israeli human rights organisation B'Tselem show that 424 Palestinians were killed by Israeli forces or Israeli civilians between January and June 2008 (the period of the Arab Media Watch study), compared with 26 Israelis killed.⁶ This comes to more than 16 Palestinians killed for every Israeli.

Together with the fact of the occupation, these numbers make wholly implausible a narrative that shows Israel retaliating the vast majority of the time, and that effectively portrays Palestinians as the aggressors in the conflict.

⁴ Greg Philo and Matt Berry, *Bad News From Israel* (2004) pp.160, 186

⁵ Greg Philo and Matt Berry, *Bad News From Israel* (2004) p. 222

⁶ <http://www.btselem.org/English/Statistics/Casualties.asp>

Appendix 1: Statistics by Newspaper and Author

Table 4: Statistics by Newspaper and Author

	Israel Retaliates		Palestinians Retaliate	
	Raw	(%)	Raw	(%)
The Daily Telegraph				
.....(No Byline)	0	0	1	100
.....Carolynne Wheeler	1	100	0	0
.....Con Coughlin	3	100	0	0
.....David Blair	1	100	0	0
.....Ron Prosor	2	100	0	0
.....Tim Butcher	11	58	8	42
Total	18	67	9	33
The Guardian				
.....(Headline)	4	57	3	43
.....(No Byline)	3	75	1	25
.....Ahmad Samih Khalidi	0	0	1	100
.....Aluf Benn	1	100	0	0
.....Daniel Barenboim	1	100	0	0
.....David Pamment	1	100	0	0
.....Ian Black	0	0	1	100
.....Jacqueline Rose	0		0	
.....Jonathan Freedland	1	100	0	0
.....Lorna Fitzsimons	0		0	
.....Peter Walker	0		0	
.....Rory Mccarthy	2	29	5	71
.....Seumas Milne	0	0	1	100
.....Siobhain Butterworth	0		0	
.....Toni O'Loughlin	6	86	1	14
Total	19	59	13	41
The Independent				
.....(Headline)	3	100	0	0
.....(No Byline)	4	80	1	20
.....Andy Mcsmith	1	100	0	0
.....Anne Penketh	0	0	1	100
.....Donald Macintyre	6	75	2	25
.....Eric Silver	0		0	
.....John Bulloch	1	100	0	0
.....Mary Dejevsky	1	100	0	0
Total	16	80	4	20

	Israel Retaliates		Palestinians Retaliate	
	Raw	(%)	Raw	(%)
The Times				
.....(Headline)	1	50	1	50
.....(No Byline)	5	83	1	17
.....Bronwen Maddox	0		0	
.....James Hider	7	70	3	30
.....Matthew Reisz	0		0	
.....Michael Binyon	1	100	0	0
.....Sam Marlowe	0		0	
.....Sheera Frenkel	1	33	2	67
Total	15	68	7	32
Daily Mail (London)				
.....(Headline)	1	100	0	0
.....(No Byline)	3	100	0	0
.....Mail Foreign Service	1	100	0	0
.....Matthew Kalman	0		0	
Total	5	100	0	0
The Evening Standard				
.....(Headline)	1	100	0	0
.....(No Byline)	0		0	
.....Ed Harris	2	100	0	0
.....Sam Lyon	1	100	0	0
Total	4	100	0	0
The Mirror				
.....Allison Martin	0		0	
.....Mark Ellis	1	100	0	0
Total	1	100	0	0
The Observer				
.....(Headline)	0		0	
.....Alex Renton	0		0	
.....Peter Beaumont	1	100	0	0
.....Sam Kiley	1	100	0	0
.....Toni O'Loughlin	0		0	
Total	2	100	0	0
Sunday Express				
.....(Headline)	1	100	0	0
.....Matthew Kalman	1	100	0	0
.....Ted Jeory	1	100	0	0
Total	3	100	0	0

Appendix 2: Methodology

To obtain instances in which either Israel or the Palestinians are portrayed as retaliating or as triggering the conflict, Arab Media Watch searched Lexis-Nexis for articles containing both the words 'Israel' and 'Palestine' (or 'Israeli' and 'Palestinian'), together with the following words: 'retaliate', 'trigger', 'avenge', 'counter', 'react', 'reciprocate', 'respond', 'revenge', 'strike back', 'hit back', 'answer', 'spark' and 'provoke.'

The full list of words chosen, together with the complete list of queries submitted to Lexis-Nexis, appears in Tables 6 and 7 on page 12.

The study covers January - June 2008, and includes all types of items, including news articles, editorials, commentaries and letters. This resulted in 860 total appearances of the target words in a total of 487 articles. Of the 860 appearances, manual examination showed only 195 to be relevant. Only those examples which portray Israel or the Palestinians as retaliating are considered relevant.

'Israel' and 'Palestine' are not confined to refer only to government forces, but include references to retaliation by individuals, groups, organisations, inanimate entities such as settlements or blockades ("*Palestinians poured through the breaches to stock up with food and fuel to **counter** the Israeli blockade*"), or situations such as 'deterioration' ("*More than 500 Palestinian shops have been closed on security grounds by the Israeli army. Another 1,100 simply went out of business as the isolated city centre withered away....the [Palestinian Hebron Rehabilitation] committee has worked hard to **counter** that deterioration...*").

References to Arab states or groups other than Palestinians ("*Egypt launches **retaliatory** action in Yom Kippur War*"), or any other party allying themselves with either side ("*British deserters fighting on the Arab side **reciprocated**...*") are excluded.

The study is not confined to purely military or violent actions, but includes instances where the response or the thing responded to is of a non-military nature, so long as a situation of conflict is being described. Examples include:

- 1) "*...the Palestinian Hebron Rehabilitation Committee is hoping to use tourism to **counter** the effects of the settlements.*"
- 2) "*...two Jewish settler groups of about 15,000 users put pressure on Facebook to designate them as being in Israel. This was **countered** by at least one 8,000-member Palestinian user group which accused Facebook of outrageous partisanship by classifying Arab East Jerusalem as being in Israel.*"
- 3) "*Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas has **responded** to the Israeli attacks by suspending all talks with the Israeli Government.*"

These examples are included as instances of Palestinians retaliating. However, uses of target verbs that convey responses to peace gestures are excluded, as in the examples below:

- 4) "*They said ceasefire action in the past had not been **reciprocated**.*"
- 5) "*This weekend, the elected Hamas government offered a six-month truce that could have led to talks. The Israeli government **responded** within hours by blowing up a senior Hamas leader and killing a 14-year-old girl.*"
- 6) "*Instead, he said, if Hamas halted the firing of mortars and rockets, Israel would **respond** by halting its own operations in Gaza.*"

Examples like these are excluded because the reference to 'response' does not cast the responder as the victim and the other side as the aggressor. For the same reasons, responses to

demonstrations are excluded ("*Israel has **responded** to the protests over settlements by pressing Palestinians to meet their road map commitments to rein in militants as a condition for establishing a state*").

However, examples where demonstrations are the response rather than the thing responded to are included ("*The rise in rocket attacks has **triggered** two weeks of demonstrations in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv by Sderot's residents*").

Future, projected or threatened action is included ("*Israel did not say whether it would **retaliate***"), even where negated ("*Israel said it would not **retaliate***") or denied ("*Israel, which denied the plan was being launched in **retaliation**...*") because by using the word 'retaliate' in these examples, the writer has framed the conflict as instigated by Palestinians.

References to retaliatory acts in the context of a work of fiction are excluded ("*The play begins with one of Aramin's sons presenting him with a gun and calling for him to take **revenge***"), but generic descriptions of the conflict are included ("*Both sides attacks are **revenge** for attacks on the other*"). This is counted as an example of both Israel and the Palestinians retaliating. Articles with multiple authors are excluded for simplicity.

The words and patterns chosen are the most frequently used to convey the sense of retaliation and provide a sufficient sample to demonstrate trends in the portrayal of retaliation in coverage of the conflict.

Table 5: Target Verbs

'retaliate'-type	'trigger'- type
answer	provoke
avenge	spark
counter	trigger
hit back	
react	
reciprocate	
respond	
retaliate	
revenge	
strike back	

Table 6: Search Patterns Submitted to Lexis-Nexis

answer! and Palestin! and Israel!	trigger! and Palestin! and Israel!
aveng! and Palestin! and Israel!	provoc! and Palestin! and Israel!
Israel! and Palestin! and counter!	provok! and Palestin! and Israel!
Palestin! and Israel! and hit! back	spark! and Palestin! and Israel!
Palestin! and Israel! and Reciprocat!	
Palestin! and Israel! and Retaliat!	
react! and Palestin! and Israel!	
respond! and Palestin! and Israel!	
response! and Palestin! and Israel!	
reveng! and Palestin! and Israel!	
strik! back and Palestin! and Israel!	
struck back and Palestin! and Israel!	
trigger! and Palestin! and Israel!	